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THE NECROPOLIS OF SILWAN VILLAGE IN THE LIGHT OF BIBLICAL DATA

In this paper we describe briefly the Iron Age necropolis in the Jerusalem area (Village of Silwan) confronting archeological evidence with biblical data. On the basis of archeological and biblical data we can deduce the most important and common beliefs concerning the death and afterlife of Israelites in this period.

1. Funerary inscriptions at Silwan Village

In the tombs at Silwan Village four funerary inscriptions were found. All of them are in Hebrew and were engraved on the facades of the three tombs: the "Tomb of the Pharaoh's Daughter", Tomb 34 and the "Tomb of the Royal Steward". In these latter tombs, two inscriptions were discovered, both of them poorly preserved. The longest one was deciphered by Avigad. His reading is as follows: "There is (the sepulchre of...)yahu who is over the house. There is no silver and no gold here, but (his bones) and the bones of his *amah* with him. Cursed be the man who will open this!" This inscription is the third longest inscription in Hebrew language, after the Moabite Stone and The Siloam tunnel inscription; it is also the first known text of the Hebrew inscription in the tombs from the pre-Exilic period¹. The shorter inscription was more problematic in deciphering, but most scholars accept the reading: *heder beketep hassur...* - "(Tomb-)chamber in the side (or slope) of the rock (or mountain)..."².

On Tomb 34 in the necropolis of Silwan inscription was found which contains three lines. In the first line is well preserved the word *qbrt*. The second line contains only one word and two letters of the following word. The third line of the inscription is not preserved. In the

¹ N.Avigad, "The Epitaph of Royal Steward from Siloam Village", in *Israel Exploration Journal* 3 (1953) 152.

² D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan. The Necropolis from the Period of the Judean Kingdom*, Jerusalem 1993, 250.

style of the script and probably in formula, the entire inscription is similar to the longer one in the "Tomb of the Royal Steward"³. The most probable reading of this inscription is: "(This is the) burial of Z... (the one) who op(ens this tomb)..."⁴.

In one of the tombs in Ketef Hinnom two plaques with inscriptions were found. Both were inscribed with formulas of benedictions very similar to the biblical Priestly Blessing (Num. 6.24-26). The larger plaque was inscribed with the words: "Bless you YHWH (and keep you, (may) YHWH shine (His face upon you and be gracious to you)"; the smaller one was inscribed with the words: "Bless you YHWH and keep you (may) shine YHWH His face upon you and give you peace". These verses dating to seventh century B.C.E. are the oldest biblical verses found outside the Bible⁵.

2. Confronting the biblical data with archeological evidences

The necropolis of Silwan is located on the eastern slope of the Kidron Valley, opposite the "City of David" and the Temple Mount. The tombs of the necropolis are hewn into upper and lower cliff. This spot was chosen probably because of the rock of the hill, easy to quarry *meleke* limestone. The entire necropolis contains 50-60 tombs⁶. Twenty seven of them are hewn into the lower cliff, which begins at the north end of Silwan and proceeds in a southern direction. The other tombs belong to the upper cliff, which is divided into a higher and lower ledge. The higher one is very steep⁷. In this cemetery archeologists identified three groups of tombs: tombs with gabled ceiling, those with a flat ceiling, and monolithic, above-ground tombs⁸. The tombs with a gabled ceiling are relatively small (prepared for single or double burial). Because of their location in the upper part of the lower cliff, the access to this group

³ D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 245-246.

⁴ D.Ussishkin, "The Necropolis from the Time of the Kingdom of Judah at Silwan, Jerusalem" in *The Biblical Archeologist* 33 (1970) 44.

⁵ G.Barkay, "Excavations in Ketef Hinnon in Jerusalem" in H.Geva (red.), *Ancient Jerusalem Revealed*. Jerusalem 1994, 103.

⁶ S.Loffreda suggested that the chronology of the necropolis should be lowered by more than 500 years. According to his opinion the tombs are from Late Hellenistic or Early Roman period, but his argumentation is rather weak in rejecting three main reasons which suggest rather pre-exilic dating of monolithic tombs: the inscriptions in old Hebrew script, the lack of Hellenistic influence and the old Egyptian prototypes (see his article "The Late Chronology of some Rock-cut Tombs of Silwan Necropolis", in *Studi Biblici Francescani: Liber Annuus* 23 (1973) 7-36).

⁷ D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 25-34.

⁸ E.Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*, Sheffield 1992, cit., 43.

of tombs required a climb. Most of them have a square entrance and a frame carved on the inner side of the entrance. Archeologists can not say precisely how the entrances were closed. In the single-burial tombs the entrance was probably sealed with masonry, in other cases perhaps square stones were used. In this type of tomb, the trough in the burial niche had a lid. The head-rest was usually carved in the trough, so that the head of the dead pointed in the direction of the entrance. The second group of tombs in the Silwan necropolis are the tombs with a flat ceiling. They are located on the upper cliff and at the southern end of the lower cliff. The entrances to these tombs are rectangular. No system concerning the resting places can be established. Some of them had a niches containing troughs without lids, other had niches with burial benches. Probably the stone sarcophagi and wooden coffins were used in this type of tomb⁹.

There are two impressive tombs in the necropolis of Silwan: the "Tomb of Pharaoh's Daughter" and the "Tomb of the Royal Steward". The name of the "Tomb of the Pharaoh's Daughter" resembles the theory that "the structure was a temple erected by Solomon in honour of Pharaoh's daughter"¹⁰. This is a monolithic tomb built above ground and shaped inside and outside by stone-cutting. It stands in an open space and is surrounded by natural rock walls. The present roof of the tomb is flat, but probably originally a pyramid crowned it¹¹. In the layer of earth covering the roof remains of the base of the pyramid were found. Above the original entrance was carved a panel for a funerary inscription. Well preserved is the letter *resh* and part of another letter, which could be a *qoph*, a *daleth*, a *resh* or even a *beth*¹². In the resting place in the chamber of the tomb can be discerned two channels carved parallel to the edges of the bench and the hollow. If the dead was laid with the head towards the front wall, the channels and the hollow were near the head of the deceased. What was the purpose of the hollow? Maybe we can find the answer in 2 Chron. 16,14. This verse describes the burial of Asa, king of Judah: "He was buried in the tomb which he had ordered to be cut for him in the City of David. He was laid in the burial chamber which was filled with perfume blended from all sorts of oils, and a very great funeral fire was made for him". There is a possibility that also the hollow in the "Tomb of Pharaoh's Daughter" was prepared for "all sorts of oils" as a funeral gifts.

⁹ D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 257-266.

¹⁰ D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 43.

¹¹ D.Ussishkin, "The Necropolis...", cit., 40.

¹² D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 242.

The "Tomb of the Royal Steward" is a monolithic above-ground monument, which is separated from the cliff. It consisted originally of an outer and an inner chamber, hewn next to each other. Later both chambers were joined creating almost a rectangular chamber. In the lateral chamber, in the front wall, a niche for a single resting place was hewn. Inside the tomb an unusual installation was found, which probably had some function in burial rites. The installation was carved outside the entrance of the tomb and was used probably as an offering table. Because of its location it could be reused many times during funeral practices. Because there are known only a few installations connected with burial practices, all of them are very important in our understanding of funerary ceremonies. We can assume that they were prepared by the tomb owners or according to their wishes during their lifetime¹³.

As we mentioned above, in the "Tomb of the Royal Steward" two inscriptions were found. The above-quoted longer inscription states that a royal steward and his *amah* were buried in the tomb. Probably it was in a double resting place. Who was the owner of this tomb? We can assume that he was Jewish because of the theophoric suffix of the name. The function of the royal steward as a very important official among the functionaries of the king was known in Judah and in Israel. The steward was responsible for the royal household. Many scholars believe that we can precisely identify the owner of this tomb as Shebanyahu whose abbreviated name is Shebna¹⁴. The clue for such an interpretation is given by the passage of the prophet Isaiah: "The Lord Yahweh Sabaoth says this: Go and find that steward, Shebna, the master of the palace: "What do you own here, who gave you the right for you to hewn yourself a tomb here?" He is hewing himself a tomb, is digging a resting-place for himself in the rock" (Isaiah 22, 15-16). This fragment supports the interpretation that the "Tomb of the Royal Steward" is that of Shebna, because it "is hewn in a high place and in a prominent position"¹⁵. It is interesting to consider the relationship between the ...yahu and his *amah*. Why was the maidservant buried in the tomb of the royal steward? According to Avigad she should be considered as a slave-wife who was inferior in position to his legal wife. We know from Exodus about a peculiar class of Hebrew free-born girls who could be sold by their father into slave-wifery. The rights of such an *amah* were safeguarded by law (Exod. 21, 7-11). "Legally, the *amah* was a bondswoman, but in practice her rank in the household depended entirely upon the position her master wished to give her"¹⁶. Sometimes, if the

¹³ D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 293.

¹⁴ W.H.Mare, *The Archeology of the Jerusalem Area*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1987, 116.

¹⁵ D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 329.

¹⁶ N.Avigad, "The Epitaph...", cit., 145-146.

slave-wife bore children to her master, she could rise to the rank of a married woman. According to the Talmud, even a concubine could be considered as married¹⁷. Yadin suggests that *amah* is not a concubine, but a legally married wife, because the term *amah* is parallel to *ebed hamelekh* that is the royal steward. In 2 Kings 22, 12 it is said that Asahiah was "a servant of the king", so we can suppose that the wife of *ebed hamelekh* bore the title *amah*¹⁸.

The shorter inscription in the "Tomb of the Royal Steward" states that the owner of the tomb built the tomb for himself during his lifetime. As the first word of the inscription (*heder*) is in singular form, it is clear that the inscription refers to only one burial chamber, which is the lateral chamber, because on its wall the inscription was engraved. The second word, *bktp*, can be used in geographical and topographical context, but also in an architectural one. The topographical context we can find, for example in the following:

Josh. 15,10: ~yrI['y>-rh; @t,K,-la, - "the side of the mount Jearim";

Josh. 15,8: ysiWby>h; @t,K,-la- "the south side of the Jebusite".

The use of architectural context of this word also can be find in the Bible: 1 Kings 6,8: "the right side of the house";

Ezek. 41,2: xt;P,h; bx;ro - "the sides of the door";

Ezek. 41,26: ~l'Wah' tApt.Ki-la, - "the sides of the porch";

Ezek. 46,19: r[;V;h; @t,K,-l[; - "the side of the gate".

The next word, *sariah*, is known from the three Nabatean inscriptions from Petra and from Mishnaic Hebrew. In both cases its meaning is similar - rock-cut chamber or rock-cut cave. In 1 Sam. 13,6 we can read that "the people hid in caves, in holes, in crevices, in vaults (*serihim*), in wells". The Book of Judges (9,46-49) relates the destruction of the town and citadel of Shechem: "...all the leading men inside Migdal-Shechem took refuge in the crypt (*sariah*) of the temple of El-Berith... Abimelech took an axe in his hand, he cut off the branch of a tree... Each of his men similarly cut off a branch; then, following Abimelech, they pulled the branches over the crypt (*sariah*) and set it on fire over those who were inside..."¹⁹. The second part of the shorter inscription from the "Tomb of the Royal Steward" is missing. We can suppose that it gave the name of the buried person, probably a member of the royal steward's family.

¹⁷ N.Avigad, "The Epitaph...", cit., 146.

¹⁸ D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 247-250.

¹⁹ D.Ussishkin, *The Village of Silwan...*, cit., 250-253.

3. Funerary customs and beliefs

At Silwan Village several burial types can be distinguished. Simple graves were ordinarily dug into the ground. Usually they contained one to three inhumations. The subterranean tombs reflect the view of Sheol as a nether world beneath the earth (Num. 16.20) or as "pit" (Psalm 26.7). These images were undoubtedly influenced by Canaanite and Mesopotamian mythology. Israelites probably derived not only from "foreign" metaphors, but also from the language of mythology²⁰.

Cave tomb burials (in natural or hewn caves) were also very common. Israelites inherited from the Canaanites the custom of burying in family burial caves. A very common type of tomb included a square chamber with a small square entrance, sometimes closed by a large stone. Inside the room were usually three rock-cut benches, sometimes with head-rests. Some of the tombs had an additional rear chamber. The burial offerings and bones were collected in repositories shaped as a sunken pit or a small chamber²¹ or on the horizontal surfaces prepared for this purpose.

A very popular burial custom was that of placing the offerings in the tombs. "The dead were believed to continue living with benevolent and perhaps malevolent powers, therefore, it is not surprising that the living would want to appease the deceased, including providing nourishment"²². The beliefs of the populations who inhabited Jerusalem concerning the afterlife were strictly connected with the burial offerings. Although it was a very common funerary practice, only in a few tombs were special installations for this purpose were prepared. Very often the lamps were placed on the benches near the head of the deceased. Maybe the explanation of this funerary custom can be found in Job 29,3: "his lamp shone over my head, and his light was my guide in the darkness". "Whatever the date of composition, these words may well reflect an earlier practice of lighting the way for the deceased in the nether world as the Lord did for the living on the earth"²³.

Near the feet of the dead "water decanters" sometimes were found. This pottery is characteristic of the Iron Age II²⁴. They indeed may have held water or wine²⁵. Domestic

²⁰ E.M.Meyers, "Secondary Burials in Palestine", in *The Biblical Archeologist* 33 (1970) 17.

²¹ A.Mazar, *The Archeology of the Land of the Bible. 10,000 - 586 B.C.E.*, New York 1992, 520.

²² E.Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices...*, cit., 122.

²³ L.Y.Rahmani, "Ancient Jerusalem's Funerary Customs and Tombs. Part Two" in *The Biblical Archeologist* 44 (1981) 234.

²⁴ N.Avigad, "Two Hebrew Inscriptions on Wine Jars" in *Israel Exploration Journal* 22 (1972) 1.

²⁵ L.Y.Rahmani, "Ancient Jerusalem...", cit., 234.

pottery in the tombs suggest the belief that it was a new home for the dead one. Sealed jars which contained liquids and the bowls with food represent the belief that the deceased needed to eat and drink after their death²⁶. After pottery, jewelry was also a very common burial gift. The deceased were thought to be vulnerable in their new situation, perhaps even more than they had been while alive. People believed that the dead needed sympathetic protective powers. All kind of jewelry served as an appeal to these powers.

²⁶ A.Mazar, *The Archeology of the Land of the Bible*, cit., 525.