

Sociolinguistic Reflections on the Letter of a 'Literate' Soldier (Lachish 3)

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A letter from a soldier who claimed to be literate was uncovered over a half century ago in excavations at the ancient Lachish. The letter was scrawled on an ostrakon (published as Lachish 3; Torczyner, 1938) during the waning days of the kingdom of Judah. As Judaeen foothills were about to come under siege, a junior officer wrote to assuage his pride, which was wounded at an insinuation by the military governor at Lachish that he could not read. Up to the present, discussions of this letter have largely focused on historical grammar; the first task of the present paper is a sociolinguistic reading of the ostrakon that treats its immediate context – namely, the impassioned defense of a soldier's ability to read – as a critical philological consideration. The paper then turns to role that the Lachish Letters should play in defining Official Hebrew of the monarchic period.

Text, Transcription, and Philological Observations

Twenty-two ostraca were recovered from a destruction layer attributed to the campaign of Nebuchadnezzar in 588 BCE at Lachish. Letter 3 is one of several ostraca that were recovered from a guardroom in the gate complex.¹ It is one of the longest and among the best preserved letters known from the late Judaeen monarchy. The readings are relatively clear and complete.² The transcription and translation benefits from the many studies of Lachish 3 (see especially Donner and Röllig, 1968; Pardee, 1982; Ahituv, 1992; Renz, 1995).

Transcription

1 עבדכ . הושעיהו שלח . ל
2 הגד לאדני יאוש . ישמע
3 יהוה את אדני שמעת . שלמ
4 ושמעתי טב. [. ועת . הפקח

¹ Yadin argued that these letters were copies of correspondence sent from Lachish, but this opinion has not found much support (Yadin 1984). Actually, however, Yadin's view was the earlier, though discarded, view (cf. Marston 1935). It is unfortunate that Lindenberger (1994:102) has accepted (without justification) Yadin's widely dismissed views.

² The author wishes to extend his thanks to the British Museum for giving me to access to the images as well as Chris Rollston and Bruce Zuckerman (West Semitic Research) for their assistance with the digital images.

5 נָא אַתְּ עֵינִי] . עֲבַדְכָּ . לְסֹפֵר . אֲשֶׁר
 6 שְׁלַחְתָּהּ] . אֶל עֲבֹדְךָ . אֲמַשׁ . כִּי . לִבִּי
 7 עֲבֹדְךָ רוּחַ . מֵאֵז . שְׁלַחְכָּ . אֶל . עַבְדְּ
 8 כִּי] [וְכִי] . אָמַר . אֲדֹנָי . לֹא . יִדְעָתָה .
 9 קָרָא סֵפֶר חִיְהוּהוּ . אִמֵּן . נִסָּה . אֵ
 10 יֵשׁ לְקָרָא לִי . סֵפֶר לְנִצָּח . וּגְמִל .
 11 כָּל סֵפֶר] [אֲשֶׁר יִבֹּא . אֵלַי] [אִמֵּן .
 12 קִרְאתִי . אַתָּה וְעוֹד³ אַתְּנָהוּ
 13 כָּל . מֵאוֹמֶה וְלְעַבְדְּכָּ . הַגֵּד .
 14 לֵאמֹר יִרְדַּךְ שֶׁר הַצֶּבֶא .
 15 כְּנִיְהוּ בְּנֵי אֶלְנַחַן לְבָא .
 16 מְצַרִּימָה . וְאֵת

Reverse

17 הַדּוּרִיָּהוּ בְּנֵי אַחִיָּהוּ ו
 18 אֲנִשׁוּ שְׁלַח לְקַחְתָּ . מִזֶּה .
 19 וְסֹפֵר . טְבִיָּהוּ עַבְדְּ . הַמֶּלֶךְ . הַבָּא
 20 אֶל . שְׁלֵמִי . בְּנֵי יַדְעָ . מֵאֵת . הַנְּבִיאָ . לְאִמֵּן
 21 רִי . הַשְּׁמֵר . שְׁלַחְתָּ . עַבְדְּ<<ד>>כָּ . אֶל . אֲדֹנָי .

Translation

1 Your servant Hoshayahu sent to
 2 inform my lord Yaush: May Yahweh cause my lord
 3 to hear a report of peace
 4 and a report of good things. And now, please
 5 explain to your servant the meaning of the letter which
 6 you sent to your servant yesterday evening because the heart
 7 of your servant has been sick since your sending to your servant
 8 and because my lord said, "you do not know (how)
 9 to read a letter." As Yahweh lives, never has any man had
 10 to read a letter to me.³ And also
 11 every letter that comes to me, surely

³ Another possible reading of lines 8-13: "And concerning what my lord said, 'Did you not understand? Then call a scribe!', as Yahweh lives, never has any man had to call a scribe for me. And also any scribe who might have come to me, truly I never called him, nor would I give anything."

12 I read it and, moreover, I can repeat it
 13 completely! And concerning your servant, it was reported
 14 saying, "The commander of the army,
 15 Konyahu ben-Elnathan, came down to enter
 16 into Egypt. And
 R17 he sent to take Hodavyahu ben-Ahiyahu and
 18 his men from this place."
 19 And as for the letter of Tobyahu, servant of the king, which came
 20 to Shallum ben-Yada through the prophet, saying,
 21 "Beware!", your servant sent it to my lord.

Philological Observations

The introduction in lines 1-4 is not standard epistolary style.⁴ Pardee noted that this is "the only address formula in an official letter of the pre-Christian era which includes the sender's name" (1982:87). Typically, the receiver's name is mentioned or a letter will simply begin with a blessing. Classic epistolary style can be seen in Lachish Letter 2, which begins, "To my lord Yaush, may Yahweh cause my lord to hear peace." A solution needs to be sought that takes into consideration the content of the letter – namely, a personal defense of the sender's literacy. In this light, the use of the sender's name may reflect a special emphasis on the person sending the letter. Indeed, the sender's name may be intended to explicitly exclude the use of a scribe, that is to say: "Your servant Hoshayahu *himself* sends to inform you."

There are further idiosyncrasies with Hoshayahu's opening formula. The idiom *šlh lhgd* (שלח להגיד "he sent to inform PN") is also otherwise unknown in the epistolary corpus. Pardee goes as far as to suggest, "The restoration is not sure because the formula is unparalleled" (1982:15). Lemaire cites semantic parallels in the Amarna corpus (cf. EA 369:2-4; 370:3-4; Lemaire, 1977:101); however, these are in the letters of Pharaoh to his vassals (not Canaanite letters to Pharaoh) and these letters depart from conventions of the Canaanite letters in several features. Typically, the epistolary genre simply employs the verb *šlh* (שלח "he sent to PN"). Ironically, the addition of *lhgd* (להגיד "to inform") serves to stress the oral background of the messenger formula; that is, the verbal root stresses the physical and verbal expression of a message. The one occurrence of the expression *šlh lhgd* (שלח להגיד "he sent to inform PN") in the Hebrew Bible reinforces the oral background of the idiom:

Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau ... and instructed them: "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord (ואשלחה להגיד לאדני), in order that I may find favor in your sight.'" (Gen 32:4-6 [Eng., 32:3-5])

While standard messenger formulas are used in this story (e.g., "thus you shall say to PN"), the whole context of the story and its particular language indicates that the messengers were carrying an oral communiqué, not a written letter. The expression

⁴ E.g., Cross (1985:45). He reads it as a *casus pendens*. This assumes that a subject + verb + objective sentence is (in Cross' words) "unusual." What is especially unusual is not the SVO order, but the non-standard epistolary opening.

šlh l hgd l-PN (PN-ל להגד "he sent to inform PN") appears to reflect an oral setting in contrast to the shorter form *šlh l-PN* (PN-ל "he sent to PN") used regularly in written correspondence. Other examples of the pair *šlh/hgyd* (... שלח ויגיד "he sent ... and he told") also suggest oral messages being sent rather than formal written correspondence (2 Sam 11:5, 18; 17:16; 1 Kgs 20:17). It is indeed ironic that this expression derives from an oral background of couriers sent to orally deliver messages, even while the author will be making a defense of his literate skills. In lines 13-14 we read, *wl^c bdk hgd l^mmr* which we might loosely translate as "and it was reported to your servant that '...'" In this case, we should also understand the verb *hgd* (from *hiphil* of \sqrt{hgd}) to indicate that Hoshayahu received a verbal communiqué.

In lines 6 and 8, we find the difficult verbal forms, *šlh^hth* (שלחתה "you sent") and *yd^cth* (ידעתה "you know"). Normally the second masculine singular suffix verb (i.e., perfect) would be spelled *-t* (ת-) rather than *-th* (תה-), even though it was apparently pronounced */-tā/*. Occasionally, the 2.m.s. suffix verb is found with the longer *-th* suffix in BH (e.g., Gen 3:12; 15:3; 21:23; Ex 12:44; 25:12; 26:32, 33 [contrast v. 34]), but it is clearly exceptional. James Barr observes that this phenomenon is associated with the verb *ntn* (נתן "to give") and the *Lamed-He* class of verbs (1989:114-127). Neither of these observations, however, apply to Lachish 3. Two other examples of the long spelling of the 2.m.s. perfect verbal suffix are attested in the Arad letters (*ktb^hth* [כתבתה] 7:6) and the Lachish letters (*yd^cth* [ידעתה] 2:6).

The unusual nature of the *mater lectionis* made Frank Moore Cross quite reluctant to read *šlh^hth* (שלחתה "you sent") and *yd^cth* (ידעתה "you know") as having the verbal suffix with a *mater lectionis* (i.e., *-th*). Cross suggested that these second person masculine singular (=2.m.s.) verbs attach a third person masculine singular (=3.m.s.) suffix, i.e., */šālahtōh/* "you sent it." Cross argues that "regularly in pre-Exilic Hebrew prose the 2.m.s. form without the suffix is written without *he*" (1985:45). The *plene* writing with *he* would become regular only in Qumran Hebrew, although it is also attested in Biblical Aramaic (according to the MT). Moreover, while it is possible in the case of *šlh^hth* to read the *-h* as a resumptive pronoun with the communiqué (*spr*) as its antecedent, there is no plausible antecedent for a suffix for *yd^cth*. Moreover, when the verb *yd^c* "to know" does take a suffix in Biblical Hebrew, it invariably refers to a person ("I knew him"), not an object like a letter (e.g., Gen 18:19; 24:16; Ex 33:12; Deut 8:3, 16; 13:3; 22:2). In light of this, it seems quite impossible in light of this to read the *-h* as a suffix pronoun.

Also in favor of reading the final *he* as a *mater lectionis* is the internal consistency of this longer spelling within the letter. There are only two cases of the 2.m.s. suffix verb and both are spelled *-th*. If there had been another example of a 2.m.s. suffix verb in this letter spelled with the shorter *-t*, then Cross' argument would certainly prevail. As it stands, however, it seems that the longer spelling *-th* of the 2.m.s. suffix verb is apparently another linguistic idiosyncrasy of this particular army officer.

In line 9 we find the contraction *hyhwh* (חיהוה "as surely as Yahweh lives") from the expected *hy yhwh*. Several scholars have grasped this contraction as reflecting

scribal practices in the Iron Age;⁵ yet, as Dennis Pardee observes, "The occurrence of the phenomenon in practically every student's paper they read should lead scholars to be wary of accepting it as a legitimate option open to ancient scribes" (1982:86). While it is likely that this orthography reflects aspects of the spoken idiom where the two words would be run together, this should not be regarded as normative scribal practice. More likely, this should be viewed as the influence of vernacular pronunciation on the spelling and becomes another indication of the rudimentary level of the officer's scribal training.

Line 12 is partially damaged and difficult to reconstruct with complete certainty. This led to several different readings, though, more recently, a consensus has accepted Ginsberg's reconstruction (1938:26), ^ʔ*tnnhw* (אתננהו), although this still has been interpreted in various ways. On the basis of the images supplied to me, however, I found it difficult to confirm this reading. We may assume there has been some deterioration in the images. Ginsberg's reading, ^ʔ*tnnhw* (אתננהו), still seems to provide the best guess at filling the lacuna. The most plausible interpretation would come from the verb \sqrt{tnn} (תננ "to repeat") with a 3.m.s. pronoun suffix attached, hence "I could repeat it"; in other words, the soldier could repeat the contents of the letter (*spr*, ספר). However, this spelling is typical of Aramaic, which regularly uses the grapheme *t*, where in Hebrew we find *š* (cf. Moscati 1980: §8.14-18). Furthermore, in Biblical Hebrew we usually find *šnh* (שננ "to repeat, recite"), not *tnn* or even *šnn*. There are a couple of cases in Judges 5:11 and 11:40 where the spelling *tnn* may appear. It is difficult to believe that a trained scribe could make such an error, though perhaps someone with rudimentary scribal skills might make such an error. Still, relying on an Aramaic spelling gives some pause and an alternative reading deriving ^ʔ*tnnhw* (אתננהו) from the verb \sqrt{ntn} (נתנ "to give") with a 3.m.s. suffix has been suggested. Hence, the sentence in lines 12-13 might be translated: "and I would not give him anything"; in other words, the soldier would not pay a scribe (*spr*, ספר) anything to read the letter for him. However, this reading also has problems since it cannot easily account for the extra *nun*. In Biblical Hebrew this is spelled either ^ʔ*tnnw* (אתננו) or ^ʔ*tnhw* (אתנהו),⁶ never as we have in Lachish 3: ^ʔ*tnnhw* (אתננהו). In the end, whether the form arises from Aramaic influence or reflects an orthographic idiosyncrasy, it seems best to frame it in the context of a writer with rudimentary scribal training.

In line 18 we find the unusual reading ^ʔ*nšw* (אנשו "his men"). Normally, epigraphic Hebrew uses the *-y* as a marker of the plural construct (e.g., *bnay* "the sons of", Arad 16:5; 49:1, 2, 3, 16; Lachish 16:4; see Gogel, 1998:197). In the present case, however, the plural is certainly marked by the use of the internal *-n-* since the singular is ^ʔ*š* (as in line 9/10 of this inscription itself). Even so, in Biblical Hebrew the plural construct of ^ʔ*š* is invariably doubly marked, i.e., ^ʔ*nšw* "his men."⁷ The defective spelling in this case goes against the tendency suggested by the full spelling of the

⁵ E.g., Lehman, 1967. Dahood applied this example to extensively rewrite the psalter in his commentary, see Dahood (1981:371-72).

⁶ See Judg 20:28; Ezek 31:11; Ps 89:28; 2 Chr 7:20.

⁷ This holds in 50 out of 51 occurrences where a suffix is attached. The one exception in 1 Sam 23:5 is corrected in the Masoretic Text by the Qere.

2.m.s. perfect verbs discussed above. This internal inconsistency only raises further questions about the linguistic competence (or level of training) of the author/scribe of the letter.

Finally, the letter ends with a rather surprising scribal error in line 21: עבכ for עב<<ג>> “your servant”. This error only reinforces the apparent critique of Hoshayahu’s superior; namely, he requires the assistance of a professional scribe.

Lachish Letters and the Problem of “Official Hebrew”

It is often assumed that the Lachish Letters as a group represent what might be termed “Official Hebrew.” B.S.J. Isserlin, for example, holds up the Lachish Letters as “official documents originating from official circles, and drafted by scribes familiar with official usages” (1972:197). If military communiqués might be termed “official,” the Lachish Letters are Official Hebrew. In a similar vein, Ian Young writes that the Lachish Letters bring us “within the heart of the administrative and military structure of the Kingdom of Judah.” He then goes on to conclude, “These letters must represent true ‘Official Hebrew’” (1993:110). Young assumes that “a military commander would have had a professional scribe attached to his service” and consequently the Lachish Letters would reflect the Official Hebrew from a trained scribe.

Yet, it is quite precarious to presume that Lachish 3 could held up as a model for “Official Hebrew.” Lachish Letter 3 is mostly devoted to the protestations that the officer needed no professional scribe. The linguistic idiosyncrasies of Letter 3 certainly do not suggest a trained professional scribe at work. The very content of Lachish 3 should rise the question of the linguistic competence of its author. And, the above philological observations can be understood to substantiate the senior officer’s assessment of his junior’s linguistic competence. If, as this article has argued, Lachish 3 was penned by a junior military officer with rudimentary linguistic skills then it would hardly be the ideal standard for “Official Hebrew.”

More than this, we must question whether the genre itself (i.e., letters) is the best departure point for describing “Official Hebrew.” Along these lines, the attempt of E.A. Knauf (1990) to determine whether Biblical Hebrew is a language based on close comparisons with the Gezer Calendar, the Samaria Ostraca, and the Deir Alla Plaster texts seems especially inappropriate since none of these come from the Judaean kingdom and the genres of these texts hardly lend themselves to creating a benchmark by which to assess Biblical Hebrew texts.⁸ At least the epistolary correspondence from Lachish (as well as Arad) would be geographically as chronologically closer to Biblical Hebrew. To be sure, we may expect certain letters to reflect certain standard features of the genre such as we find in the introduction; however, there is no reason to expect much beyond this. By analogy, one would hardly want the average American business correspondence to serve as the standard of American English. The happy circumstance that ostraca are the largest corpus of extra-biblical Hebrew literature hardly warrants the assessment that they represent a

⁸ See the critiques by A. Hurvitz (1999) and R. North (1999).

pre-exilic standard Hebrew. The Lachish Letters most likely represent the mundane literacy of the late Judaeen administrative infrastructure. We should reasonably expect a much lower level of linguistic competence by the authors of these letters when compared to the authors of biblical literature. While genre of letters does not lend itself to being a guide to standard Hebrew, if we can speak of such a thing, at least these letters from Lachish (as well as Arad) are arguably from a similar time and geographic proximity as Classical Biblical Hebrew is supposed to be.

An additional consideration concerns whether the junior officer actually wrote his response or whether it was penned by the hand of an army scribe. If the letter was actually written by an army scribe then we might have less room for ascribing linguistic idiosyncrasies to the scribal training of the junior officer. Cross, for example, points out that the letter also implies that scribes were readily available and argues that "the skilled and elegant hand of the letter is ... the hand of an army scribe" (1985:47). This is hardly self-evident however. For example, the recently published ostrakon – a list of silver recipients with 17 separate signatures – indicates that a number of individuals might have had good penmanship, without implying they had anything more than mundane linguistic competence (see Deutsch and Heltzer, 1995:92-103).

The physical evidence also undermines the theory that the Lachish Letters were all composed by army scribes. To begin with, it appears that five of the ostraca (2, 6, 7, 8, 18) actually come from the same pot and must have been sent within a very short time period (Torczyner 1938:184); all of the Lachish Letters were probably composed within a very narrow time frame. Yet, Birnbaum pointed out long ago that all that the main letters (1-9, 11, 16-18) seem to be written by different hands (1939a:23). Birnbaum's conclusion stands and effectively undermines suggestions that the letters are copies (e.g., Yadin 1984; Barstad 1993). They are not written by the same scribe. This alone would seem to preclude that the Lachish Letters represent the work of trained scribes – unless we assume that small military outposts had several scribes or that different scribes were regularly coming and going. When we survey the extent of literary activity in the late Judaeen monarchy however, it seems more likely that literacy has spread beyond narrow scribal circles to military officers, merchants, and craftsmen as well as a variety of government officials. One did not necessarily need a scribe to write a letter, although in the case of sensitive military correspondence it may have been wiser to employ the services of a professional scribe. This apparently was the reason that Yaush encouraged Hoshayahu to employ a professional in his future correspondence.

The extent of literacy has been a controversial issue in recent years (cf. Schniedewind 2000). This letter of a "literate" soldier has been often overlooked, sometimes ignored, and occasionally misconstrued in these discussions. Yet, given the limitations of the evidence, the letter of a soldier defending his literacy must be a focal point in this ongoing discussion. This letter of the literate soldier is powerful evidence pointing to seminal changes in the social fabric of society during the late Judaeen monarchy – even if the level of this soldier's literacy was quite basic and needed a scribe to help him.

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Abstract

Lachish Letter 3 is among the longest and most important epigraphic finds dating to the late Judean monarchy. In the letter a junior officer, accused of needing a scribe, claims that he can read and does not need a scribe. This paper argues that the letter's discussion concerning his literacy should inform our linguistic analysis of the letter. It argues that his linguistic skills were only rudimentary, which results in several of the idiosyncrasies in grammar and orthography. It further points to the difficulties inherent in using this letter and other inscriptional material to outline "Standard" or "Official" Hebrew during the Iron Age.

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