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**A FRAGMENTARY CUNEIFORM TABLET FROM THE  
OPHEL (JERUSALEM): METHODOLOGICAL MUSINGS ABOUT  
THE PROPOSED GENRE AND *SITZ IM LEBEN*\*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Summary: A Fragmentary Cuneiform Tablet from the Ophel (Jerusalem):  
Methodological Musings about the Proposed Genre and *Sitz im Leben***

It is here argued that the genre and historical context of the cuneiform tablet from Jerusalem (“Jerusalem 1”) cannot be determined with certitude. There are simply not enough cuneiform signs preserved to facilitate such an assessment. Of course, the mineralogical analyses are useful and do demonstrate that the soil used to make the tablet was from the region of Jerusalem, but this fact cannot be construed as demonstrating that the tablet was an international letter. Rather, I believe that this fragmentary tablet could have been (among other things) some sort of literary document, some sort of letter, or some sort of legal document. Not much more than this can be said about its genre.

**Keywords:** Akkadian Tablet – Mineralogical Composition – Local Clay

**Resumen: Una tablilla cuneiforme fragmentaria de Ofel (Jerusalén):  
Reflexiones metodológicas sobre el género y el *Sitz im Leben* propuestos**

En este trabajo se postula que no se puede determinar con certeza el género y el contexto histórico de la tablilla cuneiforme de Jerusalén (“Jerusalén 1”). Simplemente, no se han preservado suficientes signos cuneiformes para facilitar dicha comprobación. Si bien es cierto que los análisis mineralógicos resultan útiles y demuestran que

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<sup>1</sup> To my teacher of ancient Near Eastern law and international diplomacy, Raymond Westbrook, *in memoriam*. I am grateful to Jerrold Cooper for discussing aspects of this article with me, and to John Huebner and Wilfred van Soldt for their reflections regarding the readings of the tablet.

el material utilizado para realizar las tabillas proviene de la región de Jerusalén, este hecho no puede ser utilizado para demostrar que la tablilla era una carta internacional. Más bien, creo que esta tablilla fragmentaria pudo haber sido (entre otras cosas) algún tipo de documento literario, o alguna clase de carta o documento legal. No puede decirse mucho más sobre su género.

**Palabras Clave:** Tablilla acadia – Composición mineralógica – Arcilla local

## INTRODUCTION

A fragmentary Akkadian tablet was discovered in Jerusalem during excavations that occurred between November 2009 and February 2010. The tablet was not found *in situ*, but rather during a subsequent wet sieving of the excavated soil. The *editio princeps* of this tablet has now appeared.<sup>2</sup> The authors of the article, and the editor of the journal, are to be congratulated for this most expeditious and useful publication of this tablet. Following the authors of the *editio princeps*, I shall refer to this tablet as “Jerusalem 1.”

Regarding the date of this tablet, (1) it is stated within the *editio princeps* that it hails from the Late Bronze Age, but the authors also concede that “the dating of the tablet is complicated by the small size of the sample of sign-forms.” They also note that “the tablet was found in area E of the excavations... in an earth fill of the great tower, which contained mainly relatively small fragments of local pottery ranging in date from the Early Bronze Age to the Iron Age IIa.” Ultimately, though, the authors conclude that “we can confirm, on epigraphic grounds, the Late Bronze Age date suggested by the archaeological context of the fragment.”<sup>3</sup> (2) The script of Jerusalem 1 strikes me as neat and sophisticated (e.g., in contrast with some of the Peripheral Akkadian that is known from some sites) and I concur with the affirmation in the *editio princeps* that “the hand of Jerusalem 1...can be categorized as higher rather than lower” (i.e., the quality of the script is high). Also of import in this connection is that the authors state that “little or nothing on Jerusalem 1 betrays the fact that our fragment is from the west.”<sup>4</sup> (3) Regarding the content of the tablet, the authors state that “with so little to work with, we cannot restore even a single full phrase in its entirety, with any degree of certainty.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, with

<sup>2</sup> Mazar, Horowitz, Oshima, and Goren 2010: 4-21.

<sup>3</sup> Mazar, Horowitz, Oshima, and Goren 2010: 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Mazar, Horowitz, Oshima, and Goren 2010: 11.

<sup>5</sup> Mazar, Horowitz, Oshima, and Goren 2010: 6.

regard to content, the authors aver that there is a significant dearth of evidence. (4) Regarding the mineralogical composition of the tablet's soil, OM (Optic mineralogy) and XRF (X-Ray Florescence) spectrometry were employed. These analyses are said to demonstrate that the tablet was made of soil from the "Central Hill Country of Israel." Because of the location of the find (Jerusalem), the authors concluded that the tablet was "a local product of Jerusalem scribes" and that it was made "of the locally available soil at the immediate surroundings of the site."<sup>6</sup>

### **I. THE *EDITIO PRINCEPS*: THE PROPOSED READINGS, GENRE, AND *SITZ IM LEBEN***

The obverse and the reverse of the tablet are inscribed. Very few signs are preserved, but a transliteration and a translation are provided.<sup>7</sup> According to the *editio princeps*, the legible words can be translated into English as follows:

*Obverse:*

- 1 [            ]
- 2 "You were...[
- 3 "a foundation/after for . [...
- 4 "to do . [...
- 5 [            ]

*Reverse:*

- 1 ...
- 2 ...[...
- 3 "they [...
- 4 . [...

For a number of reasons, within the *editio princeps* of Jerusalem 1, there is substantial reference to the Amarna Letters. At one level, there is a compelling rationale for this. After all, the Amarna Corpus dates to the Late Bronze Age, numerous of these letters hail from the Levant, and several come from Jerusalem itself (e.g., EA 285-290, with the letters having been commissioned by Jerusalem's Abdi-Heba).<sup>8</sup> But in some respects a predominant reliance on

<sup>6</sup> Mazar, Horowitz, Oshima, and Goren 2010: 18.

<sup>7</sup> Mazar, Horowitz, Oshima, and Goren 2010: 6.

<sup>8</sup> For an English translation of the Amarna Letters, see Moran 1992. For reference to the primary literature, and some of the most substantive secondary discussions, see Moran 1975 (reprinted 2003).

the Amarna Letters is problematic, as the Amarna Corpus is circumscribed (e.g., in terms of historical context and genres represented). Broader reference to various sites with Late Bronze Age cuneiform tablets would have been rather useful.

In any case, within the *editio princeps*, it is the Jerusalem Amarna Letters that constitute the predominant frame of reference. The authors of the *editio princeps* note that some signs on the Jerusalem fragment (i.e., Jerusalem 1) “match those of the Abdi-Heba letters (MU, NA, ZI, I, BI, ŠU, and A),” but they also note that “some do not (NU, AM, TUM, IŠ, AL, and mostly likely ŠA, although this sign is not completely preserved on Jerusalem 1).” In addition, they also affirm that “the differences between Jerusalem 1 and EA 285-290 do not allow us to identify the scribe of Jerusalem 1 with the scribe (or, more likely, scribes) of the Abdi-Heba letters.”<sup>9</sup> They also aver that “it is our impression that the scribe of Jerusalem 1 shows greater expertise than the scribes of Abdi-Heba in El-Amarna 285-290.” Finally, the authors also state that in one case (namely, *i-pe-ša*, with the lexical meaning “to do”) there may be a “clear indication of Amarna-type phraseology,” but they then concede that a total of three attested uses in the Amarna Corpus “do not a rule make.”<sup>10</sup>

At this juncture in the article, the authors state that “given the fact that the tablet is written on clay from the Jerusalem region and that its find site is close to what must have been the acropolis of Late Bronze Age Jerusalem, *there is good reason to believe that the letter fragment does, in fact, come from a letter of a king of Jerusalem, mostly likely an archive copy of a letter from Jerusalem to Pharaoh*” (emphasis mine). It is also considered as possible that the “Jerusalem King in question could be Abdi-Heba,” but the authors then state “but again perhaps not, since Jerusalem 1 does not include any specific feature that would tie it directly to El Amarna 285-290.” They then conclude that “in short, the ductus of our letter fragment would be appropriate for a finely written letter from a king of Jerusalem to the Egyptian court.”<sup>11</sup> It is with the assertion of the probability of these historical conclusions that I wish respectfully to differ.

<sup>9</sup>In this regard it should be noted that even if one could affirm that it was the same scribe that wrote (some of) the Jerusalem Amarna Letters and Jerusalem 1, this would still not demonstrate decisively that Jerusalem 1 is international royal correspondence between the kings of Jerusalem and Egypt. After all, scribes were capable of writing, or copying, various genres. I suspect that some scribes did “specialize” in the production of certain genres of texts, but one cannot assume that the scribe(s) of the Jerusalem Amarna Letters wrote nothing but international royal correspondence sent to Egypt.

<sup>10</sup>Mazar, Horowitz, Oshima, and Goren 2010: 10-11.

<sup>11</sup>Mazar, Horowitz, Oshima, and Goren 2010: 11-12.

## II. CRITICAL MUSINGS REGARDING GENRE AND SITZ IM LEBEN

I should like to affirm that there are not sufficient data either to posit as probable a precise *Sitz im Leben* (i.e., international royal correspondence between the kings of Jerusalem and Egypt) or a genre (i.e., epistolary text). Here are the main points that I would emphasize: (1) There are no personal names that are preserved on this tablet (i.e., on Jerusalem 1). (2) There are no titles (e.g., “king,” “ruler”) preserved on this tablet. (3) There are no place names (e.g., “Egypt”) preserved on this tablet. (4) Although the script is a fine script, this is not sufficient reason to conclude that this must have been international royal correspondence. (5) The putative linguistic connections regarding the verb “to do” are meager and also could be understood as a reflection of a dialect used in this region during the Late Bronze Age, rather than something that can be said to be distinctively “Amarna Canaanite” per se. (6) Archive copies (or “reference copies”) of epigraphic texts are certainly attested, but this is not the sole reason that can account for the fact that a tablet was made of “local clay.” (7) Even the precise chronological horizon of the Late Bronze Age during which this text was written cannot be determined and so to posit as probable a particular historical context is, at best, difficult. (8) Finally, it should be noted (as has Erin Kuhns-Darby, personal correspondence) that although there is an archaeological context for this tablet, it is certainly not a stratified find, as it was removed from its depositional context and subsequently discovered during a “wet sieving” process.

### *A. Content and Conclusions: Responses to Potential Criticisms*

Someone might attempt to retort that the presence of the second person is demonstrative of an epistolary text and, therefore, sufficient evidence for the assertion that Jerusalem 1 must be considered a letter. This is, however, not a particularly cogent criticism. Note, for example, the following in a Late Bronze Age text from Emar: “Indeed, everything which I owe, I also shall pay you (*u-šal-la-am-ka-mi*).”<sup>12</sup> Also from Late Bronze Age Emar: “If Lullue before the face of her mother says ‘you are not my mother (*u-ul um-mi at-ti ta-qa-bi*)’ she shall give a maidservant and she shall go wherever she wishes.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, second person possessive pronouns also occur: “But if Abia to the face of Ahi-Dagan says, ‘take your money (*KU-BABBAR-MEŠ-ka*),

<sup>12</sup> Arnaud 1985-1987: 709 [Msk 753 = #127], line 5. The translations of the Emar texts provided here are my own.

<sup>13</sup> Arnaud 1985-1987: 188-189 [Msk R3 = #176], lines 18-20.

and from your house (*É-ka*) I will go,' let Abia give eighty shekels of silver that he may go wherever he wishes."<sup>14</sup> And again, from still another Emar tablet: "But if Bazila to the face of Sin-abu and his wife shall say, 'I shall not honor you (*la-a a-pal-làh-ku-nu-ši*); take your money (*KÙ-BABBAR-ku-nu*), and I shall leave your house (*É-ku-nu*),' (then) Bazila has no claim to his wife and sons."<sup>15</sup> These tablets from Emar hail from the Late Bronze Age, they are legal texts (i.e., not letters) and they use the second person. The point is this: *the use of the second person certainly cannot be construed as evidence that a text must be a letter.*

Furthermore, John Huehnergard (personal correspondence) has noted the following: "An additional factor is that the reading of line 2 [of Jerusalem 1] as *tab-ša* 'you are' is problematic. The traces of the signs as copied do not conform well to the reading. If the tablet was written in Amarna Canaan-Akkadian (which is not certain given the fragmentary state of the text), the reading is also unlikely grammatically: all examples of the verb *bašû* listed in the Knudtzon glossary are based on the durative *ibašši*, none on the preterite *ibši*; further, 1<sup>st</sup> —and 2<sup>nd</sup>— person forms of *bašû* in such Amarna texts are what are called mixed forms: the base is the durative *ibašši* but the person is marked by suffixes, as in *i-ba-ša-ta* 'you are' in EA 73:40. So I doubt that line two has a form meaning 'you are'; and that leaves us even less on which to judge what type of text it is." Huehnergard's sober reflections are demonstrative of the difficulties of reading a fragmentary tablet such as this, and his doubts about the reading "you are" must be considered particularly important.

Furthermore, and along those lines, Wilfred van Soldt (personal communication) has also differed (in his readings) with the authors of the *editio princeps* and he has proposed a restoration of two lines of the obverse. Here are his restorations: "Line 2', *i?-[š]a-am-m[u-ú]*, "They (will) hear." The *i-* at the beginning is rather dubious, a plene spelling at the end of the word is attested in some Jerusalem letters, cf. EA 285: 23 (*i-ba-šu-ú*) and 286: 48 (*it-ta-šú-ú*), but cf. *ta-ša-mi-ú* in EA 286: 50.<sup>16</sup> Line 3', *iš-tu4 a-na URU [... a/ta/illik(u)]*, "After I/you/ he/they had gone to the city of [...]." Obviously van Soldt is cautious with his restorations and rightfully so (hence the presence of the question mark and also various options he provides for person and number), but it may be that his proposed restorations will find general acceptance among Assyriologists. Therefore, it is necessary for me to reflect

<sup>14</sup> Arnaud 1985-1987: 123-124 [Msk 7511 = #117], lines 13-17.

<sup>15</sup> Arnaud 1985-1987: 24-26 [Msk 7361 = #16], lines 17-20.

<sup>16</sup> Moran 1975: 153-154 (reprinted 2003); Cochavi-Rainey 2007: 37-38.

on (some of) these proposed restorations, if perforce with brevity.<sup>17</sup> (1) The verb “to go” (*alākum*) occurs in various genres of literature, as does the word “city” (e.g., the logogram *URU*); therefore, the presence of these words cannot be construed as evidence for the genre of Jerusalem 1. (2) Someone familiar primarily with epistolary texts might, nevertheless, seize upon the use of the verb *šemû(m)* and attempt to propose that the presence of this verb should be understood as evidence for considering Jerusalem 1 to be an epistolary tablet. Nevertheless, this would not be a convincing argument either. To be sure, the verb *šemû(m)* occurs in letters, but its usage is certainly not restricted to this genre. Rather, this word can and does occur in a wide range of genres, from legal texts to religious texts.<sup>18</sup> Along those lines, here is a rather standard case of the usage of this verb from the Late Bronze Age Idrimi Statue Inscription (royal apologia, with literary features): “And my country heard of me (*iš-mu-un-ni-ma*)....” and several lines later “a powerful king heard and... (*iš-me-ma*).”<sup>19</sup> In sum, even though a form of the verb *šemû(m)* might be present, this does not lead to the conclusion that Jerusalem 1 is probably epistolary.

Furthermore, it should be noted in this connection that even if one might be able to establish the fact that this fragment is that of a letter, it would not be prudent to assume in a definitive fashion that it was an international letter. The reason for this is rather simple: international correspondence was not the only form of correspondence in the ancient Near East.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the Mari Letters (among other corpora, or portions thereof) demonstrate this.<sup>21</sup> Finally, I should also like to note in this connection that someone might wish to contend that Jerusalem 1 must be an international letter because of the high quality of the script. However, most Assyriologists would be disinclined to accept this. After all, various genres of texts (e.g., literary, legal, epistolary, lexical, administrative) were written in fine scripts.<sup>22</sup> That is, a fine scribe wrote in a fine script, regardless of the genre of the document that was being produced.

<sup>17</sup> Regarding the issue of restorations, and some basic methodological principles, see Rollston 2010: 4-6.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Brinkman 1992: 277-287.

<sup>19</sup> For a transliteration of the text, reference to important primary and secondary treatments, and a translation, see Greenstein and Marcus 1976: 59-96. The translations of Idrimi that I have provided here are my own (namely, segments of lines 35 and 51-52).

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it would not be prudent to assume that international correspondence originating at Jerusalem could only have been with Egypt. Scribal apparatus were present at a number of city-states in this region and it cannot reasonably be asserted that it is impossible for the city-state of Jerusalem to have corresponded with, for example, a neighboring Levantine city-state.

<sup>21</sup> For a translation of the prophetic letters from Mari, see the recent translation by Roberts 2002: 157-253.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted in this connection that Jerusalem 1 is (arguably) *not* an administrative text,

### ***B. The Clay used for a Tablet: Methodological Reflections***

Someone might argue (as do the authors of the *editio princeps*) that because (1) this tablet was found in Jerusalem and because (2) the soil from which it was made comes from the region of Jerusalem, it must be understood as a “reference copy” or “archive copy” of a letter. Such a conclusion, however, does not necessarily follow from the data. That is, I would contend that the mineralogical analysis of Jerusalem 1 cannot be used as the primary basis for considering Jerusalem 1 to be a letter. After all, a legal text (e.g., a purchase or sale contract, marriage, divorce, adoption) made in a particular city, and archived within that city, would (arguably) often have been made of soil from that city. Moreover, an administrative text, or a lexical text, made in a city, and archived in a city, would (arguably) often have been made of soil from that city. Furthermore, I would contend that the same was often the case for literary texts as well. That is, a literary text produced (e.g., copied) in a particular city, and archived within that city, would (arguably) often have been made of soil from that city. Basically, I am suggesting that the principle of economy was operative for the production of tablets, thus, there would *not* normally have been a strong motivation for the importation of dirt from distant regions so as to produce tablets. Rather local soil would be used for this purpose. That is, I am confident that using local soil for tablet production (for a number of genres) was the norm in the ancient Near East. Thus, the fact that Jerusalem 1 is made of local soil does not mean that this document must be epistolary.

Moreover, there is mineralogical evidence that supports my contention. For example, two lexical tablets were found in the city of Aphek and both have been analyzed and it has been determined that both were made of soils from the region of Aphek, that is, “local provenance.” That is, the use of “local clay” cannot be construed as evidence that a tablet must be a “reference copy of a letter.” These tablets are lexical and are made of local clay. Furthermore, an administrative tablet from was found at Aphek and its soil has been analyzed and it has been concluded that this tablet “should be considered a locally produced document.”<sup>23</sup> Again, this reveals the fact that the use of “local clay” cannot be construed as evidence that a tablet must be a “reference copy of a letter.” After all, this tablet is made of local clay and the tablet is administrative. A mathematical prism tablet has been found at Hazor and mineralogical

as there are no preserved numbers and no line beginning with a personal name (for this observation, I am indebted to Jerrold Cooper).

<sup>23</sup> Goren, Na’aman, Mommsen, and Finkelstein 2007.

analysis of it has determined that it was produced locally, that is, in the region of Hazor.<sup>24</sup> Again, the point is that the use of “local clay” is not something that is restricted to epistolary correspondence.<sup>25</sup> Of course, letters were also made of local clay. Sometimes (but probably not always) two copies of a letter would be made.<sup>26</sup> In such a case, the “original” of the letter was sent to the intended recipient and would be made, of course, of local clay.<sup>27</sup> But sometimes a copy of the letter was also retained by the sender. In such a case, the copy of the letter would arguably be made of local soil (i.e., at the place of origin). In fact, Goren (personal correspondence) has noted a number of examples. Thus, he has stated that “El Amarna Letters 1, 5, 14, 31, 99, 162-3, 190, 367, 369-70 are copies of letters sent by the Pharaohs (Amenophis III-IV) to other countries and vassal city-states.” He can make this affirmation because of the mineralogical composition of the clay of these tablets.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the same would hold true for literature. In this regard, note that Goren (*et al.*) has (have) actually argued that the Megiddo Gilgamesh Fragment was produced by scribes functioning at Gezer. The basis for that suggestion is the fact that this tablet was composed of clay from the region of Gezer.<sup>29</sup> Again, the point is that even literary tablets would have been composed of “local clay.”

<sup>24</sup> Goren 2000: 34-35.

<sup>25</sup> In this connection, I should mention that various sorts of tablets could be, and were, transported in the ancient Near East, even lexical and administrative tablets. After all, one could envision a lexical tablet composed in one city, of local soil, and then transported to a different city (e.g., for the purposes of scribal education). In addition, one could envision a legal tablet composed in one city, of local clay, that might be transported to a different city (e.g., for judicial proceedings). In other words, one can envision tablets being transported and there is even mineralogical evidence for such transportation (Goren, Mommsen, Finkelstein, and Na’aman 2009: 771).

<sup>26</sup> Note that Sasson 2007 argues that for Mari (at least) “reference copies” or “archive copies” are relatively rare. Of course, someone might suggest that the fact that a reference copy of this or that letter is not known may have more to do with ancient archiving practices and issues of preservation through time. This is obviously, at times, the case. Nevertheless, I suspect that Sasson is correct and that at times no reference copies of a letter were produced.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, mineralogical studies of the Amarna Letters have demonstrated this point. See Goren, Finkelstein, and Na’aman 2004: *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> See also, Goren, Finkelstein, and Na’aman 2004. Regarding the Aphek tablet that is a letter from Takuhlinu (a high official in the court of Ugarit) to Haya (an Egyptian official of Canaan), it has been stated (Goren, Na’aman, Mommsen, and Finkelstein 2007) that this was composed at Aphek (though from Takuhlinu of Ugarit). For this reason, it was suggested that this tablet might have been (1) a “copy of an original Ugaritic letter deposited in another place” or (2) “a literary model letter that imitated authentic Ugaritic letters.” These are, of course, not the only possible interpretations. In any case, even if one accepts the first of these two possibilities, this clearly is something quite different from a standard archival copy. After all, this tablet was found at Aphek, not Ugarit.

<sup>29</sup> Goren, Mommsen, Finkelstein, and Na’aman 2009: 763, 771. Note that, in this case, the

The main point is readily apparent: the fact that the soil of Jerusalem 1 was local soil cannot be used as the primary basis for the argument that this tablet is the reference copy of a piece of international correspondence sent from the king of Jerusalem to the king of Egypt. After all, many different types of documents were written on tablets that were made of local clay. Thus, the fact that a particular tablet is made of local clay cannot be used as a basis for the argument that a document must be an international letter. To be able to make such a claim about a tablet (i.e., that it is an international epistolary document), there would need to be enough preserved text to substantiate the argument, but there is not. To be sure, I firmly believe that Yuval Goren's laboratory analyses of archaeological objects are among the most interesting and useful avenues of research that are being conducted in the field. Goren is certainly to be commended. Nevertheless, the data demonstrate that local clay was used for a variety of genres and so it is not convincing to argue that Jerusalem 1 must be international correspondence letter because it was composed of local clay.

Thus, I contend that (among the varied possibilities) this tablet from Jerusalem (1) could be some sort of literary text; (2) it could be some sort of legal text; (3) it could be some sort of epistolary text (but even in this case, it need not have been international correspondence!). Therefore, my point is simply this: because there is such a dearth of preserved text on this tablet, it is best not to attempt to posit a historical context or even a genre. Ultimately, Jerusalem 1 should be considered to be further demonstration of the fact that Late Bronze Age Jerusalem had a contingent of scribes with formal, standardized education in cuneiform.

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authors argue that this literary tablet was produced (i.e., copied) in the region of Gezer, but subsequently transported in antiquity to Megiddo. This seems reasonable, as literary tablets would have been transported in antiquity for a number of reasons.

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