Notes on the Gabriel Inscription

Torleif Elgvin
Evangelical Lutheran University College, Oslo


The Gabriel Inscription was published in March 2007 (Yardeni/Elizur 2007). Two months later I headed a symposium on this text in Oslo and suggested a tentative English translation of it (Elgvin 2007). Important contributions on this enigmatic text were published by Matthias Henze last summer (Henze 2011). In the following I present for consideration some notes and observations on the Gabriel text, and conclude with a structured English translation of it.¹ Photographs made by Bruce Zuckerman and his team in 2009, available on InscriptiFact (ISF), have been consulted.

¹ I am indebted to readers from Semítica’s editorial board for helpful suggestions.
Textual Notes

L. 12. The beginning of this line is read by Yardeni/Elizur as יִשְׂרָאֵל יִמְבִּית. Qimron/Yuditsky correctly observe that there are two words before “house of Israel” and render יִשְׂרָאֵל יִמְבִּית. According to ISF 11423 the first word ends יִוְי or יִי: the left leg and horizontal upper part of the first stroke of tav is clear. Based on Yardeni’s full-sized drawing of the text (Yardeni/Elizur 2007) one could read this first word as שֹמֵת or שֹמֵת. On her drawing one sees the right edge and lower corner of a square letter, possibly mem, and before this two or three strokes which may be interpreted as the left leg and top of het, enabling the reading יִמְבִּית. The next word perhaps opens with bet, kap, or ‘ayin (cf. ISF 11423). Above the first two letters of this word a supralinear lamed can be discerned. The two opening words of line 12 would contain a verb and a reference to God’s action for or in relation to the house of Israel. I tentatively suggest to read יִשְׂרָאֵל יִמְבִּית “I will have pity on you, house of Israel.” While רחֵם takes a direct object or an object introduced by על, וּכְבָר or הטור may be the easiest material reading of the word before “house of Israel.”

L. 12. יִרְוֵישָלָם may be interpreted not as “the greatness of Jerusalem,” but as “great deeds (to be) done for Jerusalem,” referring to God’s deeds in the past or the close future, cf. 1 Chr 17:19.21.

Ll. 16-17. עָבָדֵי דֹּוד בְּשֵׁקֶש מִן, מִפְּנֵי אָמָרִים may be read as אָמָרִים מִפְּנֵי עָבָדֵי דֹּוד. The last word of line 16 can materially be read אָמָרִים “Ephraim” or אָמָרִים “words,” as the second letter of this word can be read as pe or mem. Qimron/Yuditsky argue for the reading אָמָרִים מִפְּנֵי עָבָדֵי דֹּוד “Give me words [in re]sponse,” referring to this expression in Prov 22:21.

2 Thus Yardeni/Elizur 2011: 13. “one can perhaps restore the name Ephraim[?]” (ibid.: 19). Hendel (2009: 8) and Qimron/Yuditsky read אָמָרִים. On ISF 11424 one can discern a tiny vertical stroke topping the upper left corner of the disputed letter, pointing to mem, not pe.
Since his first publication in 2007 the reading “Ephraim” has been essential for Knohl’s interpretations. Based on the physical evidence he argues that the first word of line 17 cannot be יבֵנֵי, but a word ending with final mem (2011: 42, note 11). With Yardeni/Elizur he restores שִׁמְוִי and interprets the crucial words: “My servant David, ask of Ephraim [that he] place the sign; (this) I ask of you.” Such a reading represents a stretched interpretation of these two lines. In this text it would be artificial to bring in a dialogue between two messiahs, one of David’s seed and one of Ephraim’s. All through the text the speakers of the dialogue are the anonymous prophet and Gabriel. And it is God or the angel who brings forward the sign (line 80), not a human agent (cf. Kim 2011: 167). The close context supports the interpretation of Qimron/Yuditsky, in lines 10-11 the prophet asks the angel for a word from the Lord, and lines 17-21 provide the response to this request. David’s request is phrased as a synthetic parallelism, “Give me words [in re]sponse, the sign I ask from you.” In ISF 11425 the last letters of the first word of line 17 are clearly ב. The third last letter looks more like a pe, but be is possible, so one should read דַבַּר or לַעֲבֹד. So far שִׁמְוִי is the best suggested restoration, which also points to אמרים and not אפרים at the end of line 16.

What is the relation between “my servant David” and the prophet behind this revelatory text? Kim (2011: 158) sees this “David” as the recipient of the revelation. He argues that the text was addressed to the leader of a militant group in a time of crisis for Jerusalem, a group who had the warrior-king David as their hero. Kim does not specify if this “David” was the one who actually had this prophetic audition and vision, or if another prophet was mediating to him. Since the text includes different scenes and visions (lines 25-26, 31-35, 38, 41, 83) and David is referred to in the third person in line 72 (cf. Collins 2011: 111), a more probable scenario would be the prophet listening to a dialogue between Gabriel and the Davidic messiah.

L. 18-19. רָאִיתָשָׁה נַבִּי. Qimron/Yuditsky notes that the reading is doubtful, and annotates the first word בֵּי. However, on ISF 11424 the first three letters are clearly drawn, although the first
letter can equally be read as bet or kap. The final taw is materially more doubtful, but it is difficult to come up with a better reading that fits with the next word, והוהי. I concur with Qimron/Yudit-sky that the digital photo favours the reading והוהי for והוהי (thus Yardeni/Elizur).

L. 22. Read “You do not stand on firm ground.”

LL. 24-25. In the beginning of line 25 there is space for a short word before והשמים. I suggest to restore [והשמים] I will shake [the powers] of heaven and the earth. This quotation of Hag 2:6 is also found in Hebr 12:26.

Ll. 31-32. With ISF 11432 read “The angel asked, ‘The thing you saw, what was it?’—I answered: ‘A [mighty] tree.’” Our author is influenced by Aramaic, and could use both ש (lines 36, 67, 71) and ד as relative pronoun (דמ, line 81). An irregular defective spelling of שראית should not be ruled out (cf. the spelling תירה for תירא in line 23), even if שראית occurs in line 71. The first word of line 32 described the tree seen in this vision.

Ll. 35-36. With Qimron/Yuditsky read עמה and not עובר. Line 36 contains the verb סמן. A man communicating a sign may have been envisioned standing on the city wall, cf. Amos 7:7.

Ll. 37-38. Read with Qimron/Yuditsky: עמיות ... זאות גלות ... וAppBar: They interpret it as “the first exile” and “the second exile,” referring to Jer 24:1-10. Alternatively one could interpret גלות as a qal or piʿel infinitive with the meaning “revelation.” Based on ISF 11426 one may possibly read זאות גלות שריון ... [וה] עמיות ישם ... ייווח ... “this is the first revelation ... this is the second revelation.”

L. 41. With Qimron/Yuditski the penultimate word should be read והוהי. With ISF 11427 one may read the end of the line והוהי as samek could equally be read bet or kap.
L. 43. The penultimate word seems to be תַּקִּירו, cf. ISF 11427. Only a trace is visible of the penultimate letter, but both legs of taw can be discerned. Alternatively one could read קֵר or קֵר followed by a word space and taw.

L. 54. “it is said” should be understood as “it is written,” referring to a biblical text.

Ll. 59-60. The letters of line 60 are difficult to read. In the beginning of line 60 Qimron/Yuditsky restore יְרוּשָׁלָם. The next word is read by Yardeni/Elizur as רוח “spirit.” Since Zech 1–6 and 11 have coloured this text, a reference to Zech 12:10 would make sense. This verse is quoted also in the opening of the Revelation of John, the closest New Testament relative of the Gabriel text. I therefore suggest the tentative restoration אשפך על רוח יְרוּשָׁלָם יְרוּשָׁלָם רוח ותוהם “[I will pour out over Jerusalem] a spirit of grace and supplication.”

L. 71. Yardeni/Elizur read שָׁראָיתָי בְּרֵכָּו. Read שָׁראָית, cf. ISF 11433. בְּרֵכָו: the second letter is materially more easily read as resh, but dalet is possible. The third letter is unclear, but kap and yod can be discerned.

L. 81. The third, fourth and fifth words of this line were read by Yardeni/Elizur אֵוֹרְפֵּת בַּקַּרְבֶּן “narrow holes(?)”. Knohl then connected this line with the slaughter of the zealot leader Simon in rocky crevices in Transjordan in 4 BC (2011: 47). taw may equally be read as het, as no extending base line of this letter can be discerned. I tentatively suggest as an alternative reading of this line שָׁרְאִי הָאִיר דַּלִּים קְרוֹבֵי הֲעַרֵים “the prince of princes, of those who are close to the courts”—referring to the angels approaching God in the courts of the heavenly sanctuary. qop for ʾalep is only a tentative option, as no descender is visible. But the letters of the line below are worn, and the same could be the case for the descender of a qop.

Ll. 80, 82. Yardeni’s 2007 drawing of the text may suggest to read at the end of lines 80 and 82 respectively אֶנֶי בֶּרֶאָלָא מַלְעַת and
(for the latter, cf. ISF 1143), leading to the following self-presentation of Gabriel: “I am Gabriel, the king of kings, the prince of princes, of those who are close to the courts.”

could alternatively be interpreted “the (first) angel of the angels,” cf. the defective spelling of מֶלֶךְ (מלך) in line 77. If this reading of line 80 is correct, the title שר השרים (line 81), used more probably of Michael than God in Dan 8:25 (cf. 8:11), is here applied to Gabriel. Elizur lists later Jewish usage of the term “prince of princes” (Yardeni/Elizur 2011: 20-21): in hekhalot literature it designates Metatron or the angelic Youth alongside the Lord, and Gabriel is positioned as the head of the princes (בראש השרים). The last reference would support my reading of lines 80-81. In piyyutim “prince of princes” is a designation for Michael. A Babylonian incantation text names the two angels who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, Gabriel and Michael (Hamidović 2009: 157).

Thematic Observations

Jewish prophecy had not ceased to function in the late Second Temple period (Gray 1993). The Gabriel text opens a window into the actual sayings of such prophets a century before this phenomenon would unfold in (Jewish) Christian contexts, as evidenced in New Testament texts, Didache, and the Ascension of Isaiah.

In this text the mediating angel adopts the genre of a human prophet, frequently repeating the formula “thus says the Lord” (cf. Kim 2011: 155). This is different from the interpreting angels we encounter in Daniel 10–12, Jubilees or 1 Enoch, but similar to Zech 1–3. This feature may reflect the theology and angelology of our author, who perhaps needed a mediator less awesome than God himself.

The text includes liturgical responses (lines 23-25, 72-74, cf. Ezek 3:12). This element may reflect the background of the
Notes on the Gabriel Inscription

prophet (Levitic?) or demonstrate a secondary use of this text in a community setting. In lines 70–72, 75–76, 79 we encounter three divine envoys, designated as prophets and shepherds, sent by God and then recalled. The image of three shepherds is found in Zech 11, where they designate human rulers with poor conduct. Elizur lists a number of rabbinic references to “three prophets,” identified as biblical prophets such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, Kohelet, Elijah, Micah, Moses, Zephaniah and Hulda (Yardeni/Elizur 2011: 18–19).

In lines 75–76 the shepherds are sent to scrutinize the people of Israel to see if there are faithful ones among them. Rather than pointing to human rulers or prophets this job description brings to mind angelic envoys with similar tasks, cf. Gen 18–19; Ezek 9; Zech 1:10-11; Rev 7:1-4. The three shepherds should be interpreted as angelic shepherds commissioned by God to test the ways of men, and may be identical with the three holy ones of line 65. A reference to three biblical prophets would not easily fit the setting of the Gabriel text, which either points to a historical situation of crisis in the first century BC or an eschatological war.

These divine envoys should be compared with the two witnesses of Rev 11, who testify to the truth before they are killed by the beast, and after three days and a half resurrected and taken to heaven. Flusser and Werman have argued persuasively that Rev 11–13 reinterprets the Oracle of Hystaspes, an anti-Roman Jewish apocalyptic text from the first century. In the Oracle (known

3 According to Hamidović, the repetitions in lines 57–59 show that the inscription is no autograph, but copied from a Vorlage. He suggests that the stone could have been used as a liturgical object (2009: 149, 151-2). For Yardeni/Elizur the “scroll style” with two columns suggests that the inscription was copied from a scroll (2011: 12).

4 In the HB “holy ones” refer to angels (Collins 1993: 313-17; idem 2011: 105). In literature from Qumran and later periods this designation may be extended to human servants of God, as in line 76.

5 Flusser 1988. According to Werman (2009) also the motif of the woman giving birth to the Messiah (Rev 11) was present in the Oracle. Flusser’s hypothesis was accepted by Aune (1998: 588-93, 726-8, 771). Schäfer has recently discussed the Jewish traditions about the mother giving birth to the messiah, who is taken
through Lactantius, a third-century Christian writer) there is one prophet who is sent by God to preach and bring the people to repentance. He is subsequently killed by the antichrist, and then called back to heaven on the third day. The Gabriel text reflects an earlier version of traditions later incorporated into the Oracle and Rev 11–13. Apocalypse of Elijah 4 reflects the same tradition, with three witnesses who preach against the antichrist. All three, the virgin Tabitha, Elijah and Enoch, are killed and resurrected. Apoc. Elijah contains both Jewish and Christian layers. The evidence of the Gabriel inscription suggests that the core of Apoc. Elijah 4 is Jewish in origin (pace Winternute, OTP 1: 724-5, 746-9).

Is there a specific historical situation of crisis behind this revelatory text, as argued by Knohl and Kim? Knohl has suggested the upheavals after the death of Herod. Other options would be Pompey’s invasion of Jerusalem 63 BC, the Parsian incursions in Judea 40-39 BC, or the civil war between Herod and the Hasmonaeans 39-37 BC that culminated in the siege and conquest of Jerusalem. But the prophet behind the Gabriel text could engage in prophetic dialogue with biblical texts on the end-time fate of Jerusalem without an acute situation of military crisis, similar to the setting of the Revelation of John. Our author is simultaneously prophet and exegete, as Fletcher-Louis has argued about John of Patmos.6

The Gabriel text repeatedly promises a sign of redemption on the third day (lines 17-19, 54, 80). Thus, a messianic hope could be connected with “the third day” already before Jesus. With this evidence it becomes more plausible that the sayings of Matt 12:40, Luke 24:46, and John 2:19 (cf. 1 Cor 15:4) can be traced back to heaven as a baby (y.Berakhot 2,4/12-14; Lam Rabba 1,16 § 51; cf. also Sefer Serubabel), and concluded that they represent post-Christian polemic: Schäfer 2010: 1-31.

6 “What John encounters in his visionary experience is made sense of through the framework of understanding already present in his cognition. The interpretation of Ezek 1 ... involved seeing again what Ezekiel had seen. It may well have involved the resort to cross-referencing, but this contributed to a dynamic imaginative activity in which the details of Ezekiel’s vision were understood by a complex interweaving of vision and textual networking”: Fletcher-Louis 2006: 45, 48; cf. idem 2008.
Notes on the Gabriel Inscription

The hope for redemption with dawn or on the third day would find support in scriptures such as Hos 6:3; Ps 46:6; Exod 8:19; 19:11,15; Gen 22:4 (on the third day Abraham sees the place of offering and symbolically receives “his son back from the dead,” cf. Hebr 11:17-19).

The Gabriel Inscription — A Structured Translation

The translation is particularly indebted to Qimron and Yuditsky 2011. Italic font indicates tentative/uncertain readings and interpretations.
guarding you, Jerusalem, and three, yes three who perform mighty deeds. 34 ... three ... 35 ... See: a man standing and ... [on the wall] 36 and he ... who will give a signal from Jerusalem. 37 And I stand over ... and he said: This is the first revelation, 38 and this is the second revelation, ... and these are the poor ones. And I saw 39 [...]

I will take pity on] Jerusalem, says the Lord of 40 Hosts ... 41 ... His glory, and I shall see wonders 43 ... walls ... 50 [The Lord your God] 51 is with you, your Shepherd[ is with you ... providing help] 52 from the angels and from on high.

[The enemy shall make war] 53 against his people, and the next day ... [a sign will be given to them,] 54 on the third day, as it is said. ... he ... 56 Yea, see ... [it shall be] 57 an end to the blood of the slaughtering in Jerusalem.

For thus says the Lord of Hosts, 58 the God of Israel. Yes, thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of 59 Israel, thus says the Lord: [I will pour out 60 over Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. 61 ... Blessed are those ... 64 ...]

[These are the] 65 three holy ones from days of old, from the beg[inning ... ] 66 Jerusalem, say: “We trust in you, [not in] 67 flesh and blood.” This is the chariot of [your guardian angel.] 68 There are many who love the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel.

[Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: [Three] 70 prophets I sent to my people, three shepherds. But when 71 I pondered on the ways [of my people] I called them back to 72 the place for the sake of David, the servant of the Lord.

— Y[ou created 73 the heavens and the earth by your [great] power and by your outstretched 74 [arm]. You show mercy towards a thousand generations ...

75 Three shepherds came to Israel ... [to see] 76 if there were [pious ones] among them, if there were holy ones among them ...

77 “Who are you?” — “I am Gabriel, the angel of [the Lord.] ... 78 you shall rescue them. A proph[e]t and a shep[herd] shall rescue you. — [I p]ray 79 you for three shepherds, for three [prop]hets.

80 On the third day: the sign! I am Gabriel, the king of kings, 81 the prince of princes, of those who are close to the courts ... 82 The sign is for him ... [thus they a]sk you. See those who love the king! 83 On
the third day, the small one that I took, I Gabriel. 84 The Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel ... 85 Then you will stand firm ... for ever

Bibliography

