

The Siloam Tunnel Inscription: Historical and Linguistic Perspectives

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In memoriam Colin Smith (1955–2008)

ABSTRACT: The present article seeks to answer two questions: a) who the builders of the Siloam Tunnel were; and b) how one explains the three linguistic peculiarities of the relatively short Siloam Tunnel inscription. The historical, archaeological and linguistic evidence suggest that the tunnel was constructed by individuals who emigrated to Jerusalem from southern Samaria (Ephraim) and Benjamin in advance of the Assyrian invasion of the land. At least three — if not four — linguistic features in the inscription are associated with the Hebrew dialect of this border region, straddling the domains of the kingdom of Israel to the north and the kingdom of Judah to the south. This finding, in turn, suggests that a literate individual from within the group of builders was responsible for the epigraph.

INTRODUCTION

THE archaeological context of the Siloam inscription and its linguistic anomalies have combined to make the Siloam Tunnel and its inscription the topic of continued investigation. Given the fashion of ancient kings to publicly commemorate the completion of water-works projects, one would expect the Siloam Tunnel inscription to have been attributed by its presumed royal sponsor, King Hezekiah of Judah (see 2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chron. 32:3–4, 30; Isa. 22:11),¹ but this is not the case.² So while this construction project must have been sponsored by the state, the lines inscribed on the wall of the Siloam Tunnel do not comprise a royal

1 While there is no absolute proof that the Siloam Tunnel is the tunnel attributed to King Hezekiah in the biblical sources, with no evidence to the contrary (especially in light of other studies cited herein), our standpoint is that they are one and the same. The recently discovered inscribed (broken) stone from the area of the spring may lend support to this conclusion, especially if the reconstruction חזקיהו[ה]...[הבר]כהב (one of several possibilities) is correct; see Reich and Shukron 2008. For the sake of completeness, we also note the reference in Ben Sira 48:17, ‘Hezekiah fortified his city, and brought water into its midst; he tunneled the rock with iron tools, and built cisterns for the water’, although this second century BCE author almost certainly relied on the earlier biblical accounts for his information.

2 In fact, a recent proposal suggests that the kings of Israel and Judah specifically did not erect royal monumental display inscriptions — in contrast to other royals of the ancient Near East — given the emphasis on modesty and humility embodied in the

inscription. On the contrary, instead of mentioning the royal patron, the epigraph celebrates its builders. This begs the question: Who were these builders? To our mind, the construction should be associated with the wave of refugees from southern Samaria who settled in Jerusalem and its environs during the late eighth century BCE. The language of the inscription consequently reflects a non-Judahite variety of Hebrew, to be identified with the area encompassing southern Ephraim and Benjamin.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Siloam Tunnel and its inscription were executed at a period of profound social, political and demographic changes in Jerusalem. Decades ago, Broshi (1974) observed that archaeological excavations and surveys pointed to a burgeoning population in Jerusalem, further arguing that this could best be accounted for by refugees from the Assyrian incursions to the north and west of Jerusalem. Estimates suggest that the population of Jerusalem grew at least four-fold and perhaps as much as ten-fold during the late eighth and early seventh centuries.³ Indeed, the purpose of the Siloam Tunnel itself was most likely to bring water to the burgeoning population on the Western Hill, rather than to prepare for an Assyrian invasion.⁴ Subsequent archaeological excavations in the region surrounding Jerusalem have further confirmed Broshi's observations, pointing to a growing population not only in Jerusalem itself, but in its vicinity as

texts that eventually found their way into the Bible (Rendsburg 2007: 95–107, esp. 95–99). The inscription mentioned in the previous footnote may represent a step away from Rendsburg's proposal, but until a (nearly) complete text is discovered, on a par with other ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions, the working hypothesis still stands.

³ Broshi suggested that the population of Jerusalem increased at least three- or four-fold in the late eighth century (1974: 21), but more recent excavations and surveys have suggested an even more dramatic growth in population. Finkelstein and Silberman are maximalists here, suggesting that the population of Jerusalem multiplied by ten (2006: 265), although this grandiose estimate likely reflects Finkelstein's overly low estimation of the size of early Iron Age Jerusalem. Barkay (2002), on the other hand, sees the growth of Jerusalem beginning as early as the ninth century, as confirmed by the fortification wall under the 'broad wall' on the Western Hill. On the period in general, especially regarding the spread of writing and the development of literature in ancient Israel, see Schniedewind 2004: 64–90.

⁴ The purpose of the Siloam Tunnel has usually been associated with the preparations against an Assyrian assault upon the city, but recent excavations have shown that the Gihon Spring was already well fortified against assault in the Middle Bronze Age and that such defenses continued into the Iron Age (see Reich 2004). Thus, as noted, a more likely explanation for the system is to convey water to the Western Hill (see Rosenberg 1999; Schniedewind 1999: 53). For more on engineering aspects of the tunnel, see Gill 1991; Lancaster and Long 1999).

well (e.g., Dagan 1992; Edelstein and Milevski 1994; Reich and Shukron 2003; Faust 2005). Sites like Ramat Raḥel to the south of Jerusalem and Gibeon (el-Jib) to the north of Jerusalem began to thrive in the late eighth century (Schniedewind 2006). Throughout the immediate countryside, farmsteads and small villages cropped up and helped support the urbanisation and growth of Jerusalem.

Recent archaeological surveys have provided more specific evidence about the composition of these demographic changes. The demographic disruption in northern Israel was especially profound in the vicinity of Bethel — that is, in the regional territory at the boundary of the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin. Bethel itself diminished in importance in the wake of the Assyrian invasions and did not revive until the Hellenistic period (Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2009; cf. Knauf 2006). Bethel's demise is indicative of a more general decline: 'The number of sites there decreased from 238 in the eighth century to 127 in the Persian period and the total built-up area shrank even more spectacularly, from c. 170 to 45 hectares' (Finkelstein and Silberman 2006: 268, citing Finkelstein *et al.* 1997: 898–909). This would indicate that the influx of population into Jerusalem was dominated by refugees from southern Ephraim and Benjamin.⁵ These factors have not been sufficiently taken into account in previous discussions of the Siloam inscription. The importance of such demographic change for language cannot be underestimated. The noted sociolinguist William Labov, for example, has pointed out that changes in the demographic composition of a community are a central factor in determining the course of linguistic change (2001: 503). The profound social and demographic changes in late eighth-century Jerusalem would have left an imprint on the language and literature of the city.

There is also literary evidence suggesting that Hezekiah attempted to integrate northern refugees into his kingdom. First of all, Hezekiah called his son Manasseh — a name well known as one of the leading tribes of the northern kingdom — perhaps as an effort to build bridges to the northern refugees. He also arranged a marriage between his son and a family from Jotbah, apparently located in the Galilee (cf. 2 Kings 21:19); this may have been another aspect of Hezekiah's

5 Naʿaman (2007) recently critiqued this theory, but he seems to have misunderstood the evidence. The Assyrian invasions and deportations of the late eighth century are well-documented events, and the anthropological phenomenon of refugees resulting from war is equally well documented. Thus, without evidence to the contrary (or an alternative compelling explanation), Naʿaman cannot simply dismiss the consensus by advocating 'a minimalist position about the possible influence they [i.e., Assyrian invasions] might have had' (2007: 38). In particular, Naʿaman does not contend with the evidence presented by Reich and Shukron (2003) concerning the vastly different magnitudes of the eastern and western expansions of Jerusalem. The eastern expansion is in keeping with Naʿaman's thesis, whereas the western expansion cannot be accounted for by a gradual growth in the size of Jerusalem. See further the rejoinder to Naʿaman's article by Finkelstein (2008).

attempt to curry favour with the northern refugees flowing into his kingdom.⁶ The prophet Isaiah enigmatically named his son Sheʿar-yashuv ‘a remnant shall return’ (Isa. 7:3), a veiled reference to the remnant of the northern kingdom destroyed by the Assyrians. Later, the prophet refers to Galilee and Samaria as a ‘land of deep darkness’ ravaged by war and further claims that the governance of the Davidic family will be their salvation (Isa. 8:23–9:6 [English versions 9:1–7]). Isaiah thus addresses the two houses of Israel (Isa. 8:14). Another tradition — namely, that Manasseh followed in the sins of King Ahab of Israel — suggests that the northern émigrés left their mark on religious practice in Jerusalem (2 Kings 21:3; cf. Micah 3:9–10; see Schniedewind 1993). Such literary evidence, of course, is also evidence of northern influence upon the scribes and scribal practice of Jerusalem, which we may surmise to extend to linguistic and even palaeographic aspects of the scribal art.

The Siloam Tunnel inscription is not a royal display inscription. It makes no mention of the king or the deity (or other gods) — which is unparalleled in royal building inscriptions. Moreover, the inscription was located six metres *inside* the tunnel from the outlet at the Siloam Pool. In other words, only those who worked on the tunnel and engraved the inscription would have known of its existence. At the same time, this is not a simple graffito, since the wall was carefully prepared and the letters are elegantly carved in a cursive style into the hard limestone.⁷ The writing employed here differs from the standard genres of royal palace and priestly temple writing; rather, the inscription is the work of engineers, craftsmen and labourers whose aim was to commemorate their accomplishment. We will return to some of these issues below after providing a linguistic analysis of the inscription.

THE LINGUISTIC PICTURE

Within the six lines of the Siloam Tunnel inscription⁸ one finds two grammatical difficulties: 1) the form רעי ‘his friend’ in lines 2–4 (3×); and 2) the form הית ‘it was’ in line 3. Both of these forms, we contend, are regional dialectal features. As we shall see, a third item in the inscription, namely, the lexeme מוצא ‘water-

6 For a similar interpretation, see Williamson 1982: 361. Also note Talmon’s interpretation of Hezekiah (1986: 123–130). For the location of Jotbah (= Yodefah), see Avi-Yonah and Gibson 2007.

7 As Ronny Reich pointed out to us (oral communication: January 2009), a place for another inscription was prepared near the entrance to the tunnel, but no inscription was written there. It would also have been out of view (Vincent 1911: 9).

8 Recent standard treatments include Ahituv 2005: 15–20; 2008: 19–25; and Dobbs-Allsopp *et al.* 2005: 499–506. The most recent comprehensive study is that of Younger 1994. For brief comments on the inscription, including an adumbration of some material in the present article, see Schniedewind 2004: 72–73.

source' in line 5, is also limited to a specific region of ancient Israel. Let us proceed to examine these individual linguistic traits, with the aim of uncovering the home of the author of the inscription. Following this examination of regional-specific features, the section will also discuss two lexical items in the inscription unknown from Biblical Hebrew or other ancient sources.

The Form רעו

The form רעו in lines 2–4 allows several interpretations — and thus several vocalisations — but the simplest and most likely is the reading $rē^cō$, exactly as occurs in Jer. 6:21 רעו.⁹ This form is in contrast to the standard BH (Biblical Hebrew) form רעהו (117×). The existence of these two by-forms within the corpus of ancient Hebrew may be explained in several ways. One is to assume that the standard form רעהו derives from the rare BH noun רעהו (cp. שדהו ~ שדה), while the rarer form רעו derives from the more common BH noun רע (Garr 1985: 57; also note Zevit 1980: 19–20). Another is simply to posit free variants, on a par with the forms למינהו and למינו in Genesis 1 (vv. 12, 21, 25 for the former; v. 11 for the latter; see Joüon and Muraoka 1991: 289). Whichever route one opts for, the development of the two forms is essentially the same: רעהו derives from the retention of the genitive ending *-i*; thus, $ri^c ihû > rē^c ēhû$ (with the first shift of *i* > \bar{e} in the pretonic open syllable, and the second shift of *i* > \bar{e} in the accented syllable); while רעו derives from the retention of the accusative ending *-a*, thus $ri^c ahû > ri^c aû$ (with elision of intervocalic *h*) > $ri^c aw$ (with shift of the *u*-vowel to the homorganic consonant *w*) > $ri^c ô$ (with monophthongisation of the resulting diphthong) > $rē^c ô$ (with shift of *i* > \bar{e} in the pretonic open syllable).

More crucial to the present enterprise is the recognition of the distribution of the form רעו in our ancient sources. The one appears in the Siloam Tunnel inscription from Jerusalem, and the other appears in the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet from Anathoth in the tribal territory of Benjamin. The linguistic profile of Jeremiah was the subject of a recent dissertation by Smith (2003), who argued that a significant number of its grammatical peculiarities could be explained as regional dialectal features. Here, it is also important to note that Jeremiah was not a court prophet. He is specifically represented as being outside the officially supported

9 Which is to say that the *waw* in רעו is the earliest example of this letter serving as *mater lectionis* to mark the 3rd person masculine singular pronominal suffix, which otherwise is spelled with *he* in ancient Hebrew inscriptions. The most commonly proposed alternative explanation is that of Cross and Freedman (1952: 50), who interpreted the *waw* as a consonant, based on the following reconstruction: $ri^c ayuhu > ri^c ēhu > ri^c ēw$. See also Hackett *et al.* 1997: 44. A counter to this argument was provided by Zevit (1980: 20, n. 17). Another suggestion was offered by Ahituv (2005: 19; 2008: 23), who suggested the possible contraction of $rē^c ēhû > rē^c û$; in this case, the *waw* would serve as *mater lectionis* marking the long /u:/ vowel. In general, see Gogel 1998: 64, n. 103.

court and government (in contrast, for example, to Isaiah). As such, the preservation of dialectal features in the text of Jeremiah may be understood as reflecting the position of Jeremiah outside the circle of official government-supported scribes, all (or the vast majority) of whom wrote in the standard Jerusalemite or Judahite dialect represented in the preponderance of the biblical material centred on Jerusalem and Judah (Rabin 1974: 28–34; 1979).

The Form הִית

The verbal form הִית in line 3, to be vocalised *hāyāt* (= הִיַתְּ), accords with the following BH examples of 3rd person feminine singular ה"ל (= "ל") suffix-conjugation (SC) verbs presenting the ending *-āt*:

Lev. 25:21: עִשָּׂת

Lev. 26:34: הִרְצִית

2 Kings 9:37: *ketiv* הִית (the *qeri* reads הִיַתְּ)

Jer. 13:19: הִגִּילְת (2×)

Ezek. 24:12: הִלְאִית

This usage is also attested in Aramaic (Degen 1969: 76; Rosenthal 1974: 51, 66; Segert 1975: 298; Muraoka and Porten 1998: 135) and in Mishnaic Hebrew, as reflected in reliable manuscripts, marked sometimes with *qameṣ* and sometimes with *pataḥ* before the final *taw* (Kutscher 1982: 128; Haneman 1980: 342–349; Pérez Fernández 1999: 115). A new reading of Mesha Stele line 12 indicates that our form, הִית, also occurs in Moabite (Lemaire 1987: 205–216, esp. 205–207; 2007; Aḥituv 2008: 45). The cumulative evidence suggests that once again we are dealing with a regional dialectal feature, associated with IH (Israelian Hebrew) and reaching as far south as Benjaminite Hebrew.¹⁰

The most obvious northern setting among the passages cited above is 2 Kings 9:37, which occurs in a story set in the Jezreel Valley (even if only the *ketiv* retains the form). The Jeremiah examples once more are to be seen as representing a characteristic trait of the Benjaminite dialect. The example in Ezekiel is to be explained as Aramaic influence on the prophet writing in Babylon.

At first glance, Leviticus — especially given its roots within the Jerusalemite priestly tradition — is an unlikely candidate for a book with regional dialectal features. By and large that statement is true, but the jubilee pericope of Lev. 25:8–24 is a unique section of the Torah, since it contains not only עִשָּׂת in v. 21, but three other IH features as well: a) the infinitive absolute הִנֵּה in v. 14, serving in place of the finite verb; b) the form טִעַנְת in v. 16, reflecting the *a > ṽ* shift; and c) the particle הִן ‘if’ in v. 20 — yielding the conclusion that this pericope derives from a non-Judahite source (Rendsburg 2008b).

¹⁰ For an attempt to identify another example in the Bible, namely Deut 33:2 תָּ, see Steiner 1996.

Among the biblical passages listed above, we are left, then, with הַרְצָת in Lev. 26:34. In this case, the author has cleverly utilised the dialectal Hebrew form in order to create the alliteration between הַרְצָת and תִּרְצָה earlier in the verse (note that the two forms are also anagrams of one another). The technique of employing rare forms and lexemes to produce alliteration is relatively common in the Bible (see, for example, Fokkelman and Rendsburg 2003; Rendsburg 2008a).

When we move to the post-biblical period, we note (as outlined above) that the ending *-āt* appears on 3rd person feminine singular ל"ה (= ל"י) SC verbs in reliable Mishnah manuscripts. Indeed, the very form הַיִּיתָ (thus the more common spelling; occasionally written as הַיִּיתָ) occurs, for example, in M. *Yevamot* 10:4, M. *Qiddushin* 2:7, *Mekhilta Yitro* 189, *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* 13:11. When we recall that the Mishnah and related texts emanate from northern Israel (Ṣippori in particular), we can once again account for the regional nature of this linguistic feature.¹¹

In light of the overall picture emerging from the above material, we consider the form הֵיית in line 3 of the Siloam Tunnel inscription as further evidence for the author of our text being non-Judahite. In addition, while the 3rd person feminine singular ל"ה (= ל"י) SC verbs ending in *-āt* are attested from Benjamin northward (to the Jezreel Valley, to the Galilee, and indeed, to Moab and Aram to the east and north-east), in light of the two other linguistic traits treated here, we would focus specifically on the linkage between הֵיית in line 3 of the Siloam Tunnel inscription and the form הַגְּלָת appearing twice in Jer. 13:19, that is to say, in the language penned by the prophet from the tribe of Benjamin.¹²

The Lexeme מוֹצֵא

Kutscher, making the important observation that Hebrew has an exceedingly rich vocabulary for springs, wells, rivers and rivulets, suggested that certain terms may have been used in limited geographic settings,¹³ with the most significant example being מוֹצֵא '(lit.) place of exiting' = 'water-source, spring' (Kutscher 1982: 55–56). This word is attested with this meaning in 2 Kings 2:21, Isa. 41:18, 58:11, Ps. 107:33, 107:35, 2 Chron. 32:30, and (as noted above) in Siloam Tunnel inscription line 5. Four of these passages (from Isaiah and Psalms) occur in poetry with no specific geographical setting; consequently, little of relevance can be gained from these attestations (note, incidentally, that Ps. 107:35 and Isa. 58:11

11 On Mishnaic Hebrew as a northern dialect, see Rendsburg 1992; 2003.

12 For an alternative interpretation, which considers these forms to be evidence of the spoken dialect, which then surfaced in Mishnaic Hebrew, see Sarfati 1992: 44–45. We do not altogether deny the possibility; on the broader question, see Rendsburg 1990.

13 This is common in many languages. See, for example, American English 'run', used in the region of Maryland, northern Virginia, western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and eastern Ohio — the most famous example of which is Bull Run in northern Virginia. See Cassidy and Hall 2002: 670–671; Kelly 2005.

are identical). The other two passages, however, are extremely relevant. The first of these (2 Kings 2:21) occurs within the Elijah and Elisha narrative and refers to a spring at Jericho, that is, within the tribal territory of Benjamin (Kallai 1986: 127–129 and map 2). The second of these (2 Chron. 32:30) refers to the spring of Gihon, specifically within the description of Hezekiah's tunnel, in conformity with the usage in Siloam Tunnel inscription line 5. Finally, we note (as recognised by Kutscher) that the toponym מוֹצָא is located within the territory of Benjamin; see Josh. 18:26, where the term is spelled הַמֹּצֵא, with the definite article, indicating that the word originally meant 'the spring'; and 1 Chron. 8:36–37, where מוֹצָא has been transformed into a descendent of Benjamin within the genealogical material (see M. *Sukkot* 4:5). Note, further, that jar handles with stamp impressions reading either מוצה or מוצה have been found most prominently at nearby Tell en-Naşbeh (30 examples), with a smattering of samples from other cities in the region (four at Gibeon, two at Jericho, four at Jerusalem, one at Ramat Raḥel and one at Belmont Castle) (see Zorn, Yellin and Hayes 1994; Avi-Yonah 2007).¹⁴ Thus, it seems likely that מוֹצָא was a specifically Benjaminite geographical term for 'spring'.¹⁵

These three linguistic items within the six lines of the Siloam Tunnel inscription suggest that the author of our text used a regional dialect of Hebrew which may be identified with the tribe of Benjamin. The second of the three features might suggest an author from further north in Israel, but the first and third items point to a Benjaminite origin. Note, however, that we hesitate to identify our author as a Benjaminite without reservation, for reasons presented below (see, in particular, 'The Benjamin–Ephraim Connection').

An Additional Linguistic Item?

The Siloam Tunnel inscription yielded two new lexical items unknown from Biblical Hebrew or other ancient sources: הַנִּקְבָּה 'the tunnel' (or perhaps 'the tunneling') in lines 1 and (3–)4, and זדה 'fissure' in line 3. The meaning of the latter term has received confirmation from the geological analysis (Frumkin and Shimron 2006), and there is nothing about it that suggests anything other than a technical term used in such settings.

The use of the former term, on the other hand, in contrast to the attestation of תעלה in 2 Kings 20:20 (see also other Judahite settings, e.g., Isa. 7:3), suggests that it may be an IH feature as well. Now, the root *nqb* 'bore, pierce' is well distributed throughout the Bible, including in clear Judahite settings (e.g., 2 Kings

¹⁴ Our thanks are extended to Jeffrey Zorn for a fruitful discussion on this matter (June 2008).

¹⁵ For another topographical term specific to the territory of Benjamin, see Elitzur 1999; 1999–2000.

12:10), so at first glance there appears to be little support for our supposition. But one piece of evidence points in that direction, namely, the use of Aramaic נקבה to render Hebrew מחתרת ‘tunneling’ in Exod. 22:1 in the Samaritan Targum.¹⁶ Is it a coincidence that the community of Samaritans — the descendants of the population of the northern kingdom of Israel — employ the very same word נקבה (albeit in an Aramaic text) as found in the Siloam Tunnel inscription to refer to a tunneling operation? Given the limited evidence,¹⁷ we are unable to answer this question, but this single piece of evidence permits one to suggest that the presence of נקבה in our epigraph is another indication of Israelian Hebrew.¹⁸

THE BENJAMIN–EPHRAIM CONNECTION

The dialectal differences between Benjamin, belonging to the kingdom of Judah, and Ephraim (in particular the region around Bethel), belonging to the kingdom of Israel, could not have been very great. Dialects transcend national boundaries — classic examples may be found in Germanic, including Limburgish, spoken in parts of the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, as well as in Frisian, with speakers along the North Sea littoral and islands on both sides of the Netherlands–Germany border. We have every reason to believe that such was the case in the area under discussion as well.

In support of this supposition is the biblical tradition that links Benjamin and Ephraim in several ways. First and foremost is, of course, the tradition that places both tribes (along with Manasseh) within the ‘Rachel group’ (see Gen. 46:19–22; Num. 1:32–37, 2:18–24; etc).

Then there are the following passages from two relatively ancient poetic texts:

- Judges 5:14: ‘From Ephraim, their root in Amaleq; behind you, Benjamin, among your peoples’
- Psalms 80:3: ‘Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, rouse your strength; and come to our salvation’

In the former poem (which famously fails to mention Judah), Benjamin is linked with Ephraim (with Machir [= Manasseh] evoked in the second half of the verse);

16 See Tal 2000: 545. The late medieval glossary *Ha-Melis* also includes an entry noting the lexical equivalence of the two terms (along with the Arabic equivalent פּי אֵלֶּנְקָב); see Ben-Hayyim 1957: 509. We are grateful to Professor Avraham Tal for confirming for us (e-mail exchange, June 2008) that the Samaritan Targum to Exod. 22:1 is the only attestation of Aramaic נקבה ‘tunnel’ in the Samaritan Aramaic corpus.

17 To complete the picture, we note that the word *nqbh* (with various different pronunciations) is relatively productive in varieties of East Aramaic; see Payne Smith 1903: 350 (‘hole, opening, hollow, burrow, tunnel’); and Sokoloff 2002: 738, 753 (‘hole, cavity, perforation, body orifice’).

18 See already Sasson 1982: 116.

in the latter poem, the *tešamim* link Ephraim and Benjamin (via the combination of *ʔazla* and *šinnor*), with Manasseh as the third component set unto itself.

We also may point to the following texts:

- Hosea 5:8: ‘Sound the shofar in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah; shout in Bet-ʔAven, behind you, Benjamin’
- Obadiah 1:19: ‘And the Negev shall possess the mountain of Esau, and the Shephelah (shall possess) the Philistines, and they shall possess the highlands of Ephraim and the highlands of Samaria; and Benjamin (shall possess?) Gilead’

In the Hosea passage, the prophet links two Benjaminite sites (Gibeah and Ramah) and a major Ephraimite city (Bethel, called here by its pejorative moniker Bet-ʔAven), without distinction, as if the three comprise a single geographical region (which in many ways they do!). He then invokes the expression ‘behind you, Benjamin’ from the ancient poem in Judges 5 (see, further, Andersen and Freedman 1980: 405–407). The Obadiah passage has spawned endless discussion (due to some syntactic ambiguities; note, for example, our question mark in the last stich),¹⁹ but regardless of one’s interpretation of the verse, once more we note the collocation of Ephraim and Benjamin in the second half of the verse (though admittedly, the *ʔatnah* separates the two).

Considered in conjunction, these four passages indicate that there is much that links Benjamin and Ephraim (perhaps socially, culturally, or historically), notwithstanding the former’s official alignment with the kingdom of Judah. As is well known, 1 Kings 12:20–21 presents potentially contradictory information, suggesting at first that Judah stood alone, and then noting that Benjamin sided with Judah (or perhaps was forced to do so) once Rehoboam had mustered troops to march against northern Israel (although this operation was quickly aborted; cf. vv. 22–24). One gains the impression from this pericope that Benjamin had more in common with the north than with the south, although it eventually came under the sway of the latter.

It is also pertinent to note that if the tribal name *bin-yāmīn* means ‘son of the south’, as seems likely, then this designation holds only if Benjamin is a component of northern Israel (as its southernmost tribe) and not of southern Judah.²⁰

All told, then, converging lines of evidence indicate that Benjamin held much in common with its neighbour to the north, that is, Ephraim — with only a (perhaps?) artificial connection to its neighbour to the south, namely, Judah.²¹ If

19 For further discussion, see Raabe 1996: 255–261.

20 The point is noted in several sources, e.g., de Vaux 1978: 641; Yeivin 1954: 263–281, in particular cols. 265–266.

21 The only counter-example would appear to be Ps. 68:27, which links Benjamin and

this is true from a social, cultural, and/or historical perspective, then most likely it is true from a dialectal perspective as well. As argued by Smith (2003), based mainly on his analysis of the language of the Book of Jeremiah, the dialect of Benjamin should be seen as a border dialect, with affinities both to Judahite Hebrew and to Israelian Hebrew. Tsumura (2003) has provided additional fodder for this conclusion, by identifying a substantial number of IH features in 1 Samuel, with its action centred in Benjamin (the home of Saul) and southern Ephraim (for example, Shiloh). To reiterate the point noted earlier, the preservation of dialectal features of this border dialect by the scribes who transmitted Jeremiah corresponds precisely with the literary presentation of Jeremiah as a prophet *outside* the official royal court. Thus, there were literary reasons for preserving these peculiar Benjaminite dialectal features in the Book of Jeremiah.

Finally, let us also recall that the Book of Hosea emanates from the city of Bethel, which is very close to the territory of Benjamin (see above, on Hos. 5:8), and that this book also is replete with IH features (Yoo 1999).

The picture that emerges from this discussion is that there are significant links between Benjamin and southern Ephraim — in a host of ways, including the linguistic aspect, the most important one for the present enterprise. It is primarily for this reason that we hesitate to declare categorically that the language of the Siloam Tunnel inscription represents Benjaminite Hebrew *per se*. It could just as easily, we submit, signify the local dialect of southern Samaria, or more specifically, southern Ephraim — to wit, the region around Bethel.²²

SUMMARY: THE CONVERGING LINES OF EVIDENCE

In light of the linguistic profile of the Siloam Tunnel inscription, with at least three (if not four) markers of Israelian Hebrew, coupled with the archaeological evidence concerning the migration of people from southern Samaria (including the Benjaminite ridge, no doubt) to Judah in general, and to Jerusalem specifically, during the last few decades of the eighth century BCE, we conclude that the author of the Siloam Tunnel inscription was one such individual, a recent refugee

Judah. All other collocations of these two tribal names in the Bible reflect the kingdom of Judah (e.g., Josh. 21:4) or its exiles (e.g., Ezra 1:5).

22 The spellings עור (2×, lines 1–2) and מוצא (line 5) suggest that the diphthong *aw* was retained in the dialect of the author. Normally one posits monophthongisation of *aw* > *ô* in IH, but the evidence comes from the Samaria ostraca further north. In line with our contemporary knowledge of dialect geography, it is possible that the phonology of our posited Benjaminite–southern Ephraimite dialect aligned with that of Jerusalem/Judah, even while the said dialect differed vis-à-vis certain lexical and grammatical features.

to Jerusalem from somewhere along the Ephraim–Benjamin border.²³ We would, in fact, go further and submit that since the tunnel itself was constructed in order to allow water to flow from the Spring to the Western Hill, as a ready supply for the burgeoning population of Jerusalem during the Iron Age IIB, the recently arrived refugees were most likely used as a labour force in the construction project — with one of them responsible for the composition of the accompanying inscription.

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23 Given the linguistic markers in the inscription, which serve as the basis for our conclusion that the text emanates from the ‘pen’ of someone in the region of Benjamin–Ephraim, we cannot accede to the theory advanced by Levi della Vida (1968) that the inscription was lifted from *sēfer dibrê hayyāmîm ləmallê yəhūdā* ‘the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah’ or its annalistic source — for these work(s) would certainly have been written in Standard Biblical Hebrew (= Judahite Hebrew), as evidenced in the canonical Book of Kings.

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