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The Lachish Cosmetic Burner and Esther 2: 12

The object to be discussed below has attracted increased attention in recent years, while it was being explained by all of us as belonging to a class of cultic objects—either pagan or Jewish or both. It turns out to be neither; the religious interpretation is entirely erroneous, and it has an easy explanation as belonging to the secular world of cosmetics and beautification of women, especially during the Persian (Achaemenian) period.

In 1944 Gertrude Caton Thompson published a series of carved incense burners at Hureiḏa in Ḥaḏramaut. They were of sandy limestone (refractory to heat), cuboid or slightly rectangular in vertical axis, standing on four

Before his death Professor Albright completed a first draft of the text of this paper and the first paragraph of a second draft. Had he lived, his essay would have been somewhat expanded and more completely documented. Unhappily, his footnotes, while marked in the text, consisted of cryptic marginal comments and, in some cases, more fully written notations (usually dated) on separate slips of paper placed in the file folder with the drafts of his text. I have tried to record his documentation in footnotes as fully as possible, but have succeeded only partially in reconstructing their content. In editing the first draft of the text, I have taken no liberties aside from removing minor grammatical inconcinities, adding diacritical marks, shifting sentences to the notes, and the like. The wording of the text is wholly Albright's. I have added my corrected drawing of the inscription which reflects the material text upon which Albright and I were in full agreement. It should be noted, finally, that Albright had not seen, at the time of his preparation of the first draft, the article of Nelson Glueck, "Incense Altars," in the volume *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May*, eds. H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), pp. 325–29, with 13 plates. He had planned, however, to include a discussion of it in his second draft [Frank Moore Cross, Jr., December 13, 1971].

squat legs, with a shallow basin at the top, where fragrant resinous substance had been burned.¹ Miss Caton Thompson also recognized the close affinity of these objects to the similar limestone "altars" found at Gezer and published by R. A. S. Macalister in 1912,² but she was not aware of similar finds at Tell Jemmeh published by Flinders Petrie.³

In 1929 Kurt Galling published a discussion of some of the Palestinian material, in which he expressed doubt about the interpretation of these objects as altars of incense. At that time he was not yet acquainted with the South Arabian incense burners of the same general form and size and with inscriptions on the four sides listing the names of different aromatic substances (all belonging to the category of *bēsāmīm*, "spices," mentioned so frequently in the Old Testament).⁴ In his short article on "Incense Altar" in *IDB*,⁵ Galling then called these objects *ḥammānīm* and accepted their interpretation as altars of incense. The identification with the pagan incense altar called *ḥammān* is, however, certainly wrong.⁶

In 1953 Miss Olga Tufnell published a cuboid chalky limestone object of the same type which had been found by J. L. Starkey in his excavation at Tell ed-Duweir (Lachish).⁷ A. Dupont-Sommer published a first translation of the inscription on one side of the cuboid incense burner, in which he rendered it:⁸

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. lbnt' y['] | L'encens J[oa] |
| 2. š bn mh[r] | s(?) fils de Meh[ir](?) |
| 3. lyh mr'[\$my'] | à Yah, maître [du ciel] |

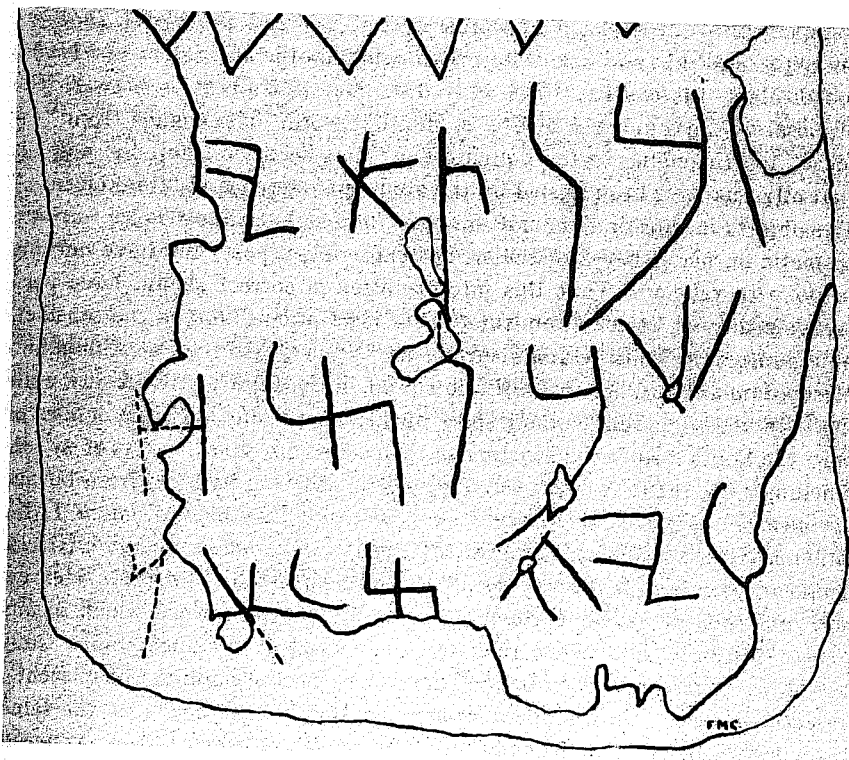
Later that same year I published a short discussion of the text⁹ in which I made some modifications in line 3 and rendered the text:

O Incense! Let Ya'osh(?)
son of Mazzer(?)
be absolved from guilt!

Five years later J. T. Milik¹⁰ offered a new translation in which he read the letters of the inscription correctly almost throughout, rendering: "The (altar of) incense belonging to 'Iyas, son of Maḥlai of . . ." In 1968 Yohanan Aharoni published a short discussion in his preliminary report on his own trial excavation at Lachish in the summer of 1966.¹¹

In February 1969 Frank M. Cross, Jr., published a superior reading of the text of this same incense burner from Lachish, rendering as follows:¹²

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. lbnt 'y | The incense (altar) of 'Iy- |
| 2. š bn m[h] | -yōš son of Ma[h]- |
| 3. ly hml'[k] | -lī, the courie[r] |



Drawing of the inscription on the Lachish cosmetic burner, by Frank M. Cross.

In a postscript to his article, Cross rejected Aharoni's reading on the same grounds which he had brought against Dupont-Sommer's interpretation.

After studying this article of Cross's, Aharoni changed his mind and proposed a new reading in a letter to me, enclosing an excellent photograph.¹³ His new position was published in a Hebrew article on "The Altar of Incense from Lachish," in *Leshonenu* 45 (1970-71), 3-6. He now proposed the reading:

- | | |
|------------|-------------------|
| lbnt' y['] | Incense - Yau- |
| š bn mh | sh son of Maḥa- |
| lyh mlk[š] | lyah from Lachish |

Another excellent photograph of the inscription was attached to the article in *Leshonenu*. Because of the two photographs, which I have studied with great care, there seems to be no doubt that Cross's reading of the letters is correct throughout. I should, therefore, read the whole as Hebrew,

changing only the division of words so that we read as follows: lbnt 'yš bn mhly hml'[k], and translate, "Belonging to the daughters of 'Iyyōš, son of Maḥli the courier." The only difference in translation between the proposal of Cross and my own is in the first word. The change from "Incense" to "Belonging to the daughters of" may seem odd, but the point is that all of us have been misled by the apparent reference to "frankincense." The objects in question are not altars of incense but simply spice burners, cosmetic burners; they are secular, not cultic in purpose, and have nothing to do with religion. That this interpretation is correct should have been recognized by us at once from the type of inscription found on the considerable number of South Arabian specimens,¹⁴ from which the Palestinian and Mesopotamian types are obviously borrowed, but generally without any writing. On the numerous cuboid spice burners with four different names of spices in South Arabian characters on their sides are seven names of sweet-smelling spice plants which recur frequently, differing in detail from burner to burner.¹⁵ Most of them are easy to identify; they include *qalam*, Latin *calamus* (Greek *kalamos*); *qust*, *costus* (Greek *kostos*); *ladan*, *ladanum* (Greek *ladanon*); *kamkam*, *lentiscus* "resin," (Greek *kamkamon*);¹⁶ *ḡurwa* = Hebrew *ṣorī* and Amarna *ṣurwa*, *balsamum lentiscus*;¹⁷ *ṭayyib*, a word which means "sweet-smelling" and hence refers to some kind of perfume. Since these are all spices (Hebrew *bēšāmīm*) and are chosen for the combination of scents, insect repellents, and therapeutic purposes, they do not belong in the same category as myrrh and frankincense, the names of which never occur on these incense burners.

In short, the four spices listed on the South Arabian incense burners are rather like apothecary's labels. In no case are they recipes for religious incense as such. Their use is described very clearly by Sir S. W. Baker in his important book *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia* (London, 1868). A long quotation from Chapter 6 of this rare work is given by the late Dr. David I. Macht.¹⁸ In describing the customs of the semi-nomadic Arabs of the eastern Sudan (northeast of the incense-producing areas of northeast Africa and southern South Arabia) he says that different perfumed spices such as oil of roses, oil of sandalwood, essence of the mimosa tree, essence of musk, and oil of cloves were the cosmetics most in demand by women from traveling native merchants.

The women have a peculiar method of scenting their bodies and clothes, by an operation that is considered to be one of the necessities of life and which is repeated at regular intervals. In the floor of the tent or hut . . . a small hole is excavated sufficiently large as to hold . . . a fire of charcoal . . . into which the woman about-to-be-scented throws a handful of various drugs. She then takes off the cloth or tope which forms her dress, and

crouches naked over the fumes while she arranges her robe to fall as a mantle from her neck to the ground like a tent. . . . None of the precious fumes can escape, all being kept under the robe, exactly as if she wore a crinoline with an incense burner. . . . She now begins to perspire freely in the hut or tent, and . . . the volatile oil from the burning perfumes is immediately absorbed [by her skin]. By the time that the fire has expired the scenting process is completed and both her person and the robe are redolent of incense with which they are so thoroughly impregnated that I have frequently smelt a party of women a full one hundred yards distant.

Baker went on to give other details, including especially a list of the characteristic perfumes used in the purification process: "ginger, cloves, cinnamon, frankincense, sandalwood, myrrh, a species of sea weed . . . from the Red Sea" and lastly "part of a shellfish brought from the southern Red Sea."

It is impossible to doubt any longer that the objects which all of us have taken to be religious in character and called altars of incense are actually quite secular and may correctly be called cosmetic burners. In fact, this very type of cosmetic incense stand may be referred to among the gifts to be given, as stipulated in the marriage contract from Elephantine, No. 15,¹⁹ by the father of the bride to his daughter. The expression in question (line 16) reads *prks 1, zy ḥsn ḥdt*, which Cowley translates "a new cosmetic box of ivory." There is no basis in Hebrew or the cognate languages for the rendering "ivory," and the word means specifically "lapful" or "bosomful." See especially Ps 129: 7. This designation would apply very nicely to a cosmetic incense burner in some more elegant material and more ornamental form than the objects we have been discussing. It is interesting to note that the date of Papyrus No. 15 in Cowley is somewhere in the third quarter of the fifth century, just about the most probable date for our inscription. The marriage contract is itself unique, since both parties are Jews, though the groom bears an Egyptian name. The latter was apparently a Persian government employee.

It is easy to understand why *Maḥli*, name of a Levite family (often associated with the subtribe or clan of Merari), should appear as patronymic, since there was undoubtedly a high proportion of unemployed Levites among the Jewish population of Palestine after the Exile. Owing to their genealogy, they enjoyed respect in the community, but they must often have been desperately poor. The mention of the Levite family of *Maḥli* is very interesting, since it is the first extrabiblical evidence for this particular family. The original name cannot have been **Maḥliyah*, as has been suggested, because *Maḥli* is almost certainly a gentilic formed from the name *Maḥlah* which appears as the designation of a clan of Manasseh along with Noah,

Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Mahlah was the eldest daughter of Zelophehad in Num 27: 1, followed by the four sisters Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, shown by the Ostraca of Samaria to be one of a group of clans of Manasseh settled to the southeast of the plain of Esdraelon, east of the watershed ridge on which Shechem stands.²⁰ The Greek Bible reads *Mool(e)i* in the passage in Num 3: 33 [MT 20] and in 1 Chron 6: 4 [MT 19]. The Lucianic text offers *Mooli* in Chronicles, and so it is evident that the Masoretic Hebrew vocalization is extremely doubtful. Num 26: 58 has among the Levite families *Hā-Libnī*, *Hā-Hebrōnī*, and *Hā-Mahlī*; it is obvious that *Libnī* and *Mahlī* are both gentilics from the towns or districts of *Libnah* and *Mahlah*. As a matter of fact, we have *Libnah* listed as one of the Levite cities in both recensions of this tenth-century list.²¹ It follows that the pronunciation of the name in the time of the Greek translation (third century B.C.) was something like *Mēholt*, an obvious gentilic of the name Abel-meholah. Elsewhere I have pointed out that the original form of the word *mēhōlāh*, "dance," was something like **maḥullatu*, which would yield a normal *mēhōlāh* in classical Hebrew.²² It is therefore more than probable that Abel-meholah, which is certainly on the west bank of the Jordan in the territory occupied by the five sisters Mahlah, Milcah, and so on, is perfectly suited to being the home of this particular Levite family. It stands to reason that the Levites settled in areas such as this would become refugees after the successive destructions of Samaria and Jerusalem.

The father of the daughters, whose name should probably be vocalized 'Iyyōš or 'Ayyūš, bears a name which is presumably a hypocoristic of common type from a name such as 'Ōšiyahū, itself shortened from *Yōšiyahū*, "Josiah," for still older *Ya'ōšyahū*; cf. 'Iddō for 'Addayah(ū).

The occupation of the Levite 'Iyyōš is clear. Since he is called *ha-mal'ak*, he must have been a royal courier, an *ἄγγελος* such as described by Herodotus and Xenophon for this same fifth century B.C. While a royal courier can scarcely have been paid very well, he was still a minor official of the Persian government and so must have enjoyed a certain amount of modest prestige. That he should have lived at Lachish, known from excavations to have been a district capital in the Achaemenian period and on an important north-south road just far enough inland to be safe from pirates and far enough from the mountains to be safe from bandits, was therefore the most natural thing in the world. We can well understand why his daughters were unmarried, since it is extremely doubtful that he had enough means of his own to provide the dowry large enough to attract suitable husbands for his daughters. That the family was poor is obvious from the fact that they were joint owners of the cosmetic incense burner and that the object itself was of poor quality.

Biblical parallels happen to be few but clear enough, on the whole. Toward the end of Is 3 the prophet follows a famous denunciation of the pride and ostentation of the daughters of Zion by saying that their elaborate use of perfumed spices (*bōsem*) will be replaced by rot (*taḥal bōsem maq*). This, however, is too early a date for the use of the South Arabic type of incense burner, and so we are left in uncertainty as to how the spices were used. In Ps 45: 8 f, where, as generally recognized, the text is somewhat poorly preserved, suggesting early oral transmission, we read in vs 9 that "therefore God will anoint thee . . . with myrrh, aloes, and cassia all thy clothes." Since the pronominal suffixes can just as well refer to the queen, as far as the consonantal text goes, this passage may refer to the elaborate perfuming practices of noble ladies.²³

A passage neglected by recent writers is Esther 2: 12, where we are told about the elaborate conditioning treatment required of the maidens who were to become members of the harem of King Xerxes in the early fifth century (485–460 B.C.). The chosen women were put into condition with six months of oil of myrrh and six months of fragrant spices (*bēsāmim*). The commentators have been understandably very chary about speculating on just what this may have meant actually, but it now seems obvious that the periods of conditioning were accompanied by the extensive use of fumigation, which would have both hygienic and therapeutic value. It is, however, impossible to separate the process from the use of cosmetic incense burners of some sort, especially in view of the traditional fifth-century date.²⁴

NOTES

¹ *The Tombs and the Moon Temple of Hureida (Ḥadramaut)* (Oxford, 1944), Pl. XVII, and pp. 1, 3, 5.

² R. A. S. Macalister, *The Excavation of Gezer II* (London, 1912), pp. 442–47; and III, Pl. CCXXV.

³ Flinders Petrie, *Gerar* (London, 1928), Pls XL, XLI, and pp. 18 f. In 1935, I also called attention to Babylonian parallels, *BASOR* 132 (1953), 46; cf. Liselotte Ziegler, *ZA NF* 13 (1942), 224–40.

⁴ *ZDPV* 52 (1929), 246 ff.

⁵ Vol. II (1962), pp. 699 f.

⁶ For a discussion of the *ḥammān*, see W. F. Albright, *ARI*, pp. 215 f, n. 58, and references.

⁷ *Lachish III: The Iron Age* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 226, 358 f; Pl. 68–71.

⁸ *Lachish III*, pp. 358 f.

⁹ *BASOR* 132 (1953), 46 f.

¹⁰ *Studi Bibliici Franciscani: liber annuus* 9 (1958–59), p. 334, n. 4.

¹¹ *IEJ* 18 (1968), 163 f.

¹² "Two Notes on Palestinian Inscriptions of the Persian Age," *BASOR* 193 (1969), 21-24.

¹³ Tel-Aviv, September 3, 1970.

¹⁴ Adolf Grohmann, *Südarabien als Wirtschaftsgebiet* (Vienna, 1922), pp. 115 ff. Cf. Grohmann, *Arabien* (Munich, 1963), p. 248, n. 6.

¹⁵ For a philological exegesis of the words in question, see N. Rhodokanakis in *All-orientalische Texte zum Alten Testament*, ed. H. Gressmann (1926), pp. 469 ff.

¹⁶ This spice was brought from Malao in Somaliland to Arabia in the first century, according to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.

¹⁷ Cf. Grohmann, *Südarabien*, pp. 114 f.

¹⁸ *The Holy Incense* (Baltimore, 1928), pp. 25 f; see also E. Neufeld, "Hygiene Conditions in Ancient Israel (Iron Age)," *Journal of the History of Medicine* 25 (1970), 427 ff.

¹⁹ A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford, 1923), pp. 44-50.

²⁰ On the geography of western Manasseh, and the distribution of the clans, see my discussions in "The Administrative Divisions of Israel and Judah," *JPOS* 5 (1925), 28-41; "The Site of Tirzah and the Topography of Western Manasseh," *JPOS* 11 (1931), 241-51, and the extension of these studies by F. M. Cross, "Epigraphic Notes on Hebrew Documents of the Eighth-Sixth Centuries B.C.: I. A New Reading of a Place Name in the Samaria Ostraca," *BASOR* 163 (1961), 12-14; and G. E. Wright, "The Provinces of Solomon," *EI* 8 (1967), 58*-68*.

²¹ See my study, "The List of Levitic Cities," in the *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1945), pp. 49-73.

²² See my comments on *mēhōlah*, Akk *mēlullu* (from **maḥlulatu*) in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to G. R. Driver*, ed. D. Winton Thomas and W. D. Hardy (Oxford, 1963), p. 5, n. 4. Cf also the "sons of *Maḥol*," 1 Kings 5: 11.

²³ I wish to thank N. Sarna and S. Talmon for suggestions in connection with these passages. [Albright did not specify precisely the obligation in question—FMC.]

²⁴ See now the Anchor commentary *Esther* by Carey A. Moore (Garden City, 1971), pp. xxiv-lx.