

THE DISTRIBUTION OF MESSAGES IN THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH IN LIGHT OF THE LACHISH OSTRACA

by

NADAV NA'AMAN

Tel Aviv

Limitations of the available sources

Understanding the mechanism of the distribution of political and ideological messages from the centre to peripheral areas is a major problem in the study of the control and administration, society and culture, in the ancient Near East. Contacts between the centre and the kingdom's districts and periphery, and the persuasion of the inhabitants by the messages delivered from the central authority, were of vital importance. The king and his court made great efforts and used various forms of written, pictorial and verbal means to disseminate their positions with regard to the ongoing issues. The issue of propaganda, the political and ideological messages conveyed to the public and the ways by which they were distributed to the public, have been repeatedly discussed in recent research, and this is not my concern here. Scholars working on the problem of communication and the distribution of various kinds of messages in the ancient Near East, have a rich corpus of documents and many kinds of pictorial evidence. The rich material enables them to produce a thorough and comprehensive discussion on the problem of communication, with all its technical, cultural and ideological aspects.¹

¹ For a general survey, see H.D. Lasswell, D. Lerner and H. Speier (eds.), *Propaganda and Communication in World History. I. The Symbolic Instrument of Early Times* (Honolulu, 1979); M.T. Larsen (ed.), *Power and Propaganda. A Symposium on Ancient Empires* (Mesopotamia 7; Copenhagen, 1979); M. Liverani, *Prestige and Interest. International Relations in the Near East ca. 1600-1100 B.C.* (Padova, 1990); idem., "Propaganda", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5 (New York, 1992), pp. 474-7, with earlier literature; R.J. Leprohon, "Royal Ideology and State Administration in Pharaonic Egypt", in J.M. Sasson (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 1 (New York, 1995), pp. 273-88; J.N. Postgate, "Royal Ideology and State Administration in Sumer and Akkad", in Sasson, *ibid.*, pp. 395-412; G. Beckman, "Royal Ideology and State Administration in Hittite Anatolia", in Sasson, *ibid.*, pp.

The situation in the study of the broad issue of communication in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the First Temple period is quite different. The Bible—the main text available for research—was written in order to convey religious and ideological messages to its readers, or to those who listened to public reading or verbal preaching of the text. Its objective of teaching must have prompted the writing of many of its compositions. Parts of the work must have been used for instruction, and their history and messages were composed in order to teach the readers/listeners religious and ethical lessons, to illustrate the ways of the God of Israel in the history of his people and to instruct them in the ways of YHWH.

However, the ways in which the central authorities of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah operated, and the concrete steps they took to disseminate messages among the populace are rarely described in the Bible. Technical matters of this kind did not concern the authors of the biblical history. Moreover, most of the events related in the Bible were first put in writing hundreds of years after the period to which they were assigned. Many episodes are 'literary', lacking concrete historical foundations, and in other cases it is not clear whether the episodes reflect the reality of the author's time, or were detached from reality. It is therefore extremely difficult to draw conclusions about the ways by which news and ideological messages were conveyed to the public at the time that they took place.

In addition to the Bible, we have epigraphic sources unearthed in archaeological excavations conducted in the areas of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The number of these primary sources is small and the information they relate is limited in scope and quality, so that until now their contribution to the study of communication and distribution of messages in the two kingdoms remains minimal.

Let me give a concrete example in order to illustrate the problem of the distribution of messages in the kingdom of Judah and the limitations of the sources available for us. According to biblical description, king Josiah carried out a cult reform in his eighteenth year, in the course of which he made radical changes in the temple of Jerusalem, closed cult places in cities all over Judah and transferred their priests to Jerusalem (2 Kgs xxiii 1-14). Later he expanded the cult reform to

529-44; M.I. Marcus, "Art and Ideology in Ancient Western Asia", in Sasson, *ibid.*, 4, pp. 2487-506.

Bethel, destroyed the temple located there, and annihilated its priesthood (verses 15-18). Then he carried out a reform in the highlands of Samaria, where he abolished the cult places and priests (verses 19-20).

Scholars debate the historicity and scope of the reform, and some have dismissed the narrative altogether.² But these scholars have not been able to point out an alternative source for many of the eliminated cult practices mentioned in the text, if it does not reflect the reality of the late seventh century Judah. Assuming for the moment that the cult reform was fictional, and was written in the exilic or post-exilic period, the cult practices related in 2 Kings xxiii must therefore find correlation in the cult of either the Babylonian or the Persian empire in the sixth-fifth centuries BCE. The only clear parallels that I know of point to the late Assyrian empire and to Judah's neighbours in the seventh century BCE.³ Considering the great detail of the description, which has no parallel in other reform accounts in the Books of Kings, and the mention of so many specific details that do not appear in any other biblical text, the author of the Books of Kings must have described a genuine historical event of the time of king Josiah.⁴

Some scholars, while admitting the historicity of the cult reform (*Kultreinigung*) dismissed the idea of a concentration of the cult in Jerusalem (*Kultzentralisation*).⁵ I don't find their arguments convincing

² See, for example, E. Würthwein, "Die Josianische Reform und das Deuteronomium", *ZThK* 73 (1976), pp. 395-423; C. Levin, "Joschija im deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk", *ZAW* 96 (1984), pp. 351-71; L.K. Handy, "Historical Probability and the Narrative of Josiah's Reform in 2 Kings", in S.W. Holloway and L.K. Handy (eds.), *The Pitcher is Broken. Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström* (JSOTS 190; Sheffield, 1995), pp. 252-75; H. Niehr, "Die Reform des Joschija", in W. Gross (ed.), *Jeremia und die "deuteronomistische Bewegung"* (Weinheim, 1995), pp. 33-55. For further literature, see B. Gieselmann, "Die sogenannte josianische Reform in der gegenwärtigen Forschung", *ZAW* 106 (1994), pp. 236-7.

³ The most comprehensive work was written by H. Spieckermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* (FRLANT 129; Göttingen, 1982). See recently C. Uehlinger, "Gab es eine joschijianische Kultreform? Plädoyer für ein begründetes Minimum", in W. Gross (ed.), *Jeremia und die "deuteronomistische Bewegung"* (Weinheim, 1995), pp. 71-81, with earlier literature.

⁴ The description of the cult reform carried out in the province of Samaria was most probably interpolated at a late stage and is not part of the original account of Josiah's reform. Verses 19-20 (or rather vv. 16^b-20) were inserted by a redactor, who inserted the story of 1 Kgs xiii and worked in the description of the elimination of the cult place of Bethel (vv. 15-16^a). See, e.g., P. Welten, *Die Königs Stempel* (Wiesbaden, 1969), p. 163, with earlier literature in n. 21; G.S. Ogden, "The Northern Extent of Josiah's Reforms", *Australian Biblical Review* 26 (1978), pp. 31-3; Spieckermann, *ibid.*, pp. 116-19, 427-28, with earlier literature.

⁵ See the literature cited by Uehlinger (n. 3), p. 71 n. 64.

at all, and very much doubt the separation of the two measures. The suggestion that the theme of cult centralization in the city of Jerusalem was born in Babylonia, at a time when there was no hope of return, seems odd. The centrality of Jerusalem in the Kingdom of Judah in the seventh century BCE was so remarkable that we can speak of the kingdom as being a kind of a city-state, in which the great capital city dominated a large territory that supplied all the needs of its population and elite. The political, demographic, administrative, social, cultic and cultural situation in seventh century BCE Judah, coupled with the belief in the divine immunity of Jerusalem that developed after its deliverance from the 701 BCE Assyrian campaign, and the great sanctity attributed to its ancient temple—all these explain the emergence of the concentration law in the Book of Deuteronomy and the efforts to implement it in the time of king Josiah.

The integral operation of a cult reform with cult centralization was the work of a school that gained power briefly under king Josiah, and was probably displaced after the king's death.⁶ The historical work that describes Josiah's restoration of the temple and his cult reform was written soon after the events and reflects what was taking place at that time. Unfortunately, no archaeological or epigraphic evidence for the reform has so far been found, and the reconstruction of the episode depends entirely on the biblical account.

Some of the cult places closed by Josiah must have existed from early times and were dedicated to YHWH. Most remarkable was the cult place of Bethel, which was founded not later than the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel by Jeroboam I (late tenth century BCE), a site whose cult tradition was associated with Jacob, the eponymous ancestor of the northern Israelite tribes, and which served as the main cult centre for the inhabitants of the central hill country for hundreds of years. Josiah also destroyed the statue of Asherah that stood in the temple of Jerusalem, and which must have enjoyed great popularity among the inhabitants of the kingdom. He did away with other installations (such as the altars to the heavenly host, the Tophet in the

⁶ R. Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit* (ATD Ergänzungsreihe 8/1; Göttingen, 1992), pp. 304-21, 361-66; idem, "Wer waren die Deuteronomisten? Das historische Rätsel einer literarischen hypothese", *EvTh* 57 (1997), pp. 319-38; F. Crüsemann, *The Torah. Theology and Social History of the old Testament Law* (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 265-72; N. Lohfink, "Gab es eine deuteronomistische Bewegung?", in W. Gross (ed.), *Jeremia und die "deuteronomistische Bewegung"* (Weinheim, 1995), pp. 352-8.

Valley of Hinnom, and the horses and chariots dedicated to the sun) that played part in the cult of Jerusalem, cancelled cult practices related to them, and prohibited divinatory customs that have been practised for generations in the Kingdom of Judah.

By what means did the king and his followers justify their moves and explain to the elite and the populace the cultic reform that contradicted in many ways their ancestral traditions? Josiah must have cited the laws of the Book of Deuteronomy and claimed that his acts were the restoration of former glory. The reform was legitimized by the claim that it had been promulgated by Moses in the formation period of Israel, but the old laws have been forgotten and neglected for many generations, until Josiah undertook to restore the original, forgotten laws.⁷ The evidence for the antiquity of the commandments, statutes and judgments was found in the “book of the law” (2 Kgs xxii 8, 11), also called “the book of covenant” (2 Kgs xxiii 2, 21), which was the book ‘discovered’ in the course of Josiah’s temple restoration. The work describing the history of Israel from the wandering in the wilderness to the time of Josiah (the Deuteronomistic History) was also written as part of the reform, and was composed in order to supply a solid historical basis for the act of reform.⁸

Although the general framework of the reform could have been drawn from the biblical text, at least in general and schematic outlines, we know nothing about the ways that it was carried out in practice. How were instructions conveyed to the officials located all over the kingdom? How were the religious and ideological messages connected with the cult reform spread among the kingdom’s inhabitants? Did

⁷ There are some examples of manipulation that Mesopotamian kings did on past events in order to legitimize their deeds in the present. See, e.g., W.G. Lambert, “Studies in Marduk”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47 (1984), pp. 4-5; P. Machinist, “The Assyrians and Their Babylonian Problem: Some Reflections”, *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin—Jahrbuch* (Berlin, 1984/1985), pp. 353-64; H. Tadmor, “Monarchy and the Elite in Assyria and Babylonia: The Question of Royal Accountability”, in S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (New York, 1986), pp. 214-23; M. deJong Ellis, “Observations on Mesopotamian Oracles and Prophetic Texts: Literary and Historiographic Observations”, *JCS* 41 (1989), pp. 178-86, with earlier literature.

⁸ For the composition of the Deuteronomistic history as an integral element of Josiah’s reform, see N. Na’aman, “Historiography, the Fashioning of the Collective Memory, and the Establishment of Historical Consciousness in Israel in the Late Monarchical Period”, *Zion* 60 (1995), pp. 460-70 (Hebrew); idem, *The Past that Shapes the Present. The Creation of Biblical Historiography in the Late First Temple Period and After the Downfall* (Jerusalem, 2002) (Hebrew).

Josiah sent supporters of the 'new' religion to the districts of the kingdom, to move from place to place, spreading the new messages and making efforts to convince the officials and elite of the justification of the steps taken by the king? Did Josiah send letters to the main population centres and direct the officials to read them in public places? Were central messages of the history conveyed to the high officials and elite in the major cities, in an effort to persuade them to support the reform and disseminate these messages among the populace? There are no answers to these questions either in the Bible or in the epigraphic material.

With this background in mind, I would like to call attention to the Lachish ostraca that illustrate the ways in which news was spread among officials of the Kingdom of Judah in the late First Temple period. It must be emphasized that the contribution of the ostraca to the study of propaganda and the distribution of messages is confined to one aspect: the spread of news about the current situation. However, being primary sources and dated to the late First Temple Period, they illustrate the concrete situation on the eve of the kingdom's downfall. Thus they may indirectly shed some light on the distribution of messages during Josiah's reform, which took place not long before the writing of the ostraca, in a territorial-administrative reality that had not changed in the short time that had elapsed.

The distribution of messages among officials in the late First Temple period

16 ostraca were discovered in a room of the gate of Stratum II at Lachish during the 1935 excavations.⁹ Since three ostraca (Nos. 2, 3, 6) were sent to Ya'ush, apparently the commander of the city of Lachish in the early sixth century BCE, it is commonly accepted that he was the owner of the archive. The name of the writer (Hosha'yahu) is mentioned only in one ostrakon (No. 3), and since Torczyner's pub-

⁹ H. Torczyner, *Lachish I (Tell ed Duweir): The Lachish Letters* (London, 1938); H. Michaud, "Les ostraca de Lakiš conservés à Londres", *Syria* 34 (1957), pp. 39-60; A. Lemaire, *Inscriptions Hébraïques. I: Les ostraca* (Paris, 1977), pp. 83-143; D. Pardee, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters* (Chico, 1982), pp. 67-114; J. Renz & W. Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik. I; Darmstadt, 1995*, pp. 405-40; B.Z. Begin, *As We Do Not See Azeqa. The Source of the Lachish Letters* (Jerusalem, 2000), with earlier literature on pp. 211-29 (Hebrew); J.A. Emerton, "Were the Lachish Letters Sent to or from Lachish?", *PEQ* 133 (2001), pp. 2-15.

lication of the ostraca in 1938, some scholars have assumed that the other letters were written by the same man. But this assumption is not without doubts. Five of the ostraca (Nos. 2, 6, 7, 8, 18) are fragments of the same pot and were sent from the same place, but there is no indication that Hosha'yahu wrote them. The difference in the opening lines between Hosha'yahu's letter and all other letters might indicate that he sent only Ostrakon No. 3. This is corroborated by a paleographic comparison of the ostraca, which indicates that they were composed by different scribes.¹⁰ The similarity in greetings and a few expressions (i.e., "who is your servant (but) a dog?"; Nos. 2, 5, 6), as well as in the conjunctions (*w'th*, *wky*, *w'nh*), reflects the scribal tradition as learned at school, and does not mean that the writer was the same.

The excavations at Lachish demonstrated its leading position in the Shephelah in the late monarchic period. An analysis of the ostraca shows that Ya'ush, the commander of Lachish, has established a wide network of communication and was in contact with several officials in the vicinity. We may assume that the ostraca arrived from several sites, not from one place as suggested by Torczyner and his followers.¹¹ It is also possible that a few ostraca (e.g., the name lists in Nos. 1, 10) were written at Lachish in the framework of the local administration.

The Lachish ostraca indicate that letters written on papyrus were sent together with ostraca. The letters, and possibly also the ostraca, are designated by the term *sēfer* (pl. *s'fārīm*). Following is a discussion of the distribution of these letters and their contents among several officials who operated in Lachish and nearby cities at that time.

(1) Ostrakon No. 18 has the following sentence: "Until evening [your se]rv[ant will send [by the hand² of Ṭ]obshalem ([*byd t]bšlm*) the letter, which my lord had sent to Azaryahu".¹² It indicates that Ya'ush had sent a letter (*sēfer*) to an official named Azaryahu, whose location is unknown. The writer of the ostrakon, who was perhaps near the road connecting the two places, promised to send it back the same day by a messenger called Ṭobshalem. The prompt dispatch of the letter ("until evening") indicates its importance, and it was probably written on papyrus and sent by Ya'ush to Azaryahu for consultation.

¹⁰ S. Birnbaum, "The Lachish Ostraca I", *PEQ* 71 (1939), pp. 20-3; see also R. de Vaux, "Les ostraka de Lachis", *RB* 48 (1939), p. 205.

¹¹ Begin (n. 9, pp. 162-73) suggested that all the ostraca were sent from the city of Maresha.

¹² For the restoration of the name Ṭobshalem, see Torczyner (n. 9), p. 192; Lemaire (n. 9), p. 132. The restoration [*byd*] ("by the hand of") is *ad sensum*.

Ostrakon No. 7 was broken from the same pot as No. 18 and most of its text is obliterated. Lines 4-6 may tentatively be restored thus: [. . . *ʔzr*]yhw spr b[yd ʔ]bšlm h[. . .]; “[. . . to Azri]yahu letter by [the hand^r of ʔ]obshalem, the [messenger^r]”. Ostrakon 7 probably preceded Ostrakon 18, and dealt with the delivery of the letter sent by Ya’ush to Azaryahu.

(2) In lines 3-7 of Ostrakon 5 an official wrote to Ya’ush as follows:¹³

Who is your servant (but) a dog that you have sent [in] this manner ([*k*]zʔt) the l[etters] (*hs*[*prm*])? to your servant. Your servant herewith returns the letters (*hsprm*) to my lord.

It is clear that, once again, letters sent to Ya’ush were forwarded by him to a neighbouring official, who, after reading them, sent them back to Ya’ush. The dispatch of letters from a high ranking official to one of lower rank is expressed by the special rhetoric—“who is your servant (but) a dog”; meaning that, although he was of lower rank, he had gained favour and his superior shared with him letters that he received.¹⁴

(3) Another indication for the forwarding of letters originally sent to Ya’ush to an official of lower rank, appears in Ostrakon No. 6. The text is partly obliterated and some of the restorations suggested below are uncertain.¹⁵

To my lord Ya’ush. May YHWH let my lord see this time in peace. Who is your servant (but) a dog that my lord sent (him) the king’s [lett]er ([*sp*]r *hmlk*) [and] the letters of the royal official[s] (*spry hsr*[*m*]) [sayi]ng: ‘read this’? And behold, the words of [the royal officials^r] are not good, because they slacken your determination [and make li]mp the hands of the m[en] who are inform[ed]^r? [. . . And now], my lord, should you not write to t[hem] as fol[lows]: ‘Wh]y are you doing this, and [in Jeru]salem^r,

¹³ Torczyner (n. 9), pp. 89-99; Pardee (n. 9), pp. 95-8.

¹⁴ For the term “dog” (*keleb*) to express a person’s subordination to a superior, see D.W. Thomas, “KELEBH ‘Dog’: Its origin and some usages of it in the Old Testament”, *VT* 10 (1960), pp. 410-27; J.M. Galán, “What is He, the Dog”, *UF* 25 (1993), pp. 173-80.

¹⁵ For the restorations and interpretations suggested for Ostrakon 6, see Torczyner (n. 9), pp. 101-19; de Vaux (n. 10), pp. 197-9; Lemaire (n. 9), pp. 120-4; Pardee (n. 9), pp. 98-103, with earlier literature; Renz (n. 9), pp. 425-7; D.W. Thomas, “Jerusalem in the Lachish Ostraca”, *PEQ* 78 (1946), pp. 86-91; K.A.D. Smelik, *Writings from Ancient Israel. A Handbook of Historical and Religious Documents* (Louisville, 1991), pp. 128-31.

be[ho]ld, to the king [and to his house²⁷] you are doing this deed'. As YHWH your God lives, [ev]er since your servant read the letters (*hsprm*) there was n[o rest for your] se[rvant].

Ya'ush sent several royal and official letters that he received from Jerusalem to the writer of the ostrakon, apparently a commander of one of the fortified cities in his neighbourhood, and asked for his advice. Having read the letters, the officer severely criticized the conduct of the royal officials, which perhaps contradicted the policy of the king (provided the restorations of lines 8-12 are correct). It is attractive to combine the ostrakon with what the Book of Jeremiah says about the bitter disputes in Jerusalem shortly before the final destruction, and the disagreements among the king and his royal officials concerning the policy vis-à-vis Babylonia. For the problem at hand, it is important to note that the commander of Lachish corresponded with the authorities in Jerusalem, and that he shared the letters he received with officers who commanded the fortified cities of the Shephelah.

(4) A reference to a letter that Ya'ush sent to an official named Hoshā'yahu, who was staying in a neighbouring city, appears in Ostrakon No. 3 (lines 1-13):¹⁶

Your servant Hoshā'yahu sent to inform my lord Ya'ush. May YHWH let my lord hear news of peace and news of good things.

And now, please explain to your servant the letter (*spr*) which you sent to your servant yesterday evening, because the heart of your servant has been sick since your sending (the letter) to your servant and because my lord said: 'You do not know how to read a letter (*spr*)'. As YHWH lives, no one has ever tried to read a letter (*spr*) to me! And also, every letter (*spr*) that comes to me, surely I read it, and moreover, I can repeat it completely!

At the beginning of his report Hoshā'yahu mentions a letter that he has just received from Ya'ush. In it Ya'ush rebuked him for not understanding an earlier letter he had sent him, and implied he should use

¹⁶ For the reading and interpretation of Ostrakon 3, see Torczyner (n. 9), pp. 45-73; Lemaire (n. 9), pp. 100-9; Pardee (n. 9), pp. 81-9, with earlier literature; Renz (n. 9), pp. 412-19; Smelik, *ibid.*, pp. 121-5; F.M. Cross, "A Literate Soldier: Lachish Letter III", in A. Kort and S. Morschauser (eds.), *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* (Winona Lake, 1985), pp. 41-7; W. Richter, "Lakīš 3—Vorschlag zur Konstitution eines Textes", *BN* 37 (1987), pp. 73-103; W.M. Schniedewind, "Sociolinguistic Reflections on the Letter of a 'Literate' Soldier (Lachish 3)", *ZAH* 13 (2000), pp. 157-66.

the services of an expert scribe. In answering the accusation, he swears by YHWH that he can read fluently and does not need the services of a scribe. Moreover, he is able to repeat to the last detail the words of a letter that he has read. Since ostraca were exchanged among neighbouring places in the Shephelah, apparently for economic reasons, the term 'letter' (*spr*) in line 5 ("And now, please explain to your servant the letter which you sent to your servant yesterday evening"), probably refers to an ostrakon that Ya'ush had sent him. If this is the case, it is the only occasion in the archive in which the word *spr* denotes a letter written on an ostrakon.¹⁷

(5) The last passage of Ostrakon No. 3 (lines 19-21) runs as follows:¹⁸

As to the letter (*spr*) of Ṭobiyahu, the servant of the king, which came to Shallum son of Yaddu'a, from the prophet, saying: 'be careful!'—your servant is sending it to my lord.

Hosha'yahu cites one word, *hiššamer* ('be careful'), from a letter sent by an unknown prophet and delivered to him by one Shallum son of Yaddu'a, whose place and office are not known. The letter was originally brought by Ṭobiyahu, who bore the title 'servant of the king' and held administrative office in the region (Ostrakon No. 5 line 10), and was now sent to Ya'ush for him to read. The fact that Hosha'yahu knows the content of the letter indicates that it was opened beforehand, and that Shallum was the addressee of the warning. Sending the letter to Ya'ush fits the practice we have noted of important letters arriving in the Shephelah being distributed among the senior officials who administered the fortified cities at that time.

(6) Writing on papyrus in one of the fortified cities of the Shephelah,

¹⁷ M. Haran ("On the Diffusion of Literacy and Schools in Ancient Israel", *SVT* 40 [1988], pp. 90-1, n. 21) suggested the noun *sēper* in biblical Hebrew denotes a scroll, and not an ostrakon. However, the combination *mt'gillat sēper* (Jer. xxxvi 4; Ezek. ii 9; Ps. xl 8) indicates that the *sēper* has different forms, and that the combination was coined to designate a scroll. Moreover, Haran did not consider the problem of how to designate a letter written on pottery. It might be suggested that the term *sēper* was flexible, and could sometimes have been used to designate an ostrakon of the kind discovered in the gate of Lachish.

¹⁸ The passage in which the prophet is mentioned has been repeatedly discussed by scholars. In addition to the commentaries enumerated in n. 9, see recently K.A.D. Smelik, "The Riddle of Tobiah's Document: Difficulties in the Interpretation of Lachish III, 19-21", *PEQ* 122 (1990), pp. 133-8; S.B. Parker, "The Lachish Letters and Official Reactions to Prophecies", in L.M. Hopfe (ed.), *Uncovering Ancient Stones. Essays in Memory of H. Neil Richardson* (Winona Lake, 1994), pp. 69-78; H.M. Barstad, "Lachish Ostrakon III and Ancient Israelite Prophecy", *Eretz Israel* 24 (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 8*-12*.

probably Mareshah, is mentioned in Ostrakon No. 4 (lines 2-4): "And now your servant has done everything that my lord sent. I have written down on a column (of a papyrus) (*delet*) everything that [you] sent me". The writer of the ostrakon states that, at the request of Ya'ush, he wrote a full report on a papyrus.¹⁹ In that report he probably described what had just occurred at his place (i.e., Mareshah), and stated that the letter was intended to be sent to Jerusalem in order to explain the case to the officials there.²⁰

Aharoni restored lines 11-12 of Ostrakon No. 40 from Arad, "And [E]sh[yah]u is staying [in my house], and he asked for the letter (*mktb*), [but] I [did not] give (it)". The letter mentioned in the ostrakon probably referred to the Edomite threat, and Eshyahu, possibly a royal messenger who visited the ostrakon's writers, asked to see it. It is not clear if they refused to show him the letter (as suggested by Aharoni), or not. Provided the restoration is correct, Eshyahu's request indicates that the reading of letters by a number of officials was common practice in Judah in the late First Temple period.

The analysis of Ya'ush's archive indicates that the ostraca uncovered in the gate of Lachish were part of a much wider correspondence, most of which written on papyrus. Ya'ush received letters from various places, including the capital city Jerusalem, and he distributed the letters he received among his subordinates in the fortified cities of the Shephelah, to update them and hear their reactions. The ostraca that he received and sent on to neighbouring officials were written concurrently with the main correspondence on papyrus, and were sometimes sent as additional notes. Ostraca were written in places where papyrus was unavailable, or in order to save expenses (note Ostrakon No. 4, written in a place where papyrus probably was available). The broad distribution of papyri and ostraca, as indicated in the Lachish archive, illustrates the ability of the educated elite to read and write in the late years of the Kingdom of Judah. It shows that high officials were literate and updated in the political issues of their time.

Ya'ush appears as a high official holding a military and administrative post, who corresponded with the royal court in Jerusalem and

¹⁹ For the term *delet* in the sense of "writing board", or "a column (of a papyrus)", see R.L. Hicks, "*delet* and *m'gillāh*. A fresh approach to Jeremiah xxxvi", *VT* 33 (1983), pp. 46-66, with earlier literature.

²⁰ For this interpretation of the ostrakon, see N. Na'aman, "The Fire Signals of Lachish Revisited", *PEQ* 131 (1999), pp. 65-7.

with neighbouring officials, and dealt with major and minor problems in Lachish and the surrounding cities. The forwarding of letters to his colleagues for their opinion indicates his political involvement and we may assume that he had a clear political position regarding what policy should be followed. Unfortunately, his position is not clarified by the ostraca.

Conclusions

The picture that emerges from the Lachish ostraca sheds some light on the questions posed in the first part of the article. It is evident that letters played an important part in the communication between the capital and cities near and far. Local officials were accustomed to share letters that they received with neighbouring colleagues. It seems that the officials and elite situated in the kingdom's districts were aware of the internal and external policies of the king and his court, and of the controversies in Jerusalem. Based on the information they received they were able to form their own opinion on the main problems debated at the time in the court of Jerusalem.

In this light we may speculate that the officials and local elite learned about Josiah's cult reform through these channels of communication, and it is possible that letters describing the implementation of the reform were dispatched and made known to them. However, we must not forget that the dispatch of letters and the spreading of news were only one aspect of the much broader issue of propaganda, the transmission of messages and ideologies, and their dissemination among kingdom's inhabitants. We need many more documents in order to better evaluate the fragmentary data conveyed in the biblical text.

Abstract

The article deals with the problem of communication between the capital city of Jerusalem and the kingdom's districts and the distribution of messages from the centre to the periphery in the late First Temple period. It calls attention to the Lachish ostraca that illustrate the ways in which news was spread among officials of the Kingdom of Judah. Letters played an important role in the communication and local officials were accustomed to share letters that they received with neighbouring colleagues. Based on the information they received the officials and local elite were aware of the internal and external policies of the king and his court and were able to form their own opinion on the main problems debated at the time in the court of Jerusalem.