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**“The Samaria Ostraca.”**

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## II. Syro-Palestinian Documents

### 148. Samaria Ostraca (Noegel)

A total of 102 ostraca (inscribed potsherds) have been discovered at Samaria (modern Sabaste), the northern capital of ancient Israel (ca. 870–722 BCE), most of them during G. Reisner's excavations in 1910. The archaeological context in which they were found and paleographic analysis of the Hebrew script in which they were written suggest that they date to the second quarter of the eighth century BCE (Kaufman 1982: 231–4), thus roughly 50 years before the Assyrian destruction of the city. Of the 102 ostraca, only 63 are legible enough to provide useful information.

The documents are of two basic types, but both types appear to have been written in Samaria in roughly the same period, and both served as means of recording the transmission of luxury goods. The first type contains the date of the shipment based on the king's reign (invariably years 9 or 10), the clan or district from which it came, the person or persons to whom it was intended, and the item that was transmitted. There is some variation in this group in terms of the number of goods or people named or the order in which the information appears, but all ostraca contain the same basic elements. A few examples include:

*In the ninth year (of the king): from (the district of) Qosah, to Gedyahu: a jar of aged wine. (Ostrakon 6)*

*In the tenth year (of the king): from (the district of) Seper, to Gedyahu: a jar of fine oil. (Ostrakon 16a)*

*In the tenth year (of the king): to Shemaryahu, from (the district) of Be'erayim: a jar of aged [wine]. Raga' (son of) Elisha' – 2, 'Uzza (son of) Qadbes – 1, 'Eliba' – 1. (Ostrakon 1)*

The second group of ostraca also begins with the date (invariably year 15 of the king), but adds the clan from which the item came, the person to whom the item is intended (often with a patronymic), a second personal name, and the name of the town within the clan or district. Another important feature that distinguishes this group, though undetectable in translation,

is its method of dating, which employs a hieratic numerical system developed first in Egypt. Two examples of the second group include:

*In the fifteenth year (of the king): from (the district of) Heleq to 'Asa' (son of) 'Ahimelekh, Heles from (the district of) Haserot. (Ostrakon 22)*

*In the fifteenth year (of the king): from (the district of) Shemyada' to Heles (son of 'Epsah), Ba'ala' (son of) Zakkur (Ostrakon 31a)*

The differences between the two groups of ostraca and the ambiguities inherent in such brief documents make it difficult for scholars to attribute to them a precise function. Scholars concur that the ostraca served as an accounting system, but there is some disagreement concerning the role of the individuals named on the dockets. Three different theories have been proposed. The first sees the individuals as officials or land owners who had been given land from the king, and who were sending the produce from these lands to Samaria as a form of in-kind tax. This view rests on reading the arguably ambiguous preposition preceding the person's name (Hebrew *le-*) as "from" or "to be credited to." The second theory understands the individuals named on the ostraca as tax officials "to" whom the merchandise was delivered as a form of in-kind tax. The third view sees the figures on the documents as important officials or nobles resident at Samaria who were providing for their own subsistence at the royal court from fields and vineyards they had received from the king. In essence they were "eating at the king's table," to use a biblical idiom (e.g., 1 Sam 8: 14; 22: 7; 2 Sam 9: 9-10; 1 Kgs 18: 19).

Of the three theories, the last has received the widest acceptance. It also makes sense given the types of fine products mentioned in the document, such as aged wines and body oil, which befit the niceties of a courtier's lifestyle. Judging by the words of the Israelite prophet Amos, a contemporary of the ostraca, these luxury goods must have appeared to the average Israelite as the extravagance of the idle rich (Amos 6: 4-6).

In addition to providing insights into such biblical texts, the ostraca provide scholars with a great deal of information on Israelite topography, clan systems, methods of distribution, and administrative practices. The topographical data they contain constitute the largest number of Israelite place names found outside the Bible, and are invaluable for locating a number of cities surrounding Samaria, some of which appear in the Bible. All of the clan names given in the second group of ostraca belong to the tribe of Manasseh. That all but one of them appear in clan lists found in the Bible (Num 26: 29-34; Josh 17: 2-3) demonstrates the longevity of ancient tribal divisions and their administrative purposes.

The amounts of oil and wine delivered and the amounts received by the people named in the documents also suggest that the ostraca represent the transactions of at least three different socio-economic classes.

Insight into ancient scribal practices comes from the ostraca as well. It is of note that typically the ostraca that document the transmission of oil were

written on gray ware while those documenting the arrival of wine were written on red ware. This suggests a method of sorting the documents based on their appearance; probably a device for facilitating organization.

As valuable as such information is, however, it does not help a great deal in elucidating the most significant problem posed by the ostraca; namely, their precise date. Unfortunately for us, the documents never name the king because the scribes who wrote them took this information for granted. The archaeological and paleographic evidence suggests the second quarter of the eighth century BCE, but there are several Israelite kings who fit into this period, and the chronology of the Israelite kings generally is much debated. Moreover, though the existence of two distinct groups of ostraca at Samaria could be interpreted as representing a change in administration, and thus be attributed to two different kings, they could just as well represent an administrative change during a single reign. In addition, one of the ostraca (n. 63) provides the longest reign mentioned in the documents, but the hieratic numerical system employed to write it has been variously interpreted as 12, 14, 16, and 17. One cannot use it, therefore, to narrow the field of possible kings whose reigns lasted at least 17 years.

The inability to offer a more precise date for the dockets has led to a number of widely divergent proposals concerning which king or kings are referenced in them (e.g., Maisler 1948; Yadin 1961; and Shea 1977). Despite a plethora of proposals, two primary theories have emerged.

The first is based on what is felt to be a paleographic consistency between the two groups of documents, and on an interpretation of the archaeological data (both groups of ostraca were found mixed together in the same spot). This theory holds that both groups of ostraca date to the reign of Jeroboam II.

The second theory, is really a set of two related theories, each of which has in common the recognition that Israelite kings sometimes placed their sons on the throne as co-regents. They also share the view that the two groups of ostraca represent a change in administration brought about by the co-regency. The two theories in this group diverge, however, when it comes to the specific kings who served as co-regents, whether Jehoahaz and Jehoash, or Joash and Jeroboam II.

Of the two theories, the second appear to have become scholarly consensus. It attributes the first group of documents (referencing years 9 and 10) to Jeroboam II (793–752 BCE), and the second group (referencing year 15) to the reign of his father Joash (798–782 BCE). It adopts a well-established chronological reconstruction, and calculates that, according to the biblical text, Joash had installed his son Jeroboam II as co-regent in 793 BCE just before the battle against Amaziah of Judah at Beth-Shemesh (2 Kgs 14: 11–14; 2 Chr 25: 21–4). This places the date of first group of ostraca at 785/784 (year 9) and 784/783 (year 10 of Jeroboam II), and the second group at 783/782 (year 15 of Joash). Since the first group of ostraca contains no clan names associated with the Manasseh tribe, the change in administrative practice is taken to suggest that when Jeroboam II came to the throne that he went outside

the traditional clan distribution system when allotting land to his courtiers. As intriguing as these suggestions are, they are nevertheless unprovable, and until further evidence comes to light, it will perhaps be most useful merely to recognize the likelihood that at least some of the Samaria Ostraca date to the reign of Jeroboam II.

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## 149. Lachish Ostraca (Noegel)

This collection of 22 inscribed postsherds (ostraca) were discovered between 1935 and 1938 at Tell ed-Duweir,<sup>21</sup> a site that most scholars have identified as ancient Lachish, an Israelite military outpost west of Jerusalem. Two of the ostraca contain lists of names, perhaps of those entering the gates of Lachish, and some of them refer to food rations. The most significant among them, however, are 12 letters, several of which are too fragmentary to provide useful historical information.

Though the ostraca were not the only inscriptions discovered at the site, nor the last to be discovered there, they are among the most important. At the time of their discovery they represented the only Hebrew inscriptions that antedated the exilic period, hence their early publication received immediate attention. Though the ostraca no longer hold this distinction, they are still valuable for the light they shed on the classical Hebrew language and its grammar and epistolary formulae, as well as on Israelite military history, administration, and intelligence. Based on archaeological and internal data found in the ostraca, scholars date them to the early summer of 589 CE, thus, just three years before the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.

It is debated whether the letters represent copies of originals that were sent to Jerusalem or elsewhere from Lachish. The letters preserve the military correspondence between an individual of higher rank (named Yaush), presumably the commander of Lachish, and one of lower rank (named Hoshiyahu), who was apparently stationed not far from Lachish. It is unclear, however, whether Yaush is the intended recipient of all the letters, or if Hoshiyahu initiated all of them. Sixteen of the letters were found in a room located in the city's entrance gate, where the military headquarters was stationed, and five of these were stored in the same vessel. Nevertheless, many of the ostraca appeared to have been authored by different hands. What is clear, however, is that all of them were written over a relatively short period of time.

It is difficult to reconstruct a single historical context for the letters based on such a limited sample, especially since they were discovered alongside hundreds of other potsherds, which may or may not have originally contained letters. Nevertheless, one can glean something of their original context from clues in the letters themselves. One learns, for example, that the Babylonian invasion of Judah had not yet begun since one could travel in some safety from Lachish to Jerusalem, and harvesting crops in the Lachish's environs was still possible. Thus one letter concludes:

*May Yahweh allow my lord to witness a good harvest today. Is Ṭobiyahu going to send royal grain to your servant? (Ostrakon 5)*