

Precarious Scholarship:  
Problems with Proposing that the Seal of Yzbl was Queen Jezebel's<sup>1</sup>

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Recently, Marjo Korpel has argued that a seal inscribed with the letters *yzbl* (IAA 65-321) is the seal of Ahab's wife Jezebel (Biblical Hebrew spelling: 'yzbl).<sup>2</sup> The putative chronological horizon for this royal couple of the Northern Kingdom of Israel is the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. According to the biblical account (1 Kgs 16:31), Jezebel (whose name is arguably a rhetorical question meaning "Where is the royal one?") was the daughter of a king of Sidon named Ethba'al. The marriage of Ahab (son of Israelite King Omri) and Jezebel (a Phoenician princess) was presumably a marital alliance establishing (or fortifying) a political relationship between Phoenicia and the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Avigad published this seal (IAA 65-321 = Avigad Sass, 1997, 275 [#740]) some time ago (Avigad 1964), but he sagely did not suggest that it belonged to the notorious Phoenician princess that became an Israelite queen. In fact, Avigad stated that "there is, of course, no basis for identifying the owner of our seal with this famous lady," although he also stated that "they may have been contemporaries, and the seal seems worthy of a queen" (Avigad 1964: 275). Avigad's caution is commendable. Some might suggest that

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, Korpel has stated in interviews that her research will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*. Dutch newspapers have carried articles about this. See [http://www.katholiekederland.nl/actualiteit/2007/detail\\_objectID613266\\_FJaar2007.html](http://www.katholiekederland.nl/actualiteit/2007/detail_objectID613266_FJaar2007.html)

he was too cautious and that Korpel has drawn cogent conclusions on the basis of the extant evidence. This is, however, not the case.

(1) Significantly, the root *zbl* is reasonably well-attested in Northwest Semitic, including attestations as part of personal names and divine epithets. Thus, it is present in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium corpus of Ugaritic texts, often as an epithet for the god Ba‘al (Del Olmo Lete and Sanmartin 2004, 998). It is also attested in Phoenician. Note, for example, the personal names *B‘l’zbl* and *Šmzbl* (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 303; Benz 1972, 304). Furthermore, the root is also attested in biblical Hebrew multiple times (e.g., Hab 3:11; 1 Kgs 8:13; 2 Chr 6:2) and it is even the root for the personal name of the eponymous founder of the tribe of Zebulun (e.g., Gen 30:20).<sup>3</sup> In addition, the root is arguably attested in Mari Akkadian (Huffmon 1965, 186). Therefore, it is readily apparent that this root is not a particularly rare root in Northwest Semitic and it is also readily apparent that it is used for multiple personal names. Korpel’s argument implies that *zbl* is a rather rare root and so the seal (with the root *zbl*) can be understood as being that of Jezebel (a name that uses that same root). However, the fact of the matter is that this is not a particularly rare root and multiple personal names are formed with this root in Northwest Semitic. Thus, Korpel’s argument contains a classic *non sequitur*.

(2) Even more problematic is the fact that the seal contains no patronymic (i.e., no “Yzbl *daughter of Ethba‘al*”) and no title (such as “*queen*”). (a) A patronymic is a critical component of any attempt to “identify” someone attested in the literary corpus (e.g., Hebrew Bible, Greek New Testament) with someone attested in the epigraphic

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the divine name Ba‘al Zebub (2 Kgs 1:2) is arguably a polemical revision of Ba‘al Zebul (cf. the Ugaritic references pairing the divine name Ba‘al and *Zbl*). Significantly, both “variants” of this divine name are preserved in manuscripts of the Greek New Testament (cf. Matt 10:25 and the textual apparatus thereof).

corpus. Fortunately, patronymics are common within the corpus of Iron Age ostraca, seals, bullae, and royal inscriptions. For example, an Old Hebrew seal from Arad (Aharoni 1981, 119 [#106] = IAA 67-663) contains the following text: “Belonging to Elyashib son of Ishyahu.” An Old Hebrew bulla from the City of David (Shoham 2000, 38 [#12] = IAA 84-145) reads: “Belonging to Yada‘yahu son of Meshullam.” However, because the *yzbl* seal (IAA 65-321) has no a patronymic (i.e., no “daughter of Ethba‘al” on the seal ), there is simply no convincing basis for assuming that this is the seal of biblical Jezebel. (b) Sometimes a title is present in an ancient inscription. For example, the Ammonite Tell Siran Bottle Inscription refers to “Amminadab king of the Ammonites” (Zayadine and Thompson 1973; = J 12943). An Old Hebrew bulla from the City of David contains reference to “[Tobšillem] son of Zakar, the physician” (Shoham 2000, 35 [no 6]). From the Aramaic Persepolis corpus, there is reference to “Data-Mithra the treasurer” (Bowman 1970, 71-74 [no. 1]). However, for the purported “seal of Jezebel,” there is no title at all (i.e., no “queen”). Ultimately, with neither patronymic, nor title, it is not tenable to attempt to argue that the owner of this seal was indeed Queen Jezebel of Israel (cf. also the useful protocols of Mykytiuk 2004).

(3) Regarding the script of this seal, certain things can be noted. (a) The *bet* is recumbent (and radically so). Recumbent *bet* is the norm for Old Hebrew seals, ostraca, and chiseled stone inscriptions; however, it is *not the norm* for either Phoenician or Aramaic inscriptions (Rollston 2006: 59-60). Thus, the stance of *bet* is diagnostic for Old Hebrew, but a *bet* this recumbent could not be an early Old Hebrew *bet* (cf. also Mesha and el-Kerak, as well as the early Old Hebrew inscriptions, such as the Shema‘ seal from Megiddo for the stance of Old Hebrew *bet* in the early period). (b) The morphology of

*yod* is striking. The head of *yod* in this seal is made with a flowing, rounded stroke. It has the graphic appearance of a single stroke. However, within Old Hebrew inscriptions (including seals) the head of *yod* is made with multiple strokes, normally quite angular: this is true of inscriptions chiseled in stone, ink inscriptions on pottery, and seals (based on my collations using a loop and also using a stereo microscope). (c) The relative length of the vertical stroke of *zayin* is not characteristic of the Old Hebrew script of the 9<sup>th</sup> century or early 8<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, it is characteristic of the late 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries (but note the absence of the tick on the horizontals). I would suggest that it would be very difficult to date this *zayin* to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, regardless of the series. (d) The *lamed* is angular, rather than rounded. This *lamed* would *not* be the norm for the Old Hebrew script of the 9<sup>th</sup> or early-8<sup>th</sup> centuries, because the hook of *lamed* in early Old Hebrew (and also in the 9<sup>th</sup> century Mesha and Kerak inscriptions) has substantial curvature (cf. Rollston 2003, 170-171). Rather, this angular *lamed* of the seal would be characteristic of the late 8<sup>th</sup> century or early 7<sup>th</sup> century Old Hebrew *lamed*.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, I would not consider it tenable to argue that the script of this seal could be 9<sup>th</sup> century Old Hebrew. It must be later.

Lemaire has suggested that this seal is “Phoenician or Phoenicianizing” (Lemaire 1986, 97). The morphology of *yod* and *lamed* are indeed better Phoenician forms than they are Old Hebrew (cf. the script of the Kition Bowl). I might be inclined to accept this seal as being written in the Phoenician script, but the stance of *bet* is not at all diagnostic for Phoenician (cf. the stance of *bet* in the Kition Bowl, etc., for a nice example of Phoenician) and the stance of *bet* is a critical diagnostic issue for the national scripts.

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that I do not think that the Gezer Calendar is written in the Old Hebrew script. Rather, I believe that it is written in the Phoenician script, as does Naveh (Naveh 1987, 65).

Furthermore, I am disinclined to resort to the assumption that space constraints would have forced the hand of an ancient Phoenician seal maker to make such a radical change in the traditional stance of *bet*. Those making seals were accustomed to working with space constraints (e.g., Lachish seal IAA 36.1829 = Avigad and Sass 59), but radical stance modifications were something that they avoided.

Someone could suggest that this seal consists of a script *mélange* and argue that this inscription is a modern forgery. Ultimately, this script does raise some (modest) concerns for me regarding the alleged antiquity of this piece. Significantly, Avigad noted that this seal comes *not* from a scientific excavation, but from the antiquities market (Avigad 1964, 274). Furthermore, some of the results of Vaughn and Dobler's analyses of seal iconography would also suggest that this seal's authenticity cannot be considered secure (Vaughn and Dobler 2006: 764-767). For the sake of argument, though, if I were to assume that this piece were ancient, I would *not* be inclined at all to date it to the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century (the chronological horizon necessary for Queen Jezebel of Israel). Rather, it would need to be dated to some later chronological horizon.

(4) Finally, I should note that Korpel restores two letters in the broken area at the top of the seal. To restore a *lamed* is acceptable, as this is a dominant feature of a seal (*lamed* = "belonging to"). However, in addition to this she restores an *'alep*. This is convenient, as it would yield the personal name Korpel wishes to find. However, the fact of the matter is that there is sufficient room for two or three more letters in addition to a *lamed*. One could certainly, therefore, propose to restore in this area the letters *B'l* and thus the personal name would be *B'l- yzbl*, with the yod marking a yaqtul as Cross suggested long ago for this seal (Cross 1966 = 2003, 182 no. 17 ). Perhaps, though, we

should restore  $\check{S}m$ , and thus the personal name would be  $\check{S}m-yzbl$ . Of course, it is plausible to suggest that nothing at all should be restored (i.e., maybe this part of the seal was not inscribed). The fact of the matter is that restorations such as this are precarious. Those that propose them (and those that read about them) must recognize that they are tenuous at best.

In conclusion, it can be stated that it is difficult indeed to accept Korpel's argument that this seal belonged to the Israelite Queen Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon. After all, the root  $zbl$  is well-attested and could be used as the verbal component for any number of personal names. Furthermore, there is neither patronymic nor title on this seal, and data such as this is necessary for any compelling identifications. In addition, the restoration of an *'alep* is speculative. Finally, the script would be difficult to date to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, regardless of the script series to which one affirmed that it belonged. Moreover, this piece is from the market and with such pieces caution must be the *modus operandi*. Ultimately, this is an interesting proposal, but it is based on no real compelling evidence.

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