

The “Smoking Guns” Are Illusory

Sidebar to: [Don't Rush to Judgment](#)

Ancient inscriptions are like the potsherds on which they are often found; dating them requires that we painstakingly search for relevant comparisons. In the case of the Jehoash inscription, there are no easy matches.

The scholars who have condemned it as a fake insist that it contains modern or incorrect usages. But we do not believe they have made their case.

Perhaps the most fought-over issue so far is the inscription's use of the word *bedeq* (בדק) in line 10. In the Bible, *bedeq* means “crack” or “fissure.” However, the inscription, because it combines *bedeq* with the verb *‘asah* (“to do,” line 9) appears to mimic not the Hebrew of the Bible but rather the modern Hebrew phrase *e‘aseh ‘et bedeq*, which means “I made repairs.” It therefore looks as if the inscription betrays a knowledge of modern Hebrew. However, it is unlikely that *bedeq* means “repair” in the inscription. The word is actually part of a construct chain that joins it together with the word *habbayit* (הבית) (“the House,” line 10), forming the expression “*bedeq habbayit*” or “the *bedeq* of the House.” If we interpret *bedeq* as “the repair,” then we would have to join it similarly to the other definite nouns (“walls,” “ledge,” “lattices,” etc.) and read the text as “the repair of the walls,” “the repair of the ledge” and so forth. But this is not possible. The appearance of the definite direct object marker *‘et* (את) in line 11, though it does not appear before every noun, is an indication that all the nouns function as direct objects of the verb *‘asah* (i.e., “I did the walls,” “I did the ledge” and “I did the lattices,” etc.). It would seem that *‘asah* alone is the verb used in the inscription to mean “repair,” not *bedeq*, which most likely carries its Biblical meaning “crack.” Use of *‘asah* to mean “make new” or “remake” is unusual, but not unimaginable (see Deuteronomy 21:12; 2 Samuel 19:25).

In addition, the Hebrew spelling in the inscription appears to fit what we know of Judahite spelling in the ninth century B.C.E. At that time, all final vowels were indicated by the letters *he*, *waw* or *yod*. Medial (middle) vowels were not used, although there were exceptions. The inscription matches both general rules. For example, whereas in the northern kingdom of Israel diphthongs (as in the “ay” sound in the word for house, *bayt*) were contracted, so that the weak consonants (“y” in this case) were no longer used in the spelling, Judahite retained the original spelling to indicate the diphthongs. Thus instead of spelling house with two letters, *bt*, as would be the case in the north, the Jehoash inscription has the third letter, *yod*, giving us *byt*. The inscription thus matches what we would expect from ninth-century B.C.E. Judah.

The only instance of a possible medial vowel letter in the inscription is the *waw* in the word *lwim* (“staircase,” in line 12). It is possible, however, that the original form had a diphthong. (*lawim*) or simply a consonant (*lewulim*).

More problematic is the word *mw* (עמו) (“his people,” line 15), which is indeed unusual for this time and appears to many to be a clear anachronism. The normal indication of a singular masculine possessive suffix attached to a singular masculine noun is by a *he* at the end, with the letter representing the sound *-hu*. The use of the *waw*, for the suffix, doesn't turn up in the archaeological record until the oldest Qumran manuscripts dating from the third-second century B.C.E, meaning that the shift from *he* to *waw* came sometime between the sixth and third centuries B.C.E. So how can we explain the *waw* in the Jehoash inscription? The Siloam Tunnel Inscription, from the eighth century B.C.E., contains a noun with the suffix *waw*—the word *r'w* (רעו) (“his fellow”). This unusual form

is explained as a contraction of the archaic *r'hw* (רעהו) with syncope loss of the *he*. Although there is no example of “his people” spelled with a *he* anywhere in the Bible or extrabiblical sources, there is little doubt that in early periods the word would actually have been pronounced with a *-hu* suffix, making it possible that the word *'mw* in the Jehoash inscription, like *r'w* of the Siloam inscription, is a contraction of an archaic form *'mhw*.—**David Noel Freedman, Shawna Dolansky Overton and David Miano**

Reference for this article

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