

PALESTINE

EXPLORATION

QUARTERLY

Embodying the *Quarterly Statement*
of the Palestine Exploration Fund
and the *Bulletin* of the British
School of Archaeology in Jerusalem

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JULY—DECEMBER 1967
NINETY-NINTH YEAR

PUBLISHED AT THE OFFICE OF THE FUND
2 HINDE MEWS, MARYLEBONE LANE, LONDON W1

17s. 6d.

U.S. \$2.73

THE LACHISH LETTERS

By N. R. GANOR

In this article we would like to refer to the ostraca discovered by the late J. L. Starkey at Tell ed-Duweir.^{1,2} The Ostraca were discovered lying deep in a burnt layer of the destroyed city; they form part of an exchange of correspondence between a certain Hoshai and someone named Yaush. The author of the letters, Hoshai, is considered to be the leader of a military company stationed at an observation outpost; whereas Yaush was most probably the military governor of the region. To quote J. W. Jack:³ 'Judging from the abject language and fulsome flattery used by the author of the letters, the individual to whom they were addressed, Jaush, must have been some very high official with something more than mere local authority' (p. 167).

The date of these ostraca was assigned by Torcyner and Starkey to the last years of the reign of King Zedekiah, i.e. contemporaneous with the campaign of Nebuchadnezzar.^{1, 2, 4} This date is now generally accepted by most scholars, though with some slight variations.^{3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12}

The reasons for this dating may be summarized as follows:

(a) The proper names appearing on the ostraca are regarded by most scholars, especially by Torcyner, to have been commoner in the period of Jeremiah than in any other period.^{4, 9}

(b) On the one hand, we have several ostraca (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 16, 18) which refer to a prophet whose words cause demoralization among the population of the city, and on the other, there is ostrakon III which tells us that the commander 'כ-יהו (the two middle letters are indistinct), the son of Elnathan, taking certain men with him went down to Egypt.'

Prof. Torcyner, who is followed in this by most scholars,^{1,4} conflates the above two disconnected statements, and so manages to see in them a striking parallel to Jeremiah 26:20-23, where we are told that King Jehoiakim sent the commander of the army, Elnathan the son of Achbor, to Egypt to fetch back the prophet Uriah the son of Shmayah to Jerusalem, where he had him executed. Once this parallel had been accepted: the 'undecipherable' name כ-יהו became Achbor or Yichbariau and the unnamed prophet became Uriah. Thus he extended the parallel where none, save the name Elnathan, existed before.

In the Bible, Uriah appears in the reign of Jehoiakim and not Zedekiah. The name Elnathan son of Achbor is not identical with Achbor son of Elnathan, even if we accept the reading of the names Achbor or Yichbariau for כ-יהו. In spite of this, it is maintained by Torcyner that the two events are identical and accordingly, he assigns the ostraca to the end of Zedekiah's reign.*

(c) Letter IV includes the statement: 'We are watching the fire signals (משואות) of Lachish according to all the indications which my Lord gives, because we do not see Azeka.'

This statement was regarded by Starkey,¹⁵ Torcyner⁴ and others^{9,16} as positive inscriptional proof for identifying Tell ed-Duweir with the Biblical Lachish. Once this identification was accepted, the assumption that the ostraca date from the reign of Zedekiah was inevitably

* The reader is referred to the work of J. W. Jack³ who already commented on the inadequacy of Torcyner's theory.

made. It rests on the fact that the ostraca were discovered amid a heavy layer of burnt debris, suggesting that the city was destroyed by fire, most probably during a war. This circumstance seen in the light of Jeremiah 34:7: 'Babylon's army fought against all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and against Azekah for these fenced cities remained of the cities of Judah', had to lead to the inescapable conclusion that the city remained intact, at least until Nebuchadnezzar's campaign.

From a consideration of the above arguments, one can see that there is no actual identity between the events reported in the Bible and those of the ostraca, but merely a resemblance—though some consider this to be a striking resemblance.

On the other hand, the script of the ostraca is considered to be the ancient Hebrew-Phoenician script. Referring to it, Torcyner states that 'the script of the ostraca seems to be identical with that of the Mesha Tablet which is 250 years earlier than the ostraca'.¹⁷ J. W. Jack expresses the same opinion³ (p. 167). However, for reasons of their own, most scholars have shied away from this cardinal question of the ostraca script.

The fact that the script of the ostraca is identical with that of the Mesha Tablet which is 250 years older, along with the discrepancies between the events mentioned in the ostraca and those considered parallel in the Bible, led us to search in the Bible for indications or events prior to Zedekiah's reign which resemble those mentioned in the ostraca.

Before continuing, let us summarize briefly the information which the ostraca yield us:

(1) The name of the governor or the captain of the city was 'Yaush' and, as remarked by J. W. Jack, 'he must have been some very high official with something more than mere local authority'.

(2) The ostraca were discovered amid a heavy layer of burnt debris, thus suggesting the destruction of the city by fire during a war.

(3) There existed an unnamed prophet who brought demoralization to the population and in connexion with this, the king and princes sent certain letters.

Concerning Lachish and other fortified cities in Judah, prior to Zedekiah's reign, we read in the Bible: 'Rehoboam dwelt in Jerusalem and built cities for defence in Judah. He built Bethlehem, and Etam, and Tekoa, and Beth-Zur, and Shoco, and Adullam, and Gath, and Maresha, and Ziph, and Adoraim, and Lachish, and Azeka, and Zora, and Ajalon, and Hebron which are in Judah and Benjamin, fenced cities, and he fortified the strongholds and put captains in them and store of victual and of oil and wine' (2 Chronicles 11:5-11).

Who were the captains that Rehoboam put in those fortified cities? The answer to this question, we find in verses 22-23 of the same chapter where we read 'and Rehoboam made Abija, the son of Maachah the chief, to be ruler among his brethren for he thought to make him king, and he dealt wisely and dispersed of all his children throughout all the countries of Judah and Benjamin unto every fenced city and he gave them victual in abundance'. In the Hebrew text, the word 'victual'—מזון—is preceded by the article הַ, i.e. הַמְזוֹן which signifies 'the victual', the known victual, i.e. the victual which he stored in the fortified cities and which is mentioned already in the same chapter (verse 11).

The above verses inform us that Rehoboam appointed his sons to be captains of the fortified cities that he built, and Abija was appointed their chief, for he was to be king. If we refer to verses 18-20 of the same chapter, we can also learn the names of the sons of Rehoboam. We read: 'and Rehoboam took him Mahalath, the daughter of Jerimoth the son of David to wife, and Abihail the daughter of Eliab the son of Jesse, which bare him children, Jeush and Shemariah, and Zaham, and after her, he took Maachah the daughter of Absalom, which bare him Abijah, and Attai, and Ziza, and Shlomith'.

According to the foregoing, one of Rehoboam's sons was named Jeush יְעוּשׁ and we have to admit that Jeush also, like his other brothers, became a captain of one of the fortified cities.

In 2 Chronicles 12:2-6 we read that 'in the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak, King of Egypt came up against Jerusalem . . . and he took the fenced cities which pertained to Judah . . . then came Shemaiah the prophet to Rehoboam and to the princes (in the Hebrew text שָׂרִים) of Judah that were gathered together to Jerusalem because of Shishak and said unto them: Thus said the Lord, ye have forsaken me, and therefore have I also left you in the hand of Shishak whereupon the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves'.

The above information suggests the destruction of the fortified cities and the existence of a prophet by the name of Shemaiah who demoralizes the population and who managed to persuade the king and the princes to call off the battle and surrender to Shishak.

The picture we get from the Bible of the period of Rehoboam is strikingly similar to the one that we get from the information yielded by the ostraca. In the ostraca Yaush יְאוּשׁ is the captain of the city and he was a 'high official, more than a local authority', whereas in the Bible יְעוּשׁ a son of King Rehoboam was to be a captain of one of his father's fortified cities.

As the interchanging of the letters א and ע occurs in Hebrew and other Semitic languages,^{13,14} יְעוּשׁ can be considered a transcription of יְאוּשׁ.

Here I would like to draw attention to Letter VI, where we read the request of Hoshai to Yaush to write to the king, and the princes and to ask them: 'Why do you act thus?'

כִּי שְׁלַח אֲדָנִי אֶת סֹפֵר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֶת סֹפְרֵי הַשָּׂרִים וְהִנֵּה דְבַרְי הַנְּבִיא לֹא טוֹבִים לְרַפּוֹת יָדַי וְלִהְשִׁקֵּיט יָדַי הָאָרֶץ וְעַתָּה אֲדָנִי הֲלֹא תִכְתֹּב אֵלֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר לִמָּה תַעֲשׂוּ כֹזָא . . . לִמָּה זֶה לְמֶלֶךְ וְלִמָּה תַעֲשׂוּ הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה. And the question arises: How comes it that Yaush, who is considered a local captain, is asked to interfere with a decision of the king and the princes? Is such interference conceivable for an ordinary captain? For Hoshai to make such a request, it implies that Yaush must be at least of the same rank as the king and the princes, and not just a local captain. Being the son of the king, like יְעוּשׁ, answers exactly to this condition.

In the ostraca we read about a prophet who demoralizes the population, and letters concerning his actions are sent by the king and the princes. In the Rehoboam period we find the prophet Shemaiah who demoralizes the population and who managed to persuade the king and princes to surrender. It may be presumed that the mention in the ostraca of the letters sent by the king and princes concerning the prophet refers to the situation before the surrender to Shishak.

The name of Shemayah appears also in letter IV: 'and Semakhyau has taken Shemayau and went up with him to the city' (וּסְמַכְיָאוּ לָקַחַ שְׁמַעְיָאוּ וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ הָעִירָה). The ostraca suggest a period of war and the destruction of the city. The Rehoboam period suggests a period of war and the destruction of the fortified cities of Judah.

Judging from the striking resemblances and identities between the Rehoboam period and the ostraca, it seems to us that we are correct in regarding Yaush—the captain mentioned in the ostraca—as being no other than Jeush, the son of Rehoboam, and accordingly, the date of the ostraca is pushed back to about 917 B.C. This date will also explain the striking resemblance between the ostraca script and that of the Mesha Tablet, previously pointed out by Torcyner and Jack.

Referring to the city of Lachish, the book of Jeremiah (34:7) tells us that 'Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish, and against Azeka, for these fenced cities remained of the cities of Judah'. Such a statement seems to contradict the possibility of the earlier dating of the ostraca as suggested by us. But this only applies when Tell ed-Duweir is equated with Lachish. As is known, Tell ed-Duweir has been identified with Lachish. This identification was made by Starkey, and Torcyner, and

is based especially on ostraca No. IV, lines 9b-13: 'We are watching the fire signals of Lachish according to all the indications which my lord hath given, because we do not see (the fire signals) of Azeka'. But can such a statement be regarded as a certain proof for the identification? This is not the opinion of Parrot⁵ and some other scholars.^{7,8,18}

It seems to us that if a certain military outpost sends letters to the city from which it set out, and for which it acts as the outpost garrison, it is hardly logical to assume that they would mention the name of their city: 'We do not see the lights of Lachish'. It is more likely they would write 'We do not see the lights of the city' or 'We do not see your lights', without mentioning the name of the city. Secondly, we would expect a military outpost in the midst of war to observe what is going on in its surroundings. It seems to us more logical and plausible that the statement, 'We are watching Lachish because we do not see Azeka', is an indication that these two cities were under observation and within the range of sight for the writer of the letters who acted as the military outpost for a third city, which is in our case, Tell ed-Duweir. This implies that Lachish, Azeka and Tell ed-Duweir were situated in close vicinity. As in the list of the fortified cities built by Rehoboam the cities Adoraim, Lachish and Azeka are mentioned together, this allows one to assume that they were also in the vicinity of each other. The name Adoraim strikingly resembles ed-Duweir, and as both are mentioned in connexion with Lachish and Azeka, it seems to us that we shall be correct to identify Tell ed-Duweir as the ancient Adoraim and to date the ostraca discovered by Starkey to the reign of Rehoboam.

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