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A Gəʿəz Inscription from Ashkelon*

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Description of the Stone

An Ethiopic inscription was found in 1998 in the National Park of Ashkelon, near an absorption center for Ethiopian Jewish immigrants (also known as Betä Isra'el, lit. 'House of Israel'). The piece is a factory-cut marble, 12.5 x 9.5 cm, with a magical formula written in black ink on the lateral faces of the marble. It is little damaged and appears to be a complete text.

Why Stone?

It is curious as to why the scribe of this inscription chose a marble stone as the medium for this magical incantation. Certainly, magical inscriptions on stone are well attested especially in the cultural context of the Ancient Near Eastern (and Graeco-Roman) world, long before the widespread availability of softer material such as parchment and paper. Such tablets were placed in houses, bathhouses and/or in places where the spirits of the dead were thought to be residing. We are also reminded of magical inscriptions inscribed in ink on earthenware bowls, such as the Aramaic incantations of Late Antiquity (see Naveh 1985), whereby the bowls would be used as a trap for demons and evil spirits, or on sheets of metal which were inserted in containers worn as phylacteries or hung, possibly suspended, in an area for protection, similar to the tefillin and mezuzah of Jews, or amulets placed in capsules (bul-lae) of Ancient Egypt. However, with the invention and availability of softer material, papyrus, paper and cloth have substituted stone and/or metal, and inscriptions in stone have become almost obsolete.

A Description of the Formula

The content of Ethiopian magic texts varied, ranging from writings bearing sacred numbers and names of God and the angels to geometrical figures and art, thought to be endowed with healing and protective qualities. These were either hung or worn.

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Our earliest surviving Ethiopic protective prayers date from the 14th century. Ethiopic literature from the 14th–15th century describes the wearing of amulets (both by Christians and Muslims) containing sacred names. Other documentation concerning the use of magic is also provided by Alvarez, the Portuguese explorer who visited Ethiopia between the years 1520–26, and noted concerning the Ethiopians “... le corps (...) orné de la taille en sus, de patenôtres enfilées avec cordes” (Mercier 1979:10). Modern scholars who have written on the subject of Ethiopian (both Christian and Jewish) magical texts include Lifchitz (1933, 1940), Mercier (1955, 1979), Rodinson (1967), and Strelcyn (1960).

Like most incantational magic, this Ethiopic apotropaic prayer displays a formula with a rhythmically organized list of words thought to be endowed with magical powers. Typical of incantational magic, metaphysical entities are beseeched to act on behalf of the beseecher, usually through the mediation of an authority or expert in incantations (ex. priests, monks).

This particular Ethiopic incantation is not addressed to a specific spiritual entity, although he is alluded to as “the protector of Eliyas, [the one who] hid Henok and Eliyas; [the one] who (rescued?) Daniel from the mouths of the lions” (cf. Genesis 5:24, 2Kings 2:11 and Daniel 6:23). The beseecher is a female, addressing herself as “your servant” (ዓመትከ) and bearing the name of አጠዴ. However, it is to be noted that the specific mention of both Elijah and Enoch in conjunction, in the same context is particularly Christian or pre-Christian in its usage (recalling the events of the transfiguration in Mark 9:2-8; Matthew 17:1-18; Luke 9:28-36. Although in these passages, it is Moses and Elijah who appear before Jesus, in apocryphal sources, the two figures are identified as Elijah and Enoch) and a reference to the messianic eschatological visions described in Revelations 11:3–6. In the apocryphal Acts of Pilate, it is recounted that Adam having been resurrected by Christ from Hades, is led into paradise where he is met by two old men, Elijah and Enoch who “pleased God and were removed here by him” (Elliott 1993:189). In another apocryphal work, the Apocalypse of Peter, Elijah and Enoch is set forth from their heavenly abode into the world to warn the world of false Christs which come unto the world at the end of days and “awake expectation” (Elliott 1993:601). Furthermore, in the Old Testament apocryphal Book of Baruch an important text in Betä Isra’el writings, a text which the Betä Isra’el community derived from the Christian Ethiopic text but expunged it of its Christian references (Leslau 1951:63), Baruch is transported to ʾAqraba, the land of the living, by the great angel Sutu’el, where he meets both Elijah and Enoch inscribing in the golden column the commandments of God (Leslau 1951:68) and the names of the just in golden ink (Leslau 1951:60).

The spiritual entity is addressed and beseeched by using the verbal forms of the Imperative (**ሠውረኒ ፡ አሰተሳንዎኒ ፡ ኅተዎ**) which is not an altogether uncommon formula in incantation addresses. The invoker also uses forms of address which attempt to charm and beseech the spiritual deity by attributing to it supernatural powers and remembering its acts of redemption in the past. Typical of biblical forms of prayer, there is an alignment in the interests of the beseecher with that of the Lord. The covenantal relationship between the Deity and man, obliges the Lord, through divine intervention, to “bind” and constrain the foes and enemies of his servant, in the manner that in past occasions he had “bound the king” and “the heart of the devil”. The redeeming acts of the Deity, both past and continuing are reiterated by the use of biblical imagery and narrative.

The content of the incantation is twofold: defensive and productive. In the former case, the beseecher asks for protection from the evil powers of her “foes” and “enemies” and in the latter, the beseecher requests from the deity health, love and peace.

Rhythmically coordinated words of power which are either nonsensical, foreign or unintelligible are applied repeatedly in the inscription. The repetition of nonsense phrases (such as **ጸጸ.ማኖሰ ፡ ተ[] ማኖሰ ፡ ኪኪ.ማኖሰ**) is meant to add to the rhythmic structure of the incantation, a very common trait of incantational magic (see Ludwig, 1987).

The Identity of the Patron and the Scribe

There are a few things worth noting concerning the identity of the patron and the scribe. First, it is unusual, in the Ethiopian Christian context, for “personal”-secular names to be used in a religious text. It is the name of Christening **ክርስትና ፡ ስዎ** (*Krəstənnā sām*), separate from the secular, every-day name, which is usually used. In contrast, the Betä Israʾel only had one principal name used both for religious and secular purposes. The use of a distinctly identifiable secular name in this inscription (**አጠዴ**) points to the Betä Israʾel origins of this apotropaic prayer. Furthermore, the identity of the scribe is almost certainly not Christian as it lacks the usual opening of a traditional text which commences with the Christian formula “In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”.

Conclusion

The syncretic elements of religious practice amongst the Betä Israʾel are clearly evident from this apotropaic prayer which incorporates symbolisms from Christian or pre-Christian sources (notably the transporting into heaven of Elijah and Enoch). This is not an uncommon phenomenon in

Betä Isra'el religious texts which reached the community primarily through the “mediation of Ethiopian Christian sources” (Kaplan 1992:73). This seems another instance where Christian imagery and imagination seem to have been adapted by the Betä Isra'el for their own religious use (cf. *Tə'əzazä Sänbät*).

On the other hand, the discovery of this apotropaic prayer which appears to be of Ethiopian Jewish origin is important in the light of the evolving religious practices of the Betä Isra'el in Israel. As newly arrived immigrants undergo a process of religious “normalization”, in closer alignment with normative Judaism, the writing and reproduction of Ethiopic apotropaic prayers, such as this one, will undoubtedly disappear from a population which no longer uses Ethiopic in matters associated with the liturgical and religious life of the community.

A Gəʿəz Inscription from Ashkelon

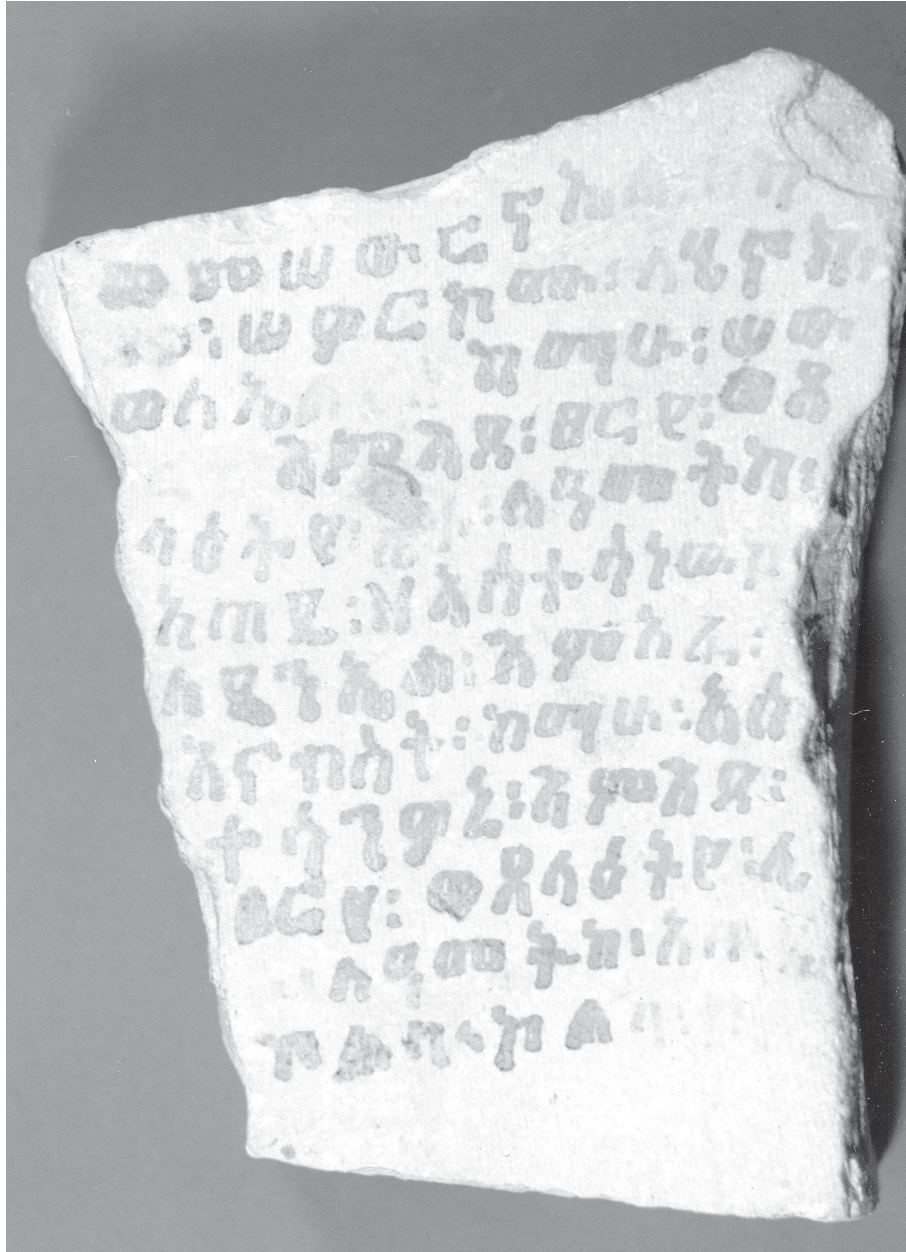


Photo 1: Frontside of the inscription stone, found 1998 in the National Park of Ashkelon, photo courtesy of the author

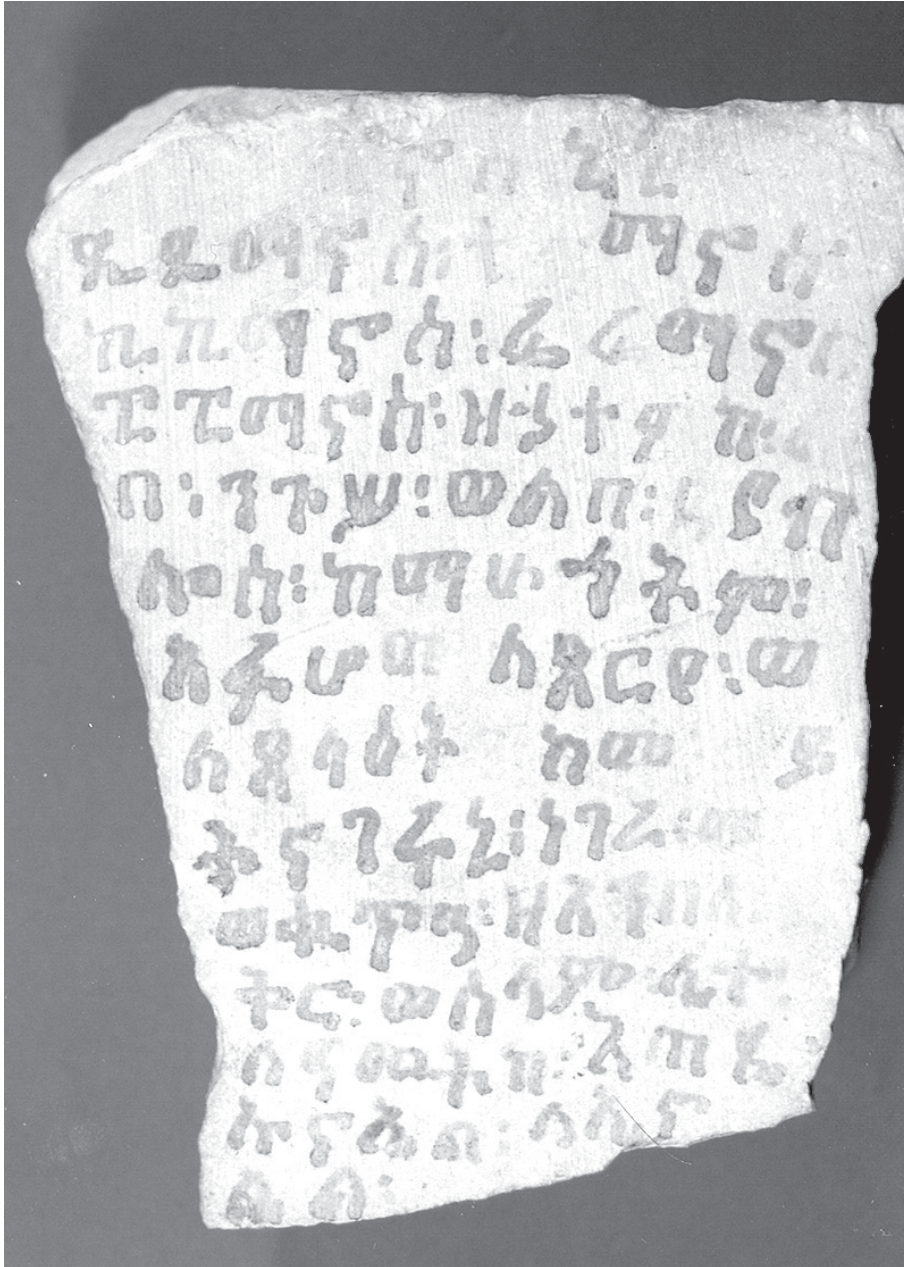


Photo 2: Backside of the inscription stone, found 1998 in the National Park of Ashkelon, photo courtesy of the author

Side 1

1 ወመሠውርኖ ኤል(ያ)ስ	1 The protector of ʿEliyas
2 [*] ፣ ሠወርኮሙ ፣ ለሄኖክ	2 You hid <i>Henok</i>
3 ወለኤልያስ ከማሁ ፣ ሠው	3 and ʿEliyas. In the same manner
4 ረኒ እምእደ ፀርዮ ፣ ወጸ	4 hide me, from the hand of my enemy
5 ላዕትዮ ፣ ሊተ ፣ ለዓመትከ	5 and my adversary, me, your servant
6 አጠዴ ፣ ዘአስተሳነውኮ	6 <i>Aṭäde</i> . The one who rescued
7 ለዳንኤል ፣ እምእደ	7 <i>Danʿel</i> from the mouths
8 አንብስት ፣ ከማሁ ፣ አስ	8 of the lions, in the same manner
9 ተሳንዎኒ ፣ እምእደ ፣	9 rescue me from the hand of
10 ፀርዮ ፣ ወጸላዕትዮ ፣ ሊ	10 my enemy and adversary, me,
11 ተ ፣ ለዓመትከ ፣ አጠዴ	11 your servant, <i>Aṭäde</i> .
12 ኮልባ ፣ ኮልባ	12 <i>Kolba, Kolba</i> .

1 The phrase is a reference to 2Kings 2:11. The use of what appears like an enclitic *na* (ኖ) is peculiar here. Could this be a Tigrinya variant of ኖይ, the *nota relationis*?

2 The phrase is a reference to Genesis 5:24 and 2Kings 2:11.

5 Regarding the orthography of the word ለዓመትከ, the historical spelling according to Leslau should be ለአመትከ (see also, side 1, line 11 and side 2, line 12).

6 ዘአስተሳነውኮ: The root of this lexeme is probably ጸነዐ (አስተጸነዐ in the Perfect) and the form is probably a corruption of ዘአስተጸነዕኮ.

7 The phrase is a reference to Daniel 6:23.

9 This form of the Imperative is not attested in Ethiopic. The form is probably a corruption of አስተጸነዐኒ. Notice that the scribe replaces the root ጸነዐ with ሰነዐ by virtue of an exchange of sibilants ጸ with ሰ. The third consonant of the root, the guttural ዐ is replaced by ወ, which by a further mistake turns into ዎ.

10 Regarding the orthography of the word ወለጸላዕትዮ, the historical spelling according to Leslau should be ወለጸላእትዮ (see also line 8, side 2).

Side 2

1 ኖሳ ኒኒ	1 <i>Nosa nini</i>
2 ጸጸግኖስ ፡ ተ [...] ግኖስ	2 <i>ṣiṣimanos, tä[]manos</i>
3 ኪኪግኖስ ፡ ፌሬግኖስ	3 <i>Kikimanos, feremanos</i>
4 ፒፒግኖስ ፡ ዘጎተምክ [...]	4 <i>Pipimanos</i> you that sealed the heart of
5 በ ፡ ንጉሥ ፡ ወልበ ፡ ዲያብ	5 the king and the heart of
6 ሎስ ፡ ከግሁ ፡ ኅተም ፡	6 the devil. In the same manner, seal
7 አፋሆሙ ለጸርየ ፡ ወ	7 the mouths of my enemies and
8 ወለጸላዕትየ ፡ ከመ ፡ ኢይ	8 adversaries so that they may not
9 ትናገሩኒ ፡ ነገረ መ [...]	9 speak a thing of*
10 ወቁጥኅ ፡ ዘእንበለ	10 and anger except only
11 [...] ቅር ፡ ወ ሰላም ፡ ሊተ	11 love (?) and peace, to me
12 ለዓመትክ ፡ አጠዴ	12 your servant, <i>Aṭāde</i> .
13 ኡናኤብ ፡ ለኤና	13 <i>Una^aeb, lä^aena</i>
14 ሊል ፡	14 <i>lil</i>

4 [...]: The reading of this letter is probably **ል** for **ልብ** (construct state **ልበ**).

7 Regarding the orthography of the word **ለጸርየ**, the historical spelling according to Leslau should be **ለፀርየ** (see line 10, side 1).

10 Regarding the orthography of the word **ወቁጥኅ**, the historical spelling according to Leslau should be **ወቁጥዓ**.

11 [...] **ቅር** ፡ The reading of this word is probably **ፍቅር** (lit. “love”) judging from the context of the verse.

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Summary

An apotropaic Ethiopic inscription was found in the National Park of Ashkelon in 1998, near an absorption center for Ethiopian Jewish immigrants (also known as Betä Israʿel). Although the piece is clearly of Betä Israʿel origin, it incorporates symbolisms from Christian or pre-Christian sources, thus demonstrating the syncretic elements in Betä Israʿel religion. The reproduction of Ethiopic prayers of this sort is undoubtedly the last of its kind with the fastly changing religious practices of Betä Israʿel in Israel.