



# The Yesha'yah[u] /Nvy[?] Bulla and its Significance: Principles for an Analyzing Archaeological Epigraphic Find

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In 2009 a trove of bullae were found in a room in the Ophel excavations by Eilat Mazar.<sup>1</sup> Most of the bullae were found incomplete, and most have not been fully published. So far, two bullae have become particularly well known due to their association with famous and important biblical figures – King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah.

Most of the bullae were used to seal sacks containing merchandise, as revealed by fibers on the back of these artifacts. Five were used to seal papyri, which were apparently stored in the room where the bullae were discovered. The room was probably a storeroom and may have served as a kind of office and transit point for merchandise.



Figs 1., 2: The Ophel Sifting Project in Emek Tsurim, in which the bullae were found (City of David – Ancient Jerusalem Archive. Photo by Moshe Magen).



The first of the two bullae to spark major public interest was used to seal a letter written on papyrus, which reads: “Hezekiah (son of), Ahaz, king of Judah,” and on the reverse it bears symbols of government and life in Egypt. This bulla reveals Egyptian influence, at least terms of its iconography, and may of course attest to other cultural influences as well as commercial and political ties between the

<sup>1</sup> All the information, as well as the interpretive possibilities, their notes and parallels, are taken from Mazar 2018.

two kingdoms, as the Bible itself reveals. These ties, as we know, were created around the rebellion against Assyria, which went against the policy of Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, who was a loyal vassal of Assyria.

The second bulla that created a stir was found near the Hezekiah bulla. It was used to seal a sack that contained various items, and was stamped with the words: "Of Yesha'yah[u] / Nvy[?]". The second line does not start at the beginning of the field designated for an inscription, but rather is indented, as if an attempt had been made to write the second word in the middle of the line for purposes of symmetry; however, this is only a supposition, because the left side of the bulla cannot be reconstructed due to its poor state of preservation. There may or may not have been another letter on the left.

Eilat Mazar has presented a number of proposals for reconstructing the inscription. The first and most attractive is to add an aleph to the word *nvy*, which would then be read "prophet," thus and the completed inscription would read "Isaiah the prophet." This proposal is the most tempting because next to Hezekiah it places the prophet of his generation, to whom the Bible ascribes quite close ties to the king. That prophet is Isaiah son of Amoz.

Other proposals see the word *nvy* as complete as it is, and interpret it as possibly the place of origin of the bulla's owner, perhaps the town of Nov, which appears in a number of parallels from this period. It is also possible that *nvy* is a name, which appears in a few parallels from this period. In that case, it would be the name of the father of the Isaiah mentioned in the bulla, although the word for son, *ben*, does not appear. The lack of the word "son" in itself is not unusual – quite a few bullae contain only two names, one on top of the other, the bottom name being that of the father.



Fig. 3. The Hezekiah son of Ahaz bulla (courtesy of Dr. Eilat Mazar. Photo by Uriah Tadmor).



Fig. 4. The Yesha'yah[u] / Nvy[?] bulla (Courtesy of Dr. Eilat Mazar. Photo by Uriah Tadmor)

Each of these proposals has its advantages and disadvantages. The letter aleph at the end of the second line is not certain. If the intent had in fact been to center the bottom line under the top line, no letter at all need have been added. If the desire had been to center the word below the line above it, then it would not have needed an alef. If the word *nyv* did not have an alef, then its translating it as “prophet” is unlikely. Even with the additional letter, we would have expected the letter *h* – the definite article in Hebrew – to appear, rendering the phrase “Isaiah the prophet,” the usual biblical format. And if we consider the word *nyv* to be the name of a profession, both possibilities appear in the Bible – that is, with and without the definite article, as Mazar notes in her publication.. Of course if the addition of the definite article is correct, it sheds new light on the relationship between the king and the prophet, because the context of the site where the bulla was found is commercial, an aspect that no one has so far taken into account. We will discuss this question below.

The suggestion that *nyv* should be regarded as a place of residence or origin is a possibility, although here too we would expect the definite article before the place name. The Bible contains such references without the definite article, but no such example has been found in the bullae so far discovered. The name of the father without the word “son”, on the other hand, is quite common, and in that case, we would not expect the definite article to be present.

Having presented the data, deciding among of the above possibilities is a matter of judgement. The “minimalist” reader, who does not tend toward adding letters without a proven necessity, would prefer the theory that the word *nyv* is the name of the father. That possibility requires no additions, and raises no problem of a missing definite article. In contrast, the lack of a definite article undermines the other two possibilities – that *nyv* constitutes a place name, or actually means “prophet”. Of the two latter options, the reading of *nyv* as “prophet” the one that would apparently require the addition of the letter alef.

In other words, purely epigraphic considerations would lead to the conclusion that the most convenient reading is “Of Isaiah from Nov.” And the least likely possibility is that the inscription reads “Isaiah the prophet.”

The second phase of the discussion sets aside the purely epigraphic aspect, and attempts to assess circumstantial probability, that is, to understand the circumstances under which the inscription was written and in this way assess what the bulla says. Here we must

concede that we lack crucial data that might fundamentally change the picture. We do not really know the nature of the relationship among the people who used the site at that time, and whether such ties went beyond the business world.

Despite the large number of bullae in our possession, neither do we know exactly how the client or the user regarded the inscription on the bulla and what he or she expected to find in it. Was the information on this person's private seal meant to securely identify its owner for business purposes? Or did the seal also have a social function, a kind of declaration or "logo"? In ancient times, most owners of seals would decorate them with some sort of image. It seems that toward the seventh century BCE this custom waned. The seal of Hezekiah bears symbols, and in that case, the seal apparently did more than merely identify its owner; after all, the owner was the king himself. But the significance for other people is more difficult to know.

As would be expected, the possibility of reading the word *nyv* as "prophet" has stirred the imagination of people interested in the subject for a number of reasons. Among lay people there are many who seek any evidence confirming (or in other cases, contradicting) the biblical account. Direct proof of the existence of a prophet by the name of Isaiah at the time of King Hezekiah would be a cause for rejoicing. But this is not our focus here; seeking proof for the Bible belongs to the realm of research in critical thinking. Moreover, in this case, as has been shown above, the ostensible proof is dubious to say the least.

Still, the possibility that this is the correct reading cannot be ignored. The likelihood is not great of finding names that are coincidentally also mentioned in the Bible. Mazar notes another such case in the City of David excavations, but these are isolated instances among many dozens of bullae found. Finding "Hezekiah" and "Isaiah" a few hundred meters apart is undoubtedly further circumstantial evidence that indeed the owner of the bulla was the prophet.

If this is the seal of Isaiah the prophet, what was the meaning of his choice to note this on his seal? Seals, as we recall, were mainly used in business transactions and bureaucracy. Was being a prophet a profession in every sense? Did the term reveal the social status of the bearer?

Biblical evidence comes from the words of Amos the prophet to Amaziah, priest of Bethel, in that same period: "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son" (Amos 7:14), spoken in response to the priest's rebuke: "O thou seer, go, flee away into the land

of Judah, and there eat bread and prophesy there” (Amos 7:12). These verses can provide proof, at least in the northern kingdom, that, as was the custom in the ancient Near East, being a prophet was a paid profession, certainly during the time of the Temple. Can the conclusion be drawn that this was the situation in the Kingdom of Judah as well? Or perhaps the opposite was true, and Amos’ words show that this was not the case?

“Prophets” as a general term in the context of the Temple are mentioned in the Bible throughout the period. One hundred years later, during Jeremiah’s trial, which took place in the Temple, there were “prophets” among those who took hold of him and sought to kill him (Jeremiah 26). Jeremiah famously clashed in the Temple court with Hananiah son of Azzur (Jeremiah 28). It is reasonable to imagine that these prophets also received a stipend of some sort, perhaps as professional diviners, alongside the priests.

But would a prophet like Isaiah have also had such a status? Amos specifically excludes himself from these prophets. The biblical tradition regards Amos and the other latter prophets as “something different,” – not “professional prophets,” whose prophecies bore the scent of bias, delivered for payment. If indeed the owner of the seal was Isaiah son of Amoz, and he chose to present himself on business occasions as “prophet,” without the definite article (Isaiah, Prophet), what does this say about his status and the status of prophecy in eighth-century BCE Judah?

As intriguing as all these questions are, they have no definitive answers. After all, the entire discussion depends on circumstantial and epigraphic conclusions as to the correct reading of the bulla. As the late Yigael Yadin often said, “We may never know.” I can only end this brief discussion with those same words.

## ■ References

### **Mazar 2018**

E., Mazar, The Ophel Excavations to the South of the Temple Mount 2009–2013, Jerusalem 2018: 175-186.