

Prof. Scott B. Noegel
Chair, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization
University of Washington

“The Lachish Ostraca.”

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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,²¹ 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)

Communication between cities also appears unhindered. Indeed, letters appear to have been received at Lachish on a daily basis, as we see in the following letter.

May Yahweh let my lord hear a report of well being and [goodness].²² [And] now, supply ten bread-loaves and two (measures) of w[in]e. Return word [to] your servant by the hand of Shelemyahu concerning that which we should do tomorrow. (Ostrakon 9)

Despite the ability to carry out daily activities, the threat of Babylon was certainly looming on the horizon for one letter tells us that a smoke signal system was being tested, much like those found in the Bible (e.g., Jer 6: 1; Judg 20: 38; 20: 40).

May Yahwe[h] let my l[ord] hear a good report at this very moment!²³ And now according to all (the orders) that my lord sent, so has your servant done. I have written on a writing board according to all that [you] sen[t m]e to do. Regarding that which my lord sent concerning the matter of Beth-Haraphid: there is no one there. Concerning Semakyahu–Shemayahu has seized him and has taken him up to the city (i.e., Jerusalem). And (as for) your servant, I cannot send the witness there [. . .], unless he [comes (to you)] with the morning (inspection) round. One will (then) know that we are observing the smoke signals of Lachish according to the codes that my lord gave us, for the code of Azekah has (indeed) not been seen.²⁴ (Ostrakon 4)

The orders received by the subordinate infer a previous context that makes any reconstruction of events impossible. The place Beth-Harapid is unknown and one cannot tell if the words “no one there” refer to a specific group mentioned in his original orders (now lost to us), or to the population of the city, perhaps in reference to an evacuation or invasion. As for Semakyahu and Shemayahu; we have no idea who they were, or why the latter arrested the former. We are similarly ignorant as to why a witness would be required. Perhaps Semakyahu’s crime was related in some way to the smoke-signal system; the witness appears to be. In any event, a legal proceeding was being arranged, but that is about all we can infer. The mention of the smoke signal system as an issue of serious concern, however, does suggest that tensions in Lachish were high.

Indeed, news of emerging political factions in Jerusalem had reached the military commander of Lachish, which he in turn relayed to one of his officers. Alarmed by the news, the officer wasted no time in alerting his superior to the damage that such news would cause to troop morale.

To my lord Yaush. May Yahweh cause my lord to see this moment (in) well being. Who is your servant (but) a dog,²⁵ that my lord has sent the king’s [lett]er [and] the office[rs’] letters [say]ing “Please read (them)!”? And behold the words of the [officers] are not good! (They) weaken [your] hands and cause the hands of the m[en] to go sl[ack]. And now] My lord, will you not write to them saying “Why are you doing this, and [in Jeru]salem?! Beh[ol]d [y]ou have done this thing against the king [and against

his house]. As Yahweh your God lives, s[inc]e your servant read [the] letter[s], your serv[ant has had no peace].” (Ostrakon 6)

This was not an imagined crisis, for Jerusalem was severely divided over whether to become a Babylonian vassal or to rebel and seek Egyptian help (Jer 38: 1–5) and the wrong decision would spell certain disaster. The soldiers knew, of course, that the cities and garrisons surrounding Jerusalem, like Lachish, would be the first to experience the disaster. Indeed, Egypt and Babylon were engaged in a colossal tug of war and the entire Levant was in the middle of it.

Just a few years earlier in 605 BCE, the Babylonians had defeated the Egyptian army in Syria at Carchemish and then again at Hamath. In 601 BCE the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (604–562 BCE) brought his troops to the very border of Egypt. Though the battle that ensued forced Nebuchadnezzar to return home and regroup, the reprieve was only temporary. A year later he again entered the Levant, and by 597 had taken Jerusalem, deported its king (Jehoiachin) to Babylon, and installed a king of his own choosing over Jerusalem named Zedekiah (597–587). Nebuchadnezzar must have thought him a good choice because his brother Jehoahaz had been dethroned earlier by the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco II (610–595 BCE) who had held influence over Jerusalem at that time. In any event, Zedekiah’s advisors and officers wielded considerably more power than he, and in 589 BCE they convinced him to withhold tribute from Babylon and side with Egypt (Jer 27: 8–11; 37: 6–8).²⁶

It is in this context that another letter informs us of an Israelite military commander who was sent to Egypt, probably to obtain military support from Pharaoh Apries (589–570 BCE) in the imminent war against Babylon.

Your servant Hoshayahu has sent (this letter) to report to my lord Yaush: May Yahweh let my lord hear a report of well being and a report of goodness.

And now, please open the eye(s) of your servant as to (the purpose of) the letter that he sent to your servant last night, for the heart of your servant has been sick since you sent (it) to your servant. For my lord said: “You don’t know how to read it!” As Yahweh lives, nobody has ever attempted to read for me a letter! And moreover, every letter that comes to me, when I have read it, afterwards I can repeat it (in) detail!

Now your servant has received (a report) saying (that) the military general Koniyaahu son of ‘Elnatan has gone down to enter Egypt. Concerning Hodavyahu son of ‘Ahiyahu and his men, he has sent (word) to take them from here. And (as for) the letter of Tobiyahu,²⁷ servant of the king (that) came to Shallum son of Yada’ from the prophet²⁸ saying “Beware,” your servant is sending it to my lord. (Ostrakon 3)

Though the letter’s contentious tone reflects something of its author’s brusque, if not defensive, personality,²⁹ it also illustrates an authority structure weakened by the Babylonian crisis. Hoshayahu’s defiant remarks to his superior border on insubordination. We are bereft of the context for Yaush’s accusation of Hoshayahu’s illiteracy, but it is difficult to take his reprimand

literally, as Hoshayahu apparently took it. Perhaps Yaush was criticizing Hoshayahu for not grasping the intent of his words, that is, for not reading "between the lines." It is likely that the concluding content of the letter was also connected to Yaush's accusation, but one cannot tell in what way.

The identity of the unnamed prophet in this letter has intrigued scholars for some time. Some see him as the same figure referenced in Lachish Ostrakon 16, a very poorly preserved letter: "[the le]tter of the sons of [-ya]hu the prophet [. . .]." The latter text informs us that the prophet's name ended with the element -yahu (a shortened form of Yahweh). This, in turn, has led some to identify him as one of the biblical prophets of the period whose names contain the same ending, especially Uriah (Jer 26: 20) or Jeremiah. However, as tantalizing as these identifications may appear, they are by no means certain. Indeed, the two prophets mentioned in the ostraca might be different individuals, and even if we possessed their entire names they might be unknown to us from the Bible. Nevertheless, it is still of general value to know that the words of prophets were taken seriously by the military elite of Lachish, either because they represented divinely sanctioned advice or unwanted interference in political affairs.

The ostraca unfortunately do not tell us more as to what transpired in Lachish before the Babylonian attack, but we can reconstruct some of the events from the Bible and from Nebuchadnezzar's own records. Relying on Egyptian support, as it turned out, was not wise. Though the Egyptian army did mount an attack against the Babylonians in the south, Nebuchadnezzar quickly routed them (Jer 34: 21; 37: 5–11), and by 588 BCE Nebuchadnezzar had possession of many of Judah's cities including Lachish (Jer 34: 6–7). In the heat of July of 587 BCE Jerusalem too was finally taken and reduced to ruins. King Zedekiah tried to flee Jerusalem but was captured near Jericho and dragged back to Riblah in Syria, where he was forced to watch the murder of his sons before being blinded (Jer 39: 1–9). He, his officials, and many other Jerusalemites then were taken to Babylon in fetters as exiles. One can only assume that the soldiers at Lachish experienced a similar grizzly fate.

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Notes

- 1 This description of Shazu (i.e., Marduk) follows the literal meaning of his name, composed of logograms for "heart" and "to know."
- 2 A protective deity or genius.
- 3 The Akkadian terms behind "adversaries" and "enemies" are largely synonymous, which makes it difficult to translate them precisely. Such phrases are common in Mesopotamian literature.
- 4 The term for corvée duty, one's basic work-obligation to the state in return for sustenance or parcels of land, uses the Akkadian word that can mean more specifically "carrying basket" or "brickmold."
- 5 As their name implies, foundation deposits were objects deposited in the foundations of monumental structures (see Ellis 1968), although the term has come to refer more generally to objects buried in walls or floors. A foundation deposit usually bears an inscription commemorating the project and an address to future kings who may discover it in the course of their own renovations. In the Neo-Babylonian period, these objects were generally cylinders such as the one bearing this inscription. Statues, tablets, and prisms were also used in ancient Mesopotamia.