

# Australian Adventist Biblical Archaeology: Jeremiah, W. L. Emmerson and the Lachish Letters – a Van Wyk Tribute

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Jeremiah is the Book in the Bible written by the prophet Jeremiah who's father was a Highpriest in the days of Josiah the young king. Jeremiah was a few years younger than Josiah and his father discovered in the Temple the Book of Deuteronomy and it became for Jeremiah a very special book at that young age. Just like in our age, there were very bad literature in those days in circulation that could contaminate the minds of the youth. But, Jeremiah refused to read the *Harry Potter Series* of his day. Deuteronomy, that is what he wanted.

W. L. Emmerson was in the Thiele-Wood-Emmerson era of archaeology between 1935-1949. The Horn era started in 1950-1973. The third period in Adventist Archaeology is between 1974-1980 and it is the younger associates of Horn. From 1980 until the present archaeology is mainly run by those with strong Social, Anthropological and Scientific backgrounds. Their Comparative Semitic Language abilities and understanding of Umwelt literature to the Bible are limited to modern vernaculars only. They have to rely on the opinions of other denominations on the texts they are employing for sources.

Not so with dr. W. L. Emmeson. He was born in 1901 in England and graduated from Stanborough Missionary College, the forerunner of Newbold College in 1928. He was the assistant to Arthur S. Maxwell in 1937 for the Signs of the Times. He loved archaeology and made a number of tours to Greece, Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq and met James L. Starkey at Lachish. He wrote 49 articles on archaeology between 1935-1949.

Emmerson presented the evidence of the Lachish Letters. Lachish is a city at Tel ed-Duweir and at the time of the discovery of 18 pieces of pottery in the guard-room of the main gate at Lachish. In those days of Emmerson, the excavators and presenter of the translation of the Hebrew letters from the city, thought that the letters are coming from the onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar against the city in 586 BCE. Later archaeologists in our own times claimed that it was the attack of Sennacherib during his 3<sup>rd</sup> campaign. They wish to reallocate the date to 702

BCE and not 701 BCE but that is a gross error on the part of a number of scholars. In fact, in Eastern-Europe there is a doctoral student who tries to prove E. Thiele wrong in many ways, which in itself is just academic pursuit but what is a problem is his inability to come to grips with linguistic and literary analysis of Akkadian sources indicating problems with the interpretation of some sources in the chronology of Sennacherib since the 1980's. Stefan Timm in his book on the Moabites for example, helped fueling the arguments in this direction while there are key aspects that were overlooked by scholars like John Brinkman at the Oriental Institute and H. Tadmor on the Eponym Chronicle text Rm. 2,97 rev. (Cb4). Scholars gave dates to some tablets that had no dates on it at all. It was mere conjectures and they accepted each other's conjectures. In 1979 David Ussishkin contested the dating of Level III at the gate where the Letters were found but he did not contest Level II where J. L. Starkey and his teams found the letters. Ussishkin dated it to 588/6 BCE when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city similarly to Starkey and similarly to Emmerson in his article of 1935.

Emmerson wrote an article "The Lachish Letters" in *Signs of the Times* Volume 62 no. 50 in 1935, pages 1-2 explaining the impact these letters have for biblical archaeology. This was while he was living in Australia. The Australian *Signs of the Times* carried this article in full. Indeed, a major giant in Adventist Archaeology came from that continent and he stands out as a lamp for the authenticity and veracity of the Word of God debate contested in that period also by Rationalism and Higher Critical ideas.

Emmerson's article is so good that it is best to keep it intact and just add more confirmation material of what he said.

#### EMMERSON'S WORDS START:

IN the days when excavators searched primarily for striking museum specimens, such things as pieces of broken pottery were passed by as of no importance; but the modern archaeologist has learnt that these may be the most valuable of all. It is now known that potsherds were sometimes used in Palestine and Syria for writing letters, keeping accounts, and similar purposes, and such documents often provide valuable information about the days in which they were written. For this reason, the expedition which has been working for the past three winters at Tell el Duweir, or ancient Lachish,\* washed and examined many thousands of fragments for possible inscriptions. This tedious search was

bountifully, rewarded by the discovery, amid the charred remains of the guard room at the main gate of the city, some eighteen pieces of pottery faintly inscribed with carbon ink in early Hebrew characters. When translated by Professor H. Torczyner, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, they proved to be military dispatches, some complete, others only fragmentary, and have now become known as the "Lachish letters." Dating from perhaps only a few weeks, or .. even days, before the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar, they are the oldest Hebrew literary documents yet found in Palestine, and ante-date by fifteen hundred years the oldest existing Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament.

**UNIQUE LITERARY VALUE** THE unique value of the letters from a literary standpoint will be realised when it is mentioned that prior to their discovery the whole of the available inscriptions in early Hebrew were not sufficient to deduce a complete alphabet. Because of this paucity of material, the critics once expressed grave doubts as to the literary abilities of the early Hebrews, and used this as an argument for the late date of the writings of the Old Testament.. If any doubts remain the Lachish letters must finally dissipate them, for Professor Torczyner, the translator, says very definitely:— "One saw that they had been written by practiced hands. . . . The preserved specimens showed a very high standard of penmanship, and proved once for all that even in the small place whence these letters came more than one man knew how to write artistically." He states that the script is akin to the Samaritan still used by the Jewish scribes of Nablus in Central Palestine, but adds that the latter "is rather a degenerate development of this beautiful script."

Such writing, the professor declares, must have had a development of many centuries. Short inscriptions in a similar but 'earlier script were found on the fragments of a large pottery ewer from the Canaanite temple on the slopes of the mound and also on a small bowl recovered from one of the tombs dating from the thirteenth century B.C. There are good reasons for believing, therefore, that this was the script in which the earliest books of the Bible were written.

**LIKE READING THE BIBLE! PROFESSOR TORCZYNER** was also forcibly impressed by the close similarity of the language of the Lachish letters to that of the Bible. "The language," he says, "is true Biblical Hebrew, as used in the best parts of the Bible." Forms of expression found in the Bible frequently appear. The writer describes himself as "a slave" and "a dog." Compare i Sam.

24: 14 ; 2 Sam. 3: 8; 2 Kings 8: 13. He salutes his superior in Bible language, "May Jehovah grant my lord tidings of peace," and so on. Here again, the hasty conclusions as to the late date of the historical books of the Bible are confounded. The language is not that of scribes of post-exilic days, but is shown to have been penned by writers contemporary with the events described. We thus have a new and important evidence of the genuineness of the Biblical writings.

**EVIDENCE OF REVIVAL UNDER JOSIAH** A STUDY of the personal names in the letters revealed some very significant facts. Of the twenty or so names, no less than eighteen occur in the Bible, and six of these are found in the Books of Chronicles and Jeremiah. Fourteen of the names end in "yahu" (corresponding to "iah," in the Bible), the abbreviation of the divine name "Jehovah" (e.g., Mattaniah, Neriah, and Hodaviah), one includes the divine name "El," namely "Elnathan," but not a single heathen deity appears in any of the names. This is in striking contrast to the names on the inscribed potsherds from Samaria, where no less than seventeen other deities are incorporated into the names of the persons referred to. These facts have an important bearing upon the religious condition of the two branches of Israel. The individuals mentioned in the Lachish letters must all have been born about the time of the great reformation under the good king Josiah (2 Chronicles 34), and the revival was evidently commemorated by the parents compounding their children's names with that of Jah or Jehovah. The Samaria potsherds date from the days of Ahab or later kings who had long before departed from Jehovah, and the names of the people reflect in a very striking way the extent of this apostasy.

**TELL EL DUWEIR PROVED TO BE LACHISH BUT** more important than either the literary character of the documents or the significance of the personal names in the letters, are the actual events recorded in the dispatches. It was Letter Four which proved Tell el Duweir to be the city of Lachish, for in replying to an accusation of negligence, the writer states that his men "are watching the signal stations of Lachish for all the signals my lord is giving." Ya'ush, the recipient of the letter, is clearly the commander of the garrison at Lachish, and the place where the letter was found must mark the site of this city.

**BIBLE PROPHET MENTIONED LETTERS** Three and Six are perhaps the most important in the whole series, for they are concerned mainly with a certain prophet who was causing a great stir at the time. He is evidently well known,

for the sixth letter refers to him simply as "the prophet" and complains:— "The words of the prophet are not good, and are lowering the morale of the officers and of the whole country and the city. . . . My lord, will you not write to him saying, 'Why do you do this?' . . . in Jerusalem, bring him to the king." Letter Sixteen did contain his name, but unfortunately only the last three letters "yahu" (or "iah") are readable. Now there were two prophets in the days of Jehoiakim who were alleged to be having such an effect upon the people. One of these was Jeremiah, of whom his enemies declared: "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." Jer. 38: 4. The other was Urijah, the son of Shemaiah, of Kirjath-jearim, who prophesied against the land and against the city "according to all the words of Jeremiah," and produced a like effect. Jer. 26: 20.

**URIJAH PURSUED INTO EGYPT THAT** "the prophet" in the Lachish letters is none other than Urijah becomes clear when we read in Letter Three

"And it has been told to me that the commander of the army Achbor the son of Elnathan, has passed here on his way to Egypt, and has sent to Hodaviah the son of Akhiah, and his men to take them from here." This, surely, is none other than the event recorded in Jer. 26: 21-23: "And when Jehoiakim the king, with all his mighty men, and all the princes, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death: but when Urijah heard it, he was afraid, and fled, and went into Egypt; and Jehoiakim the king sent men into Egypt, namely, Elnathan the son of Achbor, and certain men with him into Egypt. And they fetched forth Urijah out of Egypt, and brought him unto Jehoiakim the king." There is a curious transposition of the names of father and son, for the Bible says, "Elnathan the son of Achbor," while the letter says, "Achbor the son of Elnathan," but the correspondence is too minute to be a mere coincidence. As Professor Torczyner says:—

"There is only one prophet about whom the Bible relates that he prophesied in the same way as Jeremiah, that he fled to Egypt, and that an officer, whose name is very similar to that given in our letters, went down with his men after him. That prophet is Urijah."

**LETTERS CONCLUSIVELY DATED LETTER THREE** goes on to say that :—"Nedebiah, the grandson of the king, has brought a letter from the

prophet to Shallum the son of Yaddua telling him to beware. I have forwarded it to you."

As Urijah came from Kirjathjearim, which was not far from Lachish, it would be natural for him to have friends in the neighbourhood some of whom might also come under suspicion of seditious conduct. From this letter it is evident that Urijah wrote to one such friend warning him of possible danger. The message had apparently been intercepted and was brought by Nedebiah to the writer of this letter, who, in turn, forwarded it to Ya'ush the commander of the garrison at Lachish.

The reference to "Nedebiah the grandson of the king" provides additional confirmation of the date of the letters, for there was only one king of Judah who had a grandson called Nedebiah, and this was Jehoiakim (Chron. 3: 18), who was on the throne when Nebuchadnezzar first invaded Judah.

**PROPHET'S FATHER PLEADS FOR HIS SON IN** Letter Four we have another statement bearing on the story of the prophet.

"Shemaiah," says the writer, "has taken Semachiah and brought him to the city Jerusalem] ." Now Urijah's father was called Shemaiah, and as he probably still lived in the vicinity of Kirjathjearim, it seems most likely that he is the Shemaiah of this letter. Thinking that he might be able to save the life of his son, he had gone up to Jerusalem, taking with him a high official, Semachiah. Apparently, however, his pleas were unavailing, for the Bible relates that Jehoiakim "slew him [Urijah] with the sword, and cast his dead body into the graves of the common people." Jer. 26: 23.

**MOST REMARKABLE CONFIRMATION OF THE BIBLE YET FOUND**  
**NEVER** has an incident of Bible history received so minute a confirmation. Professor Torczyner well remarks:—

"Up till now we have got, even out of our most fortunate excavations, only outside evidence concerning the contents of the Bible, reports written mostly by Israel's enemies about wars, sieges, captures, and destructions. Now, for the first time, we have got in our letters real internal records written by the men themselves who wrote our Bible, concerning their religious thoughts and their sufferings within the last period of Judah's independent history, adding thus a most important chapter to our Bible."

Coming at a time when skepticism is rampant, we surely cannot but see in these results of modern archaeological research a divine Providence at work shattering the hasty conclusions of speculative critics and vindicating the trustworthiness of the sacred Scriptures.

EMMERSON's WORDS END

### Sources:

W. L. Emmerson, "The Lachish Letters" *Signs of the Times* Vol. 50 no. 40 (October 7, 1935), 1-3. Retrieved online at the digital site of the James White Library at the Center for Adventist Studies. The following link is available:

<http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Search/Pages/results.aspx/Results.aspx?k=kings%20of%20the%20east%20in%20Revelation&start1=151>

D. Ussishkin, "Answers at Lachish," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Nov/Dec 1979).

Lloyd A. Willis, *Archaeology in Adventist Literature 1937-1980 AUSDDS* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University, 1982), 121-149.



Ussishkin says: Lachish is situated on Tel Lachish in Hebrew or Tell ed-Duweir in Arabic, about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem in the Judean hills.



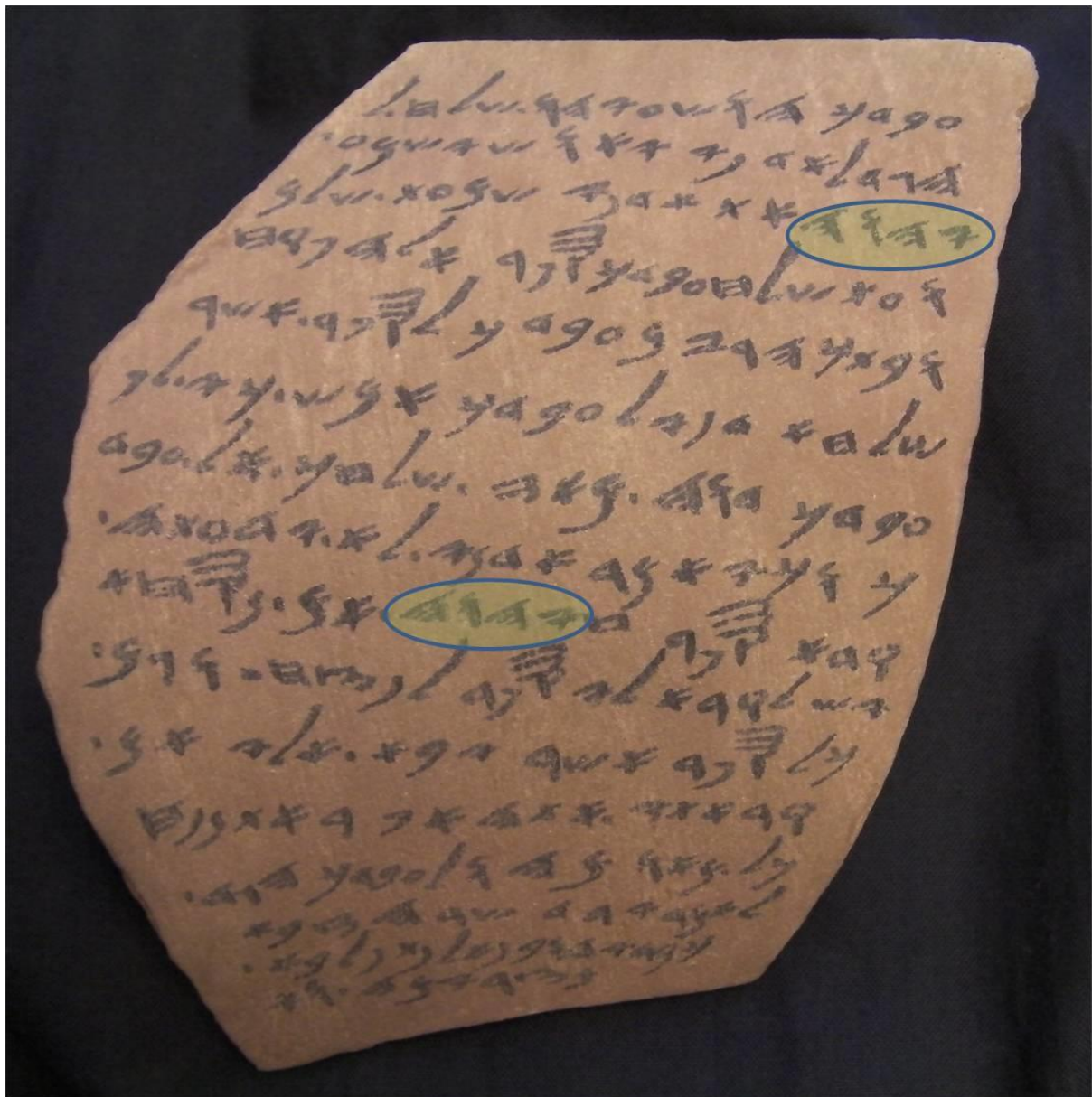


A sketch online by BW2013 showing how the city probably looked in those days.

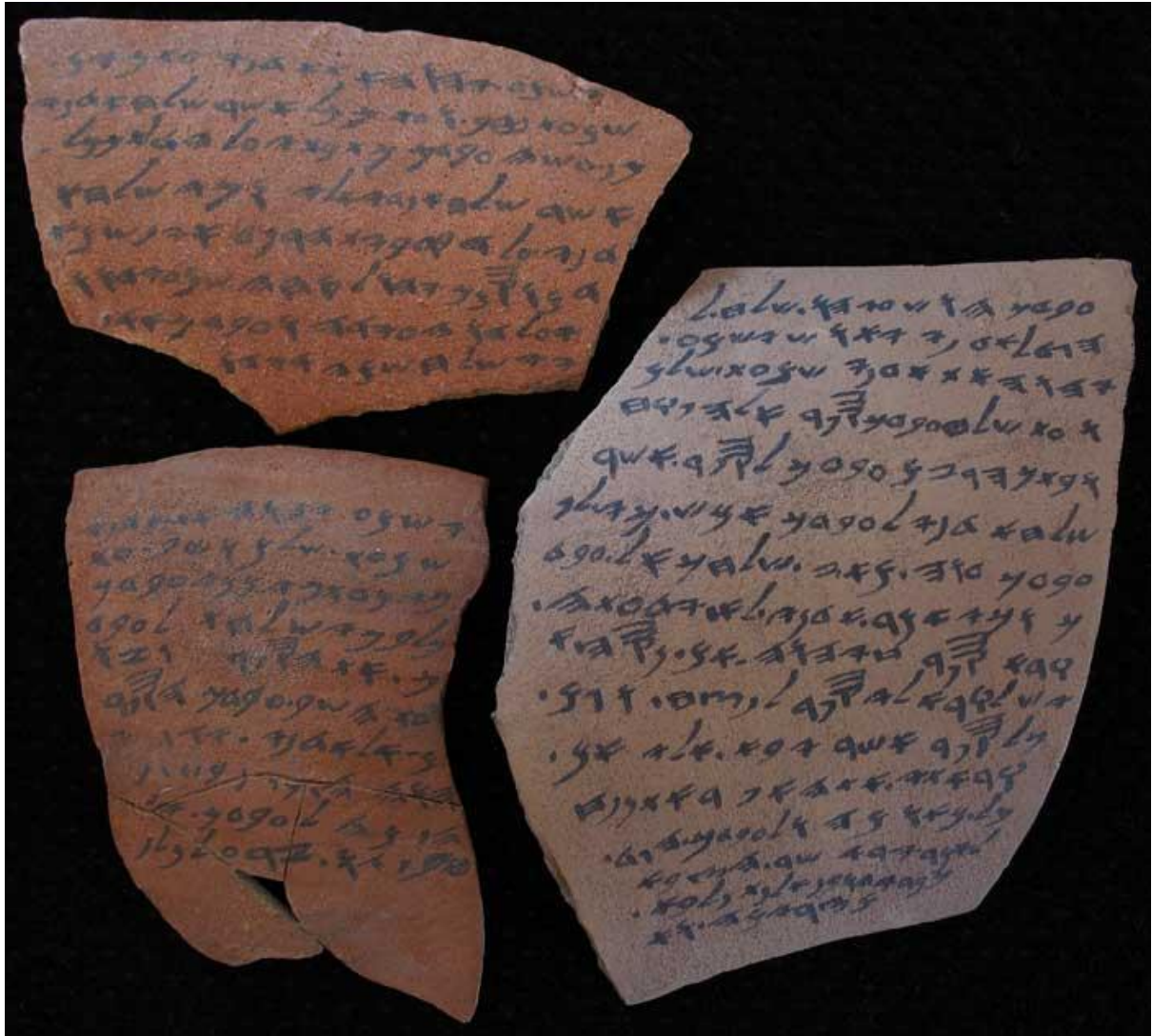


The very spot where the Lachish Letters were found (retrieved online)





Online is this illustration of the name YHWH (Lord or Yahweh) third line top right as well as lower.



Online photo of letters very clear.

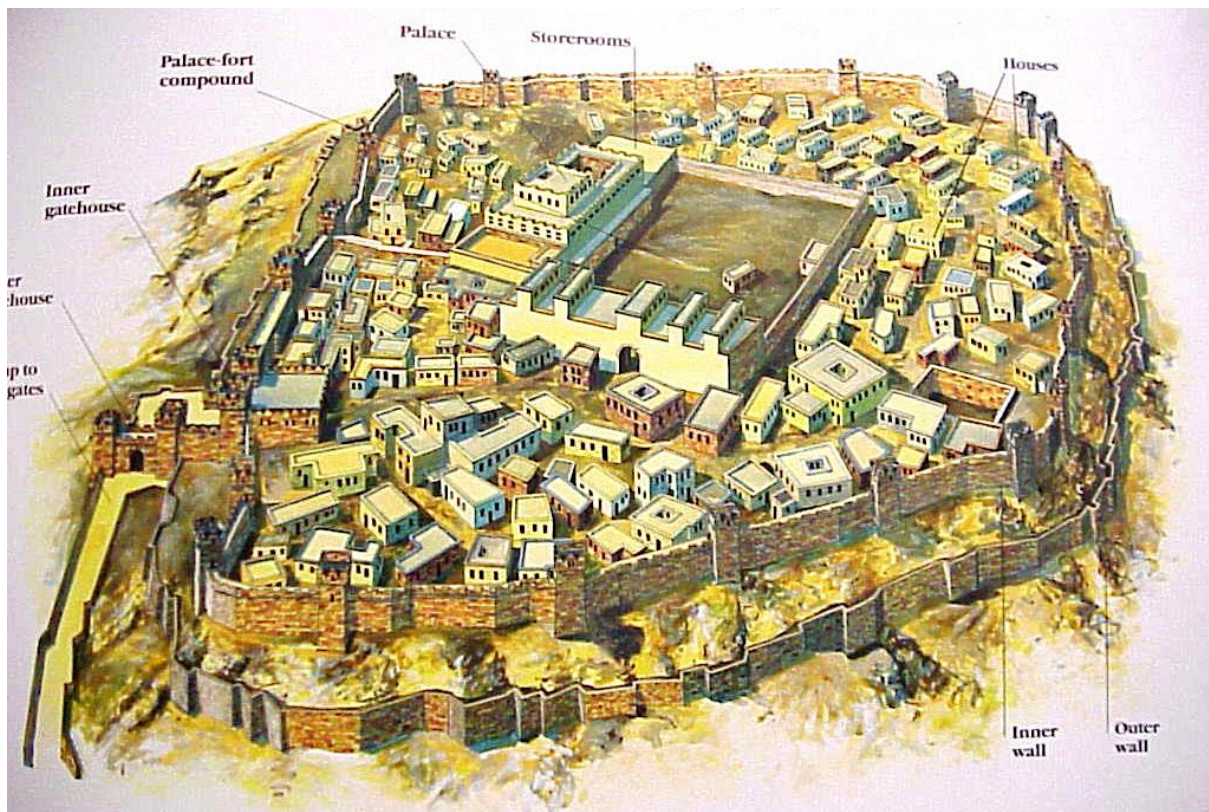


Online map showing Lachish's location





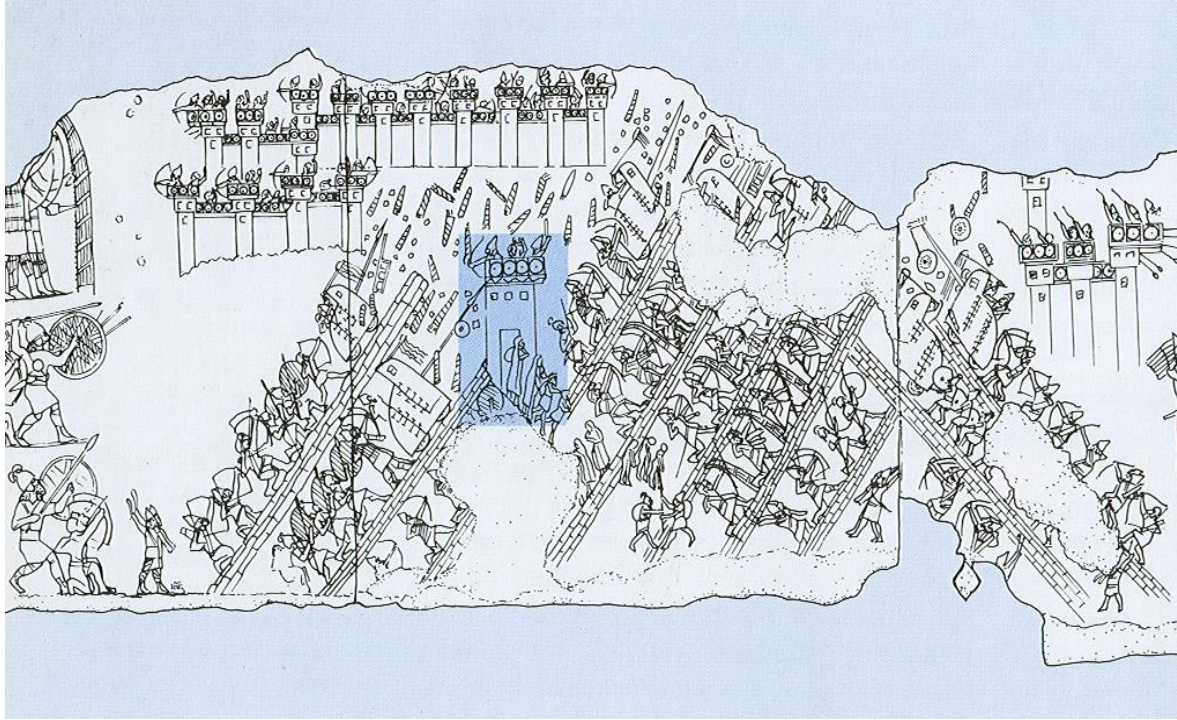
Lachish relief in the British Museum after Sennacherib's attack of 701 BCE earlier than Level III at the gate where the Lachish Letters were found in Level II dating to 586 BCE by Nebuchadnezzar (So Kenyon et al who dated Level III to Nebuchadnezzar 597 BCE, see Ussishkin 1979).





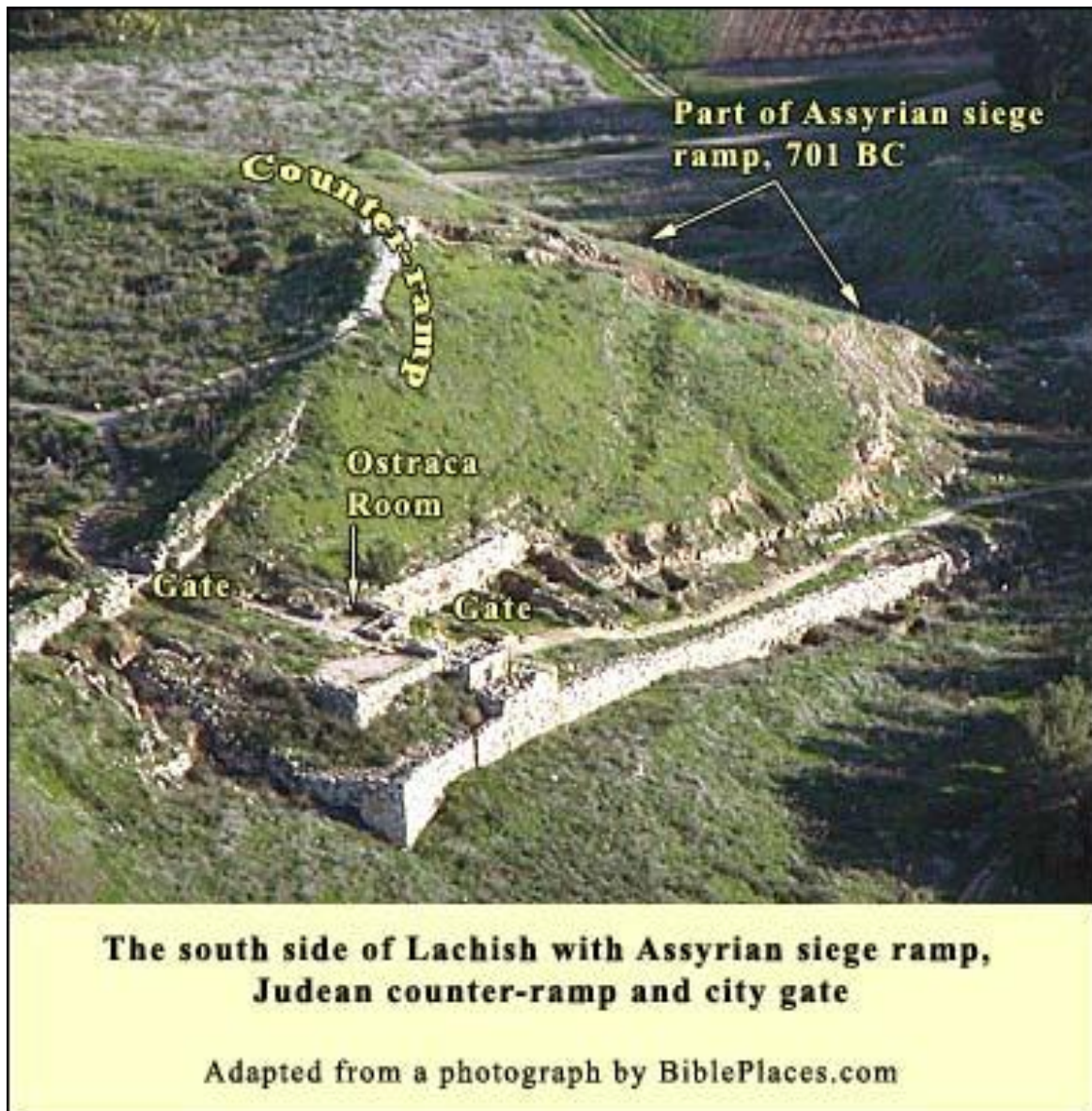
The Lachish Letters were found in the Inner gatehouse.

[www.odysseyadventures.ca/articles/lachish\\_slides/lachish\\_text.htm](http://www.odysseyadventures.ca/articles/lachish_slides/lachish_text.htm)



Online portrayal of the attack on Lachish by Sennacherib in 701 BCE (originally from Niniveh from his palace but now in the British Museum)

[emp.byui.edu](http://emp.byui.edu)



**The south side of Lachish with Assyrian siege ramp, Judean counter-ramp and city gate**

Adapted from a photograph by BiblePlaces.com

This picture shows the Assyrian siege ramps that were created and also the Ostraca Room which is the potsherds on which the Lachish Letters were found. Starkey's archaeology around 1935 focussed on the Nebuchadnezzar siege but David Ussishkin in modern times with vehement discussion regarding issues related to dating by pottery, focussed on the Assyrian siege of Sennacherib. At Gezer for example, I worked as a "rookie" under dr. Randall Younker of Andrews University in cooperation with Arizona University dr. William Dever in 1991. Dever and Ussishkin had great differences on datings of places due to pottery issues.

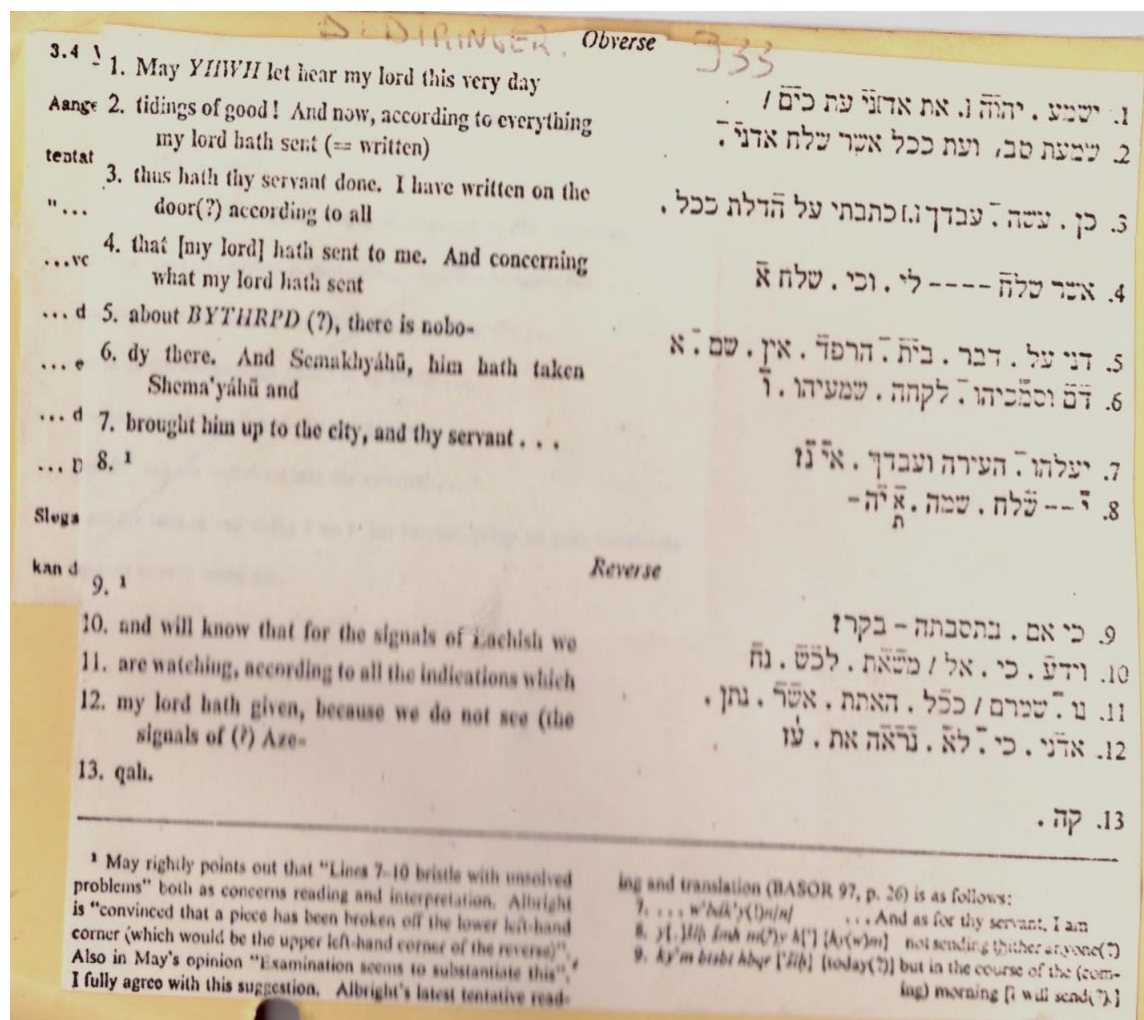




Approach to the tell and one can see the gates where the Lachish Letters were found. Nebuchadnezzar's troops saw in 586 BCE no different a scene than this.

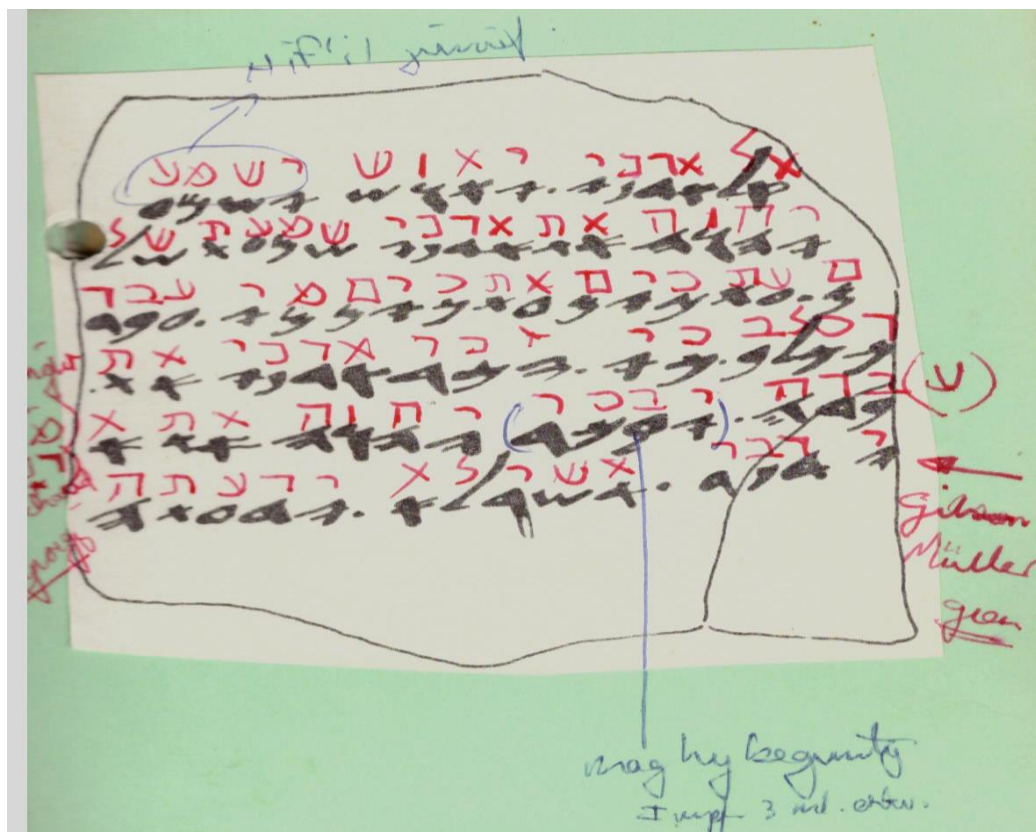
***Presentation of the Original Lachish Letters plus Analysis and Translations***





Lachish Letter IV which Emmerson (1935) "Tell el Duweir proved to be Lachish" cited where "the men are watching the signal stations of Lachish for all the signals my Lord is giving" (see Letter IV Reverse lines 9-10). Letter IV is also mentioned by Emmerson (1935) "Prophet's father pleads for his son". Shema'yāhū is mentioned in Lachish Letter IV Obverse lines 6-7 but also in connection with Jeremiah 26:23 as is pointed out by Emmerson. Emmerson cited these lines 6-7 in his article. Jerusalem in Emmerson's rendering is not in the text but implied. The rest of the sentence is definitely the reading of the lines.





Lachish Letter II which Emmerson (1935) “Like reading the Bible” mentioned that the writer refers to himself as a “dog” (see Letter II lines 3-4 the last word in line three on the right and the almost the whole line 4; but also Letter V lines 3-4 and Letter VI lines 2-3).

### Translation:

1. To my lord Joash: May He let you hear,
2. Yahweh, my lord peace
3. even surely today [literal: this very day, this very day]. Who is your slave:
4. a dog that my lord remembered
5. his servant May the Lord *step-upon*\* [that
6. say] word that is not revealed by you.

\*From a common Egyptian root bkr always meaning in many forms “step, stairs, stairway” and in a verb the action of climbing steps or stairs. It is the Imperfect 3 masculine singular verb that some has translated as “may He bless”. In Aramaic and Assyrian bukrū the root means rising, just like the stair-climbing in Egyptian, but in *time*: to mean “rise early” or in Assyrian “first-born”. Egyptian connections were strong in these days in Judah as we learn from both the Lachish Letters and Jeremiah so that I chose the Egyptian meaning here.

1. אל אדני . יאוש ישמע .
2. יהוה , את אדני . שומעת של
3. ם . עת . כים עת כים מי . עבד
4. ך . כלב . כי . זכר . אדני . את .
5. [ע]בדה . יבכר . יהוה . את . א
6. [?] ?] דבר . אשר לא . ידעתה

# TRANSLATION

1. To my lord Ya'ôsh: May YHWH let hear
2. my lord tidings of peace (well-being)
3. this very day, this very day ! Who is thy servant
4. (but) a dog, that my lord remembered
5. his [s]ervant? May YHWH . . . (\* begünstig)
6. my [saying] something what thou dost not know !

Voorkant

Handwritten Hebrew text on the front of a palm leaf manuscript. A large red 'X' is drawn over the text. Marginal notes in Dutch are visible on the left: "die negentien", "Seebert", "Scholiek", "ne", "Het", "in", "Kloster", "no", "ang", "Jelf", "Hofss", "Tel", "ed - duweir Ostr", "Heb. inskripsie".

Achterkant

Handwritten Hebrew text on the back of a palm leaf manuscript. A large red 'X' is drawn over the text. Marginal notes in Dutch are visible on the right: "deur", "aan", "de", "veel", "deur", "aan", "de", "veel".

17. הדיחו בן אחיהו  
 18. אנשו שלח , לקחת , מזה .  
 19. וספר , עבדו עבד , המלך , הבא  
 20. אל . שלם , בן ידע , מאת , הנבא , לאמ  
 21. ר . השמר , שלה . עבודך . אל . אדני .

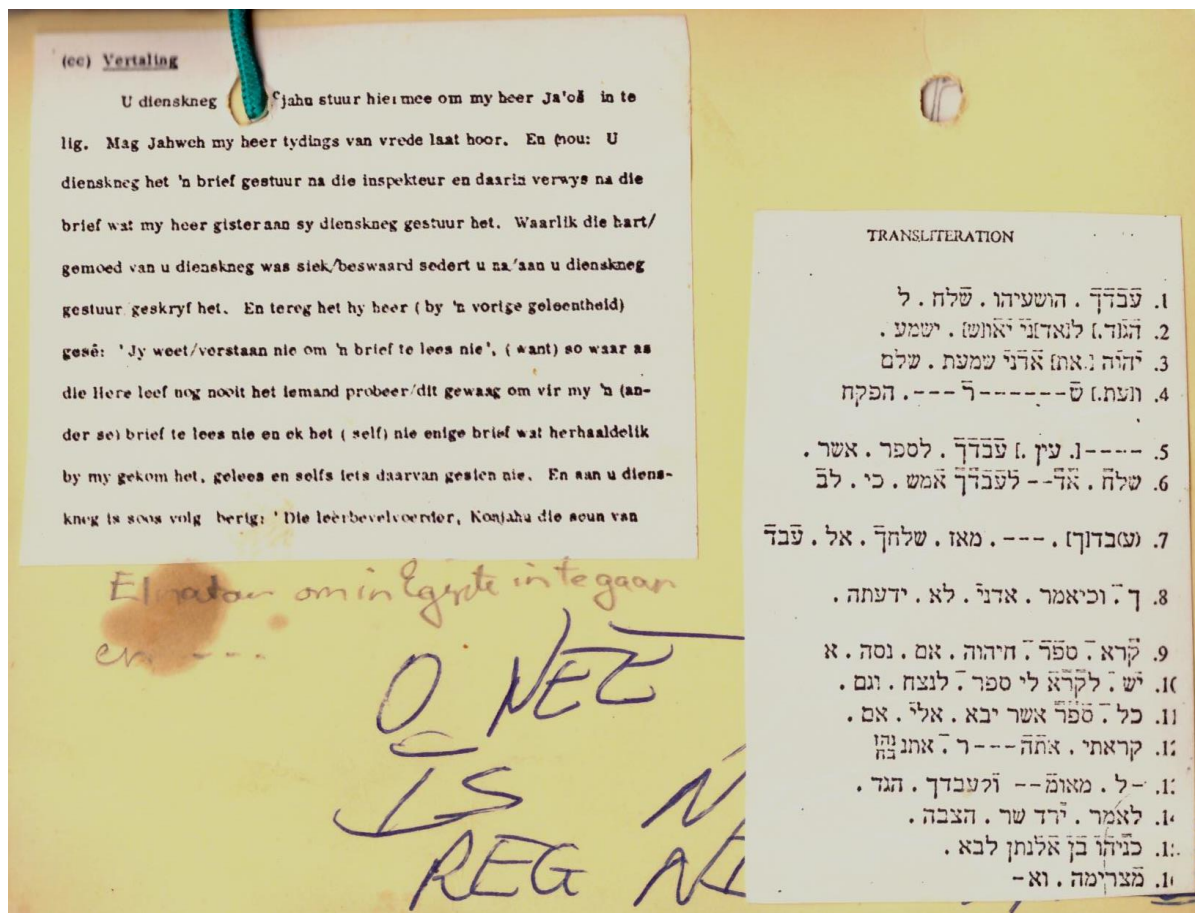
Reverse

17. Išdawayāhū son of Ahīyāhū and  
 18. his men he sent to take . . . .  
 19. And as for the letter of Tōbyāhū servant of the  
 king which came  
 20. to Shallam son of Yaddua' [[A.: through = the  
 instrumentality of]] the prophet sayi-  
 21. ng: Beware! Thy ser[vant] hath sent it to my lord.



Lachish Letter III which is the one cited by Emmerson (1935) “Letters Conclusively Dated Letter Three” for the reference to the prophet mentioned in Letter III Reverse lines 19-21 (last two words on right of line 20 and the first two words of line 21 to the right). “through the prophet saying beware”. These are profound words establishing the veracity of Jeremiah’s account as pointed out by Emmerson (Jeremiah 38:4 and Jeremiah 26:20). Two prophets who prophesied against the king was Jeremiah and the other one was Urijah, the son of Shemiah. Emmerson referred to the name El-Natan that one can see in Letter III Obverse line 15 in the middle. It is the name God attached to a verb but not that of a Phoenician deity as we find at the Samaria Ostraca. Emmerson’s point is well taken comparing the bad influence of the earlier times of Samaria with that of the post-Reformation times of Josiah at Lachish. Nedebiah the son of Jehoiakim (Chronicles 3:18) is mentioned in the time of 609 BCE as on the throne and in Lachish Letter III Reverse line 19 his name is mentioned. The name Nadabyahu is written differently by some scholars. Some ignore the contested letter /n/ and just read Adabiyahu. Others see it as Thobiayahu. or a /th/. This line of reasoning is not very convincing. The older view originally seeing it as an /n/ or the way reported by Emmerson seems to be the correct one since the /n/ compares to other examples on the same ostrakon. Thus, read Nadabyahu. The context for this letter is Jeremiah 26:20-24.

This Lachish Letter III is indeed the most profound letter connecting directly and correctly with the context and background of events in both Jeremiah 26:20-24 and Lachish III. Seemingly the date was 609 BCE.



In Line 9 of Lachish Letter III is the word *hyhwh* saying “*As the Lord lives*” and in Jeremiah 5:2 he complains that the people are saying *hwy yhwh* “*As the Lord lives*”. One cannot miss the connection of the outside extra-biblical source and the Bible here. There is no truth in the theories of modernity that the Jews concocted their Hebrew Bible falsely in late times.