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Mt. Ebal curse tablet? A refutation of the claims regarding the so called Mt. Ebal curse tablet

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Abstract

A refutation of the claims by Scott Stripling et al. regarding the epigraphic analysis and paleographic contents of the folded lead object discovered on Mt. Ebal in 2019 during the wet-sifting of dump piles from a previous archaeological excavation by Adam Zertal. This piece of lead is often referred to as the “Mt. Ebal Curse Tablet”. An article regarding this find, by Stripling et al., titled “You are Cursed by the God YHW:” an early Hebrew inscription from Mt. Ebal”, was published on May 23, 2023, in the *Heritage Science* journal.

Keywords Mt. Ebal Curse Tablet, Lead tablet, Defixio, Yahu, YHW, x-ray tomography, Wet sifting, Archaeology, Paleo-Hebrew, Proto-alphabetic writing

Introduction

Dr. Scott Stripling and his archaeological team have been perfecting a process called “wet-sifting”, which was previously used by Dr. Gabriel Barkay’s team on a large scale at the Temple Mount Sifting project in Jerusalem and was adopted by Stripling and crew for work at Tel-Shiloh and Mt. Ebal, Israel. Wet-sifting takes material from archaeological settings that has been previously dry sifted and cleans it with water. Ronny Reich et al. have noted the cost, both in terms of time and finances, of performing wet-sifting, but they have also noted the benefits of the numerous small finds that are thereby recovered, such as coins, seal impressions and scarabs [1, pp. 154–163]. By using this process of wet-sifting, Dr. Stripling’s teams have likewise greatly increased the number of small

objects found. His teams at Tel Shiloh have had incredible success implementing wet-sifting during the multiple seasons of digging there. At Tel Shiloh they carefully track the exact location and stratum from whence the material to be wet-sifted is removed. This allows any objects found in the wet-sifting process to be properly located in the correct archaeological context.

In December 2019, on Mt. Ebal, a team led by Dr. Stripling from Associates for Biblical Research conducted wet-sifting of two dump piles of discarded material from a previous archaeological expedition (1982–1989) led by Adam Zertal. Among the small finds revealed by the wet-sifting process was a 2 cm × 2 cm × 0.3 cm folded piece of lead discovered by wet-sifting expert Frankie Snyder. It was found in the material from the “East” dump pile [2, p. 3]. Unfortunately, because the material was from a dump pile, it is impossible to date the lead tablet based upon archaeological evidence such as pottery or other datable finds. It is true that Adam Zertal’s team was digging in layers that he dated to the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age. But we cannot be sure that all of the material in the dump pile was from a layer dating to those time periods. It is entirely possible that the lead object under discussion was laying on or near the top of the soil that

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was initially removed by Zertal's team. In theory, such a layer of initial soil would be at the bottom of the dump pile. But Stripling's wet-sifting team was not able to sift on site and were required to relocate the dirt to a nearby area. This transfer of dirt nullified any possible stratigraphy of the dump piles. The situation therefore is analogous to that of the Temple Mount Sifting Project, in that any finds must be dated from evidence drawn from the object itself. Stripling et al. date this lead object to the thirteenth century BC based on the stratigraphy of Zertal's excavation.

Stripling et al. have made spectacular claims about the epigraphic contents within this folded lead object [2] which will be discussed below. Among those spectacular claims are these: that it contains a curse written in Hebrew, that it was written by an Israelite, that it dates to the thirteenth century BC and that it twice contains the name Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Curse tablets (defixiones)

Stripling suspected that the folded piece of lead was a "defixio" or "curse tablet", which suspicion is reasonable based on its appearance (see below). A defixio usually contains an appeal to a deity to curse someone who has wronged the person making the appeal. For example, a third century BC lead defixio written in Greek and found in what was Greek controlled Libya reads:

*I summon Tyche hither: you, come here right now
with Zeus and the two Graces.
Praxidika, daughter of great-hearted Aglaokarpos,
bind for me the tongue, hands and feet of Pheronika!
I shall deposit these (words) in an ox-horn and
beneath the hoary earth [3].*

This example is very typical of the contents of a defixio (a curse tablet). Notice that the person being cursed is specifically named, which is expected in a defixio. Other information is sometimes included, such as the reason for the curse. The curse may be a request for justice or an attempt to curse a competitor or for political or amorous reasons. The curse was typically written on lead and then folded, often multiple times and then pierced with a nail. Finally, it would be deposited in a hidden or perhaps sacred place to be read only by the deities. Curse tablets were not intended for public reading, which was generally prevented by folding the lead, though many defixiones have now been unfolded.

The folded lead object found by Stripling resembles known curse tablets because it is a small piece of folded lead and was found near a sacred place (an altar), though it is on the small end of the spectrum for a defixio and seems to lack the piercing by a nail.

Curse tablets are known and abundant from the Greco-Roman period and into Medieval times and they are associated with pagan culture. Over 1500 have been found in Europe in areas ranging from modern day Turkey to Great Britain. The earliest known curse tablet is written in Greek and is from the late sixth century BC. It was found in Sicily, which at the time was controlled by Greece. The Grecian culture seems to be the origin of defixiones. Curse tablets begin to appear in other languages in the fourth century BC [4] though not in Hebrew. Thus, the earliest known curse tablet is some seven centuries younger than the thirteenth century BC date proposed by Stripling et al. for this object, and particularly by Gershon Galil who was one of the authors. The article by Stripling et al. also states "... the other authors believe it could be older." ([2], p. 22), which only exacerbates the situation. Concerning this anachronistic issue, Omri Yagel and Erez Ben-Yosef of the Tel Aviv University wrote: "This fact casts doubt on the authenticity of the recently found lead amulet from Mount Ebal..." [5]. To be clear, this object found by Stripling is dated 700 years too early and is also assigned to a culture to which it does not belong. The writing and burying of curse tablets belong to European pagan culture, not to Israelite culture or to Yahweh worship. However, Numbers 5:23 should not be ignored within this discussion, though significant differences exist between the Israelite practice found in that passage and those of defixio production.¹

This object found by Stripling's team does seem like a curse tablet in that defixiones were typically buried in a grave or well or hole in the ground, being committed to the attention of the gods. If this lead object was purposefully placed/buried at the proposed altar on Mt. Ebal, then that is consistent with the proposal that it was a tablet and/or amulet, though it might be expected to contain some type of religious text rather than a curse. There is considerable debate as to whether the stone structure on Mt. Ebal is indeed an altar [6, p. 186], though the animal bones and ash on location are evidence that it is an altar. Additionally, due to the high numbers of kosher animal bones, it is likely an Israelite altar, though not necessarily "Joshua's altar" as proposed by both Zertal [7] and given possibility by Stripling [2, p. 1].

Stripling et al. do point out correctly that: "The oldest known inscribed lead strip, however, was discovered in

¹ In Numbers 5:23 the Israelite priest would write curses regarding a potentially unfaithful wife in a book (ספר) with water soluble ink and then dissolve them in bitter water, which the woman would then drink. Thus, the woman would ingest the curses and if she was guilty the curses would take effect, but if innocent, they would have no effect. (c.f. Ezekiel 3:1ff and Revelation 10:9ff).

1936 at Late Bronze Age Büyükkale, the acropolis of the Hittite capital of Ḫattusas” (located in modern Turkey). Thus, writing on lead in the Late Bronze Age is reasonable. However, they go on to claim concerning that lead strip from Turkey: “Unfortunately, the inscription is poorly preserved and consequently it has not been fully deciphered.” [2, p. 21]. Indeed, discerning writing on the published images of that lead strip from Turkey seems extremely difficult (See Akdoğan’s Figs. 5, 6, 7) [8].² It must also be noted that at this period the Hittite Empire was using hieroglyphic writing rather than the alphabetic writing claimed by Stripling et al. for the “Mt. Ebal Curse Tablet”. Nonetheless, writing on lead in some fashion in the thirteenth century BC or earlier is reasonable, even though curse tablets, are not known from that period.

Metallurgical analysis

Stripling attempted to open the folded piece of lead and immediately a small corner broke off, indicating that opening would be impossible at that time. He did have the small piece of lead that broke off analyzed by Professor Naama Yahalom-Mack of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Stripling et al. state that “Metallurgical analysis of the tablet’s lead by Professor Naama Yahalom-Mack at Hebrew University revealed that it derived from a mine in the Aegean (Lavriion, Greece), which was known to be in use in the Late Bronze Age.” [2, p. 3]. However, the article by Stripling et al. fails to mention how long the mine was in operation, nor which particular mine³ in Lavriion was the origin of the lead. The reality is that the mines at Lavriion Greece were in operation intermittently from the 3rd millennium BC until the sixth century AD and again from AD 1859–1982. In ancient times the mining hit its peak in the fifth century BC [9, 10], which coincidentally is approximately the time period when lead curse tablets start to appear.

The article by Stripling et al. also does not address the idea of the lead having secondary or tertiary uses. In other words, the lead may have found its final usage well into the Christian Era, when curse tablets were common. The lead may have been re-smelted to allow for re-use.

Because of an origin in a mine in Lavriion Greece and because mining there hit its peak in in the fifth century

BC, this folded lead object fits well, from a metallurgical standpoint, of dating it to the Greek period and not to the Late Bronze or Early Iron Age. Additionally, if the lead originated in Greece, as claimed, it would be just as reasonable to assume that whoever placed it (or lost it) on Mt. Ebal was from Europe and not from the Levant. Thus, the metallurgical analysis, currently, does not add support to the claims of Stripling et al. According to Stripling et al. Naama Yahalom-Mack will separately publish her findings [2, p. 3], but it is doubtful that any future publication of the metallurgical analysis will add any more clarity to the issue.⁴ It is also worth noting that attempts to date this piece of lead based on fluctuations of imports of lead to the land of Canaan is also of little help, since this tiny piece of lead could have been carried by anyone traveling from Greece to the Levant at any time.

If the folded lead object clearly contained writing, then epigraphic and paleographic analysis would provide a date. However, as will be seen below, the evidence of writing and particularly of early alphabetic letters on this lead object is tentative at best.

Letters inside?

In order to be a curse tablet, the object would be expected to have writing related to cursing inside of it. Though blank defixiones exist, as well as defixiones with only scratches [11, 12]. However they cannot properly be called “tablets” if they do not contain writing, because a “tablet” by definition is intended to receive writing.

Because Stripling was unable to open the folded lead object to see if it contained an inscription, it was decided to use x-ray tomography to attempt to see inside the tablet. Such technology has been implemented in the past with success for non-lead objects and twice for lead objects [13]. However in this case, initial analysis showed no clear lines of text, though a few letters were suspected initially in the upper right corner of “Inner B”. (Inner B is the right interior page of the folded lead object). Those suspected letters resemble the early alphabetic letters corresponding to the letters א ת ט א—ALEPH, TAV, HEY and MEM. Additionally, a second, very small TAV may appear to the right of the MEM. However the ALEPH that was initially seen is actually only a series of scratches. This is clearly shown by the fact that both “horns” of the proposed letter, which resembles an ox head, continue far past the “ceiling”. The “ceiling” is the equivalent of the line above a letter on modern notebook paper. Typically, ancient letters remained below this line. Some letters would indeed extend above, but the horns

² The English language version of the referenced article and associated images are also available online: https://www.academia.edu/24157868/THE_KIRSEHIR_LETTER_A_NEW_HIEROGLYPHIC_LUWIAN_TEXT_ON_A_LEAD_STRIP [9].

³ The earliest mining was of the surface ore. Mining in the fifth century BC was of underground ore, spurred at least in part for the quest for silver, which was extracted from amongst the lead ore. It is unclear to the present author if a precise metallurgical analysis would be able to distinguish between the earlier and later mining endeavors. If such a distinction can be made, the lowest date for the Mt. Ebal Curse Tablet could be established.

⁴ Yahalom-Mack’s analysis is being published in an article in the *Israel Exploration Journal* Vol. 73, No. 2, late 2023.



Fig. 1 Colored lines by M.H. source image from Stripling et. al. Fig. 3 [2]. The proposed letter ALEPH should appear as an ox head with horns. The red arrows point to the proposed horns which extend further than expected – even to the edge of the lead

of this proposed ALEPH go far above, all the way to the edge of the lead. In fact, about four different lines proceed from the head of this proposed ox head shaped letter. Therefore, one of the most obvious “letters” is immediately rejected as merely imperfections in the lead. See Fig. 1 with the “horns” of the ALEPH indicated by the red arrows.

Pieter Girt van der Veen, who worked on the project as an epigrapher has mentioned in private communication that the extension of the horns may be “break out” in the lead. In other words, if this is an ALEPH, the horns were not drawn that long originally, but the length was a result of the written incisions starting a process that somewhat resembles a growing crack in a piece of glass or perhaps are simply coincidental. This may be a possibility but seems unlikely.

A problem with all these possible letters is their tiny size. Stripling et al. report that the letters on the “tablet” vary from 1.5 to 4 mm. These particular letters, which may exist, represent the far limits of this range with the proposed TAV being one of the smaller ones and is directly to the left of the proposed HEY, which is one of the largest letters. Such a size variation is unusual, even though TAV can lend itself to a small relative size. The proposed MEM on the other side of the HEY is also small and the 2nd TAV is smaller still. By comparison the much later silver scrolls found at Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem (c. 700 BC or later) contain letters averaging 5 mm for scroll #1 and 3.5 mm for scroll #2. Scroll #2 is only 11 mm wide [14]. That is only half as wide as the Mt. Ebal folded lead object, yet its letters are over twice as large as the smallest proposed letters on the Mt. Ebal folded lead object. To put the size of these small, proposed letters in

perspective, consider that the current Penny from the USA mint is 1.52 mm thick [15]. Also 1.5 mm tall letters equal 4.5-point type font.

The epigraphers

In order to decipher potential letters and text, two epigraphers⁵ were enlisted by Stripling and Associates for Biblical Research. They were Pieter Gert van der Veen and Gershon Galil. Galil claimed to see 48 letters and put together a chiasitic text of several lines based on these 48 letters. While Stripling and van der Veen have since claimed seeing fewer letters than Galil, there is a note at the end of their publication stating: “All authors read and approved the final manuscript” but also a note saying “GG deciphered most of the letters in the inscription...” [2, p. 22].

Analysis of the proposed text

The proposed Hebrew text and proposed translation on inner B is shown below. Note that the letters in square brackets were claimed to be visible only by Galil.

אתה ארור לאל יהו ארור	You are cursed by the god yhw, cursed.
מת[ת] ארור ארור מת[ת]	You will die, cursed—cursed, you will surely die.
א[א]רור אתה ליהו [א]רור	Cursed you are by yhw—cursed.

Decipherment and translation adapted from Stripling et al [2, pp. 6–7].

Galil’s reading is highly improbable for a text from the Late Bronze or Early Iron Age and indeed for several hundred more years.

The very first word is the pronoun אתה “you”. The problems with this initial word are threefold. First, it is out of place, occurring before the reflexive verb. Second, this pronoun lacks a noun to which it refers. A curse tablet should name the person being cursed. Galil’s proposed reading contains a pronoun that doesn’t refer to anyone. This begs the question: Who is being cursed? The third problem is the spelling, which uses three letters instead of two—the third letter being the consonant HEY acting as a vowel. This plene spelling (full spelling) is something that would not be seen until many centuries later [16]

If the problems here only regarded syntax, it might be explainable as an anomaly. Indeed, there is the one rare occurrence of the word ברוך “blessed” appearing after the subject in 1st Kings 2:45. But this is the rare exception within the Bible. In all other cases, and they are many, the words “cursed” and “blessed” occur before the subject

⁵ A third epigrapher was on the team but was not specialized in West Semitic.

in the Bible. See for example, Genesis 3:14 which reads: אָרוּר אַתָּה (cursed are you). Strikingly, the most abundant examples of the normal syntax occur in the very passages about placing the “cursing” and “blessing” on Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Deuteronomy chapters 27–28).

Galil’s problematic syntax also lacks support outside of the Bible. However, we do not currently have a large enough corpus of 2nd millennium texts from the land of Canaan for comparison. Thus, syntax alone, though a strong proof, is not absolute proof that Galil’s text is impossible, but it is unlikely, and therefore presents a red flag. Indeed, if we compare the three lines published, he proposes a word order in the first line that is then reversed in the third line. This unlikely syntax along with the unusual path proposed for the letters (see below) allowed Stripling et al. and particularly Galil to produce a text that contains linguistic features commonly seen in the Hebrew Bible (the chiasmic formula and parallelisms) and containing a curse making it a defixio and thus tying it to the mount of cursing, namely, Mt. Ebal (Deut. 11:29).⁶

Concerning the missing subject of the pronoun, we have a unique text here compared to known curse tablets and even to other curse inscriptions, such as those over tombs. In other words, curse inscriptions name the person or the type of person being cursed. Likewise, the curses in the Bible have an object of the cursing (such as the disobedient Israelites). Here there is zero indication of who is being cursed or the type of person being cursed or even a type of action being cursed.

Even if these two problems of syntax and grammar were overcome, there remains the problem of the plene spelling of אַתָּה—ATAH—“you”, which is completely unacceptable. Plene (full) spellings are basically unknown in the 2nd millennium. Early alphabetic was purely consonantal. No vowels existed. Eventually some of the consonants were used as vowels to aid the reader. A consonant used in this way is called a mater lectionis which is Latin for “mother of reading”. Matres lectionis start to appear in the Mesha Stele (ninth century BC) at the end of words only [16] and even then not consistently. For example, in the Mesha Stele, the pronoun אֲנִי “I” lacks a mater lectionis, in this case a final YUD. Frank Cross has pointed out the change that must have begun to occur sometime between the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the ninth century that brought about letters being used to represent vowel sounds [17]. Matres Lectionis begin to be used much later internally (seventh century BC). Thus, any spelling with a consonant

acting as a vowel is incompatible with the date assigned by Stripling et al. to their proposed text inside this folded lead object.

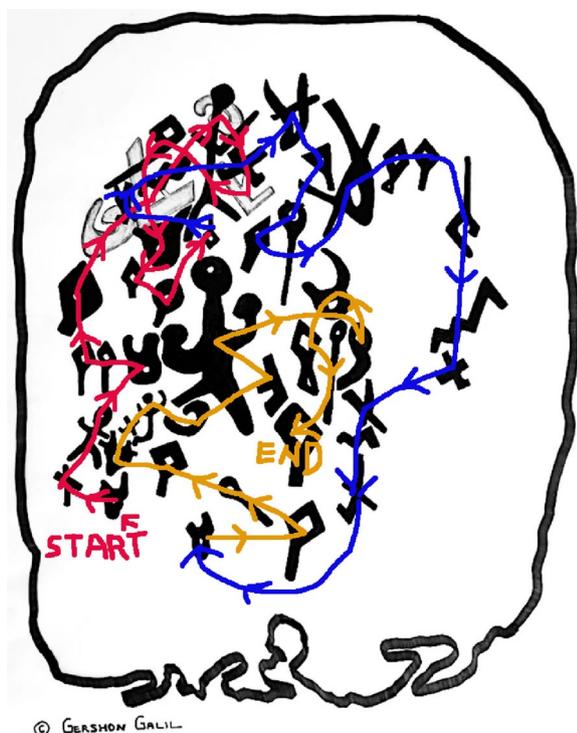
The problems with Galil’s proposed decipherment only grow as we consider the second word: אָרוּר—ARUR—“cursed”. This word also contains a vowel, and this time it is in the middle of the word rather than at the end. This would not be expected until at least the late eighth century BC. By comparison, the Siloam Inscription (c. 700 BC) has none internally. For example, the Siloam inscription spells the word “day” as יָד instead of יוֹד lacking the internal letter VAV⁷ acting as a vowel. The Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls (7th or 6th century BC) continue to show defective spelling internally. For example, the word “Shalom” is spelled שָׁלֵם instead of שָׁלוֹם again lacking the internal letter VAV.

The earliest occurrence of the word “cursed” אָרוּר (ARUR) being spelled with an internal VAV is from the tomb of Shebnayahu in Jerusalem, which dates to not earlier than the (late) eighth century BC. ([17], p. 417) And even there it is surprisingly early, when comparing the contemporary Siloam tunnel inscription. The Shebnayahu tomb inscription has some unique spellings, possibly indicating a Phoenician influence. In the Bible he claims to understand Aramaic (2nd Kings 18:26) and he may have been an immigrant, which is supported by the similarity of his inscription to known Phoenician inscriptions [18 p. 147] though his immigrant status is contested. [19 pp. 61–63].

Galil claims that this word ARUR (cursed) occurs six times in the text. That is 6 out of 14 total words. Galil claims they all contain an internal letter VAV, something unknown in any other Hebrew text for several more centuries. The appeal to Ugaritic for evidence of internal vowels being in use in the thirteenth century is misleading. It is true that there are the rare cases where the letter YUD in Ugaritic appears to act as a vowel at the end of a word in two texts, but this is atypical, and they are not internal vowels in the root words. Ugaritic also appears to have three different letter Alephs that seem to represent three different consonant–vowel combinations. There is limited evidence that in very rare cases these different Alephs acted as stand-alone vowel sounds. However, it is important to remember that the internal use of a consonant as a stand-alone vowel indicator to represent the sound the sound of the letter U is unknown in Ugaritic. It is also important to remember that Ugaritic was written with cuneiform graphemes used to represent letters. These Ugaritic letters (graphemes) are not the same signs

⁶ Galil has also made several yet unpublished epigraphic claims regarding other “finds” [31, 30] Including another curse inscription which is also falling under scrutiny [29]

⁷ The spelling VAV and WAW are used interchangeably herein to refer to the 6th letter of the Hebrew Alphabet.



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Fig. 2 Colored lines by M.H., source image from Stripling et al. Fig. 5 [2] by Gershon Galil. Red = first line, Blue = second line, Yellow = third line of Galil's proposed Hebrew text

used to write proto-Siniatic (early alphabetic), which has been claimed by Stripling et al. to exist on the folded lead tablet.

Again, one can examine the Siloam Tunnel inscription, which is clearly Hebrew or more accurately 'Judahite' (see 2nd Kings 18:26), where the use of a mater lectionis in the plural endings does not yet exist and again it must be pointed out that the Siloam inscription is hundreds of years later than the proposed date for the Mt. Ebal "curse tablet". To be clear, the extant evidence of early alphabetic writing shows that it was purely consonantal, lacking any vowel letters. If this folded lead object contains early alphabetic writing, it too would lack vowel letters.

The other epigrapher on the project, Pieter Girt van der Veen, has agreed with my analysis regarding the vowel letters, stating in a personal email dated July 28, 2023: "I do agree with you that the claimed existence of the mater in atah and arur is false and is based on Galil's imaginary readings."

Thus within the first two words of Galil's text, we see that it is simply a most improbable text that he has "deciphered".

Another problem with Galil's suggested decipherment is the apparently random direction in which the writing proceeds, i.e. the path of the letters. See Fig. 2, where the

present author has drawn colored lines showing the paths of Galil's proposed text. The Red lines represent Galil's first line of text. The blue is the second line and the yellow is the third line. The arrows show the direction of reading.

Galil claims that the writing on Inner B starts in the lower left corner and immediately proceeds left, which is completely unusual as explained below. The path of proposed writing then proceeds up to the right⁸ and then left and then up and then up right and then down right and then left and up left and down and down left and then down right and then back up. And that is only the red path, which follows Galil's first line of text. The other two lines of text, indicated by blue and yellow lines, are also convoluted in their paths. While it is true that early alphabetic texts did not appear to have an established direction, they do not vary direction so wildly within a singular text/inscription. For example, a text might read left to right, or right to left, or vertically from top to bottom, or even boustrophedon "as the ox plows" (successive lines alternating direction) or even in a circular path. It is even possible that a text would wrap around a picture or object. A text might even change direction when running out of space. But we have no examples of all these directions being used within one text and even within individual words,⁹ which thing Galil has claimed he sees multiple times on Inner B of this folded lead object.

Observe for example the start of the yellow line. The first four proposed letters spell ARUR. But notice that from the first to the second letter the reading is dextrograde (to the right) and then switches to sinistograde (to the left) for the third and fourth letters. This type of changing direction might occur, rarely, in a text at the edge of a page, but not randomly within a word when there is not a space constraint. Also note that the third letter is lying on its side, thus not oriented correctly. Letter orientation is important. This example is just one of the proposed words. If the paths of the letters are followed, we quickly see the problem compounding. Galil even skips over proposed letters to get to other proposed letters so that he can spell the words he claims are there—especially true of the proposed reading of "to yahu" along the same yellow line in the diagram.

If we look at the start of the red line, we see it goes left and then immediately up. One must ask why a scribe

⁸ Douglas Petrovich pointed out during his presentation at the 2023 Near Eastern Archaeological Society meeting that texts never read from bottom to top. This is in stark contrast to Galil's first line of text which reads from the bottom up. This is yet another problem for Galil's decipherment.

⁹ Any appeal to Egyptian royal name scarabs as an example of random directions used on a writing surface is irrelevant. A closer comparison to our present discussion would be bullae containing alphabetic writing, which are known to be directional.



Fig. 3 A Doric Greek inscribed lead curse tablet dating to the 5th century BC. Copyright Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images. Used under perpetual license. Image CH6164924 [20]

would start in the lower left corner and go left, giving himself room to write only two letters before running out of space. We must remember that the supposed scribe was working with an unfolded piece of lead. Thus, according to Galil's reading the scribe stopped after writing just two letters at the edge of the yet made fold before turning vertical. If such a scribe were so greatly skilled as to stop at the imaginary line of where the lead would be folded after he was done, surely he would have had the good sense to start writing in the opposite corner and to continue in some sensible fashion.

By comparison, known lead curse tablets, such as the Doric Greek one pictured in Fig. 3,¹⁰ which dates to the fifth century BC clearly show that scribes would write all the way across the lead, before it was folded. There is no reason to think that earlier in history a scribe would plan ahead to not cross the fold.

Differing letter counts

Gershon Galil claimed to see 48 letters on Inner B. Scott Stripling, who is an archaeologist and not an epigrapher, has since claimed to see 40 letters. In June 2023, Stripling made public that Galil had been removed from the project. The other West-Semitic epigrapher on the team, Pieter Gert van der Veen, wrote in a personal communication, by email, on July 28, 2023: "I doubt Galil's 48 letters, but am happy with a maximum of 10–15 on the inside. Yet there may be even fewer, as the scans (and I like to stress this here) do not always yield the evidence we wish to see." He also went on to state "Yes I believe

that we do have writing on the tablet and no, Galil's interpretation is not acceptable. Even so with much fewer letters, I tend to maintain my basic conclusion, that we have *YHW* and *TMT* and possibly *AR(R)* on the inside as well as on the outside..."

"Yahu"

One of the most spectacular claims by Stripling et al. is that the lead object twice contains the name Yahweh on Inner B, but short one letter—יה In other words, Stripling, as well as van der Veen and Galil, claim that the letters יה (YUD, HEY and VAV) appear in the top right register of inner B (top left in Galil's mirror image drawing). They claim that these three proposed letters are a shortened form of the name Yahweh—which elsewhere is always spelled with four letters: יהוה. The shortened form is unknown as a stand-alone name. It is true that the shortened form was often used in theophoric names in the monarchal period in Israel, especially as a suffix. For example, Elijah's name means "My God is Yahweh" and is spelled יהליהו (1st Kings 17:1), lacking the final letter HEY. However even as a suffix, it was basically unknown before the time of the prophet Samuel [21]. In other words, even in the very high Biblical chronology, it was unknown as a suffix within the Bible before the eleventh century BC. Outside of the Bible, the Mesha Stele (ninth century BC) has the oldest clear reference to Yahweh and it is spelled with all four letters.

Attempts to prove the existence of an earlier shortened form by appeal to an Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription from the Soleb temple dating to the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep III (early fourteenth century BC) is tentative at best. The inscription mentions the "Shasu of Yahwe". This is likely a reference to Yahweh. However, it cannot be shown that the spelling and proposed pronunciation of the hieroglyphics is indicative of a shortened form in the Hebrew language. In fact, four hieroglyphs are used (M17, O4, V4, G1), as pointed out by Titus Kennedy who goes on to state: "...the final sign is classed as a G43 bird (w), but this was a mistake, and the sign is clearly the G1 falcon representing the aleph". [22, p. 184] Thus this cartouche represents the Hebrew equivalent of יהוה (YUD, HEY, VAV, ALEPH). It must also be remembered that names often change both spelling and pronunciation in foreign languages. Consider for example the name of Joshua יהושע in Exodus 17:9. A direct translation into the Septuagint Greek text renders it: Ἰησοῦ. Similar pronunciation, but not exactly the same, and this is for a direct translation of a text into another alphabetic language, whereas the hieroglyphic inscription under discussion is not a translation nor transliteration of a Hebrew text at all. This inscription represents the Egyptian spelling of the name of Yahweh and doesn't

¹⁰ Bridgeman Images. "A Doric Greek inscribed curse tablet (lead)". used under perpetual license. <https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/greek-school/a-doric-greek-inscribed-curse-tablet-lead/lead/asset/6164924>.

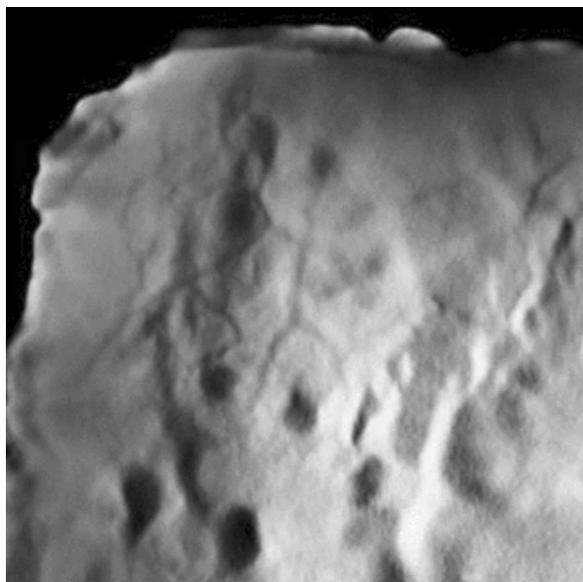


Fig. 4 Source image Stripling et. al. Fig. 4 [2]—image has been flipped horizontally

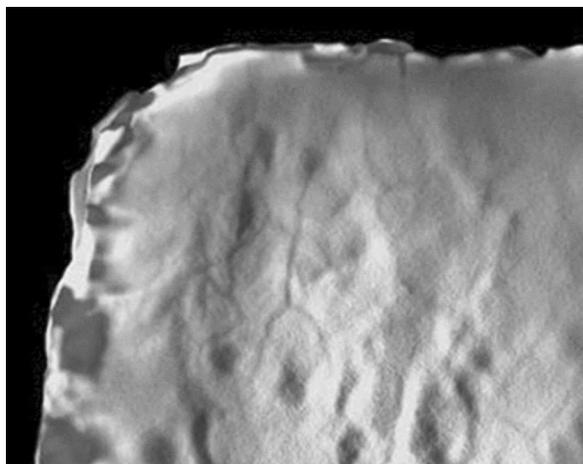


Fig. 5 Source image Stripling et. al. Fig. 3 [2]—image has been flipped horizontally

necessarily accurately represent the contemporary Hebrew pronunciation. This Soleb temple inscription is not representative of a shortened form of the tetragrammaton but actually testifies against Stripling et al.’s claims of the discovery of a shortened form on the folded lead object, since the Soleb temple inscription consists of four graphemes and not three and dates to the proposed century of the Mt. Ebal Curse Tablet.

It is also unexpected for Stripling et al. to claim plene spellings for the words “You” (אתה—ATAH) and

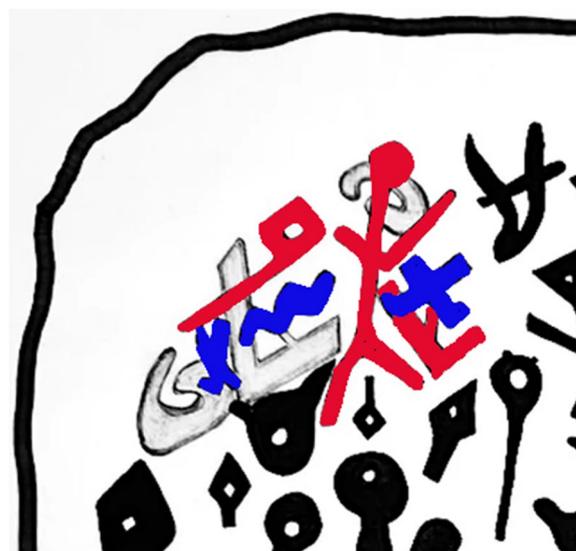


Fig. 6 red and blue coloring by M.H., source image from Stripling et. al. Fig. 7 [2] by Gershon Galil. The red coloring is of the three proposed letters spelling יהו (Yahu or YHW). The blue letters are the proposed word תמת (you will die). The grey letters are Galil’s and spell the proposed word לאל (to god)

“cursed” (ארור—ARUR) but then to claim a defective spelling for the name Yahweh (YHW instead of YHWH).

In addition to the problem of a stand-alone shortened form of Yahweh, there is also the greater problem of showing that the letters representing such a shortened form exist on Inner B. A close examination of the clearest images: Figs. 4, 5¹¹ of this area of “inner B” that Stripling et al. published, clearly does not show a letter YUD (normally resembling an elbow and forearm with thumb and hand). There are some markings that resemble the early alphabetic letter HEY, which looks like a stick figure man with his hands raised. The letter VAV (WAW) is highly speculative.

Galil drew not only these three letters, but also three letters spelling לאל “to God” and תמת “you will die”. And he drew them all on top of each other.

The present author has taken Galil’s drawing, Fig. 6, and colored the proposed word יהו (YHW) in red and the word תמת (you will die) in blue. Galil himself drew the word לאל (to god) in grey.

The word לאל “to god” goes from lower left to upper right diagonally (keeping in mind that Galil’s drawings are mirror images of the tomographic scans). The word יהו “YHW” goes right to left. The word תמת “to die” goes from left to right and is written over top of the supposed

¹¹ Images have been flipped horizontally to make for simpler comparison to the drawings by Stripling et al. which they published in mirror image to their tomographic scans.

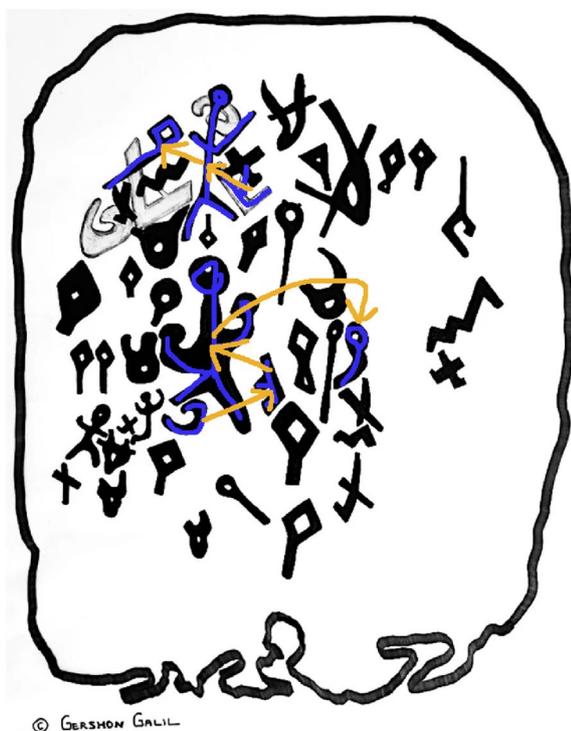


Fig. 7 Blue and yellow coloring by M.H. source image Stripling et al. Fig. 7 [2] by Gershon Galil. The blue colored letters in the upper register are the proposed word יהוה (Yahu or YHW). The blue letters in the middle spell the proposed word יהוה (to yahu/YHW). The yellow lines and arrows indicate the proposed direction of reading

name of God. Besides the unusual proposal of a scribe writing in layers like this, there is the theological consideration of a hypothetical Israelite scribe writing “you will die” over the words “to god YHW”. Just to be completely clear, Galil claims that a scribe wrote “to god” in one direction, and then crisscrossed over that with the name “YHW” and again crisscrossed over that with the word meaning “you will die”.

There is a further problem here of the orientation of the letters. Notice the first and last letters in the word לאל are the same letter, but in Galil’s drawing they have opposite orientations. Orientation in ancient writing is important (as it also is today). Letters “face” the direction of writing. This is true in Egyptian writing and also in early alphabetic which apparently derived its letter forms from Egyptian hieroglyphics. The problem of lack of orientation exists in Galil’s other proposed words as well, including the supposed name “YHW”, with each letter having a different orientation. In some of Galil’s other proposed words, some letters are upside down compared to other letters in the same word. For example, for the word ארוך (ARUR = “cursed”) that precedes the word תמות “you will die”, Galil has drawn the first R in ARUR right side up and

the second one completely upside down (located under the crotch of the stick figure).

Any appeal to the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostracon (eleventh century BC?) for an example of multiple letter orientations should be ignored since that was most likely a child’s practice writing tablet and is likely not a translatable text. The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon is a broken piece of pottery (a sherd) that contains writing, possibly in Hebrew.¹² Pottery sherds were the “scratch paper” of ancient Canaan. This particular piece has several lines of text and contains the letter ALEPH, which resembles a capital “A”, in three different orientations. Pupils, and especially young children, who are first learning to write, will often incorrectly orient their letters.¹³ They will also use lines, such as those on this ostracon,¹⁴ to help them establish the baseline for their letters. Additionally the letters are relatively large and thus consistent with those of an untrained hand rather than those of an expert scribe. Any attempts to translate the contents of this pottery sherd into a meaningful text and especially one of monumental or royal importance are best ignored [23] The value of this ostracon to our present discussion is its lack of matres lectionis, thus again showing that the proposed text by Stripling et al. is simply indefensible.

The second proposed occurrence of the name “YHW” is even less tenable. Figure 7 shows both occurrences as proposed by Galil. The present author has colored both blue. The first occurrence being in the upper left, and the second in the middle of the drawing. The second one supposedly reads ליהו “to YHW” and all four letters are colored blue. The present author then drew yellow arrows over both readings to show the direction that Galil proposed the readings should happen. Notice especially that the last letter in “to YHW” in the middle of the page, a letter WAW (VAV), is only obtained by skipping over several other proposed letters and in the opposite direction from the previous letter. Such a proposal by Galil is simply not defensible.

¹² It is very likely that up to this point in history, Canaanite and Hebrew were the same language. Arguments about texts such as this being in the Hebrew language or not, are mis-guided. Rather the debate should revolve around whether a text is “Israelite”, which would be evidenced by the message contained in the text and supported by evidence such as the context in which the text was found.

¹³ The present author witnessed this exact mistake in a modern text written by a four-year old girl, where the young learner wrote a capital letter A in three different orientations on the same page within her set of practice words.

¹⁴ It is possible that the lines may have been drawn after the text was written since the characters generally do not touch the lines.



Fig. 8 Red circle by M.H., source image Stripling et. al. Fig. 6 [2]. Photograph by Jaroslav Valach

Other problems with the publication

The article by Stripling et al. has several other problems besides those mentioned above. The most glaring problem is the lack of a composite image. The few images of Inner B provided by them only show some partially focused areas with the rest blurred. This makes analysis of their claims more difficult. They also failed to label their drawings and images of individual letters in their Table 1–10 in order to connect them to Fig. 7. This makes it difficult for the reader to check their claims.

Stripling has stated, in person, during the Tel Shiloh excavations of 2023, that a website will be launched with better images. However, the question begs to be asked: If better images exist, and those images would strengthen their case, then why were they not included in their peer-reviewed publication? The existence of other images is not doubted but rather their usefulness in deciphering letters, for surely anyone who wanted to substantiate such great claims as those made by Stripling et al. would have included the very best and most convincing images in their publication.

Their article also claims: “Importantly, the “Outer A” text is very similar to “Inner B,” with the crucial exception that it lacks the term “El.” However, it employs the divine name “YHW” [2, p. 7]. They did include an image of Outer A, which is of good quality and reproduced here as Fig. 8. They also provided table number 11 of eight closeup images of Outer A that supposedly show “representative letters” [2 p. 20]. The images, however,

do not clearly show Early Alphabetic or Hebrew letters on Outer A. However, both Stripling and van der Veen have pointed out, in personal communication, what looks like an ALEPH in the lower left of the image of Outer A (Fig. 8).

They also provide a closeup in Table 11, image 1 of their article. The reader should note that ancient ALEPH resembles an upside down letter “A” and was drawn as an ox head with horns. These striations could be shown to be the letter ALEPH if there were other letters near the proposed ALEPH so as to make a word. The reality is that random scratches can look very similar to letters.

By observing Table 2 in their article, it is clearly visible that authors Stripling and van der Veen have drawn nine different proposed “Alephs” for Inner B and they all differ significantly in form from one to the other and also when compared to their tenth proposed ALEPH on Outer A. None of the images or drawings are convincing. The reader must remember that what confirms markings as letters and not mere striations in a surface is the proximity to other clear letters. A lone proposed ALEPH, whether real or imagined, is of no value by itself and ought to be ignored as coincidental scratching. Such scratching or denting can even occur during the excavation or later in the dry-sifting or in the wet-sifting process, both of which are performed on mesh trays. Both Stripling and van der Veen have mentioned in personal communication, the future publication of their proposed decipherment of letters on the outside of the tablet. However, any such future publication will likely be met with strong criticism by the scholarly community, for the outside does not rely on tomographic scans but can already be analyzed visually. It is also important to note that there is another higher quality image of Outer A available dating to 2022 [20], in which the proposed Aleph is much less visible and indeed the entire left side of the Aleph seems to be missing. A single image can be misleading due to shadows and contrast levels. For this reason, Stripling et al. should have provided multiple high-quality images in their article, both to reinforce their claims and to allow other scholars to make their own assessments more accurately.

As mentioned above, they also make the spectacular claim that “YHW” appears also on Outer A. Such a claim lacks evidence in the clear image of Outer A (see above).

As was mentioned previously, Stripling et al. took the very confusing approach of drawing diagrams of Inner B in mirror image of the actual scans. This unusual approach only added confusion to their article.

Another claim they make is that bulges on Outer B confirm the letters on Inner B. However, they have failed to show that these bulges add clarity to deciphering any

of the proposed letters. The reality is a dent on one side of a 0.4 mm thick piece of lead will of course appear on the opposite side. The only thing this would prove is that the scratches on the inside are indeed there and are not x-ray anomalies. The scratches or bulges do not prove letters. An examination of the close-up images of the bulges in Table 10, is not at all convincing regarding letters on the inside.

Conclusion

What is this folded lead object? Without a text inside that involves cursing someone, it cannot be claimed to be a curse tablet. Indeed, without a text, Stripling et al. cannot even claim it is a tablet. It may have been a clasp around a piece of string, as publicly suggested by Dr. Robert Cargill and also Dr. Gad Barnea. However, if it was attached to string, it may have been worn as an amulet and thus would be expected to have writing in it, similar to other amulets such as the Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls.

If there are a few early alphabetic letters inside this folded lead object, they may contain a completely different message from what Stripling et al. have claimed. If the four letters in the upper right corner of Inner B—תהמת do exist and are not merely striations in the lead, then we have either the word “Depths” or possibly the name “Tiamat”. The word “depths” may derive from the name of the Mesopotamian goddess of the sea, Tiamat, [24p. 147] and might be spelled the same in early alphabetic script. If the final TAV is not there, then we are left with the word “depth” in the singular. This reading appropriately lacks internal or external vowel letters, but is from left to right (dextrograde) instead of the later Hebrew direction of writing during the monarchal period which is always right to left (sinistrograde).

Prof. Amihai Mazar has suggested that this folded lead object resembles a fishing weight.¹⁵ If this is correct and if the fishing weight contains letters, the word “depth(s)” would be consistent with the intended use of a fishing weight.

The markings they claim to be a WAW (VAV) as part of the shortened name YHW in the upper right register (laying on its side on top of the proposed MEM (Table 4, Scan 1A) ([2] p. 13), actually resembles the Chi-Rho of Emperor Constantine’s time (fourth century). But such a proposal is also based on imagination rather than clear evidence.

It also possible that this lead object is a tesserae plumbeae (tablet of lead) used by the Romans for labeling. The size is consistent with this possibility as well as the fact that they were inscribed on both sides. These labels

would contain artistic markings and/or inscriptions [25]. They would even be used as admission tickets to the theater or circus. [26. p. 144] In other words, this could have been a theater ticket, containing artistic markings, that a Roman soldier folded in half and lost on Mt. Ebal. This example shows the many, many possible origins of this folded lead object. Without further evidence, the possibilities cannot be reduced beyond the point of imaginative speculation.

The only substantiated claim that Stripling et al. can make at this time is that they have found a very old, small piece of folded lead on Mt. Ebal using wet-sifting. While such a find highlights the usefulness of wet-sifting, there is currently insufficient epigraphic evidence to conclude that writing exists on the interior or exterior of this folded piece of lead.

As of July 2023, Stripling and Associates for Biblical Research continue to promote this folded lead object as a curse tablet containing ancient Hebrew writing, including the name of the God of Israel [27]. However the sensational claims of Stripling et al. lack evidence, and as Prof. Christopher Rollston has pointed out regarding their claims, “sensational claims require sensational evidence” [28].

A recent scientific development is a technique called “neutron tomography”, which has been implemented successfully to read the inside of the lead Bispegata amulet [13] and perhaps could be implemented to shed more light into the folded piece of lead from Mt. Ebal.

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¹⁵ Forthcoming article in the Israel Exploration Journal.

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