THE AGE OF THE SILOAM INSCRIPTION AND
HEZEKIAH’S TUNNEL

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Living in an age when ancient Israelite history is challenged more and more, we should not be surprised that attention has now turned to buildings and inscriptions. One of the re-writers of history is Philip Davies, known for his attempt to re-date almost the entire Hebrew Bible to the Persian era.¹ Now, there is one obstacle for the history revisionists, namely, the hard artefacts, especially if these, in one way or another, relate to some biblical narratives. However, hindrances are there to be overcome, and in the Biblical Archaeologist for 1966 Davies and John Rogerson express the opinion that the so-called Hezekiah’s tunnel and the famous Siloam inscription are from the Hasmonean period.² They suggest that Hezekiah’s water project was what now is called Warren’s Shaft. Only in the Hasmonean period, when Warren’s Shaft was situated outside the city wall, was the tunnel built. The re-dating of the tunnel and the inscription by Rogerson and Davies builds upon what they call three sets of evidence, i.e. the archaeological, the biblical and the epigraphical, including the language of the inscription.

In the Biblical Archaeologist for 1966 Ronald Hendel objects to their comparison between the epigraphy of the Siloam inscription and the palaeo-Hebrew texts from Qumran.³ In the Biblical Archaeology Review 23/2 (1997), quite a few distinguished scholars point out a number of weaknesses, especially in the palaeographic part of the article by Rogerson and Davies. Therefore, it may now be time for a scrutiny of the entire problem of the Siloam inscription in its archaeological and linguistic context.

¹ In Search of “Ancient Israel” (Sheffield, 1992).
The Siloam inscription was until autumn 1996, by a consensus of scholars, held as one of the few 8th-century B.C. Hebrew inscriptions of some length. The inscription, found in 1880 by the 16-year-old Jacob Eliahu, is mysterious, being a building inscription without the characteristic features of the genre like the glorification of the king for all his good deeds including this and that, and now also this tunnel. We find nothing of that in the Siloam inscription, only a very short description of how the work was actually done. Who made this inscription and why? May we guess that it was some workmen’s foreman or official at a relatively low level who arranged the making of the memorial inscription after weeks of hard and awkward underground work? Or was the inscription never completed? The inscription was made in the bottom third of a polished part of the cliff. The intention for the upper part and two other similarly prepared surfaces in the tunnel will probably never be known.

I. The archaeological evidence

I am not myself an archaeologist, but this seems to me to be the strongest part of the article. Rogerson and Davies start by pointing out that there are three water systems connecting the Gihon spring with the Siloam pool. First, we have Warren’s shaft, discovered in 1867, a vertical shaft connecting a tunnel underneath the city wall with an extension of the small reservoir at the spring. Even if Kenyon’s supposed connection between this shaft and King David’s conquest of the city can never be proved, there is no dispute about the Iron Age, or earlier, dating of this construction. Secondly, there is a partly open-air channel running along the eastern slope of the hill of Ophel, obviously serving for irrigation in periods of peace. The third system is the

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4 The identity of the finder is normally never mentioned. In Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem* (printed in Lebanon, 1950; reprinted in Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 95-6, however, the finder is identified with Jacob Eliahu, who later became a member of the (Swedish)-American Colony. Bertha Vester was the daughter of Horatio and Anna Spafford, founders of the American Colony in Jerusalem.
