

“The Prophet” in the Lachish Ostraca

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In the course of its third season of excavation at Tell ed-Duweir, now generally, but not certainly, identified with the ancient city of Lachish,^{1*} the Wellcome Archæological Research Expedition to the Near East, under the leadership of the late J. L. Starkey, discovered in 1935 eighteen inscribed ostraca. In 1938 three more were unearthed. The discovery of these ostraca was in itself a very considerable event in Palestinian archæology, for, as is well known, ancient Hebrew inscriptions are few in number. These ostraca have a special importance, however, in that they are inscribed with continuous Hebrew texts. Prior to their discovery, only one such text was known, viz., the Siloam inscription. This consists of six lines. Now that these ostraca have been found, we are presented all at once, by the eighteen ostraca of 1935 alone, with some ninety or more lines of readable Hebrew. These ostraca provide us with the first real personal Jewish documents ever to be found in Palestine, and it may be said without fear of exaggeration that no more valuable discovery has ever been made in the Biblical archæology of that country. Their importance was realized from the moment when Père Vincent, of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française, to whom Starkey first showed them, recognized their literary character and deciphered certain names and words in them.² The first discussion of them—of the first four of them—was contributed in 1935 by Professor H. Torczyner, of the University of Jerusalem, to the Bialik memorial volume.³ It is of

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some interest that this first discussion of them was written; two thousand five hundred years later than the period to which the ostraca belong, in the language of the ostraca themselves, in Hebrew. In 1938 Professor Torczyner, with the collaboration of others, published in full for the first time the eighteen ostraca discovered in 1935 in a volume entitled *The Lachish Letters*, and this was followed in 1940 by a revised edition, written in Hebrew.⁴ In this revised edition all twenty-one ostraca are treated. Since Professor Torczyner’s work first appeared, scholars in this country and on the continent of Europe, in the United States and in Palestine, have devoted themselves to the study of the ostraca, and a large literature about them has already grown up. The labours of these scholars have amply confirmed the great importance of the ostraca for Hebrew and Old Testament study, more especially for the study of Hebrew orthography, pronunciation, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary; for the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible; for the study of ancient Hebrew proper names and of ancient Hebrew letter

* The notes to which these figures refer will be found on page 24 ff.

form. As to their date, they may, on archaeological grounds, be assigned with reasonable certainty—in this all agree—to the period of Jeremiah, more precisely to the last days of Zedekiah, when the Hebrew monarchy was fast nearing its end, when, as Jeremiah writes, “the king of Babylon’s army fought against Jerusalem, and against all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and Azekah; for these alone remained of the cities of Judah as fenced cities” (xxxiv. 7). If we would be more exact in our dating, we could, with some reason, assign these documents to the summer of 589 B.C., at the end of which year Lachish probably fell.⁵ Incidentally, this close dating of the ostraca has a special value in that it provides a reliable criterion for the dating of other inscriptional material from Palestine.⁶

With this new material now available to him, the Hebrew and

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Old Testament student is enabled both to examine afresh some old problems and to turn his attention to some new ones. The problem we have chosen for discussion on this occasion is a new one—“the prophet” in the Lachish ostraca. We shall consider first the evidence provided by the ostraca for the belief that a prophet is mentioned in them. With this evidence established, we shall turn to a discussion of the prophet’s identity, more especially with reference to his proposed identification with Jeremiah. We shall then deal briefly with the question of the role played by the prophet. Some remarks will next be made on a fundamental error of method which underlies theories based upon the belief that the ostraca form an interrelated group; and we shall end with some observations on the kind of contact that may rightfully be looked for between the ostraca and the book of Jeremiah. In what follows there will, I hope, be something of interest both for the Hebraist, and for the student of the Old Testament who has no Hebrew.

To our first task then—the examination of the evidence provided by the ostraca for the belief that a prophet is mentioned in them. Now the Hebrew word **הַנָּבִיא** “the prophet,” is read or restored by Torczyner in four passages, viz., in Ostraca iii, I. 20; vi, I. 5 ; viii, I. 3, and xvi, I. 5. Of its occurrence in iii, I. 20, with the preposition **מֵאֵת** before it, there can be no possible doubt. It is quite clear in the reproductions.⁷ A word-divider stands before and after **מֵאֵת** and after **הַנָּבִיא**. The preposition **מֵאֵת** after the preceding **הַכֵּן** (to be read **הַכֵּן** “which came”)⁸ does not permit **הַנָּבִיא** being read as anything else but as a substantive **הַנָּבִיא** “the prophet,” **נָבִיא** being written defectively in accordance with usual practice in the ostraca.⁹ We may be quite certain, therefore, that iii, I. 20 contains a reference to a prophet.

In vi, I. 5, Torczyner restores **הַנָּבִיא**,¹⁰ remarking: “What word had been used for the prophet, whether **הַפִּקֵּחַ**, **הַנָּבִיא** or

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another word, is uncertain; the marks visible on the photograph are not traces of letters but deceptive scratches on the surface slip of the pottery. Still **הַנָּבִיא** the more usual word in the Bible, is found three times in our ostraca, and seems the most likely suggestion.”¹¹ Support for this view comes from Dussaud,¹² A. Vincent,¹³ and Michaud.¹⁴ Others, however, depart radically from Torczyner’s restoration, and restore instead **הַשָּׂרִים** “the princes.” This is the reading of Albright,¹⁵ who sees clear traces of **ש** on the photograph. It is accepted by

Hempel,¹⁶ and by de Vaux,¹⁷ who sees on the ostracon itself the beginning of a ω , though he can see no trace of a γ . Elliger,¹⁸ however, thinks the γ is recognizable. For myself, I can only see one letter clearly on the reproductions of the ostracon, either in the English or the Hebrew edition, viz., the letter η of the article. This letter, it is to be observed, is the only one that appears in Harding's hand-copy in Torczyner's 1938 edition.¹⁹ The restoration of $\aleph\eta\gamma$ in this passage is, we believe, without justification.²⁰ There is, therefore, no reference to a prophet here.

Ostracon viii, I. 3 begins, according to Torczyner's reading, with the letters $\aleph\eta\gamma$ "The prophet," Torczyner remarks, "may even be referred to in $\aleph\gamma$ (?) on the obverse in line 3. However, this and the reading of the single letters in lines 4-5 may be wrong."²¹ Torczyner's γ is indeed possible,²² but it could also be a δ ,²³ while the sign he reads as γ is more like ϵ .²⁴ Following this ϵ (?) is a space, after which Torczyner reads \aleph , which, even if it were correct, cannot, on account of the spacing, be taken as the \aleph of $\aleph\gamma$, written defectively, as it is in iii, I. 20. The reading $\aleph\gamma$ in this passage is therefore out of the question.²⁵ The reading of this line, as of most of this ostracon, is hopeless,²⁶ and it must be dismissed as evidence for the mention of a prophet.

In our last passage, xvi, I. 5, Torczyner²⁷ and others²⁸ read

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$\aleph\eta\gamma$ this word being preceded, according to Torczyner, by the letters $\eta\gamma$, which he takes to be the final elements of a proper name.²⁹ We shall have to return to consider these two letters later on. The reading $\aleph\eta\gamma$ here, however, is very doubtful—only the η and the \aleph are certain.³⁰ The supposed reference to a prophet in this passage too must be regarded as highly doubtful.

From this brief examination of the evidence of the ostraca a clear conclusion emerges, viz., that, of the four passages referred to, only one—iii, I. 20—can be regarded as containing an indisputable reference to a prophet. We shall return later to a consideration of this passage, and also of vi, I. 5 and xvi, I. 5. Of viii, I. 3, we need take no further account in our discussion.

In his 1938 edition, Torczyner found another reference to a prophet in the occurrence in Ostracon iii, I. 4 of a word which he at that time read as $\eta\gamma\epsilon\eta$.³¹ The Hebrew root $\eta\gamma\epsilon$ is always used in the Old Testament in the sense of "open" the eyes, except once, where it is used of "opening" the ears (Is. xlii. 20) while the adjective $\eta\gamma\epsilon$ occurs twice with the meaning "seeing, clear-sighted" (Ex. iv. 11, xxiii. 8). The word was accordingly interpreted by Torczyner as meaning "the open-eyed", i.e. the seer, the prophet. This interpretation met with little favour from the first,³² and in the meantime the word has been variously interpreted by other scholars. In his 1940 edition, Torczyner has taken account of these more recent interpretations, and has abandoned his former one, adding an entirely new one to those which have been proposed by others. As his latest interpretation is in no way connected with a prophet—nor indeed are the interpretations of others—it is not necessary to say any more about it here.

The occurrence of נבִּיָּא in Ostrakon iii, 1. 20 is of great interest, for it is the first extra-Biblical instance of this word which figures

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so prominently in the religious vocabulary of the Old Testament. It is hardly surprising that the discovery of it in this ostrakon should have caught the imagination of some scholars, and fired them with a desire to find an answer to the question—who might the prophet be? Now that we know the extent of our evidence—that there is only one certain reference to a prophet in the ostraca—we are better able to go on to consider this question.

Let us see first how Torczyner answers this question. According to him the ostraca form a single correspondence between Hosha'yahu, the commander of a small outpost to the north of Lachish, probably Qiryat-Ye'arim, and Ya'ush, the military governor of Lachish, and most of them have the prophet as their main topic. Both Hosha'yahu and Ya'ush, and their followers, were on the side of the prophet, and were loyal worshippers of Yahweh. The prophet in question is, Torczyner thinks, Uriah, the son of Shemaiah, of Qiryat-Ye'arim. Torczyner, in fact, goes so far as to hold that five of the ostraca, viz., ii, iii, vi, xii, and xvi, are some of the actual documents on which Jeremiah xxvi. 20 ff., which have Uriah for their subject, are based³³—Ostrakon iii, he writes, “may be considered as an authentic chapter of the Holy Scriptures.”³⁴ In this passage from Jeremiah we are told how Uriah prophesied against the city and the land, as did Jeremiah; how the king sought his life; how he fled to Egypt; how the king sent Elnathan, the son of Achbor, to bring him back from Egypt to Jerusalem; and how the king slew him there.

I have shown elsewhere³⁵ that there are cogent reasons against the acceptance of Torczyner's identification of the prophet with Uriah. Here I need only remark, first, that there is no mention of Uriah anywhere in the ostraca; secondly, that the choice of Qiryat-Ye'arim as the headquarters of Hosha'yahu, whence the ostraca were sent to Ya'ush, is determined Lot

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Torczyner only by Uriah's connection with the place, and by nothing else—the ostraca may have been sent from some other place, for example, from Mareshah,³⁶ or Debir,³⁷ or Beth-Shemesh³⁸; thirdly, that a serious chronological difficulty is involved in that, whereas the ostraca belong to the period of Zedekiah, Uriah's flight into Egypt, as recorded in Jeremiah xxvi. 20 ff., occurred in the reign of Jehoiakim; and lastly, that Torczyner's contention that the object of the expedition, which, according to Ostrakon iii, 1. 14 ff., went down to Egypt, was to fetch Uriah thence, is founded upon pure assumption which has nothing to justify it. I do not propose to dwell further upon Torczyner's identification of the prophet with Uriah. It is to be regarded as quite untenable. It is, therefore, a pity that Torczyner still adheres to it in his 1940 edition.³⁹ As Albright has truly said: “The unfortunate Uriah has become a head of King Charles in Torczyner's treatment of the Lachish Letters.”⁴⁰

We turn now to a consideration of the identification of the prophet with Jeremiah. We may begin with Jack's⁴¹ theory, which, stated briefly, is as follows. The ostraca reflect the struggle between the pro-Babylonian and pro-Egyptian elements in Judah at the time of the Babylonian invasion which culminated in the fall of the capital. Zedekiah and his court, and probably most of the people, were pro-Egyptian, and were looking to Egypt for help, whereas Jeremiah and his followers favoured submission to Babylon. Lachish, in close contact with

Egypt, was pro-Egyptian, and, with Ya'ush, its governor, was opposed to Jeremiah's policy. Hosha'yahu, on the contrary, was pro-Babylonian and sympathetic to Jeremiah's policy, and he was taken to task for it by Ya'ush. Where Hosha'yahu's sympathies lay is clearly shown, Jack thinks, in the ostraca. Thus, for example, Ostrakon i, a list of ten names, of which eight end in -yahu, represents the men of Hosha'yahu's entourage, who are

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shown by the yahu-ending of their names to be a group of partisans of the prophet; and again, in Ostrakon vi, Hosha'yahu begs Ya'ush to use his influence with the king in order to save the prophet. As was said above, Hosha'yahu's headquarters, from which the ostraca were sent, may have been, not as Torczyner thought, Qiryat-Ye'arim, but Mareshah. Jack favours this location, recalling that this city was the home of prophets in days gone by—of Eliezer (2 Chr. xx. 37) and probably of Micah also (Mic. i. 1). Its prophetic tradition would thus be an element in its pro-Jeremian sympathies.

Dussaud, writing like Jack, in 1938, also identifies the prophet with Jeremiah. According to him, Hosha'yahu and Ya'ush and their men were faithful followers of Yahweh, and were in communication with the prophet. Within this group of pious Judæans only Jeremiah, he thinks, is possible as the prophet—only he could impress “the country and the city” (i.e. Judah and Jerusalem) with demoralizing speech such as is found in Ostrakon vi, 11. 5-7. Dussaud claims that, with the discovery of these ostraca, the political role of Jeremiah is for the first time confirmed.⁴² The lead thus given by Jack and Dussaud has been followed by A. Vincent,⁴³ writing in 1938, and by Michaud,⁴⁴ writing in 1941. The identification of the prophet with Jeremiah is regarded by Vaccari,⁴⁵ writing in 1939, and by Van den Oudenrijn,⁴⁶ writing in 1942, as possible, but difficult to prove.

This proposed identification of the prophet with Jeremiah must now be examined. First of all, it must be asked—is there any mention of Jeremiah in the ostraca? Two passages come in for consideration here, viz., Ostrakon xvi, 1. 5 and Ostrakon xvii, 1. 3. In the first passage, Torczyner's reading אגנח which we have shown earlier is very doubtful, is preceded in his transcription by the letters יה which, as was said above, he takes to be the final element of a proper name—of course, of Uriah.⁴⁷ De Vaux,⁴⁸

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on the other hand, with some reservation, regards it as permissible to restore the name Jeremiah, and to see here, as well as in Ostrakon iii, 1. 20, allusions to the preaching and activity of Jeremiah. Dussaud,⁴⁹ too, finds it tempting to read the name Jeremiah, but he hesitates to affirm it. It is to be observed that the letters יה are by no means certain. It is true that Harding's hand-copy shows the letters quite clearly. Yet an examination of the photograph in the 1938 edition—there is no photograph of it in the 1940 edition—lends some support to Birnbaum's view that the two letters are illegible.⁵⁰ In the circumstances it would be hazardous to see in these two signs the final element of a proper name.

In the second passage, Ostrakon xvii, 1. 3, Torczyner, in his 1938 edition, read יהימיה which, he says, “apparently was the name יהימיה Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah),”⁵¹ without, however, any suggestion that this is a reference to the great prophet. Jack,⁵² however, reading likewise, thinks that this is a direct reference to the prophet Jeremiah. Dussaud⁵³ parts company with

him here. Once again, it is a question of the correct reading. Further study since 1938 has shown conclusively that Gordon's⁵⁴ reading of the first three signs is the correct one. He reads, not רמ"י but רנ"י, i.e. the last three letters of ארנ"י "my lord", which occurs frequently in these texts. Gordon's reading has been generally adopted,⁵⁵ and is regarded as possible by Torczyner himself in his 1940 edition.⁵⁶ We conclude, therefore, that, whereas in Ostrakon xvi, 1. 5, it is far from certain that a name is to be read, it is quite certain that in Ostrakon xvii, 1. 3, a name is not to be read. In neither passage may we believe that there is any reference to Jeremiah.

If we were to admit, *argumenti causa*, that the reading preceding the doubtful reading הגנב in Ostrakon xvi, 1. 5 were correct, and further that these two letters were all that remained of a proper

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name, it could still be argued that the name might equally well be that of some other prophet, and not Jeremiah. Torczyner himself draws attention to the fact that there were other prophets at this time.⁵⁷ We learn from the book of Jeremiah the names of some other prophets of the period, besides those of Uriah and Jeremiah, who bore Yahweh names. There was, for example, Hananiah (Jer. xxviii. 1 ff.); and again there were Zedekiah (xxix. 31) and Shemaiah (xxix. 31). And there were no doubt others. If indeed we were to go further and admit, again *argumenti causa*, that the name to be read here is Jeremiah, we could not be certain that the person so named is the prophet himself. The name Jeremiah, it should be observed, appears to have been not uncommon at this time.⁵⁸ Thus, in Jeremiah lii. 1, we meet Jeremiah of Libnah, father of Hamutal, who was the mother of King Zedekiah, and in Jeremiah xxxv. 3 there is mentioned a Jeremiah who was the son of Habaziniah. Yet another Jeremiah, this time the father of Mibtaḥyahu, occurs in our ostraca, viz., in Ostrakon i, 1. 4.

So far then our examination of the ostraca has yielded nothing in favour of an identification of the prophet mentioned in Ostrakon iii, 1. 20 with Jeremiah. We must consider next what might at first sight appear to be a weighty argument in favour of this identification, and of finding a direct allusion to Jeremiah in the ostraca. I refer to the relationship that has been claimed between Jeremiah xxxviii. 4, on the one hand, and Ostrakon vi, 11. 5-7 on the other. The passage from Jeremiah, which refers to Jeremiah himself runs as follows: "Then the princes said unto the king, Let this man, we pray thee, be put to death; forasmuch as he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words unto them: for this man seeketh not the welfare of this people, but the hurt." Torczyner's translation of Ostrakon vi, 11. 5-7 runs in his

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1938 edition⁵⁹ as follows: "The words of the (prophet). are not good, (liable) to loosen the hands, (to make) sink the hands of the coun(try and) the city." Torczyner's text in his 1940 edition differs from that of the 1938 edition only in that the reading הע"ר, "the city," in line 7 is abandoned.⁶⁰ Jack⁶¹ thinks the resemblance between the Jeremiah passage and the passage in the ostrakon is too striking to be accidental, and Dussaud⁶² and A. Vincent⁶³ would similarly find a connection between the defeatist sentiments expressed in the ostrakon and Jeremiah xxxviii. 4 (cf. xxxiv). Van den Oudenrijn⁶⁴ also thinks there may be some connection between Jeremiah xxxviii and Ostrakon vi, and Michaud⁶⁵ argues similarly. It is

interesting to recall in passing that Torczyner in all confidence interprets Ostrakon vi, 11. 5-7 of Uriah! The resemblance between the two passages is, it may be granted, at first sight noteworthy. But on examination the resemblance is seen to pale. Reference has already been made to the uncertainty of the reading הַנְּבִיא “the prophet” in line 5 of this ostrakon. If there is no reference to a prophet here, it must follow that Jack’s identification of הַשָּׂרָרִים [ס] “the princes,” in line 4 with the princes mentioned in Jeremiah xxxviii. 4, who besought Zedekiah to put Jeremiah to death,⁶⁶ is seriously weakened. The remaining similarity between the two passages is the use of רָפָה with יָדַיִם. In Ostrakon vi, 1. 6, there occurs the phrase יָדַיִם לְרַפֵּת “to weaken the hands” (Pi‘el infinitive construct), while in the Jeremiah passage יָרִיב מְרַפֵּא אֶת “weakeneth the hands” (Pi‘el participle) is found. That the occurrence of the same phrase in both passages does not carry with it any necessary connection between them is shown by the fact that precisely the same phrase as is used in Jeremiah is used on quite another occasion of quite other persons, viz., the people of the land, the עַם הָאָרֶץ who, as is stated in Ezra iv. 4, “weakened the hands (יָרִיב מְרַפֵּא—Pi‘el participle) of the people of Judah.”

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The phrase יָרִיב רָפָה was no doubt a stock one in Hebrew to express the bringing about, by speech or behaviour, of a state of demoralization, discouragement, despondency, defeatism, dread. In the same way רָפָה in the Qal with יָדַיִם as subject, of which there are several instances in the Old Testament,⁶⁷ was a stock phrase to describe the being in a state of demoralization, discouragement and such like. Further, phrases like יָדַיִם רַפּוֹת “slack hands” (Is. xxxv. 3, Job iv. 3), used figuratively of fear and discouragement, and רַפּוּן יָדַיִם “the sinking down of hands” (Jer. xlvii. 3), used similarly of helpless terror, only go to show how firmly rooted in the Hebrew vocabulary was this use of רָפָה with יָדַיִם. Our examination of the supposed similarity of language as between Jeremiah xxxviii. 4 and Ostrakon vi, 11. 5-7 shows, therefore, that there is no strong reason why the language of the ostrakon should be thought to be more applicable to Jeremiah than, say, to one or more of those prophets who, as we may learn from a passage like Jeremiah xxvii. 14 ff., were active in the spreading of a false optimism concerning Judah’s fate at the hands of the king of Babylon. Incidentally, none of the Hebrew phrases just referred to is applied in the Old Testament to Uriah.

The only certain mention of a prophet in the ostraca, it will be remembered, is to be found in Ostrakon iii, 1. 20, and we must now go on to discuss the significance of this mention of him. It is necessary that we first establish the correct translation of lines 19-21 of this ostrakon. In his 1938 edition, Torczyner⁶⁸ interpreted this passage to mean that the letter referred to in it, which contains a warning, was written by the prophet. This letter, Torczyner thought, was brought by Nedabyahu, which he at that time wrongly read for the correct Tobyahu,⁶⁹ to Shallum, the son of Yaddua’. Torczyner’s translation of these lines; however, on which his interpretation was based, was soon seen,

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on linguistic grounds, to be highly improbable, and to-day most scholars translate these lines differently, as follows⁷⁰: “And as for the letter of Tobyahu, servant of the king, which came to

Shallum, the son of Yaddua', through (the instrumentality of)⁷¹ the prophet, saying, 'Beware,' thy servant hath sent it to my lord.'" The writer of the letter was, therefore, not, as Torczyner thought, the prophet, but Tobyahu, and it came to Shallum through the instrumentality of the prophet (מֵאֵת הַנָּבִיא). In his 1940 edition, Torczyner⁷² accepts the view that the writer of the letter was Tobyahu, and that it came to Shallum from the prophet. He interprets this to mean that the prophet was the recipient of the letter, which contains a warning from Tobyahu, who was acting in league with the king and the princes in opposition to the prophet. The prophet in his danger turns to his supporters, of whom Shallum was one, and the latter in turn seeks the support of others, among them Hosha'yahu and Ya'ush. We need not linger over this highly imaginative interpretation. All that we are told in this passage of our ostracon is that Tobyahu's letter came to Shallum through the instrumentality of the prophet. The prophet, that is, comes before us in the role of a messenger between Tobyahu and Shallum.⁷³ Was the prophet acting alone in this? Did he act fortuitously, on this one occasion only? Or did he act in company with others as part of an organized system of messengers, and so on other occasions also? We cannot know for certain, but the studies of Elliger⁷⁴ and Junge⁷⁵ point to interesting possibilities. The former has argued, with much plausibility, that there was in operation at this time an organized system, for military purposes, of communications by letter through relays of messengers. Perhaps the prophet may have been one of a chain of messengers, entrusted with the important duty of receiving and passing on military communications. It may seem surprising that a prophet should

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be found playing a military role of this kind. Yet it is not impossible that he may have done so. For Junge has pointed out how, in the Josianic period, which for the purpose of his study extends to the fall of the southern kingdom,⁷⁶ the conscription of Judæan citizens for war service was highly organized; and perhaps even prophets may not have found themselves exempt from such service. While we should not regard this picture of the prophet as a militiaman, charged with duties pertaining to communications, as anything more than an interesting possibility, it serves to illustrate the way in which the study of these ostraca may open up fresh lines of investigation.

A word may be said about the use of the definite article in הַנָּבִיא, "the prophet," in Ostracon iii, 1. 20. Jack⁷⁷ holds that "the prophet" at this time could only mean Jeremiah. We cannot accept this view. One of the occasions on which Hebrew uses the definite article is when a person or thing already mentioned is referred to again.⁷⁸ It is quite possible that on some ostracon previously sent to Ya'ush, which is now lost to us, there may have been a mention of a prophet. If so, it would only have been necessary in subsequent communications to refer to "the prophet". A good example of this use of the definite article in Hebrew, with the very word נָבִיא "prophet", is to be found in 1 Kings xx. In verse 13, an unknown prophet came to Ahab. In this verse he is called נָבִיא אֲדָמָה "a certain prophet." In verse 22, where he is referred to for the second time, he is called simply הַנָּבִיא "the prophet." The definite article in הַנָּבִיא in the ostracon could then be explained along these lines. It would also be possible, as Elliger has suggested, to explain the definite article as indicating that the prophet was the only one in the locality; or again, that he was known to Ya'ush as an accredited messenger.⁷⁹ On either explanation, the presence of the article would present no difficulty from the point of view of Hebrew

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usage. It cannot be held, therefore, that the presence of the definite article supports the view that “the prophet” must of necessity refer to Jeremiah.

It will have become clear by now that there is nothing in the ostraca approaching proof that Jeremiah is the prophet referred to in Ostrakon iii, 1. 20.⁸⁰ If the prophet is not Jeremiah, is it possible to say who he was? It has been mentioned earlier that the names of some other prophets who lived at this time are known. Our prophet may have been one of these. But again there is no proof that he was. We are driven to the only conclusion possible—we do now know who he was.⁸¹ Anonymous prophets are numerous in the Old Testament. In Judges vi. 8, for example, when Israel cried to Yahweh because of the Midianites, there was sent to them אִשׁ נָבִי, a nameless prophet; 1 Kings xiii. 11 tells of a certain old prophet—יְהוֹנָדָב אִשׁ נָבִי—who lived in Bethel—again no name is given; the case of אִשׁ נָבִי in 1 Kings xx. 13, to which reference has already been made, is another example; and were not a hundred nameless prophets of Yahweh saved by Obadiah from the murderous designs of Jezebel (1 Kings xviii. 4, 13)? Our only reliable evidence provided by the ostraca, let me remind you, is the sole mention of אִשׁ נָבִי in Ostrakon iii, 1. 20. From this one mention on one ostrakon our only safe conclusion is that we have to do here with a prophet whose name we do not know any more than we know the names of the numerous anonymous prophets who meet us in the Old Testament.

Brief reference must now be made to a fundamental error of method which underlies the theories of Torczyner, and of those other scholars who have attempted to identify the prophet. I refer to the error of treating the ostraca as an interrelated group, and of interpreting them each by reference to the other.⁸² Starkey,⁸³ writing of the discovery of the ostraca, remarks that

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they are only a small proportion of hundreds of jar fragments that were found in what he takes to have been a guard-room where messages were received by the senior officer.⁸⁴ He goes on: “As so many had been affected by fire, it is impossible to know how much correspondence may have been destroyed in this way.”⁸⁵ How many of these jar fragments, we may ask, may not have been inscribed before fire destroyed all traces of writing upon them?⁸⁶ Would it not be miraculous, we may ask further, if just those, on which writing has been preserved, should originate from one and the same sender, and deal with one and the same theme?⁸⁷ It is surely rather to be expected that, so far as concerns the few saved by a lucky chance out of many others which may well have been inscribed, but no longer bear any writing upon them, we should have to think in terms of more than one sender and of more than one subject treated in them. This expectation is borne out by palæographical study of the ostraca, which has shown that they were written by different scribes,⁸⁸ and so probably originate from different senders.⁸⁹ A study of the style of the ostraca, particularly of the introductory formulæ used in them, points in the same direction.⁹⁰ In this connection it is worth while recalling that Hosha‘yahu, the supposed sender of all the ostraca, is mentioned by name only in one of them, viz., iii, 1. 1. With regard to the subject-matter of the ostraca, we shall not find it difficult to suppose that written messages on a variety of subjects, mostly perhaps of a military nature, will have been received at the guard-room at Lachish in the exciting days of 589 B.C.; and we should expect the few inscribed ostraca that have been recovered to reflect this variety of subject-matter. Considerations of this kind justify the belief that the method of

Torczyner and others, which assumes that all the ostraca were sent by the same person, and that one main theme runs through them all, is a faulty one, and that, until it has been shown beyond

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question that these ostraca—or at least some of them—stand in some kind of relation to each other, it is premature to attempt to build upon them, taken as a group, any theory whose central figure is Uriah, or Jeremiah, or anyone else.

It is always a temptation to look in new archæological discoveries in Palestine for some direct contact with the Old Testament. We must be on our guard against a too ready yielding to this temptation. Archæological discovery rarely provides such direct contact. Rather does it provide material by means of which we may hope, laboriously and little by little, to fill in the background of Israelite life and thought. We shall be adopting an altogether wrong attitude to Palestinian archæology—and one that will inevitably be fraught with disappointment—if we come to it in the expectation that it will provide easy solutions to Old Testament problems. New discoveries, while they may help us to solve some old problems, bring new problems with them. Patience and sober caution are needed to deal with archeological material, and a disservice will be done both to archæology and to Old Testament study if more is claimed for archæology than it may legitimately be expected to yield. It is with such considerations in mind that we approach our study of the Lachish ostraca in general, and of the problem of the prophet in particular.

We may indeed, without venturing beyond the bounds of a proper caution, observe certain points of contact between the ostraca and the book of Jeremiah, which enable us to fill in some part of the political, military, and cultural background of the times. I have already quoted Jeremiah xxxiv. 7, where Lachish and Azekah are mentioned together, just as they are, and in the same order, in Ostrakon iv, 1. 10 and 11. 12-13. I have mentioned, too, that Ostrakon vi, 11. 5-7 may reflect a movement in favour of surrender to Babylon, such as meets us in the pages of Jeremiah. Again, Ostrakon iv, 1. 12, shows us that, in addition to written

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messages, fire signals were sent out from the garrisons of Lachish and Azekah, as a means of communication, as they were some fourteen hundred years earlier at Man (Tell el-Hariri) on the Middle Euphrates.⁹¹ In this connection, it is highly interesting to note that the Hebrew word used on the ostracon for fire signal, viz., **נִשְׁמָה** is precisely that which is used in Jeremiah vi. 1, when the children of Benjamin are bidden to “blow the trumpet in Tekoa, and set up a sign of fire (**נִשְׁמָה**) in Beth-haccerem”.⁹² Reference, too, may be made to the fact that an analysis of the proper names that occur in the ostraca shows that they were commoner in Jeremiah’s period than in the period before or after him—a fact which, incidentally, goes to corroborate the dating of the ostraca on archæological grounds. Much more important, however, is the fact that from these ostraca we now know for certain the kind of script and language that were used in Judah at the time of Jeremiah. The scribes who wrote on these ostraca used a pen of wood or reed and iron carbon ink, and the script they employed was a cursive form of the ancient Phœnician-Hebrew script. Jeremiah himself will have used this script when he “subscribed the deed” relating to the purchase of “the field that was in Anathoth”, and so too will the witnesses to the deed (Jer. xxxii. 6 ff.). It is in this script that

Baruch will have written at Jeremiah's dictation "upon a roll of a book" (Jer. xxxvi. 4, cf. verse 32). Our ostraca illustrate for us some of the things he will have been at pains to observe and other things he will have endeavoured to avoid.

Such contacts as these between the ostraca and the book of Jeremiah are, it must be stressed, indirect, and not direct, contacts. Direct contact has not yet been proved. With regard to our particular problem, the prophet who is mentioned in Ostrakon iii, we fail to find any kind of contact between the ostraca and the book of Jeremiah. Lines 19-21 of Ostrakon iii inform us that the

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prophet was the means whereby a letter written by Tobyahu, a royal servant, reached Shallum the son of Yaddua'. From the ostraca we learn no more for certain about him than this. We have caught but a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy figure. We have penetrated the darkness that surrounds him only a little. Until the darkness lifts, and we are able clearly to perceive where to-day we but dimly discern, we shall do well to refrain from unprofitable attempts to establish his identity.

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NOTES

The following abbreviations are used throughout the notes:

A = W. F. Albright, in the *Bull. of the Amer. Schools of Or. Res.*

B = S. Birnbaum, The Lachish Ostraca i and ii in *Pal. Explor. Fund Quarterly*, 1939, pp. 20 ff., and pp. 91 ff.

D = R. Dussaud, Le prophète Jérémie et les lettres de Lakish, in *Syria*, xix (1938), pp. 256 ff.

E¹ = K. Elliger, Die Ostraka von Lachis, in *Palästinajahrbuch*, 1938, pp. 30 ff.

E² = the same writer's Zu Text u. Schrift der Ostraka von Lachis, in *Zeitschr. d. deutsch. Pal-Vereins*, 1939, pp. 63 ff.

H = J. Hempel, Die Ostraka von Lakiš, in *Zeitschr. für d. alttestamentl. Wiss.*, 1938, pp. 126 ff.

J = J. W. Jack, The Lachish Letters; their Date and Import, in *Pal. Explor. Fund Quarterly*, 1938, pp. 165 ff.

M = H. Michaud, Le témoignage des ostraca de Tell Douweir concernant le prophète Jérémie, in *Rev. des Études Semitiques-Babloniaca*, 1941, pp. 42 ff.

O = M. A. Van den Oudenrijn, *Les fouilles de Lākiš et l'étude de l'Ancien Testament* (Librairie de l'Université, Fribourg en Suisse, 1942).

R = J. Reider, The Lachish Letters, in *Jew. Quart. Rev.*, xxix (1939), pp. 225 ff.

T¹ = H. Torczyner, *The Lachish Letters*, 1938.

T² = the same writer's תעוררת לביש (Library of Palestinology of the Jew. Pal. Explor. Soc., ed. S. Yeivin, xv/xvii, Jerusalem, 1940).

Th. = D. Winton Thomas, The Lachish Letters, in *Journ. of Theol. Studies*, xi (1939), pp. 1 ff.

V = R. de Vaux, Les Ostraka de Lāchis, in *Rev. Biblique*, 1939, pp. 181 ff.

Va = A. Vaccari, Le Lettere di Lachis, in *Biblica*, vol. 20 (1939), pp. 180 ff

¹ For the question of the identification of Tell ed-Duweir with Lachish, see A. Jirku, *Zeitschr. für d. alttestamentl. Wiss.*, xvi (1939), p. 152 f., and the present writer in *Pal. Explor. Fund Quarterly*, 1940, p. 148 f. See further W. F. Albright, *Bull. of the Amer. Schools of O. Res.*, 82 (1941), p. 21, and K. Elliger, Die Heimat des Propheten Micha, *Zeitschr. d. deutsch. Pal-Vereins*. 1934, pp. 104ff.

² T¹ 13.

³ כננסת לזכר ח.ג. ביליק 1 (1935-6), pp. 371 ff.

⁴ T².

⁵ Th 2, n.2; cf. V.182, n. 2.

⁶ D 270.

⁷ T¹ 48 (and Harding's hand-copy, p. 49); T² 55.

⁸ This reading (cf. C. H. Gordon, *Bull. of the Amer. Schools of Or. Res.*, 71 (1938), 26) is accepted by T¹ 86, 90, in place of הָבֵא "brought", T¹ 51, 59f.

⁹ Th 9.

¹⁰ T¹ 117; T² 138, 157, 172.

¹¹ T¹ 112.

¹² D 262, n. 5.

¹³ Les Lettres de Lachis, in *Journal des Savants*, 1938, p. 66.

¹⁴ M 58.

¹⁵ A 73 (1939), 19, n. 25; 82 (1941), 22.

¹⁶ H 135.

¹⁷ V 198.

¹⁸ E² 76.

¹⁹ T¹ 103; cf. B ii, 104

²⁰ Cf. R 237; Va 197 regards both גבא and שרם as arbitrary but he thinks the former is the less unlikely of the two.

²¹ T¹ 129; cf. T² 174.

²² B ii, 104.

²³ E² 81.

²⁴ E² 81; cf. B ii, 104 f.

²⁵ Cf. B ii, 105.

²⁶ Cf. H 136.

²⁷ T¹ 173; T² 188.

²⁸ So. H 139; E² 87 ; V 206; J 172; M 56.

²⁹ T¹ 173; T² 190.

³⁰ B i, 26; B ii, 108f.

³¹ T¹ 53, 65.

³² Th 6; cf. O 52.

³³ T¹ 18; T² p. לט.

³⁴ T¹ 62.

³⁵ Th 5 f.

³⁶ R 227, n. 7; Th 5; Va 190.

³⁷ A 61 (1936), 16.

³⁸ D 259.

³⁹ See especially p. חל f.

⁴⁰ A 82 (1941), 22, n. 22.

⁴¹ J 176 ff.

⁴² D 269.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, 67 f.

⁴⁴ M 56 ff.

⁴⁵ Va 190.

⁴⁶ O 35.

⁴⁷ T¹ 173; T² 190.

⁴⁸ V 206.

⁴⁹ D 263, n. 1.

⁵⁰ B i, 27; ii, 108 f. M, however, regards the letters חו as certain (p. 56).

⁵¹ T¹ 177.

⁵² J 176; cf. the same writer in *Expository Times*, 1938, 381.

⁵³ D 263, n. 1.

⁵⁴ *Bull. of the Amer. Schools of Or. Res.*, 70 (1938), 18.

⁵⁵ A 70 (1938), 16 ; H 139 ; V 206, n. 1; E² 88 ; R 239 ; M 56 f. Cf. B ii, 109 f.

⁵⁶ T² 192.

⁵⁷ T¹ 65; T² 93. Cf. V 206.

⁵⁸ Cf. V 206, n. 1; O 32.

⁵⁹ T¹ 117.

⁶⁰ T² 138. The reading נְשִׂיָּם in line 7 is retained, but the possibility that נְשִׂיָּם “the men” should be read in its place (cf. A 73 (1939), 20; 82 (1941), 22; J 176, n. 1) is allowed, p. 160 f.

⁶¹ J 176.

⁶² D 263.

⁶³ *Op. cit.*, 67.

⁶⁴ O 35.

⁶⁵ M 59.

⁶⁶ J 171, 175 f.; cf. M 59.

⁶⁷ 2 Sam. iv. 1; Is. xiii. 7; Jer. vi. 24; 1. 43; Ezek. vii. 17; xxi. 12; Zph. iii. 16. Once, it would seem, נְשִׂיָּם is omitted (Jer. xlix. 24).

⁶⁸ T¹ 59 f.; cf. D 267, n. 2.

⁶⁹ This reading is accepted in T² 84.

⁷⁰ So. A 73 (1939), 19; H 131; E¹ 45; V 190, 193. M (50, 56) and A. Vincent, *op. cit.*, 65, however, as T¹.

⁷¹ A 73 (1939), 19, n. 24, compares 2 Kings iii. 11, where בְּיָדוֹ is used in the sense of “through the instrumentality of” (a prophet).

⁷² T² 87f.

⁷³ Cf. H 132.

⁷⁴ E¹ 44 ff.

⁷⁵ E. Junge, *Die Wiederaufbau des Heerwesens des Reiches Juda unter Josia*, 1937.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2 f.

⁷⁷ J 176; cf. M 59.

⁷⁸ See Gesenius, *Hebr. Grammar* (Kautzsch-Cowley), and ed., 126 (d)a.

⁷⁹ E¹ 46.

⁸⁰ Cf. H 132, n. 1.

⁸¹ Cf. R 234.

⁸² Cf. V 204; M 44 f.

⁸³ T¹ 11.

⁸⁴ T¹ 12.

⁸⁵ T¹ 11.

⁸⁶ Cf. V 182; E¹ 35; O 30.

⁸⁷ Cf. V 204; E¹ 35.

⁸⁸ See especially the work of B. According to him (i, 23), all the ostraca are written by different hands. But he probably goes too far in this. Cf. V 205, n. 2; M 44; Va 181, n. 1.

⁸⁹ Cf. B i, 27f; E¹ 40.

⁹⁰ Cf. B i, 24 f; E¹ 40 ff.

⁹¹ See G. Dossin, Signaux lumineux au pays de Mari, in *Rev. d'Assyriologie*. xxxv (1938), pp. 174 ff.

⁹² Cf. Jud. xx. 40 (and verse 38).

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