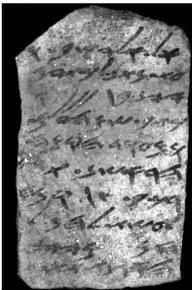
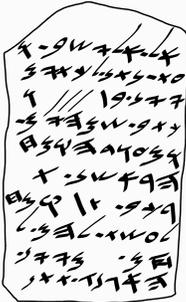


Ancient Hebrew Letters

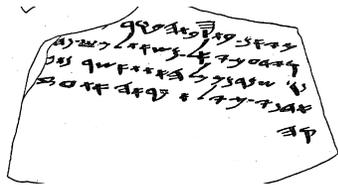
The most ancient artifacts of the Hebrew language are non-literary writings of ink on ostraca (pieces of broken pottery, or potsherds). Ostraca were frequently used for receipts and lists of various kinds, but a significant number of those discovered are short private letters. In Arad, along the southern border of ancient Judah, archaeologists uncovered a collection of letters regarding the movement of military troops and provisions. The *Kittiyim* mentioned often in the Arad letters appear to be hired mercenary soldiers.

Arad Ostracon 1 (text and translation of lines 1–4)

| | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|---|
|  |  | <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>אל אלישב ו עת נתן לכתיים וין ב \ \ \ ו כתב שם הים</p> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>To Eliyashib: and now, give to the Kittiyim wine: 1 b(ath), 3 (hin), and write the name of the day.</p> </td> </tr> </table> | <p>אל אלישב ו עת נתן לכתיים וין ב \ \ \ ו כתב שם הים</p> | <p>To Eliyashib: and now, give to the Kittiyim wine: 1 b(ath), 3 (hin), and write the name of the day.</p> |
| <p>אל אלישב ו עת נתן לכתיים וין ב \ \ \ ו כתב שם הים</p> | <p>To Eliyashib: and now, give to the Kittiyim wine: 1 b(ath), 3 (hin), and write the name of the day.</p> | | | |

Another significant discovery is the collection of letters uncovered within the burned out city gate of Lachish, in the Shephela region of ancient Judah. Lachish was one of the last centers of military defense against the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., and the gate was burned at that time. These letters shed light upon the military preparations and the general mood of the people during the last days of the kingdom of Judah.

Lachish Ostracon 4, Reverse (text and translation of lines 10–13)

| | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
|  | <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>וידע כי אל משאת לכש נח נו שמרמ ככל האתת אשר נתנ אדני כי לא נראה את עז קה</p> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>And know that to the signal-stations of Lachish we are watching according to all the signs that my lord gave, for we cannot see Aze- -qah</p> </td> </tr> </table> | <p>וידע כי אל משאת לכש נח נו שמרמ ככל האתת אשר נתנ אדני כי לא נראה את עז קה</p> | <p>And know that to the signal-stations of Lachish we are watching according to all the signs that my lord gave, for we cannot see Aze- -qah</p> |
| <p>וידע כי אל משאת לכש נח נו שמרמ ככל האתת אשר נתנ אדני כי לא נראה את עז קה</p> | <p>And know that to the signal-stations of Lachish we are watching according to all the signs that my lord gave, for we cannot see Aze- -qah</p> | | |

A letter from Yavneh Yam was written by a farm worker to his overseer regarding the confiscation of his cloak in a legal dispute. The Biblical law codes provide relevant background for interpreting the letter (Exod 22:25–27; Deut 24:12–15, 17).

Exodus 22:25–27 (see also Deut 24:12–15, 17)

25 If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. 26 If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; 27 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.

Yavneh Yam Ostrakon (text and translation of line 8b–12a)

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|--|---|---|
| | <p>6 כאשר כלת את קצרי זה יממ לקח את בגד עבדכ וכל אחי יענו לי הקצרמ אתי בחמ [השמש כל] אחי יענו לי אמנ נקתי מא [שמ לכנ ישב את] בגדי</p> | <p>^{8b}When I completed ⁹my harvest these days, he took the garment of your servant! ¹⁰And all of my fellows, who are harvesting with me in the heat ¹¹of the sun, will bear witness for me. All my fellows will bear witness for me! Surely, I am innocent from ¹²guilt. Come, let him return my garment.</p> |
|--|---|---|

These letters show us some of the ancient Israelite letter-writing conventions. Many of the letters begin by identifying the addressee and/or a formulaic greeting, but few mention the sender. One exceptional letter from Lachish identifies both the sender and the addressee and includes a formulaic greeting:

עבדך הושעיהו להגד לאדני ישמע יהוה את אדני שמעת שלם
 “Your servant Hoshiyahu has sent to tell my lord Yaush: May Yhwh grant my lord to hear peaceable news.” (Lachish 3:1–3)

The transition from the opening to the body of the letter is often made with one of two formulaic phrases: ועת “and now” or the more rhetorical charged מי עבדך כלב כי “Who is your servant (but) a dog that . . .”. The latter is limited to letters written to a superior. The earliest Hebrew letters notably lack a closing formula of any sort, which may simply be due to their brevity.

Although Aramaic letters exist in the biblical book of Ezra, Hebrew letters are preserved only as fragments in the Bible. For example, the letter fragments in the Bible never mention the sender or addressee since these are introduced in the narrative frame. They also lack the opening greeting. The only formulaic remnant is the periodic use of ועתָה “and now” (2 Kgs 5:6; 10:2–3).