

## THE ANCIENT HEBREW INSCRIPTION OF SILOAM

TRANSLATED BY THE EDITOR

THE oldest Hebrew inscription yet discovered is engraved on the rocky wall of the subterranean channel which conveys the water of the Virgin's Spring at Jerusalem into the Pool of Siloam. The history of its discovery is curious. In the summer of 1880 one of the native pupils of Dr. Schick, a German architect long resident in Jerusalem, was playing with some other lads in the Pool, and while wading up the subterranean channel slipped and fell into the water. On rising to the surface, he noticed, in spite of the darkness, what looked like letters on the rock which formed the southern wall of the channel. Dr. Schick, on being told of them, visited the spot, and found that an ancient inscription, concealed for the most part by the water, actually existed there.

The first thing to be done was to lower the level of the water, so as to expose the inscription to view. But his efforts to copy the text were not successful. He was not a palæographer; and as the letters of the inscription, as well as every crack and flaw in the stone,

had been filled by the water with a deposit of lime, it was impossible for him to distinguish between characters and accidental markings on the rock, or to make out the exact forms of the letters. The first intelligible copy was accordingly made by myself during my visit to Jerusalem in February 1881. As, however, I had to sit for hours in the mud and water, working by the dim light of a candle, my copy required correction in several points, and it was not until the arrival of Dr. Guthe six weeks later that an exact facsimile was obtained. Dr. Guthe removed the deposit of lime by the application of an acid, and so revealed the original appearance of the tablet. A cast of it was taken, and squeezes made from the cast which could be studied at leisure and in a good light.

The inscription is engraved on the lower part of an artificial tablet cut in the wall of rock about 19 feet from the place where the subterranean conduit opens out upon the Pool of Siloam, and on the right hand side of one who enters it. The conduit is at first about 16 feet high; but the height gradually lessens until in one place it is not quite 2 feet above the floor of the passage. According to Captain Conder's measurements, the tunnel is 1708 yards in length from the point where it leaves the Spring of the Virgin to the point where it enters the Pool of Siloam. It does not run, however, in a straight line, and towards the centre there are two *culs de sac*, the origin of which is explained by the inscription. We there learn that the workmen began the conduit simultaneously at

both ends, like the engineers of the Mont Cénis tunnel, intending to meet in the middle. But they did not succeed in doing so, though the two excavations had approached one another sufficiently near for the workmen in the one to hear the sound of the pickaxes used by the workmen in the other. How such a feat of engineering was possible in the age when the tunnel was excavated it is difficult to understand, more especially when we remember that the channel slopes downward through the rock, and winds very considerably. It may be added that the floor of the conduit has been rounded to allow the water to pass through it more easily.

The Pool of Siloam is of comparatively modern construction, but it encloses the remains of a much older reservoir. It is situated on the south-eastern extremity of the hill, sometimes, but erroneously, called Ophel, which lies to the south of the Temple-hill, now represented by the Mosque of Omar, but separated from the latter by the remains of a valley, which was first perceived by Dr. Guthe and Dr. Schick. The Virgin's Spring is on the opposite side of the hill, but more to the north, overlooking the valley of the Kidron. As it is the only natural spring, or "gihon," as the Jews would have called it, in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, the command of its supply of water was of primary importance to the inhabitants of the Jewish capital. It was, however, outside the walls of the city, and hence the necessity of cutting a conduit through the hill which should

convey its water to a reservoir within the town. We are told in 2 Chron. xxxii. 4 that when the Assyrians invaded Judah Hezekiah "stopped all the fountains," that is to say, he concealed them under masonry or earth. The Virgin's Spring or Gihon must have been similarly sealed up, while its water was conducted into the city through a subterranean channel.

The date of the inscription has occasioned a good deal of controversy, some scholars assigning it to the reign of Hezekiah, and others to an earlier period. The chief reason for believing it to have been a work of Hezekiah is that in 2 Kings xx. 20 it is stated that "he made a pool and a conduit, and brought water into the city," while in 2 Chron. xxxii. 30 we read that he "stopped the upper watercourse of Gihon, and brought it straight down to the west side of the city of David." But a more literal rendering of the latter passage would be, "he stopped the exit (*môtsâ*) of the waters of the Upper Gihon, and he directed them downwards on the west side of the city of David." Here it is evident that by the Upper Gihon is meant the Spring of the Virgin, for which the word *môtsâ* or "exit" is employed in the inscription. Besides the Upper Gihon there must have been another or Lower Gihon, which can have been none other than the Pool of Siloam. This had become a second source of water-supply, and might therefore with propriety be named "a spring."

It would consequently appear from the chronicler's words that the Pool of Siloam already existed in the time of Hezekiah, and that what the Jewish monarch did was to excavate a second conduit, running from the Pool, not in a winding direction like the tunnel of Siloam, but in a straight direction along the western side of the city of David. Now such a conduit has actually been discovered cut in the rock and leading from the Pool of Siloam to another reservoir which once existed below.

There is, moreover, evidence in the Book of Isaiah that the tunnel of Siloam was in existence before Hezekiah came to the throne. In Isaiah viii. 6 a prophecy is recorded, uttered while Ahaz was still reigning, in which allusion is made to "the waters of Shiloah that go softly." This can hardly refer to anything else than the gently-flowing stream which still runs through the tunnel of Siloam. The inference is supported by the name Shiloah itself, which probably signifies "the tunnel," and would have been given to the locality in consequence of the channel which was here excavated through the rock.

The characters of the inscription exhibit to us the alphabet which was used by the prophets before the Exile. They belong to what may be termed the southern or Jewish branch of the old Phœnician alphabet, a parallel branch to which was used in Moab, and is found on the Moabite Stone. The forms of some of the letters are more archaic than

those on the Moabite Stone, the forms of others less so. Similar forms are met with on early Israelitish and Jewish seals, which go back to a period preceding the Captivity. They are characterised by a peculiarity which shows not only that writing was common, but also that the usual writing material was papyrus or parchment, and not stone or metal. The "tails" attached to certain letters are not straight as on the Moabite Stone or in Phœnician inscriptions, but rounded. The words, it may be added, do not always end with the line.

The language of the inscription is the purest Hebrew. It presents us with only one unknown word, *zadah* in line 3, which seems to mean "excess" or "obstacle." Why it should have been engraved on the lower part of a carefully-prepared tablet, where the water of the conduit would necessarily conceal it, it is impossible to conjecture. The upper part of the tablet may perhaps have been intended to contain a royal inscription giving the name of the king under whom the work was executed.

One fact, however, is made very clear by the text. Whether it were the Siloam tunnel itself, or the second tunnel leading from it to a lower reservoir, that was constructed by Hezekiah, in either case the Pool of Siloam would lie "on the west side of the city of David." "The city of David" must, accordingly, have stood on the southern hill, the so-called Ophel; and since the city of David was identical with Zion, according to 2 Samuel v. 7, this hill must

represent the original mount of Zion. Consequently the valley of the Sons of Hinnom must be the valley which was known in the time of Josephus as the Tyropœon or Cheesemakers'. It once divided both the Temple hill and the southern hill from the mountains on the west, though it is now choked with the rubbish which the numerous destroyers of Jerusalem have thrown into it. In some places the rubbish is more than 70 feet deep, and under it, if anywhere, we must look for the tombs of the kings that were cut in the rocky cliff of the city of David. Here, too, if anywhere, will be found the relics of the temple and palace that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed, overlaid with the accumulations of more than two thousand years.

A cast of the Siloam inscription may be seen in the rooms of the Palestine Exploration Fund, and facsimiles in Canon Isaac Taylor's *History of the Alphabet*, i. p. 234, and in *Fresh Light from the Monuments*, p. 101.

1. (Behold the) excavation! Now this is the history of the excavation. While the excavators were still lifting up
2. the pick,<sup>1</sup> each towards his neighbour, and while there were yet three cubits to (excavate, there was heard) the voice of one man
3. calling to his neighbour, for there was an *excess* (?) in the rock on the right hand (and on the left?). And after that on the day

<sup>1</sup> *Garzen*, translated "ax" in 1 Kings vi. 7, where it is used of the instrument with which the stones of Solomon's temple were quarried.

4. of excavating the excavators had struck pick against pick, one against another,
5. the waters flowed from the spring<sup>1</sup> to the pool<sup>2</sup> for a distance of 1200 cubits. And (part)<sup>3</sup>
6. of a cubit was the height of the rock over the head of the excavators.

<sup>1</sup> *Môtsâ*, literally "exit," which is used of the Upper Gihon or Virgin's Spring in 2 Chron. xxxii. 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Berêchah*, rendered "pool" in 2 Sam. ii. 13, Isaiah xxii. 9, 11, etc. We learn from the latter passage (Isaiah xxii. 9, 11) that there were at least three "pools" or reservoirs in Jerusalem in the time of Hezekiah, and yet our inscription shows that there must have been a period when only one such reservoir existed, since it terms the Pool of Siloam "the pool."

<sup>3</sup> A flaw in the rock makes this word doubtful. It begins with *m* and ends with *t*, and appears to consist of three letters.

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