

Hayim Tawil

**A Note on the
Ahiram Inscription**

In the first line of the Aḥiram inscription (KAI, No. 1:1), mention of the construction of Aḥiram's sarcophagus by his son is accompanied by the enigmatic phrase כִּשְׁחָה נְעֻלָּם. In 1926 Albright,¹ followed by Harris,² rendered the phrase "as a place of sleeping in the otherworld," deriving כִּשְׁחָה from Akkadian *šittu*, Hebrew שָׁנָה, "sleep," and נְעֻלָּם from the Late Hebrew expression נְעֻלָּם הַבָּא. Twenty-one years later, Albright, following Dussaud,³ rendered "as his ab(o)de in eternity,"⁴ assuming an omission of a כ, i.e., *kšth>kš(b)th*. He compared the usage of יָשַׁן with נְעֻלָּם to the biblical Hebrew phrase מְכוֹן לְשֹׁנְךָ עוֹלָמִים⁵, "your everlasting dwelling place," translating נְעֻלָּם "in eternity." In his translation of the Aḥiram inscription, Rosenthal⁶ adopts Albright's *kaš(ib)tiḥ(u)*, but his rendering, "as his eternal <dwelling> place," glosses over the difficult usage of the preposition כ.

Albright's interpretation is open to question for several reasons. First, although the verb יָשַׁן is attested in biblical Hebrew in connection with burial places,

¹ "The End of the Sarcophagus Text of Aḥiram," *JPOS* 6 (1926), p.79.

² *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language* (New Haven, 1936), p.107.

³ "Les Inscriptions phéniciennes du tombeau d'Aḥiram, roi de Byblos," *Syria* 5 (1924), p. 136.

⁴ "The Phoenician Inscriptions of the Tenth Century B.C. from Byblos," *JAOS* 67 (1947), p. 155, n. 19.

⁵ I Kings 8:13 = II Chr. 6:2.

⁶ *ANET*³, p.661b.

e.g., ⁷היושנים בקברים ובנוצורים ילינו "who dwell in the tombs, who lodge in the niches," there the prophet refers not to the dead but to the living who occupy burial places. Also, the analogy drawn by Albright to מכוון לשבתך עולמים is inappropriate, since ישב is employed in the context of the divine abode rather than one involving a place of human burial. In short, the verb ישב is not employed to express burial either in biblical Hebrew or in Phoenician.

Second, Albright's emendation of šth>š(b)th overlooks the attested usage of שית and its semantic equivalents in contexts clearly involving burial. Biblical Hebrew employs both the verb שית and its poetic counterpart שפת in such contexts as a) ⁸כצאן לשאול שחול "like sheep they are placed(!) into Sheol," b) ⁹שחני בכור החתיות "you placed me in the nethermost pit," c) ¹⁰ולעפר מות חשפתי "you put me in the grave of (lit. the dust of) death." Ugaritic employs the verb šyt with hrt, "hollows, holes," e.g., abky waqbrnh ašt bḥrt ilm arš¹¹ "I weep and place it in the hollows of the earth-ghosts." Similarly, the verb שים is attested in Phoenician alongside the substantive קבר, e.g., ¹²אש [ש]ם לקבר זה "that placed in this grave." It would seem best to follow those scholars¹³ who construe the form שחה as the 3 per. masc. perfect of שית with the 3 per. masc. sing. accusative suffix and render כשחה "when he put him."

Third, Albright's rendering of בעלם, "in eternity,"¹⁴ is problematic, since Northwest Semitic never employs the preposition כ with the substantive עלם. So, too, Akkadian *ina dār/ dārāti/ dārīti seems not to be attested.¹⁵

⁷ Isa. 65:4.

⁸ Ps. 49:15.

⁹ Ps. 88:7.

¹⁰ Ps. 22:16. Note that the Targum renders עפר מות as בית קבורתא.

¹¹ ID:112, 126, 141; cf. I*AB, 5:5; IAB, 1:16-18.

¹² "The Phoenician Inscriptions of the Cyprus Museum," *Iraq* 6 (1939), p. 107.

¹³ C. Torrey, "The Ahiṣim Inscription from Byblos," *JAOS* 45 (1925), p. 270; M. Montet, *Byblos et l'Égypte* (Paris, 1928-29), p. 238, n.1; J. Friedrich, "Zur Einleitungsformel der ältesten phönizischen Inschriften aus Byblos," *Mélanges syriens* (Paris, 1939), p. 43. See most recently H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden, 1968) (hereafter *KAI*), Band II, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴ So, too, J. Friedrich, *op. cit.*, p. 43, renders the phrase כשחה בעלם "when he put him in eternity (=the tomb)." The rendering "in eternity" is also adopted in *KAI* II, p. 2.

¹⁵ Note that ina dārīti (EA 147:48) is considered an error for ana dārīti by CAD, D, p. 115.

The problem is avoided when the ב of בְּעֵלָם is interpreted as something other than the preposition "in." The most likely alternative to the latter is in viewing בְּעֵלָם as an abbreviation for בֵּית עֵלָם , "in¹⁶ the house of eternity." It should be recalled that the omission of the ה in the word בֵּית , "house," is attested in Old Aramaic¹⁷ בִּי טַב , "a good house," as well as in Egyptian Aramaic¹⁸ אֲחִי אַרְק "there is the land of one house belonging to me," and¹⁹ בִּי זִילִי "like a thief who demolishes a house." In Jewish Aramaic, בִּי is the regular construct of בֵּית in such cases as בֵּית רִנָּן , "college,"²⁰ בֵּית אָבָא , "a house of the father," and בֵּית קְבוּרָא , "cemetery."²¹

More striking is the abbreviation of בֵּית in the expression בֵּית עֵלָם , "cemetery." The identical euphemism, בֵּית עֵלָם , is attested in Punic with the meaning "tomb," e.g.,²³ $\text{חֲדָר בֵּית עֵלָם קַבְרִי}$ "a niche in a tomb, a grave has been made," as well as in Palmyrene inscriptions, e.g.,²⁴ $\text{בֵּית עֵלָם דִּנְא עֵבֶד מַתָּנִי}$ "this house of eternity has been made by Matani...." In biblical Hebrew one finds²⁵ בֵּית הָאֵלִים

¹⁶ The preposition ב need not appear orthographically when it precedes a word beginning with the same letter; cf. e.g., Gen. 24:23. The phenomenon also occurs in Ugaritic, e.g., bty (for *bbty) in IK:205; IIK, 1:14-15 $\text{bhyk abn nsmh blmtk}$ (for *bblmtk) ngln ; *ibid.*, ll. 98-99. See further H.L. Ginsberg, "The North-Canaanite Myth of Anath and Aqhat: II," *BASOR* 98 (1945), p. 16, n. 27, and p. 20, n. 46; U. Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath* (Jerusalem, 1953), p. 39. Clearly, the examples are too numerous to be explained on the basis of haplography. Note that Torrey (*op. cit.*, p. 272) considered עֵלָם the abbreviated form of בֵּית עֵלָם , anticipating, somewhat, the suggestion offered above. However, he retained ב as the preposition, rather than as an abbreviation of בֵּית .

¹⁷ *KAI*, No. 216:16 (Bīr-Rākib). In this example, and in those which follow, the abbreviation בִּי for בֵּית , "house," reflects the indication of the diphthong by yod . In Byblian Phoenician the diphthong is not preserved, hence in the Ahiḥram inscription ב may stand for בֵּית , "house."

¹⁸ A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (reprint: 1967), No. 9:3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Ahiḥram: 125.

²⁰ See M. Jastrow, *Dictionary* (New York, 1950), p. 158b for other examples.

²¹ Targum on Job 7:9.

²² T. Nöldeke, "Syrische Inschriften," *ZA* 21 (1908), p. 158.

²³ *CIS*: 124; also N. Slouschz, *The Thesaurus of the Phoenician Inscriptions* (Tel-Aviv, 1942), p. 126, No. 109.

²⁴ G. Cooke, *A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1903), p. 307:1; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 308:1, 339:6.

²⁵ Ecc. 12:5. See H. L. Ginsberg, *Koheleth* (Jerusalem, 1961), p. 132.

לְמִן בֵּית עוֹלָם "because man goes to his house of eternity," and this usage continues, being commonly attested in Late Hebrew.

As long noted, Egyptian employs the euphemistic expression nīwt nt nḥḥ,²⁶ "the city of eternity." To be viewed alongside this usage is the Akkadian šubat dārāti/dārāt, "the dwelling place of eternity," attested as follows: a) ēkal šalāli kimah tapšūti šubat dārāti²⁷ "a palace of sleeping, a resting tomb, a dwelling place of eternity," b) ēkal tapšūti šubat dārāt²⁸ "a palace of repose, a dwelling place of eternity." It should be noted that both of these references are drawn from inscriptions appearing on bricks from the royal sepulchre at Assur. Thus, Akkadian šubat dārāti/dārāt, "a dwelling place of eternity," rendered "גַּרְב" by von Soden,²⁹ is the exact semantic equivalent of Northwest Semitic לְמִן בֵּית עוֹלָם or, as it appears in the Aḥiram inscription, בְּעֵלָם.

²⁶ Montet, *op. cit.*, p. 238, n. 1.

²⁷ OIP 2, 151, No. 14:3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 13:2.

²⁹ *AHw.*, p. 164; contrast the rendering "to dwell there forever" in *CAD*, D, p. 111.