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Inscription Uncovered in 2010 Keeps Shedding Light on Bible History

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La Sierra University team found possibly earliest mention of the name ‘Hebrews.’

By: Darla Martin Tucker, La Sierra University News

They found it back in 2010, a cylinder-shaped stone object partially immersed in the earth of an early temple site in Jordan. Washed with water, its mysteries would shed light on an epic biblical battle and reveal a very rare discovery — the possibly earliest known written mention of the name “Hebrews.”

La Sierra University professor and archaeologist Chang-ho Ji, along with several La Sierra students, found the pedestal-like cylindrical altar in the ruins of a 3,000-year-old Iron Age temple at Khirbut Ataruz, which Ji discovered in 2000. Ten years later, the temple grabbed international media attention as the largest such structure in the Levant. The temple ruins produced hundreds of artifacts, including the carved pedestal altar that is nearly 20 inches (50 cm) high and more than seven inches (18 cm) in diameter and which bears two inscriptions in Moabite language and early Moabite script.

The scratched writing appears horizontally and vertically on the stone and refers to a battle waged and won by Moabite king Mesha in revolt against a king of Israel. The inscriptions substantiate accounts of battles inscribed on the famous Mesha Stele, a three-foot-tall (one-meter-tall) stone tablet dating to 840 BC, when it was commissioned by King Mesha. The stele is on display at the Louvre in Paris.

The day it was uncovered at Ataruz, Ji asked the student supervisor of the dig site square, Junhyung Park, to take the stone cylinder to the crew’s apartments in Madaba and wash it with water. Park brought the cleaned artifact back to Ji and said, “Professor, there’s some sort of scratch on the stone.” “Immediately I could see it was ancient writing,” the archaeologist said.

Two years later, noted George Washington University Northwest Semitic languages associate professor and epigraphist Christopher Rollston arrived in Amman to see the artifact for himself,

intrigued by photos Ji had sent him. “As soon as I saw the inscription, I knew that it was very important, but also quite difficult,” Rollston said.

Rollston and his team, which included Johns Hopkins University doctoral student Adam Bean, determined after a lengthy and detailed analysis that the scratched writing from the late 9th century or early 8th century BC may include the earliest written form of the word “Hebrews” and confirms that King Mesha overran Ataruz, one of several major cities Mesha claims to have captured in the Mesha Stele inscription.

The Mesha Stele states that the country of Moab had fallen under the hegemony of the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Omri of Israel, who reigned 876-869 BC. Omri is also mentioned in the Bible in **1 Kings 16:16-30** and in Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, Rollston said. Then, according to Mesha’s own words on the Mesha Stele, Moab rebelled against Israel and gained its independence along with the territory, which had been taken from Moab during the reign of Omri and his successors.

“Since there are a fairly small number of inscriptions in Moabite, this inscription is extraordinarily important. Moreover, because it connects with both the Mesha Stele, also found in Jordan, and the Bible, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this inscription,” Rollston said. “The Ataruz Inscriptions are the earliest evidence we have so far for a distinctive Moabite script.” The commissioned Mesha Stele was written in Moabite but with ancient Hebrew script.

Rollston and his team worked between 200 and 300 hours analyzing the inscription and writing a scientific article about their findings. The lexicon work, which involves considering various lexical options and attempting to ascertain the best possible readings, proved the most laborious, he said.

The scientific journal *Levant* published the findings in July 2019, and the discovery was announced by news media around the Middle East and within the archaeological community. “When one combines the biblical material in Kings, the Mesha Stele, and the Ataruz Inscriptions, a fairly full picture comes to life, one in which one can stitch together the biblical and inscriptional evidence and know a great deal about geopolitics in the ancient Levantine world of the late ninth and early eighth centuries,” Rollston said in an article by *The Times of Israel*.

The inscriptions were written by two different scribes at different times, during an age when Moabite language and writing was being developed, Chang said. The temple at Ataruz is the first archaeological site to confirm the battles described on the Mesha Stele “and especially this inscription. It was a huge surprise,” said Chang, who conducted carbon dating and other archaeological analysis of the inscribed cylinder.

For Chang, the discovery and interpretation of the cylinder altar inscription is a key career highlight, and for the university, another significant moment as a top national contributor to the biblical archaeology field through its Center for Near Eastern Archaeology. “This is a fantastic discovery, and La Sierra University is making a great contribution,” Chang said. “As an archaeologist, this is something that is once in a lifetime.”

La Sierra University is a Seventh-day Adventist higher-education institution located in Riverside, California, United States. The institution provides more than 120 degrees at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels for about 2,300 students. Each year since 2014, *U.S. News & World Report* has named the school the most diverse university in the western United States. *The original version of this story was posted on La Sierra University's news site.*

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