

The Seal of the Prophet Isaiah?

While excavating the Ophel in 2009, an area between the Temple Mount and the City of David, Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar unearthed 34 clay seal impressions (bullae). The bullae were found in Iron Age debris dated to the eighth – seventh centuries B.C. just outside of the royal bakery.

The bullae measuring about a half inch in diameter and the color of soil was discovered by wet sifting where debris, excavated dirt of the site, was washed with water.

Among the 34 bullae was one that had the name “Isaiah,” which was found less than ten feet from King Hezekiah’s bulla. Mazar notes, “the names of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah are mentioned in one breath 14 of the 29 times the name of Isaiah is recalled (2 Kings 19–20; Isaiah 37–39). No other figure was closer to King Hezekiah than the prophet Isaiah.”

However, the Isaiah bulla is broken and is difficult to determine if it contains the word “prophet” or “the prophet.”

The Isaiah bulla reads: “l’Yesha’yah” (belonging to Isaiah) with the Hebrew letters “nvy” below it. Isaiah’s name is missing the letter “u” which should appear as “Yesha’yahu.”

The Isaiah Bulla is divided into three registers:

Top Register: this part was largely broken; however, the remains of an image of a grazing doe can be seen.

Middle Register: “l’Yesha’yah” (belonging to Isaiah) appears.

Lower Register: the Hebrew letters “nvy” are visible.

Mazar hypothesizes that the damaged portion of the bulla may contain additional Hebrew letters. In a reconstruction, seen in blue, the following is surmised:

In the Middle Register, it is likely that the letter “u” (vav) completes the correct spelling of Isaiah’s name “Yesha’yahu.” If “heh” (definitive article) was added after the letter “vav,” then the middle register would read “belonging to Isaiah the”.

The name “Isaiah” is undisputed.

If the letter “aleph” was added at the damaged end of the lower register, the clay impression would read “nvy” (prophet).

Location of the Bullae Discovery.



Photo from Times of Israel
(<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-find-of-biblical-proportions-proof-of-prophet-isaiah-believed-unearthed/>)



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A number of scholars dismiss Mazar's hypothetical reconstruction and are skeptical of the bulla belonging to the prophet Isaiah. Their reasons include the possibility of the bulla belonging to a person named Isaiah or perhaps even the name of a location, which cannot be conclusively ruled out.

However what cannot be so easily dismissed and remains compelling are:

1. The location of the find was within the royal palace.
2. The strata age of the find was Iron Age (8th-7th century, B.C.), which is the correct period of time for Hezekiah and Isaiah.
3. The find was within ten foot proximity to Hezekiah's bulla.

The above points are consistent with the biblical record that depict a close relationship between the prophet Isaiah and King Hezekiah (rule 727 - 698 B.C.).

References:

1. Mazar, E: "Is This the Prophet Isaiah's Signature?" in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 44:2, March/April May/June 2018.
2. Borschel-Dan, A: "In find of biblical proportions, seal of Prophet Isaiah said found in Jerusalem" in *Times of Israel*, February 2018 (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-find-of-biblical-proportions-proof-of-prophet-isaiah-believed-unearthed/>).