



Type: Book Chapter

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## Israelite Inscriptions from the Time of Jeremiah and Lehi

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Source: *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*

Editor(s): John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely

Published: Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon  
Studies, Brigham Young University, 2004

Page(s): 193–244

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## Chapter 7

# ISRAELITE INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE TIME OF JEREMIAH AND LEHI

*Dana M. Pike*

The greater the number of sources the better when investigating the history and culture of people in antiquity. Narrative and prophetic texts in the Bible and 1 Nephi have great value in helping us understand the milieu in which Jeremiah and Lehi received and fulfilled their prophetic missions, but these records are not our only documentary sources. A number of Israelite inscriptions dating to the period of 640–586 B.C., the general time of Jeremiah and Lehi, provide additional glimpses into this pivotal and primarily tragic period in Israelite history.

The number of inscriptions discovered from ancient Israel and its immediate neighbors—Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, and Phoenicia—pales in comparison to the bountiful harvest of texts from ancient Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt. However, known Israelite inscriptions do shed important light on the text and the historical and cultural context of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), including the time period of Jeremiah and Lehi.

The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and Judah in 597 B.C. and returned and destroyed Solomon's temple in 586 B.C., killing

and exiling thousands of Judahites in the process. Israelite history in the land of Canaan prior to 586 B.C. is conveniently referred to by scholars as both the preexilic (i.e., before the Babylonian exile) and the First Temple period (Solomon's temple stood from ca. 960 to 586 B.C.).

Appendix 1 (below) provides a convenient overview of the major preexilic Israelite inscriptions, along with a few of the more noteworthy inscriptions from Israel's immediate neighbors. Only the best preserved inscriptions from the latter portion of the preexilic period, 640–586 B.C., are highlighted in this chapter. They are all from the kingdom of Judah (the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered and incorporated into the Assyrian empire in 722 B.C.). Small or ill-preserved inscriptions from this time period are listed in appendix 1 but are not discussed below. Postexilic Israelite inscriptions are neither listed nor discussed.

### **The Value of Inscriptions**

Archaeological excavation produces two broad types of evidence: nontextual artifacts—ranging in size from beads and seeds to monumental architecture—and inscriptions or texts. Both types must be coordinated with each other in any serious effort to understand the life and times of ancient Israelites or any other people. While inscriptions may seem more readily accessible and understandable than many artifacts are, they, like artifacts, require careful interpretation in order to be employed productively. Authentic Israelite inscriptions (distinguished from forgeries, for which there is, sadly, a flourishing market) are available to us as they existed over twenty-five hundred years ago. They are valuable primary documents not susceptible to tampering or editing, having no transmission history (in contrast to the Bible). As such, ancient inscriptions are of great importance to any study of Israel's past.

However, all archaeological evidence must be coordinated with biblical data to effectively understand ancient Israel. On the one hand, because of its vast size and the great span of time it covers, the Bible preserves historical, cultural, and religious data that would otherwise be unknown if we had only the relatively small corpus of ancient Israelite inscriptions. On the other hand, the Bible has inherent limitations for students of ancient Israelite history and culture because of its focus on religious themes. For example, little if anything is recorded in the Bible about King Ahab's political or military activity during his twenty-year reign or about the plight of the agrarian class of Judahites who remained in the land after many from the upper and middle classes were deported to Babylonia in the 590s and 580s B.C. Thus biblical data must be carefully employed and coordinated with what is learned from inscriptions and artifacts.

Inscriptions help to broaden and deepen our understanding of the various dimensions of Israelite history and society. For example, some preserve Hebrew language features and vocabulary not found in the Bible. They also present evidence of scribal and administrative practices not otherwise attested. Some inscriptions highlight socioeconomic matters, such as an appeal to local authorities for justice, the allocating of provisions to royal officials or to mercenaries, and the authorizing and sealing of official documents. Historical inscriptions, like those from ninth-century Dan and eighth-century Jerusalem, provide information that augments the biblical account. Votive inscriptions help demonstrate Israelite religious inclinations. Tomb inscriptions invoke curses on robbers, who almost inevitably disturbed the remains of the deceased in their quest for treasure or trinkets. Some inscriptions provide a view of the personality of ancient Israelites, allowing us to hear their "voice" in a fascinating way. For example, an Israelite military officer named Hoshaiiah indignantly wrote to his superior: "My lord said, 'You do not know how to read a letter!' As

YHWH lives, no one has ever attempted (i.e., had) to read a letter to *me!* For I can read any letter which is sent to me, and moreover, I can recite it back in order” (Lachish ostrakon 3; see text and discussion below). Israelite inscriptions thus provide avenues to explore the language, history, and culture of ancient Israel that are not available using the Bible alone.

### **The Media of Inscriptions**

Preexilic Israelite inscriptions survive mainly on stone or pottery and as impressions in lumps of clay. Only rarely are they preserved on papyrus or metal. Stone, with the exception of the softer limestone in the Judean hills, provided a durable medium for inscriptions. For example, the face of unquarried stone was generally smoothed prior to engraving for tomb and other types of inscriptions (e.g., the Silwan and the Hezekiah/Siloam Tunnel inscriptions).<sup>1</sup> Quarried stone was fashioned into stelae that could be engraved (e.g., the Tel Dan inscription; compare the Jaredite monumental inscription that Mosiah<sub>1</sub> translated, as recounted in Omni 1:19–22). Unfortunately, only a few relatively short or fragmentary preexilic Israelite inscriptions in stone have been discovered in Israel, and none of them dates to 640–586 B.C., the time period discussed herein.<sup>2</sup>

Stamp seals represent another type of stone inscription. They are small conical or scaraboid-shaped objects, the flat surface of which is about the size of a person’s thumbnail. Seals were generally made from semiprecious stone, although ivory and bone were occasionally employed. The brief, identifying inscription on each seal, carved in mirror image, usually consists of a person’s name and patronym or official title. Sometimes a picture is included as well. A few Israelite seals have only a picture and title but no name. Stamp seals were usually pressed into a lump of clay to leave an impression of what was carved into the seal (see photo

essay, page 70). Papyrus documents were “sealed” in this manner after they had been folded and wrapped around with a string. Such clay lumps containing seal impressions are called *bullae* (plural; the singular, *bullā*, is the Latin word meaning “bubble”). Many bullae preserve impressions of string and papyrus fibers on the back. Over seven hundred preexilic Israelite seals and seal impressions have been discovered.<sup>3</sup> However, most of them were not found during controlled archaeological excavations. Looters of ancient sites have discovered some, but there is legitimate concern that some are forgeries.<sup>4</sup>

Given the ubiquitous nature of pottery in antiquity, potsherds (broken pieces of fired pottery) provided a ready, inexpensive source of “scrap paper.” Ostraca (inscriptions on potsherds) were usually produced by writing with a pen and ink, although the texts of a small number of ostraca were incised with a stylus on a fired potsherd. (Additionally, stamp seals and styli were sometimes used to mark the handles or shoulders of pots to indicate ownership or the place of production before such pots were fired.) Ostraca typically functioned as memos and short letters. They were generally utilized for temporary notations and communications. Texts of any import that were written on ostraca were eventually transferred to other media, especially papyrus. Significant collections of ostraca from the Judahite cities of Arad and Lachish (discussed below) date to the time of Jeremiah and Lehi.

Hazards to preservation—such as moisture, fire, war, and time—have combined to diminish the number of inscriptions that have been found on stone and pottery and to almost totally eliminate four other media on which ancient Israelite texts were no doubt produced: papyrus, metal, plaster, and leather. Evidence from the Bible (e.g., Jeremiah 36) and from the contemporary practices of nearby Egypt suggests that

many ancient Israelite texts were written on papyrus. The large number of bullae that have survived the papyrus documents they originally sealed further attests to the numerous Israelite papyri that have perished. Such documents were written with ink on single sheets of papyrus as well as on scrolls formed by gluing multiple sheets together. Only a fragment of one pre-exilic Israelite papyrus text has been discovered to date (Wadi Murabba<sup>4</sup> at papyrus 17, from about 700 B.C.).

While metal was occasionally used as a medium for texts in the ancient Near East, very little evidence of this practice has survived from ancient Israel. The small inscriptions on two rolls of silver foil discovered at Ketef Hinnom in western Jerusalem (discussed below) that date to the time of Jeremiah and Lehi are rare indeed. No bronze plates (or “brass,” as it is rendered in the Book of Mormon), such as those Nephi acquired from Laban (1 Nephi 4), have been discovered in Israel by archaeologists.<sup>5</sup>

Another medium of inscriptions for which there is little archaeological evidence from ancient Israel is ink on plaster. Moses instructed the Israelites that after crossing the Jordan River and subduing the land of Canaan under Joshua’s direction, they should assemble at Shechem and

set up large stones and cover them with plaster. You shall write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over. . . . So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. . . . You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly. (Deuteronomy 27:2–4, 8)<sup>6</sup>

The fulfillment of these instructions as recorded in Joshua 8:30–35 suggests that Israelites may have employed a similar means for creating public inscriptions on other occasions, although none has been discovered in the heartland of Israel. However, the

likelihood of such a practice is supported by the 1960 discovery of lengthy inscriptions in a script with Aramaic and Ammonite affinities on a plastered wall of a shrine at Deir ‘Alla, in the eastern Jordan River valley, dating to the first half of the eighth century B.C. The 1975 discovery of a few fragmentary texts on plastered walls at the remote Israelite caravanserai/shrine of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in northeast Sinai further illustrates this practice.<sup>7</sup>

Leather was occasionally employed for documents by pre-exilic Israelite scribes. As was the case with papyrus, texts were written in ink on single sheets or on scrolls formed by stitching several sheets together. However, leather was not nearly as common a writing medium in preexilic Israel as it became in the postexilic period.<sup>8</sup> For example, the majority of the Dead Sea Scrolls, from the last two centuries B.C., were written on leather.<sup>9</sup> No text from preexilic Israel has been discovered on leather.

### **Literacy in Ancient Israel**

It may seem odd to discuss Israelite literacy in a study of Israelite inscriptions. Clearly, the evidence of inscriptions indicates that people could write and read. The evidence also indicates that Israelites, like other West Semites, utilized a twenty-two-character alphabet developed by Canaanites about eight hundred years before Jeremiah and Lehi, which made literacy a seemingly simple attainment in contrast to the complex and cumbersome writing systems of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hittites; their systems required years to master and essentially limited literacy to professional scribes. However, the extent and degree of literacy among ancient Israelites is an important consideration since it influences our understanding of so many aspects of their lives, such as the accessibility of “scripture” for the average Israelite and how prophets like Jeremiah and Lehi communicated their messages.



While some scholars assert that the majority of ancient Israelites were literate, there is no academic unanimity on this question because there is no way to accurately assess the extent of their literacy. While many Israelites were literate, the majority were probably not fully literate, at least according to our conception of literacy.<sup>10</sup> Literacy requires not only the training to master the skills of reading and writing but also the opportunity to employ and reinforce those skills. The majority of Israelites during the preexilic period were involved in agricultural and pastoral occupations. The political and religious leadership constituted about 5 percent of the total population (the upper class, using modern terminology). Those engaged in administrative and midlevel management positions in the military, palace, or temple, along with those in mercantile activities (traders, shop owners, and large producers), probably constituted about 20–30 percent of the population (the middle class). This means that approximately two-thirds of the Israelite population were in the lower class of their socioeconomic system (not unlike the situation in many less developed countries today). Those Israelites who lived in urban areas, like Jeremiah and Lehi in Jerusalem, undoubtedly developed some degree of literacy. But the majority of the population probably had relatively few opportunities to read and write, decreasing the motivation for literacy.

The Bible and the Book of Mormon consistently depict well-developed writing and reading skills among some Israelites, but they also indicate a significant oral dimension in Israelite society. For instance, the Lord instructed Isaiah to write a prophecy (Isaiah 8:1–2). Lehi and Ezekiel each read from a scroll shown them in vision (1 Nephi 1:11–14; Ezekiel 2:9–10). Nephi indicated that he and his father (and presumably Laban) could read and write (1 Nephi 1:1–3, 16–17; 5:10–16). Jeremiah's scribe Baruch recorded the prophet's teachings more than once (Jeremiah

36:2, 28). However, there is no indication that these or other prophets copied and circulated their teachings for public distribution in written form.<sup>11</sup> The recurring instruction of the Lord to his prophets was to “go speak” to the people (Ezekiel 3:1; cf. Jeremiah 7:2; 36:6; 1 Nephi 1:18).

Moses taught the early Israelites to “keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6–9). This passage underscores the strong oral component of the transmission of knowledge among Israelites (“keep these words . . . in your heart,” “recite them”; Exodus 12:25–27 and 17:14 provide other indications of this oral dimension). But the injunction to attach scripture texts to doorposts and gates and to wear them, even if figurative, implies a certain level of literacy (there is no preexilic evidence for the practice of literally “wearing” scripture, such as developed with the wearing of *tefillin*/phylacteries in the Second Temple period).<sup>12</sup>

Among the archaeological evidence for ancient Israelite literacy, ostraca, seals, and seal impressions constitute the bulk of surviving Israelite inscriptions. Seals and bullae were utilized by people in administrative and mercantile positions. Israelite ostraca primarily preserve administrative texts from economic and military contexts. The Mesad Hashavyahu ostrakon (discussed below), a rare example of a document from a commoner, preserves a letter dictated to a professional scribe, not written by the sender himself. Thus, the available archaeological evidence demonstrates literacy only among the upper and middle classes.

No evidence has been found that written materials were commonplace among the lower class.

This socioeconomically based disparity in literacy levels is partly a matter of function. Subsistence living does not necessitate developed literacy. Significantly, however, archaeological evidence of literacy is preserved from throughout the land of Israel, not just in the capital or major cities. There were thus literate people dispersed throughout the countryside. Practically speaking, however, the labor, skill, and expense of producing extended religious or literary documents (such as a set of scriptures) placed such works beyond the financial means of most Israelites, in addition to their being beyond the ability of many Israelites to utilize them.<sup>13</sup>

Concluding this brief discussion of Israelite literacy, an important distinction must be made between the ability to write and the ability to read and, furthermore, between the ability to read short, simple texts and longer, more complex texts. Writing reinforces reading skills, but a rudimentary reading skill can be attained without the ability to write. A diverse range of literary skills existed among ancient Israelites. A *tentative* estimate is that about a third of ancient Israelites in Jeremiah's and Lehi's day were fairly to completely literate (i.e., they could read and write on an adequate to an accomplished level); about a third were probably barely to fairly literate (i.e., they were able to read or write to some degree but not necessarily with the same facility); and about a third were completely illiterate to barely literate.<sup>14</sup> This means that the inscriptions reviewed below could not have been read or read very well by some ancient Israelites. Understanding this situation helps to partially explain why the scriptures depict the *public* ministries of prophets like Jeremiah and Lehi as primarily oral in nature.

## **Major Inscriptions from the Time of Jeremiah and Lehi**

The most important Israelite inscriptions from 640 to 586 B.C. will now be reviewed to illustrate the relevant data they preserve.<sup>15</sup> Only representative examples of seals and ostraca from this time period have been included. The descriptions of the documents cited herein are of necessity brief. The reader is invited to pursue the citations provided in appendix 2 and the endnotes for further details and discussion.<sup>16</sup>

### **Arad Ostraca**

Arad (Tel Arad), a Canaanite and then Israelite city, is located about eighteen miles east of Beersheba at the southern border of the kingdom of Judah. The Judahite fortress at Arad, along with a string of similar facilities in the region, played an important role in the defensive system of Judah's southern, Negev frontier from the mid-tenth through the early sixth centuries B.C. A small Israelite temple existed at Arad from the tenth through eighth centuries, but it was never rebuilt following its destruction during the reign of Hezekiah (727–697 B.C.). About two hundred inscriptions were discovered at Arad in excavations carried out from 1962 to 1964, most of them ostraca. Three more ostraca were discovered in 1976. Many of these ostraca are poorly preserved, being broken and/or having faded ink. One hundred and seven of the inscriptions from Arad are written in Hebrew, mainly in ink, although sixteen of them were incised with a stylus on jugs or bowls after the containers had been fired. The bulk of the remaining Arad inscriptions are ostraca written in Aramaic (fifth to fourth century B.C.), with a few later inscriptions in Greek and Arabic. The Hebrew ostraca date mainly from the late eighth to early sixth centuries B.C.<sup>17</sup>

The majority of the Hebrew ostraca from Arad are lists of names and administrative letters to commanders of the fort. Of particular interest here, because they are contemporary with Jeremiah and Lehi, are some ostraca comprising a portion of the archive of Eliashib, Arad's Judahite commander from the later portion of Josiah's reign until about 595 B.C. This correspondence, from stratum VI of the tel, generally consists of orders to Eliashib to provide food supplies (olive oil, wine, bread, and flour) to troops in the region, although at least one ostrakon (#24) contains an urgent order at "the word of the king" that troops be sent to Ramat-Negev, a nearby fortress. In addition to ostraca, three stamp seals belonging to Eliashib have been discovered (stratum VII).

Arad ostrakon 1:

To Eliashib: And now, give to the Kittim three *baths*<sup>18</sup> of wine, and write the name of the day. And from the remainder of the first flour you will deliver one measure of flour for them to make bread. You will give (them some) of the wine from the mixing bowls.

This letter preserves instructions to Arad's military commander Eliashib to distribute basic rations to the Kittim. The Kittim were mercenaries, probably Greeks from Cyprus and the Aegean islands, working in the Negev for the kingdom of Judah.<sup>19</sup> A basic administrative accounting system was clearly in place.

Arad ostrakon 18:

To my lord Eliashib: May YHWH inquire after your well-being. And now, give to Shemaryahu a measure (of flour), and to the Kerosite you will give a measure (of flour).<sup>20</sup> And concerning the matter about which you commanded me, it is well. He is staying in the house of YHWH.

The Kerosite in question was probably a member of the clan of Keros, who were Nethinim, or temple servants (see Nehemiah

7:46–47). After giving instructions about rations, this ostracon reports on a matter known to the sender and to Eliashib, but not to us. Someone is staying in one of the chambers (not the sanctuary proper) of the “house of YHWH.” The phrase “house of YHWH,” or “house of the LORD,” as it is usually rendered in English translations of the Bible, is the standard designation for Jehovah’s temple in ancient Israel (e.g., 1 Kings 6:1, 37; 2 Kings 25:9). Whether this report to Eliashib was intended to indicate the loca-

tion or the status (safety?) of the individual is not discernible, nor can we tell if the person was at the temple by Eliashib’s order. The Jerusalem temple is presumably the one in question. Nehemiah 13:4–9 also preserves a report of someone staying in the Jerusalem temple complex (however, the Eliashib mentioned in this biblical passage is not the same person mentioned in the Arad ostraca).

### Lachish Ostraca

Lachish (Tel ed-Duweir) was a prominent Canaanite and then Judahite city in the Shephelah region of the country, approximately twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem and about midway between Ashqelon on the Mediterranean coast and Hebron in the Judean hill country. Its destruction by the Assyrians in 701



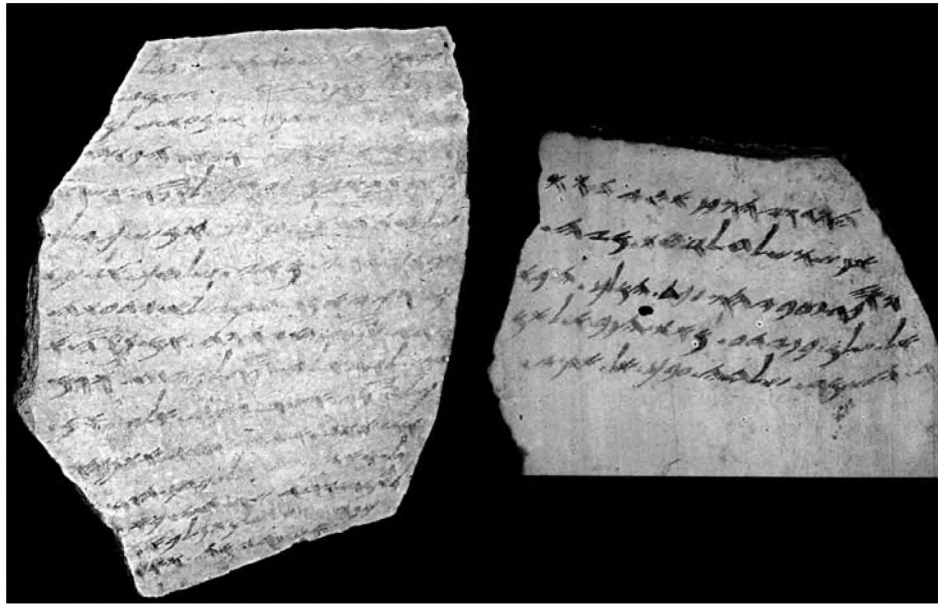
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Arad ostracon 18 (obverse; ca. 600 B.C.; 6.6 x 4.2 cm [= 2.6 x 1.65 in]). Discovered in 1964 in the Judahite fortress town of Arad in the Negev. The last line reads *byt yhwh*, “house of the Lord.” (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

B.C. is recorded in the Bible (2 Kings 18:13–19; 19:8) and is commemorated in bas reliefs that once lined a room in Assyrian king Sennacherib's new palace in Nineveh. Lachish was rebuilt and remained an important Judahite city until its subsequent destruction by the Babylonians, ca. 587 B.C.

An important group of twenty-one ostraca was discovered during excavations at Lachish in the 1930s. Eleven more inscriptions were discovered in renewed excavations in the 1960s to 1980s. Twelve of the first twenty-one Lachish ostraca are letters and two are lists of names. The letters consist mainly of correspondence to the city's military commander, identified as Yaush in ostraca 2, 3, and 6, regarding military, political, and administrative circumstances of the early 580s B.C. As with many of the Arad ostraca, the ink on several of the Lachish ostraca is poorly preserved. Interestingly, ostraca 2, 6, 7, 8, and 18 were all written on sherds from the same pot.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the first group of twenty-one ostraca, those of interest here, were found in a guard room between the outer and inner gate complexes of Lachish, which were destroyed by the Babylonians when Zedekiah was king of Judah. Some earlier scholars dated this group of ostraca to 587–586 B.C., after the Babylonians were already in Judah reconquering the country. However, these texts more likely derive from the time just before the Babylonian invasion of the kingdom of Judah—588 B.C.—after King Zedekiah had broken his vassal treaty with the Babylonians but before the destructive reprisals began. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians arrived in Judah by January 587 B.C., laying siege to Jerusalem for eighteen months before finally destroying the temple and much of the city. Second Kings 25 focuses on the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, but archaeological evidence indicates that the Babylonians also exercised their military might against other significant cities in the kingdom of Judah, including Lachish.



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Lachish ostrakon 3 (obverse left, top portion of reverse right; 13 x 8 cm [= 5.1 x 3.15 in]). One of the letters discovered in 1935 in a guard room beneath the rubble of a gate tower in the Judahite city of Lachish. This ostrakon mentions an unnamed prophet. (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

### Lachish ostrakon 3:

Your servant Hoshayahu sends a report to my lord Yaush. May YHWH cause my lord to hear peaceful and good news. And now, please open the ear of (i.e., explain to) your servant concerning the letter which you sent to your servant last night, for your servant has been heartsick since you sent (the letter) to your servant. My lord said, "You do not know how to read a letter!" As YHWH lives, no one has ever attempted (i.e., had) to read a letter to *me*! For I can read any letter which is sent to me, and moreover, I can recite it back in order. Now, your servant has been informed that the captain of the host (i.e., commander), Konyahu the son of Elnatan, has moved south to enter Egypt. He has sent (orders) to retrieve Hodawياهو son of Ahiyahu and his men from here. Furthermore, your servant is sending to my lord the letter (which was in the possession?) of Tobiyahu, the servant of the king, which was sent to Shallum son of Yadda from the prophet, saying, "Beware!"



Hoshayahu, a frustrated subordinate, sent this entertaining letter to his superior officer, Yaush. We do not know where Hoshayahu was stationed, but clearly he did not appreciate a remark made to and about him in a previous letter from Yaush. After protesting his concern and reiterating his abilities, Hoshayahu communicates important information about Judahite troop movements (“Konyahu . . . has moved south to enter Egypt”), which suggests at least a partial coordination of Judahite defensive efforts with Egypt. He then indicates that he has forwarded a letter of warning from an unidentified prophet to someone named Shallum. The specific context of the warning is not known, but given the troubled times the letter was no doubt apropos and may have been political in nature. This unnamed prophet could certainly have been Jeremiah, but this connection, while possible, remains mere speculation. The prophet Urijah, mentioned only in Jeremiah 26:20–23, has also been nominated as “the prophet” in this ostrakon; however, this is not possible because of chronological and onomastic differences.<sup>22</sup> Lachish ostrakon 16 refers to “]yah, the prophet,” but unfortunately the ostrakon is broken and the first part of the name is missing (both the names Jeremiah and Urijah end in *-yah(u)* in Hebrew, but so do many other names from this time period). We cannot determine whether this partially named prophet is the same as the unnamed one in ostrakon 3.

The comment in Lachish ostrakon 3 that Judahite troops had “moved south to enter Egypt” is reminiscent of Jeremiah 26:20–23, which recounts that a prophet named Urijah fled to Egypt, fearing for his life after rebuking King Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.) and prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem. Judahite troops tracked Urijah down and returned him to Jerusalem, whereupon he was executed (a potential fate for Lehi, Jeremiah, and other prophets as well). Early claims that

Jeremiah 26 and Lachish ostraca 3 document the same event are inaccurate and groundless.<sup>23</sup>

Lachish ostrakon 4:

May YHWH cause m[y lord] to hear good news on this day. And now, everything which my lord sent (me instructions to do), so your servant has done. I have written in the record according to all (the instructions) which you sent to me. And as my lord sent (i.e., asked) concerning the matter of Beth-hrpd: there is no one there. As for Semakyahu, Shemayahu seized him and made him go up (i.e., sent or took him) to the city. Your servant is not able to send the witness there [today]. If (my lord) [cam]e during the morning watch, he would know that we are watching the signal (-fires) of Lachish according to all the signs (code) which my lord has given (us), for we cannot see Azeqah.<sup>24</sup>

In this letter an unnamed subordinate at an unknown site reports to his superior on various matters of concern. He begins by assuring his commander that he has fulfilled his orders. The record that he has made is most likely a column of notations on a sheet of papyrus (the same Hebrew word, *delet*, literally “door,” also occurs in Jeremiah 36:23 with this sense).<sup>25</sup> Not only is “the matter of Beth-hrpd” unknown to us, but so also are its location and its pronunciation. Neither do we know who Semakyahu was, nor with what he was charged. The “city” to which Semakyahu has been sent is undoubtedly Jerusalem, to which one always “goes up,” as indicated in numerous biblical passages.<sup>26</sup>

The last item in this report presumably refers to a trial run of a signal system that occurred prior to the Babylonian entry into Judah. Some of the first scholars to translate this letter rendered the last phrase as, “we can *no longer* see the signal-fires of Azeqah,” suggesting that Azeqah, one of the last three Judahite cities to hold out against the Babylonians, had already fallen,

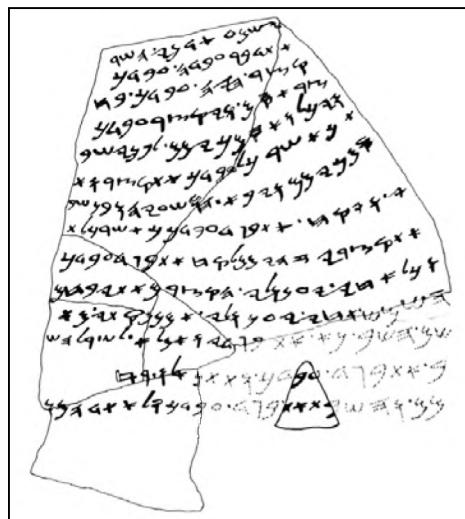
leaving only Lachish and Jerusalem (cf. Jeremiah 34:7). However, the rendition “no longer” was based on a supposed later date for the Lachish letters (587–586 B.C., after the Babylonians were already in Judah), *not* on the text itself. The Hebrew phrase does not mean “no longer”; it means only that the signal could not be seen (perhaps because of the hilly topography of the area or because the signal attempt had “misfired”). Lachish ostracon 4 thus indicates that while movement about the Judahite countryside was generally possible, safety was a concern and trouble was imminent.

Lehi, Ishmael, and their families left Jerusalem several years before these Lachish ostraca were written, while Mulek and those who traveled with him probably left Jerusalem within a year or two of their writing. Hugh Nibley rightly observed the value of the Lachish ostraca in expanding our view of the challenging times in which Lehi, Mulek, and Jeremiah lived: they “give us an eyewitness account of the actual world of Lehi—a tiny peephole, indeed, but an unobstructed one.”<sup>27</sup> Thus Nibley often referred to these ostraca when discussing the background of 1 Nephi 1–4. However, some of Nibley’s assertions about the Lachish ostraca require qualification or correction. Relying heavily on the initial publication and discussion of the ostraca, he asserted some specific but unsupportable connections between the Bible and these ostraca<sup>28</sup> and made some interpretations that are dated and no longer accepted.<sup>29</sup> Nibley’s references to the Lachish ostraca must thus be used cautiously and in conjunction with more up-to-date studies of these valuable documents.

### **Mesad Hashavyahu Ostracon**

Mesad Hashavyahu, a Judahite fort near Yavneh Yam and the Mediterranean coast, was excavated in 1960, resulting in the discovery of four ostraca, three of which are small and insignificant. One, however, contains a letter written by a scribe to an unnamed

commander of the fort as dictated by an unnamed farm laborer with a complaint in need of resolution. This ostrakon now survives in six pieces (with at least one more piece missing). It dates to the late seventh century, probably to the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.), when Judah regained control of this region by the Mediterranean coast. The personal focus and the social implications of the content of this Mesad Hashavyahu ostrakon make it important.



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Mesad Hashavyahu ostrakon (line drawing; ca. 620s B.C.; 20 x 7.5–16.5 cm [= 7.87 x 2.95–6.5 in]). Discovered in 1960 during the excavation of Mesad Hashavyahu, a Judahite fortress near modern Yavneh Yam. (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

May my lord the commander hear the matter of his servant. Your servant is a reaper. Your servant was in Hasar-’Asam. Your servant had reaped and completed (his work) and had stored (the grain) for several days before stopping. When your servant had completed his reaping and it was stored for a few days, Hoshayahu son of Shobay came and took the garment of your servant. When I had finished my reaping, several days ago, he took your servant’s garment. All my companions will testify for me, those who were reaping with me in the heat of [the] s[un]. My companions will testify for me, “It is so.” I am free from any [guilt. So please return] my garment. And if it does not seem (like an obligation) to the commander to retur[n the garment of your ser]vant, [then show pi]ty on him, and re[turn the garment of] your [ser]vant (anyway, i.e., out of pity). Do not be silent [about this matter].

This interesting letter, the lower portion of which is not well preserved, contains the personal plea of a reaper petitioning a local

commander or official for justice. In requesting that the commander intercede on his behalf, the reaper declares his innocence and indicates that witnesses will verify his story. He hopes that if no sense of duty motivates the commander, then pity for the reaper's circumstances will. One assumes that Hoshayahu son of Shobay, the supervisor of a group of farm workers, had a different tale to tell.

This letter's rather rough style suggests that it was dictated by the reaper to a scribe who worked at the local fortress. The message was most likely delivered to the commander as is. The lack of a formal greeting at the beginning (compare the Arad and Lachish letters included above) suggests to some scholars that a scribe may have copied this original draft and added the proper formalities (e.g., an invocation of blessing) before delivery. But the context of this message—a plea from a farm worker to a local official—is such that we would not expect formalities. Compare the fairly similar language in 1 Samuel 26:19: “Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant.”

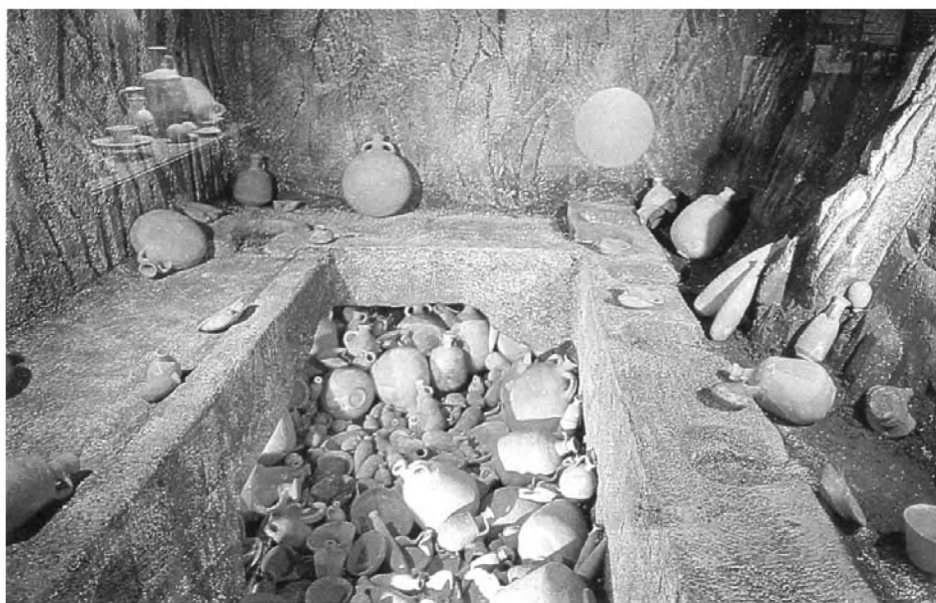
The reaper's situation as represented on this ostrakon is reminiscent of a Mosaic injunction designed to protect those of the lower class of Israelite society, such as day laborers: “If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate” (Exodus 22:26–27; cf. Deuteronomy 24:12–13). The reaper's cloak had been confiscated and not returned to him, despite his claims of having fulfilled his obligations. Although this scripture is not cited as support in the letter, the reaper's request suggests that such a perspective was considered the ideal in his society. And we may assume that the reaper also appealed to a Higher Authority in addition to the local commander.

Neither this particular Mosaic precept nor a reaper's plea for justice is preserved in the Book of Mormon. However, since

the Lehites had “the five books of Moses” on the brass plates (1 Nephi 5:11) and lived the law of Moses (e.g., 1 Nephi 4:15–16; 2 Nephi 25:24), and since the Book of Mormon refers to reaping grain (2 Nephi 5:11), as well as to reaping souls (Alma 26:5), one assumes that the Lehites were familiar with the need and the divine injunction to protect day-laboring reapers and other people in similar socioeconomic situations.

### **Ketef Hinnom Amulets<sup>30</sup>**

Ketef Hinnom, or “shoulder of Hinnom,” is located on the west side of the Hinnom Valley, which historically formed the western topographic boundary of ancient Jerusalem and served as an area for burials in both the First and Second Temple periods. Two small rolls of inscribed silver foil were discovered in 1979, along with a number of other items dating from the end of the First Temple period through the Second Temple period, in a secondary bone repository beside chamber 25 of burial cave 24 near the modern Scottish Church of St. Andrew. Based on paleographic analysis and



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Reconstruction of a Ketef Hinnom tomb near which two silver amulets were found.

the associated finds, these two inscribed rolls date to about 600 B.C. From wear patterns, each of these silver rolls had apparently been worn on a cord, apparently around someone's neck, as an amulet or charm. When unrolled, one measures 9.7 x 2.7 cm (ca. 3.8 x 1.06 inches) and the other 3.9 x 1.1 cm (ca. 1.54 x 0.43 inches).

The text on these two amulets was incised with a stylus. It is remarkably similar to the Aaronic priestly blessing contained in Numbers 6:24–26, although not completely rendered. Unfortunately, the text, which averages 4–5 letters per line, is not well preserved nor very legible because of wear at the edges of the rolls and wrinkles in the silver. The relationship between the text in Numbers 6 and that preserved on the amulets is as follows:

Numbers 6	Amulet 1 (the larger)	Amulet 2 (the smaller)
	[several lines that are partially to totally illegible]	[several lines that are partially to totally illegible]
	[one who loves] the covenant [ . . . m]ercy [ . . . ] from all . . . [ . . . ] and from evil [ . . . ] for YHWH . . .	
24 The Lord bless you and keep you;	May YHWH bless you and keep you.	May YHWH bless you and keep you.
25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;	[May] YHWH [make his fa]ce [shi]ne	May YHWH make his face shine [upon] you and give you peace
26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.		[several lines that are partially to totally illegible]

These two small silver rolls are significant for several reasons. First, they preserve the oldest known attestation of a form of a biblical passage in its original language. Thus, as with the brass plates mentioned in the Book of Mormon, these silver rolls indicate that texts which we consider scripture existed and were utilized in ancient Israel before Lehi left Jerusalem. Second, they attest to the Israelite practice of engraving religious texts on metal in the time of Lehi and Jeremiah, although, practically speaking, the brass plates are vastly different in scope from these silver rolls.<sup>31</sup> Finally, they provide evidence of the personalization of a blessing, which according to Numbers 6 was originally pronounced by the priests over the congregation of Israel, in an apparent effort to invoke divine protection against evil influences. The practice of wearing such amulets may be a realization of the figurative instruction in Proverbs 6:20–22: “My child, keep your father’s commandment, and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. Bind them upon your heart always; tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you” (cf. Deuteronomy 6:8).

### Seals and Bullae

The large quantity of seals and bullae discovered thus far qualifies them as



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Ketef Hinnom amulet 2 (ca. 600 b.c.; 3.9 x 1.1 cm [= 1.54 x 0.43 in]). One of two small rolls of silver foil partially preserving a form of Numbers 6:24–25 discovered in 1980 during the excavation of a burial chamber near the Church of St. Andrew, Jerusalem. (see photo essay, page 76, for color photo). (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



the best attested type of inscription from ancient Israel. Found individually and in groups, Israelite seals, bullae, and seal impressions on jar handles now number more than seven hundred. These miniature inscriptions provide insights about Israelite society far greater than their size might suggest. Seals were owned and used by upper- and middle-class individuals involved in military, religious, and political administration and in mercantile, scribal, and other occupations. Seals functioned to identify an individual and to authenticate and validate a transaction or command (see comments and references above in “The Media of Inscriptions”). As noted above, since the provenance of most of the seals and bullae is unknown, these objects must be viewed with some skepticism—some are doubtless fakes.

Most Israelite seals belonged to people unknown to us, but a number of seals and bullae from the time of Jeremiah and Lehi may be linked with known biblical personalities.<sup>32</sup> The best example of this is an impression seemingly made by the seal of Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch: “belonging to Berekyahu, son of Neriyaahu, the scribe.”<sup>33</sup> Although the provenance of the bulla is unknown, it is generally considered authentic and is dated by paleography to the later portion of the seventh century B.C. The text on this bulla is similar to the identifying phrase in Jeremiah 36:32, “Baruch son of Neriah, the scribe,” except that Baruch’s name on the bulla is a longer, theophoric form of the name preserved in the Bible.<sup>34</sup> A seal with the inscription “belonging to Serayahu, (son of) Neriyaahu,” likely belonged to Baruch’s brother Seraiah, who was an official of King Zedekiah (Jeremiah 51:59).<sup>35</sup> Again, the provenance is unknown.

In 1982, fifty-one bullae were excavated from an Israelite house located on the eastern slope of the Ophel Ridge (Area G), an area that had been destroyed in the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. The documents that these bullae originally sealed were destroyed in the resulting fire, but the fire baked and preserved the clay bullae.

One of the seal impressions reads: “belonging to Gemaryahu, [son of] Shaphan.” This is likely the Gemariah mentioned in Jeremiah 36:10.<sup>36</sup> A broken bulla from an unknown provenance may have belonged to another son of Shaphan who is mentioned in 2 Kings 22:12 and Jeremiah 26:24: “[belonging to A]hiqam (?), [so]n of Shaphan.”<sup>37</sup>

Another bulla that probably derives from a contemporary of Jeremiah and Lehi who is named in the Bible reads:

“belonging to Yerahmeel, son of the king.”<sup>38</sup> As recounted in Jeremiah 36:26, Jerahmeel, the son of the king, was one of three officials ordered to arrest Jeremiah and Baruch. (The KJV inaccurately renders this phrase “son of Hammelech,” as if Hammelech was a proper name; it is, rather, a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase “son of the king.”)<sup>39</sup>

A seal with a similar inscription, “belonging to Malkiyahu, son of the king,” is decorated with seven pomegranates and a border of dots.<sup>40</sup> Purchased on the antiquities market by antiquities collector S. Moussaieff, this seal, if it is authentic, probably belonged to the “Malchiah son of the king” mentioned in Jeremiah 38:6 (again, the KJV renders “son of Hammelech” for “son of the king”). The prophet Jeremiah was arrested and placed in “the cistern of Malchiah son of the king” (the KJV



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Seal impression of Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah the prophet (ca. 600 B.C.; 1.7 x 1.6 cm [= 0.67 x 0.63 in]). The reverse of the bulla (not shown) preserves impressions from papyrus fibers and from the string that had secured a sealed papyrus document. (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

renders “cistern” as “dungeon,” based on the function of this particular cistern). Some Latter-day Saints have proposed that this seal belonged to Mulek, son of King Zedekiah, who traveled to the Americas as recounted in the Book of Mormon (Helaman 6:10; 8:21).<sup>41</sup> If this is so, the name Mulek functions as a shortened form of the fuller, theophoric form Malkiyahu (compare Baruch and Berekyahu).<sup>42</sup>

Such seals and bullae attest to an active and extensive practice of written communication, documentation, and verification in the days of Jeremiah and Lehi. They help us better understand the bureaucratic activity of their time. Unfortunately, the documents that were secured with such seal impressions have not survived.

The Bible indicates that Jeremiah owned and used a personal seal (Jeremiah 32:10). Given the description of possessions that Lehi left behind in Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:4; 3:16, 22), it is very likely that Lehi, and perhaps his older sons, owned seals as well, although this is never mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

### **Inscriptions of Uncertain Date or Authenticity**

A set of inscriptions in a cave tomb and on two ostraca are included in this overview of Israelite inscriptions from 640 to 586 B.C. but are designated “uncertain” because of differences of opinion regarding their dating and authenticity.

#### **Khirbet Beit Lei Inscriptions**

A tomb cut into a hill near Khirbet Beit Lei, about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem and five miles east of Lachish, was discovered in 1961. Nine short texts and several drawings (illustrating, among other things, three humans and two ships) were inscribed on the limestone walls of the main chamber in antiquity.<sup>43</sup> The content of these texts is religious, but they have no demonstrable relationship to the burials in the tomb: neither

names nor any of the standard burial formulae are contained in these texts. All the inscriptions are very difficult to decipher because of the relatively rough original preparation of the stone's surface, subsequent surface deterioration, and competing scratches on the walls.

Possible dates for these inscriptions range from the late eighth through the early fifth centuries. For example, the original publication and a recent review of this material (including quality photographs and line drawings) conclude that both the design of the burial chamber and the paleography of the inscriptions suggest a date of ca. 700 B.C.<sup>44</sup> That was the time of Hezekiah and Isaiah, not Zedekiah, Jeremiah, and Lehi. Other scholars prefer a date ranging from the early to mid-500s B.C.<sup>45</sup> Still others argue for a postexilic, Persian period date (ca. 400s B.C.) based on certain finds outside the tomb and on certain expressions in the inscriptions.<sup>46</sup> The earlier dating is more likely correct, meaning these inscriptions are too early for consideration in this chapter. However, the main texts are included here since many Latter-day Saints have heard of these inscriptions.

Two differing translations (designated with lowercase “a” and “b”) are provided for each of the following three inscriptions to illustrate the significant diversity among scholars on how to render these challenging texts:

Khirbet Beit Lei Inscription A:<sup>47</sup>

- a. Yahveh (is) the God of the whole earth;  
the mountains of Judah belong to him, to the God of  
Jerusalem. (Naveh)
- b. YHWH, my god, exposed/laid bare his land.  
A terror he led for his own sake to Jerusalem. (Zevit)

Khirbet Beit Lei Inscription B:<sup>48</sup>

- a. The (Mount of) Moriah Thou hast favoured, the  
dwelling of Yah, Yahveh. (Naveh)

- b. The source smote the hand. Absolve (from culpability)  
the hand, YHWH. (Zevit)

Khirbet Beit Lei Inscription C:<sup>49</sup>

- a. [Ya]hveh deliver (us)! (Naveh)
- b. Save. Destruction. (Zevit)

Depending on how one transcribes and translates these inscriptions, especially A and B, they may contain moving, positive proclamations about the power of Jehovah or tragic declarations of his power against Judah. It is impossible to determine who wrote these texts, although a prophet or priest may have been responsible. Those who date these inscriptions to the Assyrian invasion of Judah (701 B.C.) or the Babylonian invasions of Judah (590s–580s B.C.) see those troubled times as their historical context.

Some Latter-day Saints have claimed that the Khirbet Beit Lei tomb, in which these inscriptions were found, served as the temporary hiding place of Nephi and his brothers after they fled from Laban (1 Nephi 3:27) and that these texts and pictures were inscribed by Nephi.<sup>50</sup> However, there is no real basis for such a claim. In addition to the obvious challenges of just reading and dating the inscriptions and the linguistic challenge of relating the name Beit Lei with the name Lehi,<sup>51</sup> this burial chamber seems much too distant from Jerusalem to be a reasonable candidate for the brothers' hiding place.

### **Moussaieff Ostraca**

Two interesting ostraca were purchased on the antiquities market by S. Moussaieff. The scholars who recently published these ostraca accept them as genuine, and various laboratory analyses tend to bolster their claim, but a few scholars have expressed concerns regarding their authenticity.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, those who published these ostraca date them paleographically

to the latter portion of the seventh century, within the parameters of this survey, but others date them to the eighth century B.C., earlier than the time period dealt with in this chapter.<sup>53</sup> The Moussaieff ostraca are probably authentic, and as such they are valuable resources for our study of ancient Israel. So, they are included here for consideration with the caveat that a few scholars have concerns about their dating and their authenticity.

Moussaieff ostrakon 1:

As Ashyahu the king has commanded you to give to Zekaryahu silver of Tarshish for the house of YHWH, three shekels (so do).

This ostrakon contains five short lines of text that record a king's command that three shekels (a measure of weight) of silver be contributed to the temple via a man named Zekaryahu (Zechariah). It may represent a directive or receipt for a donation to the Jerusalem temple. The king's name, Ashyahu, is previously unattested as the name of a Judahite monarch but is understood as a variant of the name Josiah.<sup>54</sup> Tarshish is the name of an unknown location, perhaps in the Mediterranean area, with whose populace Israelites, Phoenicians, and others engaged in mercantile activities, importing luxury goods such as silver and gold (1 Kings 10:22; Isaiah 2:16; 23:1; Jonah 1:3).

Moussaieff ostrakon 2:

May YHWH bless you with peace. And now, may my lord the governor (or commander) hear your maidservant. My husband died (leaving) no sons (or children). So let your hand be with me and give into the hand of your maidservant the inheritance about which you spoke (or promised) to Amasyahu. As for the wheat field in Naamah, you have (already) given (it) to his brother.

This second ostrakon contains a plea from a widow to an unnamed official regarding a question of inheritance. Amasyahu was probably her deceased husband or a close relative (the husband's brother who had already received the wheat field?). Numbers 27:8–11 indicates that when an Israelite man died with no sons, his inheritance went to his daughters. If the man had neither sons nor daughters, his brother(s) received the inheritance, with the understanding that his widow would be cared for. In this ostrakon the widow requests the use, if not the outright ownership, of land or some other form of inheritance, presumably to (better) provide for her own needs. Her request for official assistance is reminiscent of the reaper's plea on the Mesad Hashavyahu ostrakon. In both letters the person making the request is unnamed, and they may have delivered their scribed request in person. The place name Naamah may refer to the town of the same name not far from Lachish (Joshua 15:41).

### **Implications of These Israelite Inscriptions**

The preceding survey of major Israelite inscriptions from 640 to 586 B.C. has illustrated their value for understanding the intersection of religion, culture, and history during that pivotal time period. These inscriptions generally provide background details in the larger picture of ancient Judah's history, rather than information about major figures from that time period.

#### **Historical Implications**

While the content of the Arad ostraca may not seem particularly exciting, they preserve important information about the administration of Judahite border fortresses and forces, including the provisioning of mercenaries. Fortress cities such as Arad played a vital role in defending Judah's southern flank from recurring Edomite incursions at the time of Lehi and

Jeremiah. Edom and the Edomites are mentioned in several Arad ostraca, including 3, 21, 24, and 40, and in such biblical passages as Ezekiel 35:1–5 and Lamentations 4:21–22.

The Lachish ostraca also help illuminate Judahite military administration as well as the preparations made for the Babylonian reprisals that came when King Zedekiah refused to honor his vassal treaty to pay tribute. In them we hear of miscommunication, troop movements, and the seizure of correspondence containing a prophetic warning (#3); of the apprehension of a witness and of a system of signal fires (#4); of a request for supplies (#5); of the communication of disheartening news, which tended “to slacken your hands” (#6; cf. Jeremiah 38:4); and so on. This was a trying time for Judahites, just prior to destruction and suffering that, according to the prophets, they brought on themselves through their lack of loyalty to Jehovah (see, e.g., Jeremiah 25:8–10). The seizure of a witness (#4) and of a letter (#3) illustrates the tension in Judah that developed from Zedekiah’s decision to terminate his vassal payments to Babylonia. Some Judahites, including Jeremiah, did not think rebellion against Babylon was the wiser course of action (e.g., Jeremiah 27:12–17). History certainly demonstrates that Zedekiah’s choice was disastrous.

### **Social and Cultural Implications**

*Socioeconomic Justice.* The pleas of the reaper (Mesad Hashavyahu ostrakon) and of the widow (Moussaieff ostrakon 2) demonstrate the ongoing need for social justice and economic assistance among the common Judahites of Jeremiah and Lehi’s day. Dealing with such petitions was a regular requirement for local and regional officials. Although neither plea cites biblical authority or precedent, both texts have affinities with specific biblical passages, as noted above. Mosaic law contained injunctions



that the needs of widows, orphans, and the poor be met mercifully and fairly (e.g., Exodus 22:22–23; 23:6; Leviticus 19:10, 15; Deuteronomy 24:19–21). We are left to wonder what response the widow and reaper received to their petitions. One can only hope that the officials to whom they appealed were like Helaman, son of Helaman, who “did fill the judgment-seat with justice and equity” (Helaman 3:20, 27).

*Letters.* Several of the ostraca cited above illustrate basic Israelite epistolary (letter-writing) conventions ca. 600 B.C., which varied somewhat depending on such factors as the formality of the communication. The salutation, for example, usually identified the recipient by name (e.g., Arad, Lachish) or title (e.g., Lachish, Mesad Hashavyahu), sometimes invoked a blessing on the recipient (e.g., Lachish, Arad), and sometimes included the name of the sender (e.g., Lachish). The transition from the salutation to the body of the letter was often marked by the expression *and now* (e.g., Lachish, Arad). Also, the person of inferior status regularly referred to him- or herself by emphasizing the relationship “your servant” when writing to someone of superior status (e.g., Lachish, Mesad Hashavyahu, Moussaieff Ostrakon 2).

Only a few of these epistolary conventions are evident in letters or portions of letters quoted in the Bible, mainly the transition marker *and now*. The salutations are not generally preserved because the sender and recipient are identified in the biblical narrative (e.g., 2 Kings 5:6; 10:2–3; 2 Chronicles 2:10–15; Jeremiah 29:4–23, 26–28). Other literary considerations may also have influenced the form of the biblically preserved letters.<sup>55</sup>

The Book of Mormon contains several quoted letters, but these are longer than the letters preserved on Israelite ostraca or in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Alma 54:4–14, 15–24; Alma 56–58; 3 Nephi 3:1–10), and they may also have been affected by their inclusion in a larger literary text. While the epistolary data from

ancient Israel and from the Book of Mormon is rather limited, some differences in practice are clearly discernible.<sup>56</sup> For example, the letters quoted in the Book of Mormon do not contain an invocation of blessing upon even nonadversarial recipients (e.g., Alma 56:2; 61:1–2; 3 Nephi 3:1–2). Furthermore, they often conclude with the sender's name (e.g., Alma 54:14, 23–24; 58:41; 3 Nephi 3:10), a practice not attested in ancient Israel. However, the approximately five hundred years between the departure of the Lehites and Mulekites from Jerusalem and the date of the first letter quoted in the Book of Mormon allow time for many cultural changes, including epistolary ones.

*Seals.* The large number of seals and seal impressions surviving from 640 to 586 B.C. serves to demonstrate the significant amount of commerce and bureaucracy that existed in ancient Judah, despite the fact that the majority of the population did not own seals. The discovery of seals and bullae from people mentioned in the Bible, such as Baruch, is an exciting development that helps to bring these individuals to life.

Documents and containers were sealed to indicate identity, to give authorization, and to provide tamperproof protection. In Arad ostrakon 17 a certain Nahum is instructed to send a quantity of olive oil and “seal it with your seal.” In concluding a real estate transaction with his cousin, Jeremiah says, “I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales” (Jeremiah 32:10; cf. vv. 9–14). The use of seals is further attested elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., 1 Kings 21:7–8; Esther 8:8–10).<sup>57</sup> Again, the indication that Lehi's family had “exceeding great” property (1 Nephi 3:24–25) suggests a social and economic attainment that would have necessitated the possession and use of a seal by Lehi, although this is not mentioned in Nephi's brief account.

### Religious Implications

A few texts from this period preserve specific references to religious features, such as a prophet (Lachish ostraca 3, 16) and the temple (Arad ostrakon 18, Moussaieff ostrakon 1). Other texts are wholly religious in nature, like the two versions of the Aaronic priestly blessing (Ketef Hinnom silver amulets), and the Khirbet Beit Lei inscriptions (although these probably do not derive from 640 to 586 B.C.).

Even the “nonreligious” Israelite inscriptions from 640 to 586 B.C. indicate a general orientation to Israelite worship at that time. For example, many of the compound personal names from the ostraca and seals have YHWH as one of their components (e.g., Berekyahu, Semakyahu).<sup>58</sup> Also, the salutations in several letters from this period invoke a blessing from YHWH, but from no other deity, on the recipient (e.g., Arad ostrakon 18; Lachish ostraca 3, 4; Moussaieff ostrakon 2).

Indeed, after reviewing the preexilic evidence, one scholar observed that “in every respect the inscriptions suggest an overwhelmingly Yahwistic society in the heartland of Israelite settlement, especially in Judah. If we had only the inscriptional evidence, it is not likely that we would ever imagine that there existed a significant amount of polytheistic practice in Israel during the period in question.”<sup>59</sup> This situation must be understood in relation to prophetic accusations against the Judahites. Jeremiah prophesied, for example, that “the Chaldeans [= Babylonians] who are fighting against this city shall come, set it on fire, and burn it, with the houses on whose roofs offerings have been made to Baal and libations have been poured out to other gods, to provoke me to anger” (Jeremiah 32:29; cf. 11:13, 17; etc.). Since Jehovah/YHWH was the national deity of Judah, it is no surprise to encounter his name regularly in inscriptions. However, the almost complete lack of evidence therein for the worship of

other gods from 640 to 586 B.C. is remarkable if one imagines the majority of the inhabitants to have worshiped other deities in addition to Jehovah. Perhaps the prophetic claims are better understood as targeting a certain segment of Judahite society, but not the society as a whole, or as targeting a trend that had reached spiritually but not statistically epidemic proportions. Otherwise one would expect more evidence of the worship of other deities in inscriptions from the period of Jeremiah and Lehi.

In addition to the worship of deities other than Jehovah and to the illegitimate forms of Jehovah worship which the Bible recounts, there was a broader range of sinful activity that incurred the divine rebuke of many Judahites. Nephi clearly indicates that Lehi “truly testified of their wickedness and their abominations” (1 Nephi 1:19; cf. vv 7–18). Furthermore, those who “steal, murder, commit adultery, [and] swear falsely” were not just those who “make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods” (Jeremiah 7:9), but they represented all segments of Judahite society (cf. Jeremiah 23:14).

In conjunction with this depiction of divinely unacceptable activities that are attested in the Bible and 1 Nephi, but not in the inscriptions, one wonders about the number of, and motivation for, Judahites who wore amulets such as those discovered at Ketef Hinnom (how many Judahites understood passages such as Deuteronomy 6:8 and Proverbs 6:20–22 literally?). While some Judahites may have worn amulets to reinforce their focus on a divine perspective, others no doubt regarded them as charms with inherent magical and protective powers because the divine name YHWH was contained thereon.

Finally, the warning from the unnamed “prophet, saying, Beware!” mentioned in Lachish ostrakon 3, presumably from a legitimate prophet of Jehovah, reminds us of those passages of scripture that indicate that at this time the Lord sent “many

prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4; cf. Jeremiah 25:2–6; 26:1–6).

## Conclusion

Although Lehi, Sariah, Ishmael, and their families left Jerusalem several years before the Babylonians arrived early in 587 B.C., they had been in the Jerusalem area a decade earlier when the Babylonians besieged the city for three months and removed the Judahite king Jehoiachin into captivity, replacing him with his uncle Zedekiah.<sup>60</sup> The “rumors of war” such as fill the Lachish ostraca were not foreign to these families. After these families arrived in the Americas, the Lord indicated to Lehi through a vision that Jerusalem had been destroyed (2 Nephi 1:4). Jeremiah, on the other hand, was called to remain in Jerusalem to witness firsthand the prophesied destruction by the Babylonians.

Although Israelite inscriptions from 640 to 586 B.C. preserve no texts from Jeremiah or Lehi nor specifically mention them, these inscriptions do have much to offer for our study of that crucial time period. They augment the Bible and allow us to better peer across the historical and cultural divide that separates us from the world of ancient Judah. The patient student of ancient Israel’s history and culture will be rewarded with many pleasures and insights from further studying these texts. The inscriptions that have been unearthed in the past century generate hope that even more exciting discoveries lie in the future.

## **Appendix 1: Selective Outline of Preexilic Inscriptions from Ancient Israel<sup>61</sup>**

(Augmented with a few other inscriptions  
of importance from the region)

Inscriptions	Approximate Date B.C.	Remarks
Izbet Sartah ostrakon	mid-12th century	Canaanite or Israelite?
Gezer calendar	mid-10th century	
Moabite/Mesha inscription	mid-9th century	Dhiban, Jordan; Moabite
Tel Dan stela fragments	mid-9th century	in Aramaic
Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions	late 9th–early 8th centuries	
Samaria ostraca	early–mid-8th century	
Deir 'Alla inscriptions	mid-8th century	Jordan; in a dialect related to Ammonite and Aramaic
ivory pomegranate inscription	late 8th century	antiquities market; probably from Jerusalem
Ein Gedi cave inscription	late 8th–early 7th centuries	
Khirbet el-Qom tomb inscriptions	late 8th–early 7th centuries	
Siloam Tunnel inscription	late 8th century	Jerusalem
Silwan Tomb inscription	late 8th century	Jerusalem
Ophel and some Arad ostraca	late 8th century	
Wadi Murabba'at papyrus 17	early 7th century	
Moussaieff ostraca	mid–late 7th century	antiquities market
Mesad Hashavyahu (Yavneh Yam) ostraca	late 7th century	
Ketef Hinnom silver amulets	late 7th century	Jerusalem
Ophel ostrakon	late 7th–early 6th centuries	Jerusalem
some Arad ostraca	late 7th–early 6th centuries (mainly)	
Lachish ostraca	early 6th century	
seals and bullae	8th–6th centuries	from various sites in Israel and Judah, plus the antiquities market
Khirbet Beit Lei inscriptions	8th–early 6th centuries	

## Appendix 2: Main Resources for Ancient Israelite Inscriptions in Translation

The following list provides citations for recent English translations of the inscriptions mentioned in this article, arranged in order of publication. Most of these works provide helpful discussions and references to the original publication of the inscriptions. Some of them include the Hebrew text as well as an English translation.

William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 2, *Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Boston: Brill, 2000), and vol. 3, *Archival Documents from the Biblical World* (2002); Sandra L. Gogel, *A Grammar of Epigraphic Hebrew* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998); James M. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994); Klaas A. D. Smelik, *Writings from Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991); Dennis Pardee et al., *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982); Nahman Avigad, “Hebrew Epigraphic Sources,” in *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History*, vol. 4, pt. 1, ed. Abraham Malamat (Jerusalem: Massada, 1979), 20–43; John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 1, *Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973); James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

See these important compilations in languages other than English: Johannes Renz and Wolfgang Röllig, *Handbuch der alt-hebräischen Epigraphik*, 3 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995); Shmuel Ahituv, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Byalik, 1992); Graham I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (transcriptions only) (New York: Cambridge

University Press, 1991); André Lemaire, *Inscriptions hébraïques*, vol. 1, *Les ostraca* (Paris: Cerf, 1977).

See also the helpful English discussions of various Israelite inscriptions, without translated texts, under the appropriate entries in Eric M. Meyers, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, 5 vols. (New York: Oxford, 1997); Ephraim Stern et al., eds., *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, 4 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Carta, 1993); and David Noel Freedman et al., eds., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992).

## NOTES

1. Tomb inscriptions include those from Silwan and Khirbet el-Qom. Inscriptions of a religious nature on unquarried stone include those at Khirbet Beit Lei and the Ein Gedi Cave. The Siloam Tunnel inscription is a rare example of an Israelite “monumental” inscription, although on a very small scale.

2. Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 515, cites the remains of only four monumental inscriptions from preexilic Israel: the Siloam Tunnel inscription (complete, but not a stela), two small fragments from Jerusalem, and one small fragment from Samaria. Three pieces from a broken ninth-century B.C. Aramaic inscription discovered at Tel Dan in northern Israel and one fragment of a Philistine temple inscription from Tel Mique are not technically *Israelite* inscriptions but share linguistic and literary similarities. The existence of a fifteen-line inscription from Jerusalem, presumably dating to the late 800s B.C., was announced in the press in January 2003. Unfortunately, the inscription was not found *in situ* but was purchased on the antiquities market, immediately raising concerns about its authenticity. The text of the inscription recounts efforts to renovate the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem and is now commonly referred to as the Jehoash Inscription or the Temple Inscription. This small stela



is now considered to be a forgery by the Israel Antiquities Authority and by many scholars, although some are not convinced of this. See, for example, Frank M. Cross, "Notes on the Forged Plaque Recording Repairs to the Temple," *Israel Exploration Journal* 53/1 (2003): 119–23; Israel Eph'al, "The 'Jehoash Inscription': A Forgery," *Israel Exploration Journal* 53/1 (2003): 124–28; Hershel Shanks, "Assessing the Jehoash Inscription," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29/3 (2003): 26–30; "What about the Jehoash Inscription?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29/5 (2003): 38–39, 83; and the IAA's "Summary Report of the Examining Committees for the James Ossuary and the Jehoash Inscription," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29/5 (2003): 27–31.

3. For a general introduction to seals, with further references, see Dana M. Pike, "Seals and Sealing among Ancient and Latter-day Israelites," in *Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 101–17. The standard scholarly reference for Israelite stamp seals is now Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, The Israel Exploration Society, and The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997).

4. See, for example, the comments about the large number of unprovenanced seals and bullae by Hershel Shanks, "The Mystery of the Bullae," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29/1 (2003): 6. Curiously, Shanks does not even mention the forgery dilemma. Christopher A. Rollston, in his presentation "Epigraphic Fakes and Frauds: The Anatomy of a Forgery" at the 2002 Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in Toronto, Canada, provided strong evidence that some seals and bullae are probably forgeries.

5. Regarding writing on metal plates in antiquity, see, for example, H. Curtis Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:273–334; Paul R. Cheesman, "External Evidences of the Book of Mormon," in *By Study and Also*

by Faith, 2:78–84; William J. Hamblin, “Sacred Writings on Bronze Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean” (FARMS paper, 1994); John L. Sorenson, “Metals and Metallurgy Relating to the Book of Mormon Text” (FARMS paper, 1992); John A. Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: “Out of Darkness unto Light”* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 41–57.

6. This and all biblical quotations in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.

7. For a thorough study of the Deir ‘Alla texts, which refer to a seer named Balaam (see Numbers 22–24), see Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allā* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1980). For a recent treatment of the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscriptions, see Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 370–405. See also Lawrence E. Stager, “The Shechem Temple where Abimelech Massacred a Thousand,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29/4 (2003): 33, who suggests that the large, uninscribed stela at ancient Shechem (Tell Balata) had once contained an inscription on a coating of plaster that has not survived.

8. Various strands of evidence indicate that papyrus was much more common than leather as a writing medium in preexilic Israel. See, for example, Meir Bar-Ilan, “Papyrus,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. Eric M. Meyers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4:246; Peter T. Daniels, “Writing Materials,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology*, 5:360–61; and Menahem Haran, “Book-Scrolls in Israel in Pre-Exilic Times,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33/1–2 (1982): 161–73.

9. For a general introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls, see, for example, Donald W. Parry and Dana M. Pike, eds., *LDS Perspectives on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997). To read these texts in translation, see, for example, Géza Vermès, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

10. See Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 39–40, for examples of the diversity of opinions on ancient literacy. For

other recent treatments of Israelite literacy, see, for example, Richard S. Hess, “Literacy in Iron Age Israel,” in *Windows into Old Testament History*, ed. V. Philips Long et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 82–102; James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), especially chapter 1; Aaron Demsky, “Literacy,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology*, 3:362–69; Alan R. Millard, “Literacy, Ancient Israelite,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Doubleday: New York, 1992), 4:337–40.

11. Israelite prophets *may* well have circulated their teachings in written form. The point is that we do not have evidence for this practice. What is preserved are episodes such as that recounted in Jeremiah 36:1–8 in which the Lord commanded Jeremiah to write the Lord’s words, after which Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch, was sent to the Temple Mount to read the text for other Israelites to hear. The Book of Mormon recounts that the multitude that assembled to hear King Benjamin was so large that his oral teachings were transcribed and “sent forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice” (Mosiah 2:8). But this could mean either that scribes went about reading Benjamin’s teachings or that numerous written texts were made available for private study. I think the former option is the more likely one.

12. As Millard observes in “Literacy: Ancient Israel,” 4:337, “from the book of Exodus onward [in the Old Testament], writing, books, and reading are mentioned frequently and without comment.” Examples include Deuteronomy 24:1–3; Joshua 24:26; 1 Samuel 10:25; 2 Samuel 11:14; 2 Kings 5:5–7; 10:1; 22:8–10; and Jeremiah 36. But again, these illustrations support literacy among the upper and middle classes, not among the lower class of producers.

On the Jewish practices of wearing phylacteries and attaching a mezuzah to a doorpost, see, for example, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Oxford University, 1997), s.v. “mezuzah,” and “tefillin.”

13. The fact that the 1QIsaiah<sup>a</sup> scroll (copied ca. 125–100 B.C.)

found in Qumran Cave 1 is ca. 24 feet long illustrates the practical challenge for anyone attempting to produce, collect, and store scripture “books” on papyrus or leather prior to the invention of the codex in the early Christian era (metal plates were more compact, of course, but could be heavy). Evidence such as that from Qumran suggests that in most cases groups of people, not individuals, possessed caches of scrolls. It would have been quite anomalous in ancient Israel if the brass plates were in Laban’s *individual* possession. This collection of plates was probably a resource for an extended family or portion of a community (1 Nephi 3:2–3, 12; 4:20–26).

14. The tentative nature of the broad categories of literacy in ancient Israel provided here cannot be sufficiently emphasized. There is no “hard evidence” on this matter. Likewise, comparisons of literacy rates between ancient and modern societies are fraught with challenges. However, one example of the variety of literary skills in a modern society may prove instructive. The following data and quotations derive from the answers given to “Frequently Asked Questions” on the website for the National Institute for Literacy ([www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html](http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html)). “The [United States] Workforce Investment Act of 1998 defines literacy as ‘an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society.’” According to the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, about 50 percent of the adult population of the United States had only level 1 or level 2 literacy (out of five levels, 5 being the most literate; data from the 2002 survey are not yet available). “Literacy experts believe that adults with skills at Levels 1 and 2 lack a sufficient foundation of basic skills to function successfully in our society.” Thus, about half of the adult population in the United States is comprised of people “with low literacy skills who lack the foundation they need to find and keep decent jobs, support their children’s education, and participate actively in civic life.” The degree of partial literacy or illiteracy is even greater in less developed modern societies and in ancient societies.

15. The translations that follow are mine, based on published photographs and transcriptions, and are intended to be quite literal in order to preserve the “flavor” of the Hebrew originals. Minor restorations in the texts are not noted, while more significant ones are included in square brackets: [ ]. Words included in parentheses, ( ), are provided to help make a smoother translation. Line numbers have not been indicated.

16. Rather than repeatedly citing basic references in the following notes, I have listed the most common and recent English translations of the inscriptions mentioned in this article in appendix 2 (pages 230–31), arranged by date of publication.

17. The major English publication of the Arad ostraca is Yohanan Aharoni, *Arad Inscriptions*, rev. and enlarged by Anson Rainey, trans. Judith Ben-Or (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981).

18. A *bath* is a measure of volume of about 20–30 liters.

19. Although the term Kittim designates various groups during the Second Temple period, it generally refers to Cyprus and the Aegean isles in the Old Testament (see, e.g., Jeremiah 2:10; Ezekiel 27:6).

20. Although it is not apparent from the translation, two different symbols are used in this message to indicate the type and size of the measure of flour that was to be distributed. The symbol in the second instance (line 6) is the same symbol found in Arad ostracon 1 (see above) and is generally interpreted to represent a *homer*, a unit of dry measure of about 150–75 liters. The first symbol in ostracon 18 (line 5) may represent a *letech*, another unit of dry measure, equal to about half a homer.

21. The original publication of the first batch of Lachish ostraca in Harry Torczyner et al., *Lachish (Tell ed-Duweir)*, vol. 1, *The Lachish Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), provides general information on their discovery and contents, along with photographs and translations. Many of the textual readings and the assertions about their historical context need revising in light of later data and interpretation. See the more recent studies cited in appendix 2, pages 230–31.

22. In the original publication of the first eighteen Lachish ostraca, Torczyner, *Lachish Letters*, 64–72, developed an elaborate theory to demonstrate that the unnamed “prophet” referred to in Lachish ostrakon 3 must be the prophet Urijah mentioned in Jeremiah 26. Despite his assertion that his theory “seems now proved” (p. 72), his attempts to mitigate the differences between the names and dates in these two texts have not been accepted by modern scholars. Latter-day Saint scholar Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 382–83, followed Torczyner in declaring “the prophet” of Lachish ostrakon 3 to be the Urijah attested in Jeremiah 26, but, again, there is no real basis for this connection, and there are a number of assumptions of scribal error required for this to work.

23. See the previous note.

24. The translation “If (my lord) [cam]e during the morning watch” represents a general consensus on how to interpret this challenging line. See Dennis Pardee’s alternative rendition in William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 3, *Archival Documents from the Biblical World* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 3:80.

25. Many scholars, beginning with Torczyner, *Lachish Letters*, 17 and 80, have suggested the term *delet* in Lachish ostrakon 4, line 3, refers to a sheet of papyrus. R. Lansing Hicks, “DELET AND MEGILLĀH: A Fresh Approach to Jeremiah xxxvi,” *Vetus Testamentum* 33/1 (1983): 52–53, asserted that the Lachish *delet* was a waxed writing board. Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 384 and 403 n. 7, speculated that the Hebrew word *delet* on Lachish ostrakon 4 referred to a metal plate. Since the word *delet* used in relation to a writing medium in ancient Israel occurs only here and in Jeremiah 36:23—where it clearly refers to something that was cut and burned, presumably papyrus—the suggestion that it here refers to a metal plate is without any real support.

26. See, for example, 1 Kings 12:27; 2 Kings 18:17; Ezra 1:3, 5; Matthew 20:17; John 2:12; Acts 15:2; 25:1.

27. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 5.

28. Nibley frequently declared as fact claims and assumptions that, while possible, go beyond any actual evidence. For example, he specifically claimed that Lachish ostracon 6 refers to Jeremiah, whose name is not mentioned in any Lachish ostraca; see, for example, Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 40: “Lachish letter No. 6, in denouncing the prophet Jeremiah for spreading defeatism both in the country and in the city, shows . . .”; *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 120 n. 68: “Jeremiah seems to have been the leader of the opposition to the government party, to judge by the Lachish Letters”; *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 384: “From the Lachish Letters we learn that Jeremiah himself made use of other writings circulating at that time, including the Lachish Letters themselves.” Furthermore, Nibley’s claim, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 385, again following Torczyner, that “Jeremiah 38:4, in fact, is a direct quotation from Letter 6,” is false. The relevant words in Jeremiah 38:4 are *mrp’ t ydy nšy hmlhḡmh*, literally “he [Jeremiah] is slackening the hands of the men of war” (i.e., he is discouraging them). The relevant words in Lachish ostracon 6, lines 6–7, are *l’ tbm lrpt ydyk[ . . . wlhš] qṭ ydy h’[nšm . . . ]*, literally “[someone’s words] are not good, slackening your hands and making quiet the hands of the m[en . . . ].” A familiar idiom is employed in both passages, but this is not a quotation. Even if the wording were the same, how would one prove such a claim? Various combinations of the verb *rph*, “to slacken, loosen” (*rp’* in Jeremiah 38:4 is an alternate form), and the noun *yad*, “hand,” are preserved in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, including 2 Samuel 4:1; Isaiah 13:7; 35:3; Jeremiah 6:24; 50:43; Ezekiel 21:7 (21:12 in Hebrew).

29. As an example of a dated assertion, Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 381, accepted the unfounded reading of Lachish ostracon 4 that “we can *no longer* see the signal-fires of Azeqah” and thus inaccurately claimed that this supports Jeremiah 34:7, that the city Azeqah had fallen, leaving only Lachish and Jerusalem when the ostraca were written (cf. the discussion above). Likewise, Nibley’s statement in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake

City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 96 (cf. *Lehi in the Desert*, 5), that the Lachish ostraca were “written at the very time of the fall of Jerusalem,” by which he presumably means 586 B.C., is inaccurate according to our current understanding (see discussion above). Note that in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 387, Nibley stated that “the Lachish Letters . . . date to 589–588 B.C.”

30. In addition to the references in appendix 2, pages 230–31, see the summary report of the discovery of these amulets and other artifacts by Gabriel Barkay, “Excavations at Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem,” in *Ancient Jerusalem Revealed*, ed. Hillel Geva, reprinted and expanded ed. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 85–106. Pages 102–5 deal with the amulets themselves.

31. William J. Adams Jr. published two short notes on these two silver amulets, rightly noting the support they offer for the use of metal as a medium for scripture texts in the time of Lehi. Unfortunately, Adams inaccurately refers to these silver rolls as “plates” a total of five times in these two notes. See “Lehi’s Jerusalem and Writing on Silver Plates,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 204–6; and “More on the Silver Plates from Lehi’s Jerusalem,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 136–37. These were reprinted in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 23–28.

32. The linking of actual seals or impressions with biblically attested persons is an assumption based on probability. If a seal or impression contains a name + patronym combination that is also attested in the Bible and if the seal or impression is dated to about the time of the person mentioned in the Bible, then a connection between the seal or impression and the biblical person is *assumed*, but it generally cannot be proven.

33. Avigad and Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, 175 #417.

34. A theophoric personal name is one that contains a divine name or title, in this case the suffixed *-yahu*, an abbreviated form of YHWH/Yahweh/Jehovah, in Berekyahu. Abbreviated forms of the



divine name YHWH in Israelite personal names are usually rendered in English Bibles as Jo-/Jeho- (from *yo-* and *yeho-*; e.g., Jonathan, Jehoram) and -iah/-jah (from *-yah* and *-yahu*; e.g., Neriah, Jeremiah, Elijah). The shorter form “Baruch” preserved in the Masoretic Text is a hypocoristicon of the theophoric form Berekyahu. On the difference in vocalization between Baruch and Berekyahu, compare the name of the Levitical porter/gatekeeper Shelemiah (1 Chronicles 26:1–2, 12–14) with the name Shallum (1 Chronicles 9:17–19), generally considered to belong to the same person. On Israelite names in general, see the LDS Bible Dictionary, s.v., “Names of persons”; and Dana M. Pike, “Names,” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 733–34. See also Dana M. Pike, “Names, Hypocoristic,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:1017–18, and “Names, Theophoric,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:1018–19.

35. Avigad and Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, 163 #390.

36. *Ibid.*, 191 #470.

37. *Ibid.*, 181 #431. Extending the inscriptional evidence of this family is a seal that is inscribed with the words “belonging to Asalyahu son of Meshullam,” which probably belonged to Azaliah, the father of Shaphan, mentioned in 2 Kings 22:3.

38. Avigad and Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, 175 #414.

39. On the debate over the title “son of the king,” which may have served as a title for officials who were not sired by the king but were probably part of the broader royal family, see, for example, Nahman Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: Remnants of a Burnt Archive* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), 27–28; and Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Has the Seal of Mulek Been Found?” forthcoming in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (2003).

40. Avigad and Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, 55 #15.

41. See the forthcoming study by Chadwick, “Has the Seal of Mulek Been Found?”

42. Two further examples of individuals named on a seal and a bulla who may also be mentioned in the Bible are included here. A beautiful seal from about 600 B.C. found at Tel en-Nasbeh, ancient Mizpah, has a carving of a cock beneath two registers of text: “belonging to

Ya'azanyahu, servant of the king." Avigad and Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, 52 #8. The Hebrew word *'ebed*, "slave, servant," functions as a title for an official when used in this context and does not refer to an actual slave. The latter did not own seals. Perhaps this seal belonged to the Jaazaniah mentioned in 2 Kings 25:23 or Jeremiah 40:8. A bulla from Lachish that also dates to the early 500s B.C. reads: "belonging to Gedalyahu, the royal steward." Avigad and Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, 172 #405. The title "royal steward" (literally, "one who is over the house" of the king) is well attested in the Bible; see, for example, 1 Kings 18:3; 2 Kings 18:18, 37; Isaiah 22:15. It is possible that this impression was made by a seal belonging to Gedaliah son of Ahikam, who was installed as governor of Judah by the Babylonians after they removed King Zedekiah from the throne in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:22; Jeremiah 40–41).

43. The pictures were incised at the same time as the texts, but scholarly interpretation of them varies, just as with the reading of the texts. One of the human figures appears to be playing a lyre and one, wearing an odd headdress and robe, has his arms raised in prayer.

44. Joseph Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave," *Israel Exploration Journal* 13 (1963): 74–92; Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, 405–38, 692–93.

45. For example, Klaas A. D. Smelik, *Writings from Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 165, dates these inscriptions to "the end of the monarchy." Frank M. Cross Jr., "The Cave Inscriptions from Khirbet Beit Lei," in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. James A. Sanders (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 304, asserts that these inscriptions "are safely dated to the sixth century," the 500s B.C. This broad dating encompasses the late preexilic, the exilic, and even the early postexilic periods.

46. Examples of presumed postexilic features include phrasing that occurs in the Bible only in postexilic books such as Chronicles; the shorter, Aramaic form of Judah = *Yehud*, according to one rendition of Khirbet Beit Lei inscription A; and curses, perhaps aimed at tomb robbers, pertinent if the burial really dates to the Persian

period. See further the discussion of John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 1, *Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 57; and Smelik, *Writings from Ancient Israel*, 165–66.

47. Naveh, “Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave,” 84; Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, 424. Zevit conveniently provides a comparison of several published translations, including Naveh’s, as well as his own rendition (pp. 417–24). Note that Zevit provides a different enumeration of these inscriptions. Thus, Khirbet Beit Lei inscription A is designated “Stop 5, upper inscription,” by him. See various other transcriptions and translations compared and contrasted in Johannes Renz and Wolfgang Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 1:245–48.

48. Naveh, “Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave,” 86; Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, 426.

49. Naveh, “Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave,” 86; Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, 430.

50. For a review of such claims, see LaMar C. Berrett, “The So-Called Lehi Cave,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 64–66, 79. See the comments of Hershel Shanks, “Is the Mormon Figure Lehi Connected with a Prophetic Inscription near Jerusalem?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 14/6 (1988): 19.

51. See Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Lehi and Sariah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 30–31, and the responses to Hoskisson’s note by Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Dana M. Pike, and John A. Tvedtnes, plus a final response from Hoskisson (pp. 32–39).

52. Pierre Boudreuil, Felice Israel, and Dennis Pardee, “King’s Command and Widow’s Plea: Two New Hebrew Ostraca of the Biblical Period,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 61/1 (1998): 2–13, is the English version of the original French publication of these texts. See further Hershel Shanks, “Three Shekels for the Lord,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 23/6 (1997): 28–32. Concerns about authenticity have been raised by Israel Eph‘al and Joseph Naveh, “Remarks on the Recently Published Moussaieff Ostraca,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 48/3–4 (1998): 269–73; and Angelika Berlejung and Andreas

Schüle, “Erwägungen zu den neuen Ostraka aus der Sammlung Moussaieff,” *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 11/1 (1998): 68–73. Pardee briefly rebuts these concerns and provides additional bibliography in Hallo and Younger, *Context of Scripture*, 3:86–87. See also the recent comments by Hershel Shanks, “The ‘Three Shekels’ and ‘Widow’s Plea’ Ostraca: Real or Fake?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29/3 (2003): 40–44.

53. Shanks, “Three Shekels for the Lord,” 31, indicates that regarding Moussaieff ostrakon 1, Israeli scholar Ada Yardeni agrees with Boudreauil, Israel, and Pardee that the paleography dates it to the late seventh century B.C. But he also reports, based on personal communication, that Frank M. Cross and P. Kyle McCarter “date the handwriting more than a century earlier.”

54. It is presumed by those who date this ostrakon to the late seventh century B.C. that the name Ashyahu represents a variation of the name Josiah. Both names consist of a form of the verb *ʾwsh* + *yah(u)*. Another option is that the name Ashyahu represents the inversion of the two elements of the name Joash. Such inversion is represented in the Bible, for example, in the name Jehoiachin/Corniah. However, both Israelite kings named Joash ruled in the ninth century, earlier than the generally accepted dating of this ostrakon.

55. See the convenient discussion of letters/epistles in the Old Testament in Dennis Pardee et al., *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982), 169–82.

56. This brief survey of letters of communication cannot deal with the different purposes for which letters were written, the relationship of the correspondents, or other factors that affected to some degree the length and style of a letter in both these cultures. For a convenient discussion of such factors in relation to letters in ancient Hebrew, see Pardee et al., *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters*, 153–64. Nor does this brief survey deal with fragments of letters or references to letters (as opposed to quotations) in the text of scripture.

57. See further Pike, “Seals and Sealing,” 103–14.

58. See note 34, above.

59. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscription* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986), 36.

60. See David Rolph Seely, “Chronology, Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey et al. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 197–99. For an alternative perspective on the chronology of this time period in connection with Lehi and Zedekiah, see Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance,” in this volume, pages 81–130.

61. A more complete but already somewhat dated list of Israelite inscriptions is found in Sandra L. Gogel, *A Grammar of Epigraphic Hebrew* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 23–25.