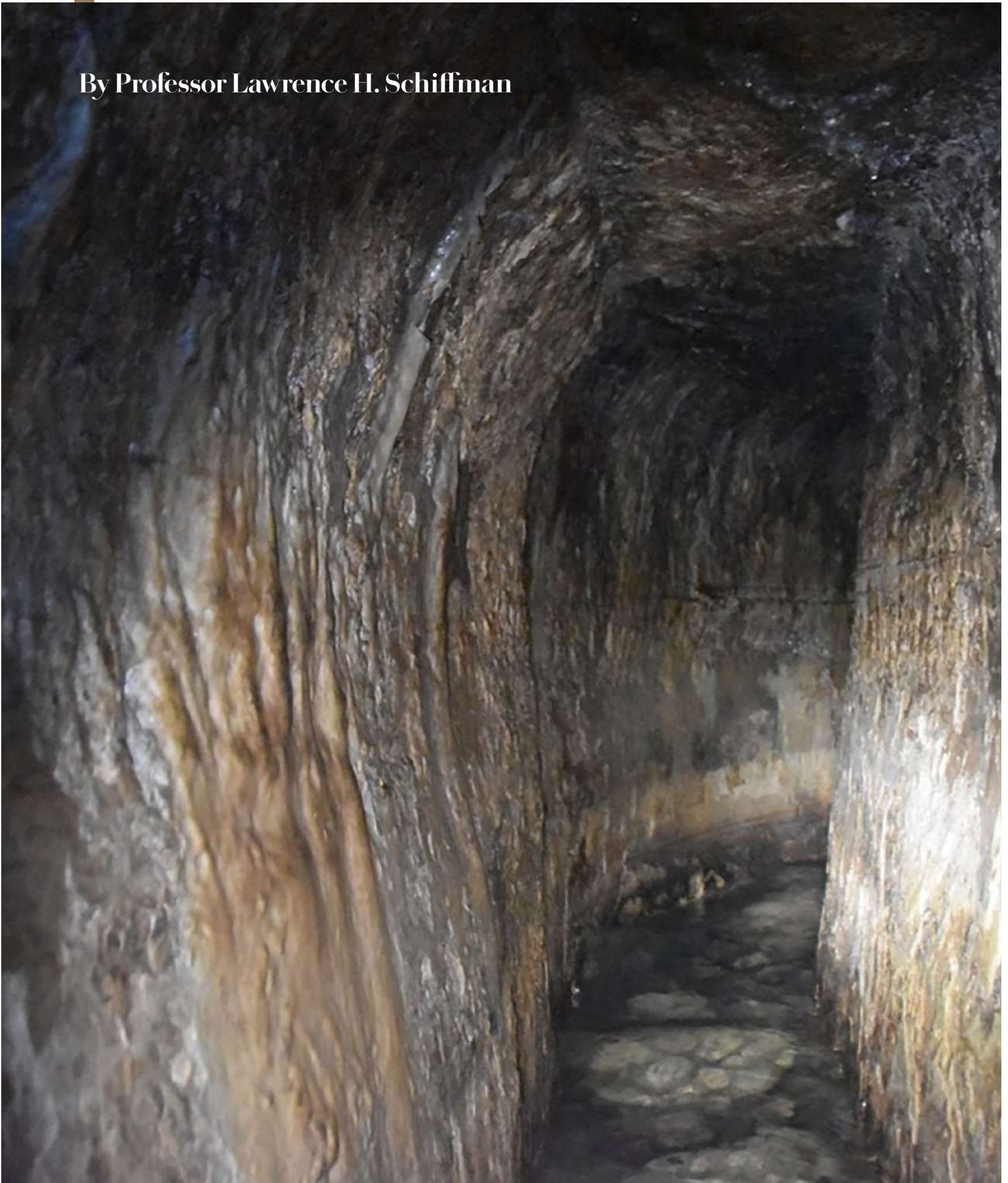
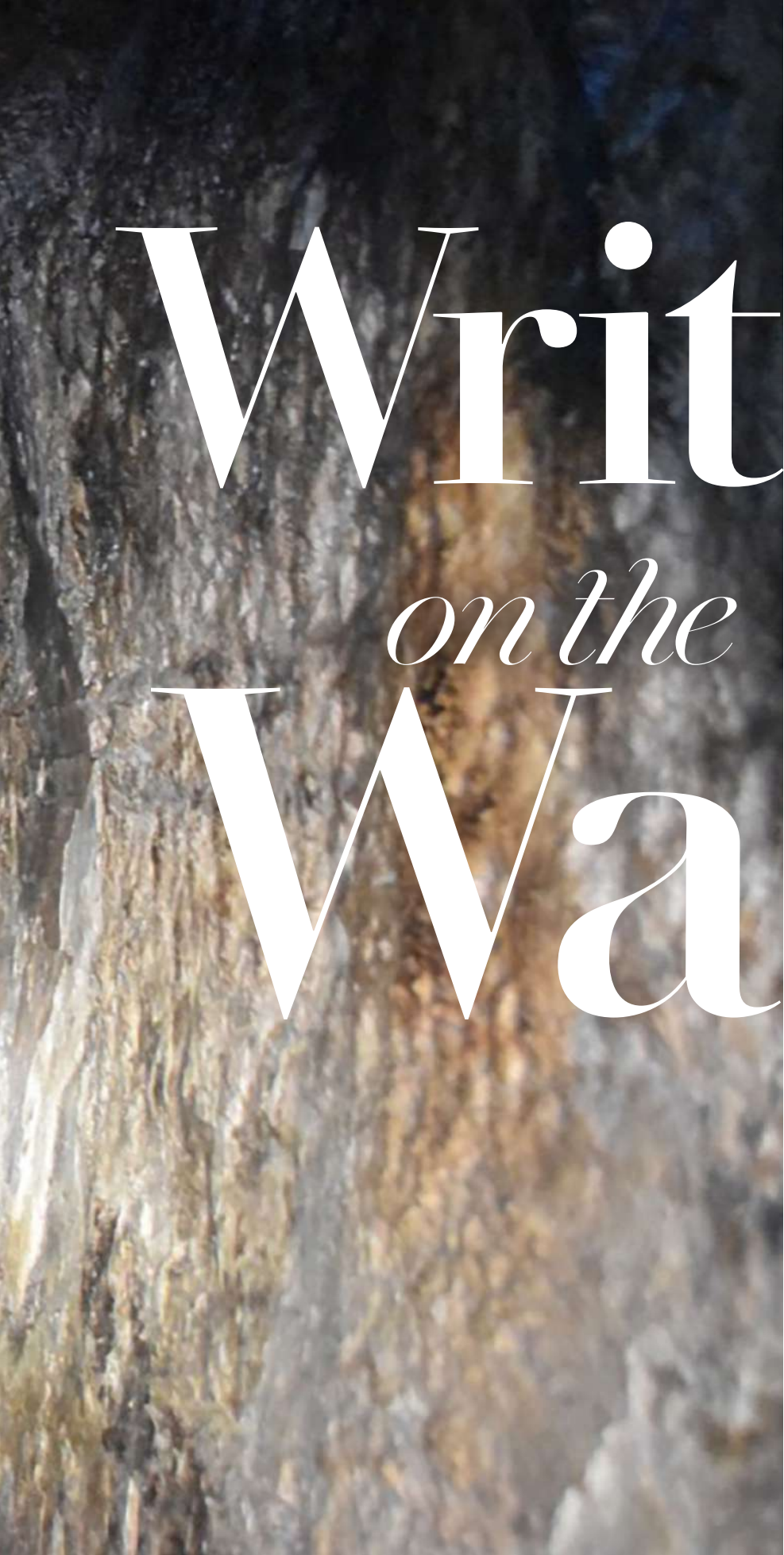


By Professor Lawrence H. Schiffman







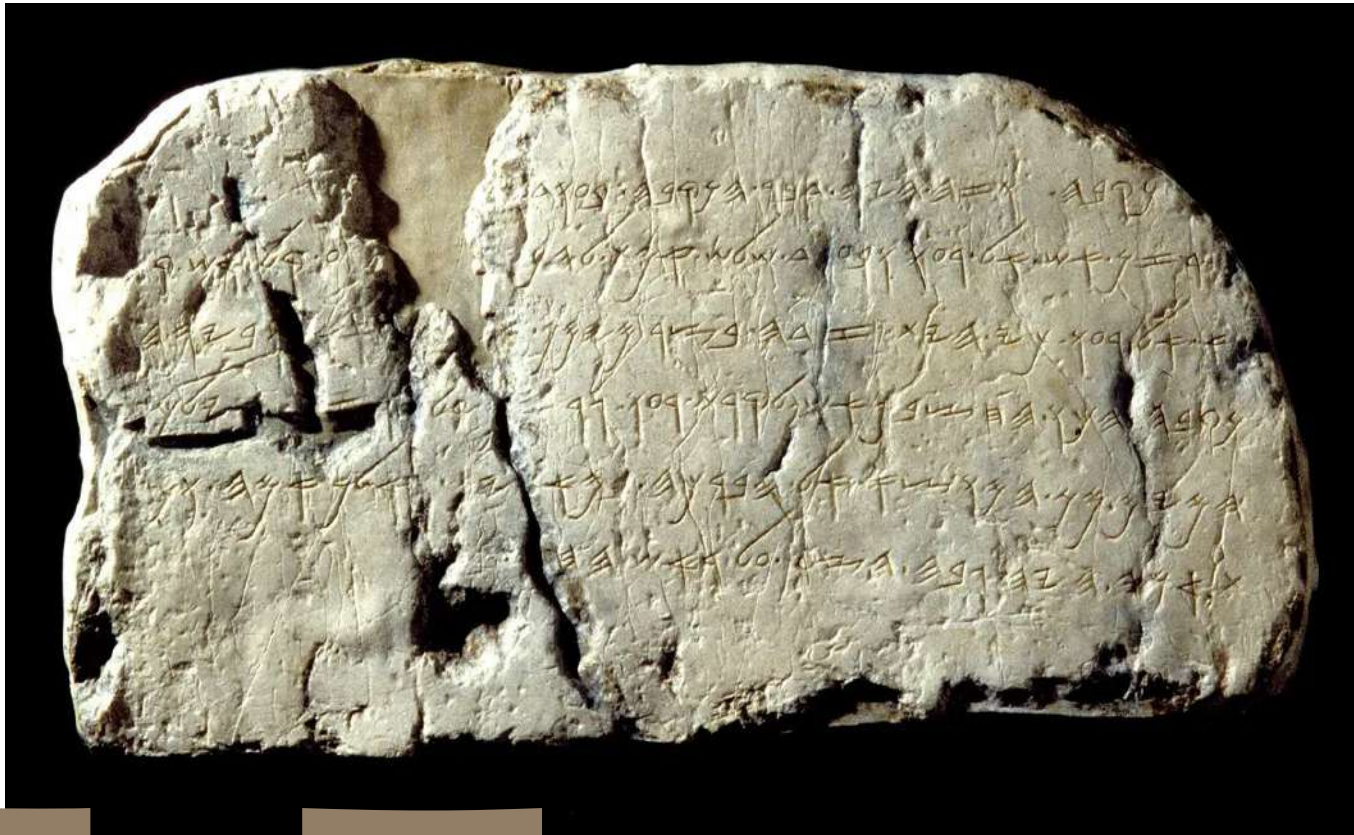
# Writing *on the* Wall?

The claim of a controversial expert to have deciphered an ancient inscription is met with doubt

*Chizkiyahu Hamelech's tunnel*

10 SHVAT 5783 FEBRUARY 1, 2023 AMI MAGAZINE 133

The Siloam Inscription describing the digging of the tunnel



You cannot imagine how thrilled I was when I saw the headline “Proof of Biblical Kings of Israel, Judah Deciphered on Jerusalem Rock Inscriptions.” The subtitle read, “Detailed Inscriptions of Eighth-Century BCE Judean King Hezekiah Discovered in Monumental Archaeological Discovery.”

But as I began to read the article, academic skepticism began to deflate my elation. I immediately noted that this announcement wasn’t one of the usual “good news for every holiday” pieces from the Israel Antiquities Authority. Instead, it originated with a University of Haifa professor who had previously been associated with sensational but highly questionable readings of ancient texts.

I continued reading and became increasingly skeptical. The article claimed that an ancient Hebrew inscription that had been deciphered referred explicitly to the digging of the Siloam tunnel (Shiloach in *Tanach*), providing its exact date. It went on to refer to inscriptions carved in rock walls, both in the Siloam tunnel and elsewhere in ancient Yerushalayim, that described the activities of this great king. These inscriptions had supposedly gone unrecognized until this professor deciphered them.



The article included an English translation of one of the inscriptions, and other articles provided the Hebrew text. Here is its slightly corrected translation:

“Chizkiyahu, the son of Achaz, king of Judah, made the pool and the conduit.

“In the 17th year, in the second [day], in the fourth [month] of King Chizkiyahu, the king brought the water into the city by a tunnel. The king led the water into the pool. He smote the Philistines from Ekron to Gaza and placed there the OREB unit of the army of Judah. He broke the images and broke in pieces the Nechushtan, and he removed the high places and cut down the *asheirah*. Chizkiyahu, the king, accumulated in all his treasure houses and in the house of the L-rd a lot of silver and gold, perfumes and good ointment.”

That is when I realized that the announcement was probably fake news. The inscription corresponds almost exactly, even in its choice of vocabulary, to Biblical accounts in *Melachim II* (18:1-8; 20:13,20). That an ancient inscription would correspond so precisely to the Biblical account is highly unlikely. This could only happen in a case of outright forgery, or if a scholar was reading illegible or imagined letters with the text of the *Tanach* in mind.

In fact, we had a similar experience with regard to the so-called “Yehoash inscription.” Although court hearings failed to prove its inauthenticity, it was widely judged by scholars to be a forgery, containing anomalies in both script and vocabulary that led the scholarly community, virtually without exception, to conclude that it was bogus.

Here again, in the case of the new Chizkiyahu inscription, almost everything could be found in *Tanach*. While it is perfectly reasonable to find an inscription that would relate to something known from *Tanach*, and there are quite a number of such texts, one that is obviously dependent on Biblical material would seem to be inauthentic.

The strange thing is that an enormous amount is known about Chizkiyahu from both *Tanach* and other ancient texts.

Chizkiyahu ruled over the Kingdom of Yehudah, coming to power right after the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians. (The kingdom had split after the passing of Shlomo Hamelech centuries earlier.)

Chizkiyahu was a righteous king who enacted sweeping reforms to prohibit violations and compromises of monotheism. He was considered one of the greatest of the Jewish kings (*Melachim II* 18:5). Among his accomplishments was purifying the *Beis Hamikdash* of idolatrous practices and uniting the

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## THE WRITING ON THE WALL?



A sign directing tourists to the tunnel



A stone bearing Chizkiyahu Hamelech's inscription

people, including those of the northern tribes, in the large-scale celebration of Pesach in Yerushalayim (*Divrei Hayamim* II 30).

Throughout his reign, he faced the challenge of continuous Assyrian attempts to assert control over the surrounding nations. As part of this effort, the Assyrian King Sargon II destroyed the Northern Kingdom. Twenty years later, Sancheiriv laid siege to Yerushalayim. After praying to Hashem in the *Beis Hamikdash*, Chizkiyahu agreed to pay a tribute of 300 silver talents to Sancheiriv to lift the siege. Despite this offer, the Assyrians renewed their siege against the city.

But Sancheiriv didn't know about the preparations Chizkiyahu had made for such an eventuality. He had fortified the walls of the city, building what is called

the broad wall, which is over 20 feet wide. He had also built a water tunnel to bring fresh water into the city from the pool of Shiloach, sealing the spring from above so that the invaders couldn't access its water. Just a week ago, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced plans to excavate the pool and open it to the public. It may have been used as a *mikvah* in the time of the *Bayis Sheini*.

This tunnel is generally known as the Siloam tunnel. It stopped the spring outside the city walls and diverted the water into the city. Many readers may have visited this archaeological site, as well as the spring house connected to it that is located in Ir David, from which the water could be drawn up for use by the city's residents. This tunnel ran for some 1,750 feet through solid rock from the spring of

Gichon. It was dug by workers with picks who started out at the two ends of the tunnel. Where they met, close to the middle, they erected a plaque with an inscription describing the final achievement of the construction of this tunnel. The inscription was discovered in 1880 and is now in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul. It conveys the excitement these workers must have felt when they met at the midpoint:

"This is the story of the tunnel while...the axes were against each other and three cubits were left... The voice of a man...called to his counterpart, [for] there was a crack in the rock on the right ... And on the day [that] the tunnel [was finished], the stonecutters struck each man toward his counterpart, ax against ax, and the water flowed from the source to the pool for 1,200 cubits.



And (100?) cubits was the height over the head of the stonecutters.”

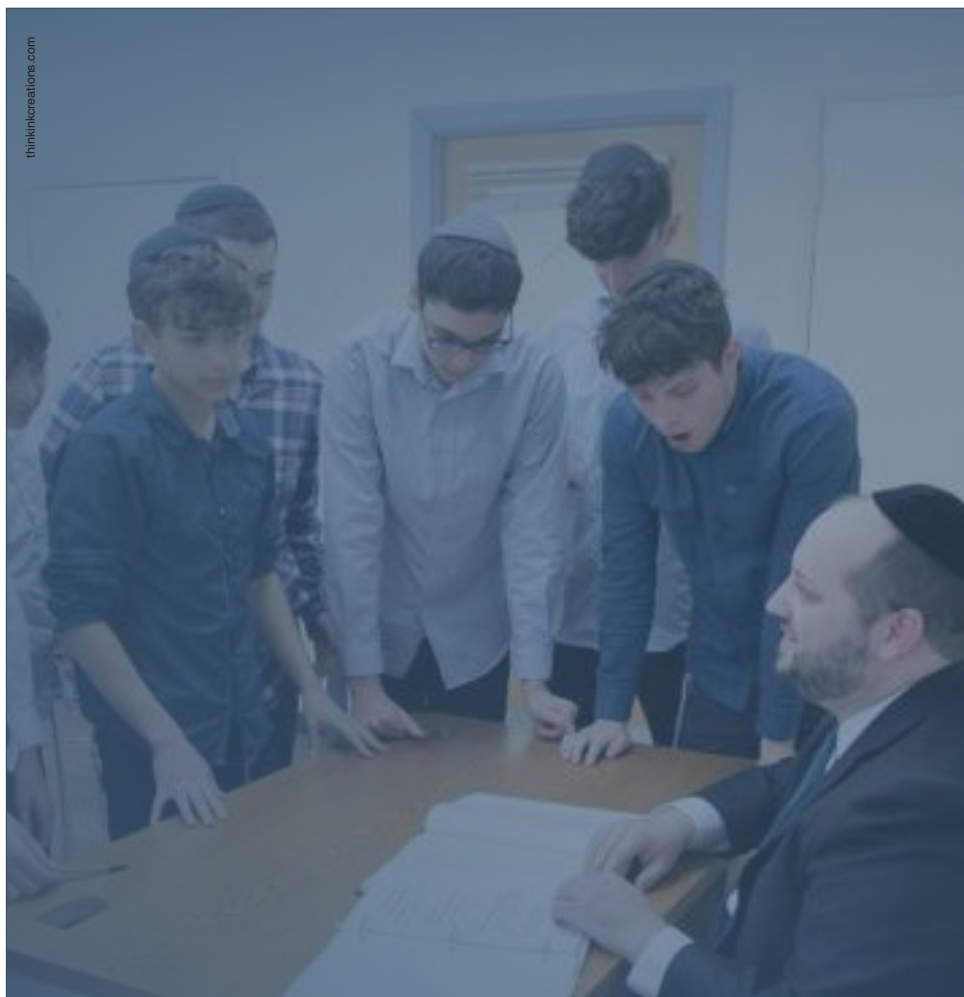
The recent overstated announcement claims that there were several additional lines at the end of this inscription in the original location in the tunnel. However, it seems to be a product of imagination rather than scholarship. Nevertheless, this tunnel provides confirmation of the Biblical report. Furthermore, when the broad wall was unearthed in the Jewish Quarter in the 1970s, it offered further archaeological evidence of the king's increased fortification of the city.

The Mishnah (*Pesachim* 4:9) presents an evaluation by *Chazal* of certain measures taken by King Chizkiyahu, three of which were approved and three of which were not. Two that were not approved are connected to the siege of Sancheiriv. Chizkiyahu removed the gold from the doors of the *Beis Hamikdash* (*Melachim* II 18:16). This was in order to help pay the bribe he offered the Assyrians to lift the siege.

Moreover, the rabbis disapproved of his closing of the Gichon Spring (*Divrei Hayamim* II 32:30). Two reasons were given for this objection—that he should have had greater faith in Hashem, and that he caused suffering to his people by limiting the water supply. (They also objected to his decision to add an Adar II on the last day of Adar I in order to make possible the massive Pesach gathering at the *Beis Hamikdash*, including some of the northern tribes.)

*Tanach* tells us that after the Assyrians besieged Yerushalayim with an enormous army, Hashem sent an angel who struck down “185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians” in one night, sending Sancheiriv back “with a shamed face to his own land” (*Yeshayahu* 37:36-38, *Divrei Hayamim* II 32:21-22). Sancheiriv's version of the story is preserved in a text known as the Sennacherib Prism, writ-

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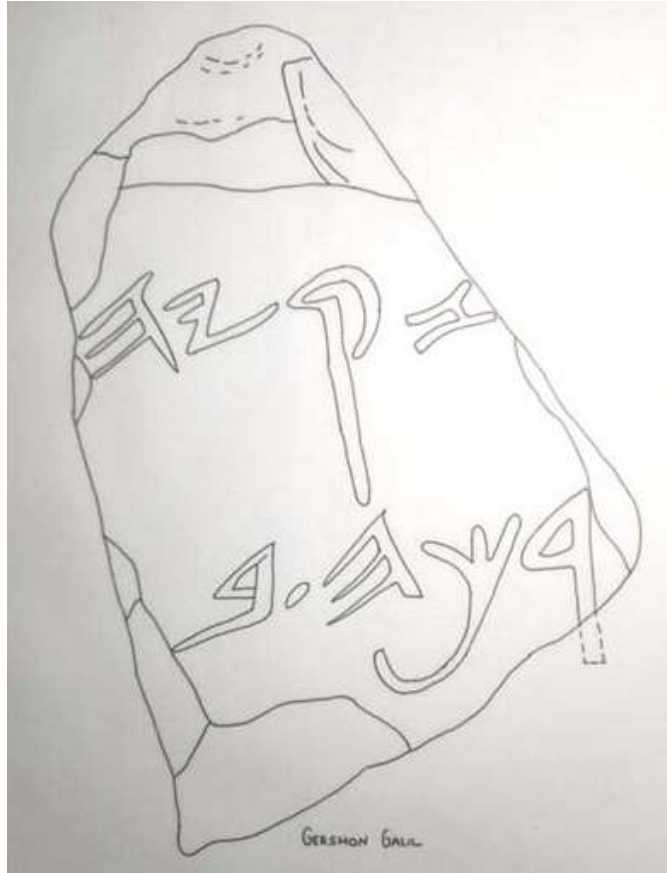
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## THE WRITING ON THE WALL?



A rendering of Chizkiyahu Hamelech's inscription

Many scholars feel consternation about the work of a particular individual who is somehow capable of reading letters where no one else sees anything.

ten in Akkadian, the language of ancient Mesopotamia, in which he claims: "As to Hezekiah, the Judean, he did not submit to my yoke... Hezekiah himself...did send me later to Nineveh, my lordly city, together with 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver..." He inflated the amount of tribute and claimed he left as a result of the capitulation of the king, making no mention of the failure of his attempt to conquer the city.

Various theories have been offered for why he abandoned the siege. The Greek historian Herodotus, followed by Josephus, suggests that there was a plague caused by mice that led to the demise of much of his army. One modern scholarly approach points to the fact that he might have returned to Assyria to quell an incipient rebellion and that he was eventu-

ally assassinated by one of his sons.

Aside from this evidence for Chizkiyahu's reign, we should note the finding of a Hebrew seal impression, known as a bulla, that reads in ancient Hebrew script (what the Gemara calls *ksav Ivri*): "L'Chizkiyahu [ben] Achaz melech Yehudah—this belongs to Chizkiyahu [son of] Achaz, the king of Judah." A seal impression is a piece of clay that was affixed to a cord to seal a container and then stamped. This item was found in the Ophel, an elevated area south of the Har Habayis in ancient Yerushalayim. A similar but unprovenanced bulla of Chizkiyahu had been previously discovered. These seal impressions were probably affixed to clay jars containing produce collected as taxes. Indeed, the period of his

reign was one of economic expansion and political strength.

It is easy to see that almost everything in the supposed new inscription is derived from *Tanach*. The only new detail is the date given for the building of the water tunnel. The "discoverer's" own announcement indicates that there is no evidence in this document of a variety of things that would be of great interest—relations with Ashur (Assyria), Babylonia, Egypt, and the kingdoms of Transjordan, the king's activity in Samaria after its destruction by Ashur, Chizkiyahu's war with the nomads, and the fact that Judah's conquests in Philistia (today's Gaza Strip) were lost to Ashur in 712 BCE.

The claim is made that this is because royal inscriptions only speak of a king's



successes and not his failures. While this is true, the absence of any new information in this inscription—and I assume in the others that have not yet been released—is a clear indication that they are not authentic.

This sensational news release and the press it has generated have prompted an eclectic group of archaeologists, representing different academic points of view and religious perspectives, to release an amazingly strong statement against press coverage of archaeological discoveries:

“Occasionally...archaeological finds and discoveries (that are at times presented as revolutionary and game-changers in the history of the Land of Israel) have been published in the popular press and on social media prior to peer review and to the full presentation, with high-quality illustrations, of these finds in scientific publications...

“One of the foundations of all research and discovery is that results must go through a process of peer review prior to publication to check for quality, suggest improvements and comments, and in some cases, reject a suggestion... Until the publication of finds or research results in a scientific and peer-reviewed publication, any claim made should be related to as unfounded, and is also unworthy of publication in the popular press.”

The statement is clearly overly strong, since responsible press coverage of archaeological discoveries helps greatly to convey both historical information and the excitement of discovery to the public. But it does reflect the consternation of scholars about the work of a particular individual who is somehow capable of reading letters where no one else sees anything, and who makes public announcements that aren't followed up by responsible scholarly articles. The truth is that in this instance, the Israeli press, virtually across the board, fell into the trap and simply reprinted this scholar's news release without soliciting any other opinions.

Does this mean that we are dealing with large-scale forgery? It seems that we are not. Rather, this is most probably a case of scholarly imagination. The “reader” of these inscriptions has a reputation for finding text on stone that no one else can see. Apparently, what we are dealing with here are some random scratches as well as patterns of formation in the stone that have been transformed into readable text where none actually exists. Even for a scholar, imagination can sometimes take over, and whole words can be read on what is literally a blank wall.

Despite everything I have written, we should not forget that Daniel was actually able to read miraculous writing on a wall that no one else could read (5:13-28). Can that be the case here? Only full scholarly publication will tell. ●

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