

Epigraphically attested Judean Hebrew, and the question of "upper class" (Official) and "popular" speech variants in Judea during the 8th-6th centuries B.C.

By B. S. J. ISSERLIN

(University of Leeds, England)

It is a regrettable but generally recognised fact that, in spite of the valuable results achieved during something like a century of archaeological activity in Palestine, the writings of the Old Testament remain our main source for Classical Hebrew to an extent which is not paralleled by an analogous role of literary texts where ancient languages like Greek or Latin are concerned. In the case of Hebrew, epigraphic finds can indeed to a limited extent supplement what we can learn from the Biblical writings, but we cannot yet set up Hebrew as found in inscriptions as an independent *corpus* which would permit us to study the development of the Hebrew language and its subvarieties during the course of its history without reference to the Old Testament. This absence of a substantial body of epigraphic texts of any length is generally unfortunate, and particularly regrettable where, e.g., Northern Israelite Hebrew is concerned. There is, however, one part of the field—Judean Hebrew during the 8th, 7th and 6th centuries (roughly the time from the Siloam Tomb and Tunnel Inscriptions to that of the Lachish Letters, or perhaps the somewhat later Khirbet Beit Lei Inscriptions) where we are somewhat better placed. Not only is there a body of texts, generally of some length, most of which were recently gathered in a handy volume, and subjected to a scholarly review by Gibson,¹ but these texts include also, by fairly universal agreement, specimens originating in different social, or functional, circles. Thus the Lachish Letters are official documents originating from official circles, and drafted by scribes familiar with official usages.² The same seems true

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1. J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Volume I, Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions*, Oxford, 1971. References in our text will where possible be made to the editions of our texts contained in this work. For Arad, Aharoni's article in *Eretz-Israel*, IX, 1969, pp. 10-21 (Hebrew) should be added.
 2. There is universal agreement that these letters represent the official correspondence between the commander of an outlying post, and the military governor at Lachish; Torczyner (*Lachish*, I, pp. 17-18) refers to the letters as a "dossier".

for the documents from Arad (among which one may recognise both letters proper and brief administrative "writs").³ At the other end of the scale, the letter from Yavneh-Yam represents by fairly general consent, popular ("lower class") Hebrew *as spoken*, rather than a text phrased by a scribe according to accepted literary conventions.⁴ In view of all this one may be tempted to look in the documents mentioned on the one side, for characteristics of official (civil and military, administrative) Hebrew; and on the other hand for those of popular (non-literary) Hebrew speech.

A few other texts widen the spectrum. The Siloam Tunnel Inscriptions should again represent earlier administrative Hebrew; the fragmentary Wady Murabba'at Papyrus A may be a public or private letter—not enough of it is preserved to tell—but it must be connected with the upper strata of society, since it makes use of an expensive writing material—papyrus—and not a potsherd, which cost nothing, and was also serviceable, up to a point. The Siloam Tomb Inscription of Shebna⁵ would probably also be phrased in a Hebrew acceptable to the upper circles of society. As against this, the tomb inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qom⁶ represent probably a humbler background—respectable country folk who could afford solidly hewn tombs, but who were not members of the urban aristocracy in the capital; and the Kh. Beit Lei graffiti may be linked with a Levitical family residing in the country⁷—i.e. we may thus connect them with the lower priestly middle class. While interesting, all these latter documents are unfortunately too short or fragmentary to tell us much about the linguistic habits or styles of speech of the circles from which they issued. It is also regrettable that epigraphic finds so far have not given us any specimens of extra-Biblical literary, legal or religious texts, from the period here under review (though

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3. See Aharoni's remarks in the original publications as to the purpose of the documents. By "writ" we mean a document containing only a brief order, like Letter B (Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 51) as against a "letter" which contains narrative matter (and possibly fuller formulae or greeting).
 4. See the literature quoted in Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 28, especially Naveh, *IEJ*, 10, 1960, p. 136; S. Yeivin, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* XIX, 1962, p. 3.
 5. In spite of recognised analogies with tomb inscriptions in Phoenicia, etc. (N. Avigad, *IEJ*, III, 1953, p. 147 ff), the situation of the tomb, and the social position of its owner, make it likely the text was phrased in a Hebrew acceptable to the court at Jerusalem.
 6. W. G. Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el Kom." *HUCA* XL-XLI, 1969-70, pp. 139-204.
 7. See J. Naveh, *IEJ* XIII, 1963, p. 90.

analogies with Biblical writings have been observed in some detail by the editors of the various inscriptions wherever this seemed apposite). The range of speech types available from epigraphic sources is thus deficient in some important respects.

If material of this kind is to be studied, certain *caveats* obviously have furthermore to be borne in mind. Even in the case of official documents — the category best represented since it includes the 6th century Lachish Letters and the Arad documents), total numbers are still very small, and the publication of additional finds from Arad (and, of course, from elsewhere) might well modify our impressions considerably (for other categories, especially “popular” Hebrew, the case is even worse). In the case of the Lachish Letters in particular it is for just such reasons difficult as yet to distinguish, among recurring features, individual style markers from characteristics which may apply more generally to official Hebrew as a whole. Coming to detail, it must also at once be said that our lexical information seems as yet insufficient to allow us to make significant distinctions between the lexical usages typical of one type of Hebrew as against another;⁸ the same seems true for phonetics⁹ and morphology¹⁰. On the other hand certain impressions can be gathered when syntactical phenomena occurring in the various types of texts are studied: to the review of these we will now accordingly proceed.

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8. Limited differences in technical vocabulary (such as the presence of the root *kyl* in the Yavneh-Yam Letter which relates agricultural operations) are not sufficient to establish different types of Hebrew. What would be desirable for this is the recognition of the employment, in different linguistic spheres within Judean Hebrew of alternative homonyms (such as *ʿsh* and *pʿl* or *ʿhz* and *lqh*). However, in the case of the only pair of terms of this kind which I noticed, namely *yrh* and *hdš*, both terms occur at Arad. The occurrence of literary metaphors of long standing, such as the description of the writer as a mere “dog”, or of formulae of greetings with a similarly long ancestry (Aharoni, *Eretz-Israel IX*, 196p. 16 Hebrew) are worth noting; the latter is very probably part of the official language, but in the case of the former parallels seem more wide ranging.
 9. It is probably not advisable yet to try to investigate such features as the presence or absence or *matres lectionis* to indicate long vowels or diphthongs, or such unusual features as the occurrence of *b* for *p* at Arad (Aharoni, *Eretz-Israel IX*, 1969, p. 11 (Hebrew), with a view to distinguishing sub-types within Judean Hebrew.
 10. The suggestion by Gibson (op. cit. pp. 30, 36) that there may have been variants in verbal suffixes of the perfect 1st sing. *-ti/ -t*, and of the 2nd sing. masc. *-ta/t* need further confirmation, within the sphere of official writings, the Arad Letters published so far do not parallel the Lachish Letters in giving a longer form *th* against the shorter *t*.

1. *WAW CONSECUTIVE CONSTRUCTIONS, ESPECIALLY WAW CONSECUTIVE FOLLOWED BY THE PREFIXIAL TENSE ("IMPERFECT" OR "PRETERITE").*

In official texts this seems rare beyond what might have been expected after all relevant factors have been taken into consideration. In the Siloam Tunnel Inscriptions there is only one certainly attested instance (*wylku hmym*, lines 4-5). Among the Lachish Letters, Letters ii, iii, and iv have no occurrence of this construction at all, and Letter iv has only one (*wy^clhu h^cra*, lines 6-7); Letters v, vi, ix and xviii (which offer between them texts of some length) are also without attested instances. Among the Arad ostraca so far published, there are a few instances of *waw consecutive* with the suffixial (perfect), one in letter D (*wlaqht*, lines 3-4)¹¹ and there is another instance of this latter type in an ostrakon published more recently.¹² There are, however, no other instances of this use of *waw consecutive*, or of *waw consecutive* with the prefixial (preterite) tense, in the other letters published. This comparative rarity cannot be entirely due to the contents related in the above mentioned documents—several of them contain recitals of past events which could easily have been related by *waw consecutive* and the prefixial tense had the writers so wished. To some extent this state of things may indeed be linked with the frequency of inverted sentence structures (favouring the *casus pendens* and related types) about which we shall have to say something later (and which the Lachish Letters in particular seem to favour); but this alone would probably not account for the state of things described entirely, as we shall see. The preserved remnants of non-official "upper" and "middle class" texts are excessively scanty, and thus will not permit us to say whether the absence of *waw consecutive* in what little has come down to us is of any real significance. However, when we come to "popular" or "low class" Hebrew the position appears to be genuinely different. The Yavneh-Yam letter contains four certain instances of the prefixial (preterite) with *waw consecutive* (*wqsr*, line 4; *wykl*, line 5; *wyb'*, line 7; *wyqh*, line 8)—as well as two examples of *waw* with infinitive absolute (*w'sm*, lines 5, 6-7). The difference between the two types of Hebrew—official and popular looks thus like being genuine. The latter would appear to be conservative in this respect, and more in line with usages attested in the older narrative account contained in the

11. Gibson, *op. cit.* p. 53.

12. Aharoni, *Eretz-Israel*, IX, 1969, p. 11 (line 2 (*wšlḥtm*)).

13. Cf. F. J. Anderson, *Orientalia*, N.S. XXXV, 1966, pp. 115-116, 118-119.

first part of the Mesha inscription, where *waw consecutive* abounds;¹³ and it looks as if M. H. Segal's suggestions that *waw consecutive* constructions were probably little used in popular speech well before the epoch of Mishnaic Hebrew¹⁴ may need some qualifications.

INVERTED SENTENCE STRUCTURE, INCLUDING CASUS PENDENS

The comparative rarity of *waw consecutive* construction is on the other hand balanced by the occurrence of a fair number of cases where the normal word order of Hebrew is replaced by inversion. Hebrew sentence structure as a means to indicate emphasis is well known,¹⁵ the frequency of employment for such devices in the Lachish Letters in particular seems above average; other documents show fewer cases. We can list a number of types of inversion used in our material.

1. *Predicate before subject:*

Kirbet el Qom, Tomb I¹⁶ *L^cfy hḥdr hzh*

(Contrast this with the word order of the Beney Khezir

Inscription, line 1 *zh hqbr lel^czr*

Siloam Tomb Inscription, lines 2-3 *'rwr h'dm 'šr yfth 't z't*

2. *Object before verb:*

Arad, Letter B, lines 9-10 *myyl 'gnt ttn*

Khirbet Bert Lei, Inscription B *hmwryh 'th ḥnbt*

2a. *Anticipation of indirect object (noun subordinated to verb by preposition):*

Lachish, Letter IV, lines 10-11 *'l ms't lkš nḥnw šmrm*

3. *Complement before verb:*

Siloam Tunnel Inscription, line 1 *lzh hyh dbr hnqbh*

Siloam Tunnel Inscription, lines 5-6 *w'lḥ 'mh hyh gbh ḥšr*

Yavneh-Yam, Letter, line 3 *qšr hyh ^cbdk*

4. *Casus pendens*

Lachish, Letter III, lines 11-12 *Kl sfr . . . 'm qr'ty 'th*

Lachish, Letter III, lines 16-17 *w't hwdwyhw šlh*

14. M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (reprinted Oxford, 1958), p. 73.

15. For the necessary comparative background in Old Testament Hebrew see C. Albrecht, *ZAW* VII, 1887, p. 218 ff.; VIII, 1888, p. 249 ff.; S. R. Driver, *a Treatise on the Use of Tenses in Hebrew* (Oxford, 1892), especially p. 264 ff.; and later studies such as A. Kropat, *Die Syntax des Autors de Chronik (Beihefte, ZAW, XVI, 1909)*, listed in R. J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax, an Outline* (Toronto, 1967), p. 101-2.

16. W. G. Dever, *HUCA* XL-LXI, 1969-70, p. 151.

Lachish, Letter III, lines 19-21 *wspr tbyhw slhh*

Lachish Letter IV, line 6 *wsmkyhw lqhh sm^eychu*

This preference for *casus pendens* constructions in the Lachish Letters may reflect marks of the individual style of the writer. More distantly related perhaps to the habits of thought involved in inversion of *casus pendens* type are sentences like the following:

Yavneh-Yam Letter, line 10 *wkl 'hy y^enw ly hqsrym*

Lachish, Letter IV, lines 2-3 *kkl 'sr šlh 'dny kn ^esh ^ebd k*

since in both of these part of the main subject of discussion is anticipated, and the rest referred to later.

Anticipation is also involved in the type of sentence encountered in the Khirbet Beit Lei, Inscription A, line 2. *L'ly yrslm*.

Inversion seems to have thus been a fairly general feature of the speech, or writings of all the strata of Hebrew here under discussion.

TEMPORAL CLAUSES, AND THE USE OF THE INFINITIVE CONSTRUCT GOVERNED BY A PREPOSITION

As is well known, Classical Hebrew has a number of alternative possibilities of expressing relations of time between two different actions: In particular, it can either use a genuine temporal clause introduced by a conjunction such as *k'sr*, or similar; or it can employ an infinitive construct preceded by a preposition, or an equivalent noun.

Of these two possibilities, it is the second one which is in very general use in our documents. Examples can be quoted from various linguistic contexts as follows:

Official texts: Siloam Tunnel Inscription, line 2, *b^ewd lhnqb*

Lachish, Letter III, line 7, *m'z šlhk*

Lachish, Letter IV, line 9, *bhfbt, hbqr*

Lachish, Letter VI, line 13, *m'z qr' ^ebdk*

The Arad ostraca have, however, not so far furnished any good examples. There is an occurrence of this type of construction also in the Yavneh-Yam Letter, lines 5-6 if *šbt* is taken as an infinitive construct.¹⁷ This letter contains, however, also the only case at present attested in the documents of a true temporal clause introduced by the conjunction (line 6- *k'sr kl ^ebd k*). This might thus be a popular rather than a high-class construction.

17. Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

WITH THE MEANING OF "IF, WHEN, AS FOR"

This occurs twice in the Lachish Letters (viz. in Letter III, line 8 (*wky 'mr 'dny*), and in Letter IV, line 4 (*wky šlh 'dny*). It is a particle which suits official style admirably, but it is not so far attested elsewhere in official letters and it may again be an individual style marker.

We have come to the end of what is of necessity a somewhat patchy survey. Certain results seem to suggest themselves. All the types of Hebrew here under review seem to favour sentence inversion, but this process is most developed in official Hebrew, especially at Lachish, but perhaps less in popular Hebrew. On the other hand, *waw* consecutive constructions seem rare, or even very rare in official Hebrew, but they appear to have been more in vogue in popular Hebrew. The use of *k 'šr* in popular Hebrew to introduce a temporal clause instead of the use of the infinitive construct preceded by a preposition, favoured in official Hebrew may also be significant: about the relevance, or otherwise, of the occurrence of *ky* in official Hebrew, we must suspend our judgment. It goes without saying that fresh discoveries are likely to transform these results; but it is hoped enough data exist now to start discussion, and that the modest summary here offered may thus be of service.

This essay is dedicated to Colin MacLaurin as a token of esteem, and in memory of pleasant hours spent in his company when he was Montague Burton Lecturer in the Department of Semitic Studies in Leeds in 1966-7 and later in 1968 when he participated in the Motya excavations.