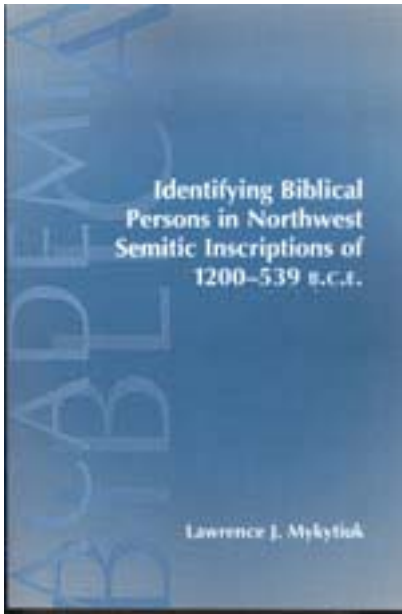


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Identifying Biblical Persons in Northwest Semitic Inscriptions of 1200–539 B.C.E.

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Lawrence Mykytiuk's new monograph will provide much relief for all those who are interested in questions of biblical historicity but who are critical of "maximalist" or "minimalist" prejudices concerning the historicity of the biblical accounts. The main body of the book comprises five chapters and is a slightly revised version of Mykytiuk's 1998 dissertation. It claims to include all Hebrew inscriptions from the pre-Persian era that turned up before October 1997 and in which names occur that can possibly be identified with persons named in the Hebrew Bible. It also discusses the Aramaic text on the Tel Dan Stela and the Moabite Mesha Inscription. Other Northwest Semitic inscriptions as well as the Hebrew inscriptions that were published between October 1997 and July 2002 are listed and briefly discussed in the appendices. The inscriptions include some longer texts on ancient monuments as well as very short texts on personal seals or impressions from personal seals on jar handles and bullae.

The book omits inscriptions that do not name persons that can be identified with persons named in the Bible. Neither does it discuss the controversial King Jehoash Inscription, which was made known to a broader public as late as January 2003. However, the continuing debate about this possible forgery demonstrates how important it is to apply a sound method for making identifications. Therefore, Mykytiuk's endeavor to describe

“the first comprehensive system for evaluating potential identifications in Northwest Semitic inscriptions” (xii) is more than welcome.

Previous studies only treat a small number of inscriptions and generally do not presuppose a method to evaluate the proposed identification of the persons named in the inscriptions with persons named in the Bible. In chapter 1 Mykytiuk tries to establish an appropriate set of criteria for determining identifications. He demonstrates that some identifications by pioneer archaeologists such as W .F. Albright are now known to be failures. Some of these mistakes were due to the limited information that the pioneers disposed of, but also to the absence of a sound methodology. There was not enough caution in the vocalization of the names, identifications were readily made even if additional identifying marks, such as patronymics and titles, were lacking, and the significance of the titles was sometimes misjudged. In the case of some provenanced inscriptions, the original dating of the layer where they had been uncovered proved to be wrong and thus the proposed identification was impossible. Also, the importance of paleography was not yet fully recognized. Fortunately, Nahman Avigad and others gradually became more aware of the potential risks when trying to identify persons named in the inscriptions with biblical figures. However, Avigad did not describe all the factors that determine the credibility of an identification.

Mykytiuk tries to make his own list of criteria as comprehensive as possible, but he admits that the criteria may have to be revised when “new” inscriptions present new problems. For now, he distinguishes eleven criteria. The first question is whether the inscriptional data are reliable. In Mykytiuk’s view, an identification is most convincing if the inscription has been excavated under controlled conditions (1) and if the exact find spot is known (2). If the artifact looks genuine but was purchased on the antiquities market, a nineteenth-century date of purchase tends to confirm the authenticity of the inscription. The pioneers’ knowledge of paleography was not yet sufficient to determine exactly when certain letter shapes were used. This means that the risk of forgery must be considered only for unprovenanced inscriptions that turned up during the twentieth or twenty-first centuries (3).

The date of the person as calculated using the data of the inscription must be in agreement with the date of the person in the biblical account. The date of the inscription can be assigned on the basis of stratigraphy (if the find spot is known), paleography, linguistic features, and the historical content in the inscription, as well as by means of highly technical methods, such as Carbon-14 dating (4). Also, the language in which the inscription is written must agree with the language expectation raised by the biblical account: a Hebrew king is expected to have written in Hebrew, a Moabite king in Moabite, and so forth (5). The validity of the identification depends also on the

sociopolitical classification of the inscription. What does the text reveal about its social, political, ethnical, religious and cultural context (6)?

The chance of confusing two different persons must be reduced as much as possible. An identification is most convincing if the name of the person is clearly legible and if its spelling is in agreement with at least one biblical spelling of this name. If the spelling or the form is different, it must be reconcilable on the basis of similar orthographical or formal variations in the Hebrew Bible or in Northwest Semitic inscriptions (7). Also, the available data on family and associates may increase the likelihood of an identification with a biblical figure. However, the combination of a name and a patronymic alone is not sufficient for a secure identification (8). If the biblical information about the person is in agreement with the title (9) and other information about the person in the inscription (10), the credibility of the identification also increases. In some cases, an identification can be regarded as certain “on grounds of singularity.” According to the biblical account, there was only one Israelite king who bore the name Omri and only one king of Judah whose name was Hezekiah. So if a genuine Hebrew inscription refers to kings bearing these names and if all other data permit it, the identification with these biblical monarchs is quite certain (11).

In chapter 2 Mykytiuk applies his set of criteria to a number of proposed identifications. In the case of the eighth-century seal with the text *l'bdy 'bd hwš'* “of Abdi, minister of Hoshea”, it is “on grounds of singularity” that Mykytiuk accepts the identification of this Hoshea with the biblical King Hoshea, who reigned over the northern kingdom approximately 732/1–722. Expert opinion substantially supports the authenticity of the seal, even though it surfaced on the antiquities market.

In the case of the bulla with the text *lbrkyhw bn nryhw hspr* “of Berekyahu, son of Neriyaahu, the scribe,” the identification of Berekyahu with Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch (Jer 32:12ff.) is possible in view of paleography and is not contradicted by the fact that the biblical form of the name is always *brwk*. In the Hebrew Bible, the spelling of the name of his father can be both *nryh* and *nryhw*. The title “scribe” corresponds completely with the biblical account, and it is unlikely that there was more than one person who fit the description during the time suggested by paleography. Mykytiuk concludes that the identification is virtually certain. Though the bulla was purchased on the antiquities market, experts are inclined to affirm its authenticity.

In most cases the seals and bullae include only a name and a patronymic. Mykytiuk concludes: “This evidence, which is massive, shows that Avigad’s requirement of a third mark in order to make a secure ID can be seen as a modern addition. . . . more than 2,500 years later, we lack the information found in the original social context which evidently

enabled the ancients to make secure IDs with only two specific identifying marks” (73). In the Old Babylonian city of Sippar, society or the government may have exercised controls to avoid letting more than one individual have the same combination of name and patronymic. It is dubious whether a similar system was found in Judah and Israel, but Mykytiuk argues that it is likely that some kind of a central registry, or regional registries, existed there. However, the possibility that within a certain period the combination of a name and a patronymic applied to more than one person cannot be excluded. If an inscription consists of no more than a name and a patronymic, an identification cannot be more than a reasonable assumption.

In cases where only a name is found, the identification remains extremely doubtful, even if the authenticity of the inscription is certain and its dating matches the proposed identification. If a name is hardly readable or partially missing, the identification is even more hypothetical.

Chapters 3 and 4 cover only inscriptions supplying identifications that are certain or quite plausible. Chapter 3 treats the identifications furnished by the provenanced Hebrew inscriptions as well as the Mesha Inscription and the Tel Dan Stela. Chapter 4 discusses the unprovenanced Hebrew inscriptions.

There can be no doubt concerning the authenticity of the famous Mesha Inscription, which was first observed at, or near, its original location in 1868. In 1869 some Bedouin broke it in pieces, but with the help of paper squeezes and sketches most of the upper portion was restored in the Louvre Museum in Paris. Mykytiuk’s careful analysis demonstrates that it is completely justified to identify the Moabite King Mesha and the Israelite King Omri with the biblical kings Mesha and Omri. Even the difficulties in dating Mesha’s revolt against the Omrides do not cast any doubt on these identifications. The paleography of the inscription suggests a ninth-century date, which agrees with the biblical account. Also, both the inscription and the Bible depict King Omri as a victorious military leader.

In the fragmentary text of the Tel Dan Stela, it is especially the expression *bytdwd* that calls for discussion. Mykytiuk’s extensive discussion of the evidence leads to the common interpretation as “house of David” and the identification of *dwd* with the biblical King David. The inscription dates from the mid-ninth to the mid-eighth century and is the report of an Aramaic king about his successful war against the Israelites. However, the author does not attempt to identify the king of Israel and the king of Judah whom the Aramaic king claims to have defeated, even though their names are partially preserved. His main conclusion relates to King David: “David’s existence and his status as the

founder of a dynasty now stand documented both in an excavated inscription and in the Bible” (132).

The now-lost but undoubtedly authentic seal with the inscription *lšm' 'bd yrb'm* “of Shema, minister of Jeroboam” was excavated in Megiddo. Though other scholars ascribe a date in the late tenth or early ninth century, Mykytiuk argues that paleography rather suggests a date in the mid-eighth century and that the stratigraphy permits this later dating. He rejects the identification of *yrb'm* with Jeroboam I and identifies him with the eighth-century King Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 13:13ff.).

The bulla with the text *lgmryhw [b]n špn* “of Gemaryahu, son of Shaphan” was excavated with some other bullae in the City of David. The paleography of the bullae suggests a date between 630 and 586. Mykytiuk demonstrates that the identification with the biblical figures Shaphan and his son Gemaryahu (Jer 36:10) is extremely likely in view of the find spot as well as the rareness of the personal name Shaphan.

The bulla with the text *l'zryhw bn hlqyhw* “of Azaryahu, son of Hīlqiyahu” belongs to the same group as the Gemaryahu bulla and must date to the same period. Both of the names in the inscription are common, but the find spot and the date of the bulla indicate that the identification with the biblical high priest Hilkiah and his son Azariah (1 Chr 5:39; 9:11; Ezra 7:1) is very plausible.

Chapter 4 treats eight unprovenanced inscriptions from the antiquities market. However, in the case of the two seals that were purchased as early as the mid-nineteenth century, forgery can be excluded. The inscription on the first reads *l'byw 'bd 'zyw* “of Abiyaw, minister of Uzziyaw,” and its paleography is dated to the mid- or late eighth century. Despite the different spelling of the name, the identification of Uzziyaw with the biblical Uzziah, king of Judah (2 Kgs 15:13ff.), is extremely plausible. The other seal contains the text *lšbnyw 'bd 'zyw* “of Shubnayaw, minister of Uzziyaw.” Paleography suggests a date in the first half of the eighth century. As the biblical account indicates that Uzziah, king of Judah, reigned from about 788/7 onward, the identification with this king is again very plausible.

The author’s caution and consistency become apparent in his treatment of six unprovenanced seals and bullae that turned up in the twentieth century. In the case of the seal with the text *l'šn' 'bd 'hz* “of Ushna, minister of Aḥaz,” already purchased in or before 1940, he doubts whether it is authentic despite its relatively early discovery and even though expert opinion stands on the side of authenticity. The paleography of the inscription suggests a date in the late eighth century, when Ahaz, son of Jotham, was king of Judah.

The author stresses that the authenticity of the seal of Abdi and the bullae of Berekyahu (see ch. 2), the bulla of Yehozarah (*lyhwzrh bn hlq[y]hw 'bd hzqyhw*), the seal ring of Hanan (*lhnn bn hlqyhw hkhn*), and the bulla of Yerahme'el (*lyrhm'l bn hmlk*) is not beyond question, even though virtually all experts assume that they are authentic. The names of the seal owners and those in the patronymics and titles can be identified with the biblical figures King Hoshea, King Hezekiah, Hilkiah the high priest, Baruch the scribe, his father Neriah, and Jerahmeel (Jer 36:26).

In chapter 5 Mykytiuk concludes that ten identifications are beyond doubt: Mesha, Omri, David, Jeroboam II, Shaphan, Gemariah, Hilkiah, Azariah, and Uzziah (the latter name on two unprovenanced seals). These ten identifications of nine persons include five kings, two high government officials, and two high priests. If the unprovenanced inscriptions discussed in chapter 4 could be proven authentic, the total number of certain identifications would rise to seventeen.

Appendices B and C offer an extensive list of proposed identifications, many of which appear to be extremely dubious. The collection includes a number of names from Northwest Semitic inscriptions that were not discussed in chapters 1–5. In the case of *bl'm* “Bile'am,” named in the Tell Deir 'Alla inscription, the author argues that the identification with Balaam named in the book of Numbers is virtually certain. Appendices B and C list also inscriptions published between the beginning of October 1997 and July 2002, such as the unprovenanced bullae with the text *l'hz yhwtm mlk yhdh* “of Aḥaz (son of) Yehotam, king of Judah” and *lhzqyhw ahz mlk yhdh* “of Hizqiyahu (son of) Aḥaz, king of Judah.” The identification of the kings named in these inscriptions with the Judean kings named in the Bible is certain, provided the inscriptions are authentic. In appendix E the author defends Lemaire's reconstruction *bt[d]wd* “house of David” in line 31 of the Mesha Inscription, and, as in the case of the Tel Dan Stela, he identifies *dwd* with the biblical King David. An extensive bibliography and an index of modern authors and editors conclude the book.

Though the nature of the book is quite technical, Mykytiuk's style is pleasant and no more difficult than necessary. The author is able to form his own opinion even about very technical matters such as the development of the Hebrew letter shapes. The application of his criteria to inscriptions that were previously discussed by many others leads to new and well-balanced insights that will certainly play a role in the future debate about the historicity of the biblical accounts.

Mykytiuk's caution with regard to the inscriptions that turned up on the antiquities market is fully justified. According to the Israel Antiquities Authority, the controversial Jehoash Inscription as well as some of the unprovenanced bullae that surfaced in or after

1997 are forgeries. Only scientific research can determine how substantial such claims are. Therefore, Mykytiuk is completely right when insisting that the most reliable technical means should be used to test the age and authenticity of the unprovenanced inscriptions. If the indictment by the Jerusalem court against the supposed forgers will not produce more clarity, only such highly technical tests can provide the definite answer to the question whether the artifacts are forgeries or extremely important witnesses to the existence of persons named in the Bible.

The author appears to be visionary when stating that “antiquity is still not a complete guarantee of genuineness; even ancient items can be altered to become fakes” (39). The ossuary that reputedly held the bones of James, Jesus’ brother, possibly dates from the first century C.E., but (part of) the inscription may have been carved in only recently. Also, in the case of the ivory pomegranate, once considered one of the most precious items in the collection of the Israel Museum, only scientific examination can provide the definite solution to the riddles. Recently the director of the museum claimed that the pomegranate itself dates back as early as the Bronze Age but that the inscription, *lby[t yhw]h qdš khnm* “of the temp[le of Yahw]eh, holy to the priests,” is a modern addition.

Mykytiuk’s positive assumption that both the stela from Tel Dan and the Mesha Inscription contain the expression “the house of David” may come as a surprise, but convincing alternatives are lacking. His treatment of the biblical evidence is well-balanced. If a Hebrew seal or bulla contains the name of a king and if according to the biblical account there was only one king bearing that name in the period to which the inscription must be dated, the author regards the identification as certain. This complete acceptance of the biblical chronology of the kings may also come as a surprise, but in my view it is fully justified as long as there is no evidence that contradicts it. Also, Mykytiuk recognizes that even the most certain identifications do not prove that the persons named both in the Bible and in the inscriptions really carried out the activities that the Bible ascribes to them. The most that we can say is that these persons were in a position to do what the Bible says they did.

Mykytiuk’s well-founded study deserves to be welcomed as a valuable contribution to the interpretation of both the Hebrew Bible and the Northwest Semitic inscriptions. It should be read by all those who are interested in the preexilic history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.