The Mt. Ebal Tablet:
The First Ancient Postmodern Inscription?

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The readings of ancient inscriptions by Gershon Galil (Haifa University) were criticized sharply in a "Public Statement on Publication of Archaeological Finds," issued by Aren Maeir on 24 December 2022:

> Occasionally, and up until recent days, archaeological finds and discoveries (that are at times presented as revolutionary and game changers in the history of the Land of Israel) have been published in the popular press and on social media, prior to peer review, and to the full presentation, with high quality illustrations, of these finds in scientific publications, even long after the initial public notification.
>
> As is clear to anyone dealing with science and research, one of the foundations of all research and discovery is that results must go through a process of peer review prior to publication, to check for quality, suggest improvements and comments, and in some cases, reject a suggestion. Without this process, research is conducted without proper checks and balances. In addition, research colleagues (in this case archaeologists and historians) cannot properly ascertain, and if need be disagree, with these claims.
>
> We cannot but stress that until the publication of finds or research results in a scientific and peer reviewed publication, any claim made should be related to as unfounded, and is also unworthy of publication in the popular press. (Maeir 2022; see also Borschel-Dan 2022, Kamman 2023)

This Statement depicted peer review as the foundation of scientific publications. But scientific publications are differentiated from "popular" ones not by peer review, but by detailed references (bibliography). Tons of scientific publications, like conference proceedings and papers invited to "peer-review" journals by guest-editors, do not pass peer review (Haak 2019). Papers are commonly rejected not by peer review, but by authoritarian decisions of editors. Plus, the amount of rubbish that passes peer review is astonishing. Recently, three authors faked twenty "nonsense" papers in one year. Four were published, three accepted, and six more were being considered when they went public (Mounk 2018). The claim about a clear separation between peer-reviewed and "popular" publications reflects *hubris*.

Maeir argued that colleagues cannot properly ascertain claims in popular publications. But scholars immediately responded to Galil in various venues (like Chris Rollston, 2022a, 2022b). Even articles in peer-reviewed journals are partial (numbers of figures are limited and not every find/detail can be included).

The claim that scientists must publish a scientific report *before* a popular one is absurd. Publishing a "goodie" first in the popular media is logical and beneficial: it reaches larger audiences than the privileged few academics, who will, eventually, read the peer-reviewed publication. It can help with financing research, contacting other scholars, and receiving feedback to fix mistakes. Recall the Aramaic sherd from Tel Lachish with the name of King Darius (Lidman 2023, Schuster 2023a, 2023b, Gilad 2023). "Darius" says nothing to the public, so the sherd was mischievously presented as of "Darius, the father of the biblical King Ahasuerus." The breaking news was soon broken: an expert of Aramaic acknowledged that she wrote this inscription as an exercise for students, and left it on the Tell. At the last

moment, the scientific article (already accepted for *'Atiqot*) could be withdrawn. Would it be better to publish it first?

Maeir was never shy of sensational popular publications about "his" discoveries, like the "Goliath sherd" from Tell eṣ-Ṣafi. It was found in summer 2005 and published in the popular media in November 2005, three years before the peer-reviewed report. Maeir encouraged the media to read it as direct evidence for the biblical Goliath:

> It is the earliest extra-biblical evidence about a Philistine figure with the name Goliath, and that, from the city from which Goliath came from … The period in which the inscription was made and the fact that it was found in Gath prove that the biblical story of Goliath is, indeed, fitting the spirit of the period of the early monarchy in Israel. (*Walla* 2005; Hebrew)

He was not shy of calling it "groundbreaking":

> "This is a groundbreaking find," he [Maeir] said of the rust-colored ceramic. ... "It is the first time in the land of Israel that we have (found) the name Goliath, or a name like Goliath." (Fisher-Ilan 2005)

A similar name is not *the same* name. In WW2 Dresden, Victor Klemperer (1999: 438, 440) noticed how a prescription for medicine by mistake turned his rare, Jewish family name into a common German name (Kleinpeter), altering m into n and r into t. A tiny change of script could spell the difference between life and death. The *Haaretz* newspaper announced:

> An Inscription was Found in the South [of Israel] with the Original Version of the Name "Goliath." (Bareket 2005; Hebrew)

A sherd that is a century later than the time of Goliath cannot carry the "original version" of his name. Add if the two names on the sherd are identified with Goliath, we end up with two Goliaths. Maeir did nothing to amend such reporting, because he wanted that this discovery:

> Will help to refute the theory that the biblical stories were written in a late period and had no basis in reality. (Bareket 2005; Hebrew)

The sherd – if the reading was correct – could prove that a name like Goliath was known in early Iron II Philistia. It does not prove the historicity of the biblical Goliath or of the story about him as a whole. When the popular *Biblical Archaeology Review* (2006) published the sherd, Maeir cynically mocked the journal that helped him generate "noise":

> Although I did not write the note that appeared in BAR, I was interviewed for it, so there may be some accurate information in it. (Maeir 2006a)

Days later, he reproduced the *BAR* text in his blog and added comments, still connecting it with Goliath (Maeir 2006b). He also encouraged the readers to find Goliath in the sherd in the "popular" Hebrew journal *Qadmoniyot* (Maeir 2007: 20–21).

Later, in the peer-reviewed publication (Maeir et al. 2008), Maeir acknowledged that there was no evidence to identify the names on the sherd with Goliath. That identification was based on an old, incorrect etymology.

Should we conclude that encouraging the media to be sensational is good when it concerns my studies, but not when it concerns yours? What should matter most is not accusations about personality traits of scholars, or types of publications, but evaluation of the content of the publications in terms of theories, methods, accuracy of facts, underlying

convictions, and reasonability of interpretation.

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The lead object from Mt. Ebal (Stripling et al. 2023) is an example. The reading was done mainly by Galil. The object is extremely worn out. It is not clear if there was ever an inscription on it. It may be a sinker used for fishing (thus Mazar 2023). Photographs of the "letters" (Stripling et al. 2023: Tables 2–6) are very blurred, and hardly match the interpreted, drawn letters. The "letters" are created by picking up what fits, dropping out what does not fit, and restoring the rest.

I argue that, in this case, Galil did not restore an ancient inscription, but created a new one, skillfully, out of random scratches, depressions, protrusions, cracks and bends. The underlying goal is to support the right of Israelis today to the entire land promised to the ancient Israelites, based on the Bible as a historical source (though not all the promised land was held by the ancient Israelites, and they accepted it).

Galil suggested that the tablet is a Hebrew Late Bronze Age curse (roughly 13th-12th centuries BCE). However, the item was found in a mixed context that included also Roman Period finds, so it can be much later. Galil (in Stripling et al. 2023: 7) reads (Fig. 1):

> You are cursed by the god *yhw*, cursed.
> You will die, cursed—cursed, you will surely die.
> Cursed you are by *yhw*—cursed.

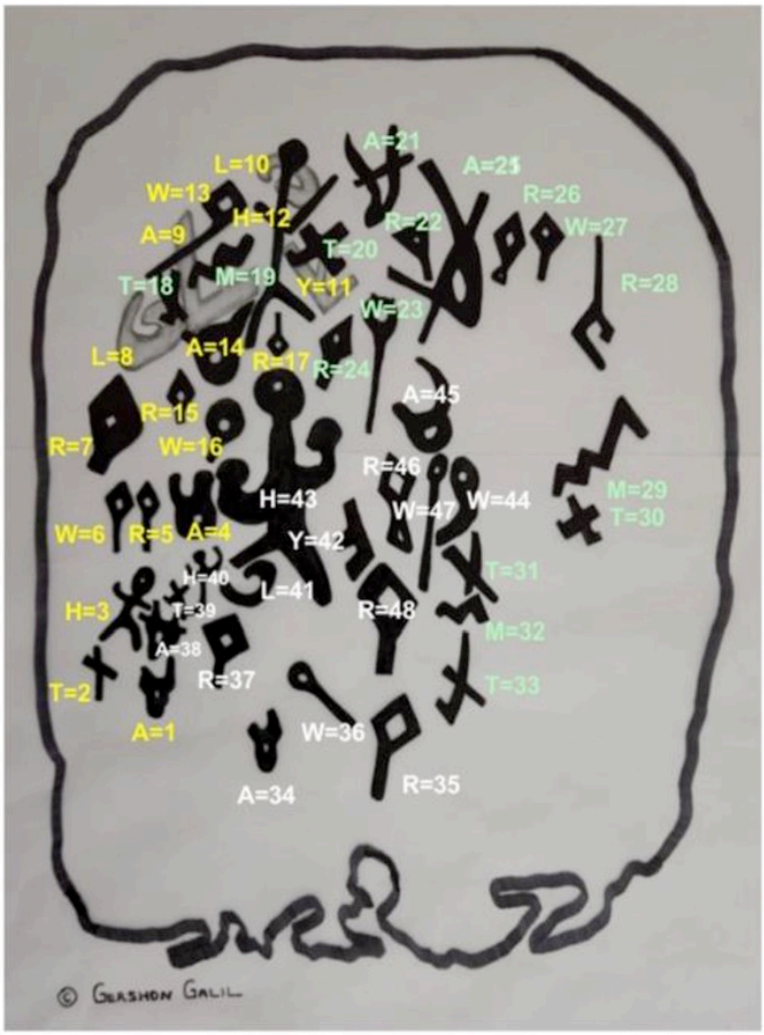


Fig. 1: Galil's reading (Stripling et al. 2023: Fig. 7). I thank Gershon Galil for the permission to reprint the figure.

In my opinion, this is not an ancient inscription, for the following reasons:

1. The "letters" vary hugely in size. Two huge "A" and "H" (signs 23, 43) are four times larger than others (signs 1, 3, 38, 40). The huge letters do not come at significant places, like the start of sentences/words.
2. The variations in the shapes of the signs are huge. People write consistently. Though handwriting can change over time, it is stable enough to allow experts to identify "hands." Either the present "inscription" is written by several hands, at a random pattern – which is illogical; or, it is the scribbles of a lunatic. Nobody writes a meaningful inscription like that.
3. The "letters" do not follow any order. One faces left, one right, another up, yet another down, and some are mirrored. The positions do not fit the supposed direction of the writing/reading, and occur even within the same "word." For example, in the supposed word "to God" (signs 8–10), the first letter L (sign 8) is different in shape and flipped some 90 degrees in relation to the second L (sign 10).
4. The direction is completely random. Early proto-alphabetic inscriptions vary: they can be right to left, left to right, or alternating (*boustrophedon*). But no inscription runs in a complete disorder. Writing does not imitate the erratic movement of a fly.

To demonstrate the issues, I have drawn the supposed letters in English, trying to replicate their sizes, shapes and positions (Fig. 2). I apologize for my limited skills as a draftsman, and not every nuance can be conveyed (for example, I show the Hebrew *Vav* by V and not W, because V conveys better the graphic form of *Vav,* while W might be confused for M). I connected the signs in the supposed words by yellow bands and arrows, to show the order – rather disorder – of the supposed inscription (Fig. 3). This would convey the nature of this "text" to readers of English.

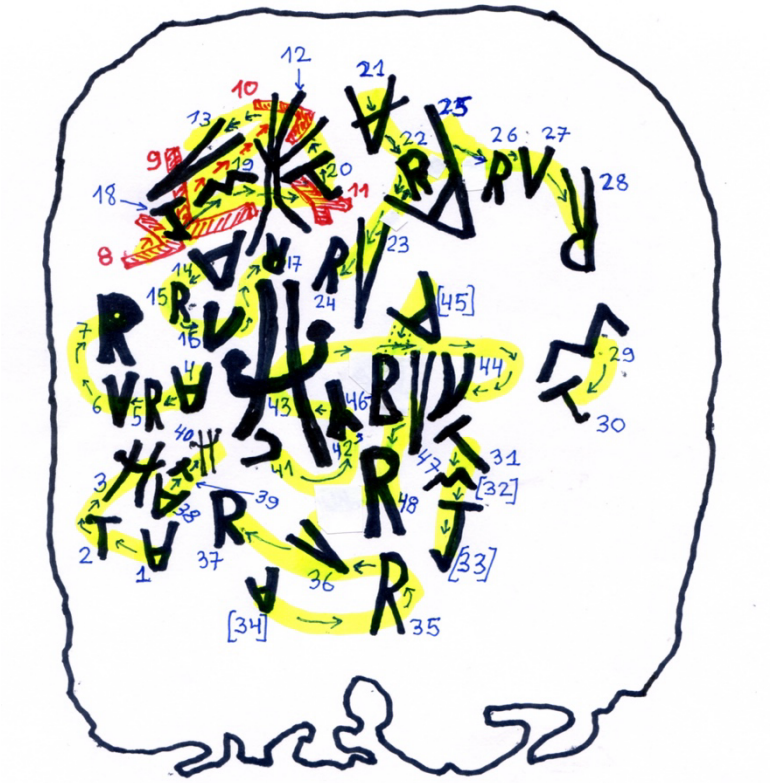


Fig. 2: A "Latinized" Ebal tablet (Kletter, after Stripling et al. 2023: Fig.7).



Fig. 3. The "order" of writing/reading. Supposed words in black/red lines; moves between words in dotted lines (Kletter, after Stripling et al. 2023: Fig. 7).

The first "word" (signs 1–3) proceeds from below clockwise. Then, there is a jump to the second "word" (signs 4–7), which is L-shaped, from right to left and upwards, only to proceed next diagonally from left to right (signs 8–10). At that point, the tablet was still mostly empty and one could proceed in perfect order. Yet, for some unexplainable reason, a U-turn appears, and the next "word" (signs 11–13) goes diagonally from right to left, with signs 12–13 on top of the last "word" (signs 8–10). Then, there is another jump to sign 14, glued to the former sign 9, as if fearing lack of space, but leaving an empty space between signs 13 and 9, as if knowing that it will be needed much later for sign 19. Next, one goes in a full circle (signs 14–17) – only this time, anti-clockwise.

To find an inscription, Galil had to resort to desperate means: jumping from place to place erratically and changing directions with almost each "letter" or "word." This is not the decipherment of an ancient text written by a scribe, but the creation of a new, artificial text by Galil. It is a purely academic (though very imaginative) exercise. Galil and his coauthors believe in this experiment: they spent much time and resources, and the results confirm their underlying ideological convictions. But this does not change the conclusion that this experiment has no historical value for the ancient world.

5. Stripling et al. (2023) refer as a comparison to early inscribed lead strips from Turkey (mostly from the Iron Age). However, these are much larger, carry clear script, and have no relation to curses. Also, Turkey is far away and nothing at Mt. Ebal suggests contacts with it.
6. Stripling et al. (2023) call the Ebal object a "lead curse" or "curse document," after "curse tablets" from the Greco-Roman world (Latin *tabella defixiones*; *defigens* means "the one who binds," referring to the curser). It seems that they did not contemplate the implications of this suggestion.

   It is true that thousands of Greco-Roman curse tablets are known, but none is earlier than the late 6th century BCE (Woolf 2022: 127–8). All name those who are cursed, because:

   > The very nature of an individual was intimately linked to his or her name.
   > (Natalías 2022: 53)

While the earliest curse tablets just name the victims, later tablets add professions, family relationships, and motives for cursing – legal disputes, love, acts of theft, etc. Often, the engravers left empty spaces for names, to be filled by those who bought the tablets. When the name was unknown (e.g., of thieves), catch-all clauses were given, like "whether man or woman, boy or girl, slave or free" (Gager 1999: 5–7; Daniel and Sulimani 2009; Gordon 2015: 167–72; Natalías 2022: 16–28, 53–62; McKie 2022: 37–38, 61–66, 117, 121–4; Bayliss 2023: 126 n. 6).

Scholars have defined several types of curses in curse tablets. Faraone (1991: 10) saw three types: 1. Direct binding formula ("I bind [someone]"); 2. Prayer formula appealing to deities ("restrain [someone]"); 3. Persuasive analogies – the curser wishes for something bad, specified in the text, to happen to the cursed ("as this lead is cold and useless, so may [Someone] be cold and useless!"). None of these types fits the supposed Mt. Ebal curse – or the types defined by others (Hillers 1964, Kitz 2014; for biblical curses, Quick 2018).

Biblical curses with the word *arur* ("cursed be") do not call for Yahweh (Kitz 2014: 66). A curse is sometimes pronounced twice in the Bible (Neh. 5:13), but not 12 times (Deut. 27 repeats the word *arur*, but in 12 different curses; each specifies the target and the condition that would "unleash" the curse). Biblical curses give the names of the cursed and the circumstances. For example, the snake is cursed for tempting Eve (Gen. 3:14), and Canaan for sinning against Noah (Gen. 9:25). It is the same with Hebrew inscriptions. For example, in a

tomb inscription from Silwan, the name and title of the curser (the tomb owner) are given, and the curse is directed against anyone who would open the tomb (Avigad 1954; Kitz 2014: 267–8).

The supposed Ebal text is the first postmodern curse: it does not reveal who is cursing, does not name the target, does not give any provisions, and does not explain the motive for the cursing. It defies all the conventions of cursing in the Bible, in ancient Hebrew and cuneiform inscriptions, and in Greco-Roman curse tablets. It does not fulfil any characteristic of ancient curses, but it fulfils the goals of Stripling et al (2023): to prolong the history of Hebrew and of Yahweh hundreds of years backward in time, and by that, "require adjustments to certain anthropological and biblical paradigms," namely, "prove" the historicity of biblical chapters like Joshua 8 and Deuteronomy 27.

Cursing is not an admirable custom. Plato proposed legislation against it and in Rome it became illegal. Pliny spoke against "malevolent prayers" and those who misled people to believe in them. Bishop Eusebius wrote against unholy "curse tablets of forbidden sorcery" (Gager 1999: 23, 27, 249–50; Woolf 2022: 125; Natalías 2022: 5–6; Burrell 1998: 128). Proverbs 26:2 speaks against a "causeless curse," which will return to the curser. Curse tablets were not written by Jews, do not contain Jewish names, and are not written in the languages associated with Judaism (Hebrew/Aramaic) (Saar 2021).

The reading of Galil for the Ebal tablet creates an inscription that is:

1. The first Hebrew inscription, 200 years older than any other;
2. The first mention of the deity *Yhw* in the Southern Levant, 400 years before the Mesha Stele;
3. The first inscribed lead amulet from Israel/Palestine, a millennium before any other;
4. The first curse inscribed on a lead object;
5. The first postmodern curse, without names of the curser or of the cursed, conditions or motives for cursing, unlike any curse from the Bible, Ancient Near East, or Greco-Roman curse tablets.

It also creates an Israelite forefather whose vocabulary is minimal, writing barbaric, and personality rude. I do not wish to have such a forefather.

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In conclusion, Maeir failed to deal with content, focusing instead on technical issues (peer review) and personality traits (sensationalism). He was unfair in trying to portray Galil as a sensationalist, and claim moral superiority. I do not doubt the integrity of Galil and I think that he genuinely believes in his readings.

However, in my opinion no ancient Late Bronze Age scribe could achieve all those "scientific firsts" implied by Galil's reading, which are suited to a certain ideology of our time. The use of sophisticated imaging techniques proves nothing if they are not employed to read an existing ancient inscription, but to create a new one. Inscriptions do not imitate the erratic movement of flies, and this one is a new, scholarly creation. Galil and his coauthors have created this inscription from scratch (or scratches). Their reading does not carry meaning for ancient periods, but reflects on our times.

Note: For a more detailed discussion, see R. Kletter, "Galil and Goliath: A Land of Archaeological Sin?" *SSRN: Social Science Research Network*. 30 November 2023. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4656111.

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