REMARKS ON THE PRIESTLY BLESSING ON TWO ANCIENT AMULETS FROM JERUSALEM

by

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In 1979, during an archaeological excavation in Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem, directed by G. Barkay of the University of Tel-Aviv, two small rolled silver plaques were found, with other items, in a burial cave given the number 25. The plaques were unrolled by J. Shenhav in the laboratories of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The silver plaques were of different sizes, the larger one measured 9.7 x 2.7 cm and the smaller one measured 3.9 x 1.1 cm. On them were faint scratchings of letters in the Hebrew script.

Among 51 letters that Barkay had identified on the large plaque he read the divine name YHWH in two different lines and the words šmr and hr. On the small plaque Barkay identified 48 letters and read in the second line the letters nyhw as the ending of a personal theophoric name.

The silver plaques remained undeciphered. In the winter of 1986, the Israel Museum was preparing an exhibition of the finds from this excavation, and the curator, Michal Dayagi-Mendels, had asked me, on the recommendation of J. Naveh, to draw them. The Museum first made available to me for this purpose enlarged photographs of the large plaque and allowed me to examine the plaque using a microscope, without which it is difficult to see the very shallowly incised letters.

1 I thank Professor M. Greenberg for his advice and guidance in writing this article. I alone am responsible for its contents.
On the plaque there were about 18 lines, in each line about 4-7 letters, some of them so effaced that almost nothing of them could be seen. The beginning and the end of the lines seemed to be missing. When I began working I found that the name YHWH appeared a third time in the last line that was preserved. The divine name appears three times in the priestly blessing (Num. vi 24-6). As I had drawn the letters ybr, which could be part of the word ybrkk, and the letters šmrk, which could be part of the word yšmrk, I tried to find other words from this text. Only one letter was preserved before the third occurrence of the name YHWH in the last line. I examined the letter carefully and decided I could see there the letter resh. So I completed the word y'r and had the text:

... ybr [k]  
k yhwh w  
[y]šmrk  
[y']r yhwh

At this point I realized that the first appearance of the tetragram on the plaque is not part of the priestly blessing.

Naveh confirmed my reading of the first plaque, and after examining the second through the microscope he told me that it seems to bear a similar text. The letters appeared clearly under the microscope, being incised much deeper into the silver than on the first plaque. With the help of enlarged photographs and the microscope I made a drawing of the second plaque, which is also broken and contains now 15 lines of about 3-5 letters each. I was able to read the letters ybr on the 5th line, part of the name YHWH on the 6th line and the letters šmrk on the 7th. Then I discovered the letters pnyw on the 9th line, the letters ykw on the 10th and mlk on the 11th line. Thus I could complete the text on the small plaque as follows:

... ybr[k]  
[k y]hwh w  
[y]šmrk  
y' r yh  
w[ ]pnyw  
[?l]ykw w[y]  
šmrk lš  
l(m)

* This fact was brought to my attention by Mr Eli Kellerman.