

Hayim Tawil

**A Note on the
Aḥiram 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 כשחה נעלם . In 1926 Albright,¹ followed by Harris,² rendered the phrase "as a place of sleeping in the otherworld," deriving חנה from Akkadian šittu , Hebrew שנה , "sleep," and נעלם from the Late Hebrew expression נעלם הבא . Twenty-one years later, Albright, following Dussaud,³ rendered "as his ab(o)de in eternity,"⁴ assuming an omission of a ב , i.e., $\text{kšth} > \text{kš(b)th}$. He compared the usage of ישב with עלם to the biblical Hebrew phrase מכון לשנתך עולמים ⁵ "your everlasting dwelling place," translating נעלם "in eternity." In his translation of the Aḥiram inscription, Rosenthal⁶ adopts Albright's kaš(ib)tih(u) , but his rendering, "as his eternal <dwelling> place," glosses over the difficult usage of the preposition ב .

Albright's interpretation is open to question for several reasons. First, although the verb ישב 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., ⁷ היושבים בקברים וננצורים 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 $\check{s}th > \check{s}(b)th$ 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) ⁸ כצאן לשאול שחור "like sheep they are placed(!) into Sheol," b) ⁹ שתני נכור חחחיות "you placed me in the nethermost pit," c) ¹⁰ ולעפר מות תשפתני "you put me in the grave of (lit. the dust of) death." Ugaritic employs the verb $\check{s}yt$ with $\check{h}rt$, "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., ¹² אש [ש]ם לקבר זה "that placed in this grave." It would seem best to follow those scholars¹³ who construe the form שתה as the 3 per. masc. perfect of שיה with the 3 per. masc. sing. accusative suffix and render כשתה "when he put him."

Third, Albright's rendering of בעלם, "in eternity,"¹⁴ is problematic, since Northwest Semitic never employs the preposition ב 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 מות עפר as 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 Ahiram 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 כשתה 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 בַּעֲלָם is interpreted as something other than the preposition "in." The most likely alternative to the latter is in viewing בַּעֲלָם as an abbreviation for בַּת עֲלָם , "in¹⁶ the house of eternity." It should be recalled that the omission of the ה in the word בַּיִת , "house," is attested in Old Aramaic¹⁷ בִּי טַב , "a good house," as well as in Egyptian Aramaic¹⁸ אֲחִי אַרְק בִּי וְ זִילִי and¹⁹ $\text{בִּי וְ שָׁתַר בִּי}$, "there is the land of one house belonging to me," and "like a thief who demolishes a house."¹⁹ In Jewish Aramaic, בִּי is the regular construct of בַּיִת in such cases as בֵּי רַבָּנָן , "college,"²⁰ בֵּי אָבִיא , "a house of the father," and בֵּי קְנוֹרָא ,²¹ "cemetery."

More striking is the abbreviation of בַּיִת in the expression בֵּי עֲלָמָא ²² "cemetery." The identical euphemism, בַּת עֲלָם , is attested in Punic with the meaning "tomb," e.g.,²³ $\text{חֲדַר בַּת עֲלָם קַבְרִי}$ "a niche in a tomb, a grave has been made," as well as in Palmyrene inscriptions, e.g.,²⁴ $\text{עֲלָם דִּנְאָ עֲבַד מַתָּנִי}$ "this house of eternity has been made by Matani...." In biblical Hebrew one finds²⁵ $\text{כִּי הוֹלֵךְ הָאָדָם}$

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 $\text{bhyk abn nšmḥ blmtk}$ (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 עֲלָם the abbreviated form of בַּת עֲלָם , anticipating, somewhat, the suggestion offered above. However, he retained ב as the preposition, rather than as an abbreviation of בַּת .

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

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

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Aḥiqar: 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.

אל ביה עולמו "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 nḥh,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 tapšuḫti šubat dārāti²⁷ "a palace of sleeping, a resting tomb, a dwelling place of eternity,"
 b) ēkal tapšuḫti 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 "Gārb" by von Soden,²⁹ is the exact semantic equivalent of Northwest Semitic אל ביה עולם or, as it appears in the Aḫiram inscription, בועלם.

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.