

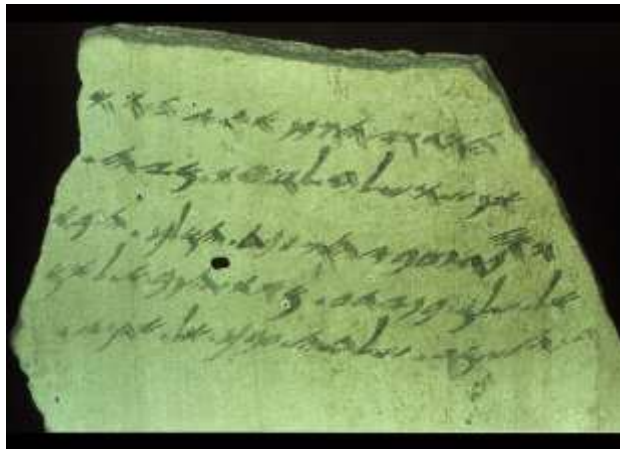
LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

THE LAST DAYS OF JUDAH (34, 37-40, 52)

The closing period of Jeremiah's life was a vindication of all he had predicted, terrible though it was. Jeremiah had prayed that Yahweh would "heal" him (i.e., vindicate his predictions) by bringing the announced disaster upon Jerusalem (17:14-15). From the beginning, he had predicted that the future for Judah and her neighbors was that they would be uprooted, torn down, destroyed, and overthrown (1:10; 12:14, 17; 18:7-10; 31:28; 45:4). When it did not happen immediately, he was ridiculed as "The Terror" (20:10) and physically abused (20:2). Now his message of doom was to be validated before his very eyes and the eyes of those who had scorned him. The kings of David's dynasty and the court prophets who supported them would live to see the death of the nation.

The Siege Begins (34:1-7)

Just as Jeremiah predicted, the terrible enemy from the north, the Babylonian army, leveled its attack on the kingdom of Judah in 589 BC. The northern army and its mercenaries began the final crush by stripping the capital of its outlying defense cities (34:1). Jeremiah warned Zedekiah that



Lachish Letter III

This is the letter that mentions an unnamed prophet, possibly Jeremiah, and the line reads, "And as for the letter of Tobiyahu, the servant of the king, which came to Shallum son of Yada' from the prophet, saying, 'Beware!'"—your servant has sent [it] to my lord."

Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem

THE LACHISH LETTERS

Rarely is an artefact unearthed whose context is directly linked to a known historical event, but this is the case with the Lachish Letters. These inscribed potsherds, called ostraca, are military correspondences with urgent orders calling for special arrangements of signal fires, the sending of a military ambassador to Egypt (presumably for military help), the inspection of guards, and the general increase of military activity. In all, 21 letters or fragments have been found. They mention several names known to us from the Book of Jeremiah, such as, Gemariah, Jaazaniah, and Neriah (cf. 29:3; 35:3; 36:4-8, 10-12, 14, 25, 32; 40:8). One of the most intriguing lines in the letters is a reference to a prophet, who warns, "Beware!" In Letter VI, the king is said to have accused someone, possibly this same prophet, of demoralizing the country, charges that were also raised against Jeremiah (38:1-4).

this military action was the beginning of the end (34:2-3), though Zedekiah himself would not personally perish in the assault (34:4-5). The last two of the defense cities to survive were Lachish and Azekah (34:6-7), and this desperate situation has been independently verified in the archaeological discovery in 1935 and 1938 of the famous Lachish Letters, correspondences apparently between the military commander of Lachish and outpost commanders who were looking for signal fires from Lachish, since the signal fires from Azekah had

disappeared.

The Temporary Withdrawal of the Babylonian Armies (37)

SIEGE WARFARE

Many ancient cities, like Jerusalem, were walled to protect themselves in times of invasion. Siege warfare consisted of an enemy surrounding a city, cutting off its water and food supplies, and preventing communication with the outside. Invaders like the Assyrians and Babylonians used siege machines with battering rams to try to breach the city walls. Once the citizens in a city were weakened through starvation, the attackers used scaling ladders to climb the walls, attempted to burn the city gates, or employed sappers to dig tunnels underneath the walls. Altogether, the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem would last nearly two years before the city wall was breached (Jer. 39:1-2). A breach in the city wall was almost always the beginning of the end.



In 2005, archaeologist Yoav Farhi excavated this seal impression naming Yehucal ben Shelemiyahu (Jehucal ben Shelemiah, cf. Jer. 37:3), the man sent by King Zedekiah to Jeremiah.

Hebrew University, Jerusalem

During the siege of Jerusalem, a report that the Egyptians were mobilizing caused the Babylonian army to withdraw in order to confront this new threat to the south (37:1-5). The respite in the siege brought new hope to King Zedekiah and the people (37:9; cf. 21:2), and Zedekiah requested Jeremiah's perspective on the situation (37:3). However, Yahweh's word to Jeremiah was that the withdrawal of the Babylonians was only temporary. They would return and completely torch Jerusalem (37:6-10).

During this period of temporary respite, Jeremiah attempted to return to his ancestral home at Anathoth, just to the north of Jerusalem (37:11-12). At the Benjamin Gate, he was arrested as a defector, flogged, and imprisoned in the vaults of a cistern house, apparently some sort of subterranean room (37:13-16). That Jeremiah was thought to be in the process of defecting to the Babylonians may have been related to his advice that the citizens of Jerusalem should simply surrender in order to save their lives (cf. 21:8-10; cf. 38:1-2). After a lengthy incarceration in this dungeon, King Zedekiah again summoned Jeremiah (37:17a). The word from Yahweh was the same. The city would surely fall (37:17b), and Zedekiah ought to accept this as a certainty rather than the false oracles of the court prophets who had been wrong all along (37:19; cf. 28:2-4, 10-11). Jeremiah also requested that he be granted a reprieve from the cistern-pit, so Zedekiah consented that he be held in the courtyard of the palace guard (37:20-21).

The Release of the Slaves (34:8-22)

During the early part of the siege, Zedekiah had made a solemn covenant with the citizens of Jerusalem to release their slaves, possibly hoping that this action would induce Yahweh to lift the blockade (34:8-10). The emancipation of the slaves would rectify many generations of abuse and an outright violation of the Deuteronomic code (34:12-15; cf. Dt. 15:12-15). When the siege was temporarily lifted, however, the Jerusalemites reneged. Once more they stripped the emancipated slaves of their freedom (34:11, 16). This reversal of freedom would recoil upon them, however, for

Yahweh now declared that the enemy would be "free" to invade Judah (34:17-22).

TALKING POINTS

- *In the modern world, we have little conception of the horrors of siege warfare which could last for months or even years. How might ancient cities have prepared themselves to withstand siege warfare?*
- *The release of the slaves was a bit like what sometimes is dubbed "foxhole repentance." Do you think God accepts such repentance in the midst of a life-threatening crisis?*

Jeremiah in the Cistern (38:1-13)



In 2008, archaeologist Eilat Mazar discovered this seal impression with the name of one of the arresting party, Gedaliah ben Pashur (Jer. 38:1).

Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Though this was not the first time Jeremiah had advocated surrender (cf. 21:8-9), his advice at this point that the Jerusalemites should defect to the Babylonians in order to save their lives was perceived as treason (38:1-4). Consequently, Zedekiah gave permission to his officials to do with Jeremiah what they wished. They consigned him to the bottom of a deep cistern which, though it had no standing water, was filled with mud (38:5-6). Had it not been for Ebed-Melech, an African friend in the king's court, Jeremiah would no doubt have died there (38:7-9). His Cushite friend managed to save him and at least return him to his incarceration in the courtyard of the guard (38:10-13). For this kindness, Ebed-Melech was promised by Yahweh that when the city fell, he would escape with his life (39:15-18).

The Private Oracle to Zedekiah (38:14-28)

Once more, Zedekiah called for Jeremiah's counsel, promising not to seek redress regardless of the prophet's words (38:14-16). Once again, Jeremiah's words were piercing. Zedekiah's only chance was immediate surrender (38:17-18). Though the king feared that he might be turned over to Jewish defectors if he surrendered, and apparently a number of Jews had taken Jeremiah's advice and had indeed "gone over" to the Babylonians (21:9; 38:2; 39:9; 52:15), Jeremiah assured him that this would not happen (38:19-23). Vacillating and indecisive to the end, Zedekiah seemed paralyzed. He only advised Jeremiah not to reveal their private conversation, and Jeremiah agreed to deceive the other officials in order to preserve his life (38:24-28).

The Fall of Jerusalem (39, 52)

Finally, in 587 BC, Jerusalem could no longer withstand the siege. Tortured by famine from within (52:6; cf. 2 Kg. 25:3) and weary with defending against the siege works from without (39:1; 52:4-5; cf. 2 Kg. 25:1-2), the terrible Deuteronomic curse for unrelenting covenant disobedience at last took its toll (Dt. 28:52-57). All efforts at defense had been exhausted, and when the wall was finally breached, the defense collapsed altogether (39:2-4; 52:7-8; 2 Kg. 25:4).¹ The remains of the Judean

¹ Ancient cities defended themselves against siege in several ways, including city walls (often casemate walls in which

army attempted to escape, along with the king, but all were captured (39:3-7; 52:7-11; 2 Kg. 25:4-7; cf. Eze. 12:10-14). The Babylonian army sacked the city, torched the temple, broke down the walls, and burned to the ground every important building (39:8; 52:12-16; 2 Kg. 25:8-10; 2 Chr. 36:19). The valuables from the temple were salvaged as plunder and carried to Babylon along with a deportation of the most important citizens (39:9-10; 52:17-30; cf. 27:16-22; 2 Kg. 25:11-21; 2 Chr. 36:18, 20).

Jeremiah, for his part, was treated with kindness. He was allowed to stay in Jerusalem with the poor



While we have no visuals of Babylonian siege machines, we have a number of depictions of Assyrian ones, machines on wheels with battering rams to hammer at city walls. Prisoners of war were sometimes impaled on stakes to intimidate defenders.

British Museum, London

who were not deported (39:11-14). The fact that Jeremiah was not deported with the others is significant in that he still could remain as a prophetic voice and he would still be in conflict with the survivors among the poor of the land. The exile was not the end of Jeremiah's ministry nor the end of his tension with his people. He continued to advise the survivors, and they in turn continued to reject him.

Jeremiah's Release (40:1-6)

Apparently, there was a staging area at Ramah, some five miles or so north of Jerusalem, where the exiles were put into formation for deportation. By some mistake, Jeremiah was chained with the others in spite of the previous order for his freedom (40:1; cf. 39:11-12). When the commander of the imperial guard released him, he reaffirmed to Jeremiah that the prophet's interpretation of the disaster had been true (40:2-3). Furthermore, he left Jeremiah the option of either going to Babylon or staying anywhere he pleased in Judea or even staying under the protection of the newly appointed Governor, Gedaliah. Jeremiah decided in favor of the latter choice.

TALKING POINTS

- *How does Psalm 74:3-8 reflect upon the fall of Jerusalem?*
- *How about the opening poem in Lamentations?*

two parallel walls were divided by cross sections), offset-inset walls (where a section of wall protruded outside the main line so as to give defenders a better view of the wall line), a glacis at the outside base of the walls (often with as much as a 40 degree incline), and towers at strategic positions on the walls, O. Borowski, "Five Ways to Defend an Ancient City," *BAR* (Mar./Apr. 1983), pp. 73-76.