

A Proposed Reading of Lachish Letter 4

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Abstract

Lachish Letter 4 is mostly legible and understandable, save one word, ןידע, the punctuation and object of which are still controversial. Here, I suggest it should be read ןידע and that its object is Šema'yāhū, a high-ranking army officer who came from Jerusalem to the Maresha Fortress in order to study Judah's western defense lines. This proposition is supported by syntactical analogies with contemporaneous biblical verses. Thus interpreted, I propose that Lachish Letter 4 is not an alarming note on the fall of the Azekah fortress, as some scholars argue, but a routine progress report on orders issued by the regional commander in Lachish.

Keywords: Maresha; Azekah; Judah's army

1. Introduction

Some ninety years after it emerged from the ashes of Layer II in Tel Lachish, the meaning of Lachish Letter 4 is still disputed. For many years, Torczyner's (1935) interpretation was widely accepted, namely that the letter's writer reported to his superior in Lachish that the Babylonian army captured the fortress of Azekah during its 587/586 BCE campaign, which later led to the conquest of Jerusalem. However, more recently, the present author suggested a less dramatic reading of the letter, considering it a routine report to the regional Judahite army commander in Lachish (Begin 2000; 2002). Below, I present an updated rendition of this view.



The letter's historical context is clear. At about 600 BCE, Judahite King Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylonia (2 Kgs 24:1). In response, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem three years later and expelled Judah's elite, including its civil administration, most competent soldiers, and weapon artisans to Babylonia (2 Kgs 24: 16; see also Cogan and Tadmor 2008: 312). It took several years for Judah to recuperate from the Babylonian blow, and four years later, the young Judahite King Zedekiah convened a regional parley in Jerusalem with representatives from Edom, Moab, Sidon, and Tyre, attempting to set in motion a new rebellion against Babylonia (Jer 27).

Five of the Lachish Letters (2, 6, 7, 8, 18) originated from the same vessel (Torczyner et al. 1938), suggesting that the corpus was written within a few days (Ahituv 2008: 58). The time of their writing might be gleaned from the letters themselves. Some indicate a military calm: Lachish Letter 3 states that the army commander went to Egypt with a unit of soldiers from a fortress near Lachish, where at least some of the letters originated. The correspondence reflects an organized army: Commands were issued, and progress reports were provided. On the other hand, the letters also mention rivalries between factions in the face of an external threat. Lachish Letter 6 states, "The words of the [officers] are not good; to weaken your hands and to [in]hibit the hands of the m[en]." (Ahituv 2008: 60). Hence, we may conclude that the letters date from sometime between the "Jerusalem parley" of 593 BCE and Babylon's final military campaign to Judah in 587 BCE.

2. Reading the Word וידע in Lachish Letter 4

We now turn to an interpretation of Lachish Letter 4. Its rendering in English is now generally accepted, except for the word וידע in line 10, which remains disputed due to several possible punctuations. In previous papers, I read the word as וידע (Begin 2000: 125) and translated it as "and he would know" (Begin 2002: 172). However, I now suggest that it be translated as "And now he knows," in the sense that a person (he) has acquired knowledge, which he retains for future purposes. In the Bible, three verses feature this word in the plural, וידעו, all sharing the same structure: a demonstration of God's power and the new knowledge acquired as a consequence. One instance, contemporaneous with the Lachish Letters, occurs in the Book of Jeremiah (16:21) — וידעו כי שמי יהוה — whereas the other two, which are roughly contemporaneous or somewhat later, occur in the Book of Ezekiel (2:5, 33:1), וידעו כי נביא היה בתוכם.

This suggestion is also supported by studies of Biblical syntax. Joüon and Muraoka (1996: 359) translated וידע as "he knows," and others suggested that וידע is to be read as featuring a *waw*-consecutive. Fassberg (2019: 79) noted that

וַיֵּדַע may be in the present tense, while Gogel (1998: 417) translated וַיֵּדַע in the future tense, “he will know that...” My proposed reading “and now he knows” actually combines all three meanings. Torczyner (1935) also read וַיֵּדַע in Lachish 4 as וַיֵּדַע and suggested that the verb’s object is Semakyāhū. However, a different interpretation is proposed here.

3. Lachish Letter 4

Lachish Letter 4 was sent by a subordinate in a fortress on the Judean foothills to his superior in Lachish, mainly reporting on tasks he had been instructed to fulfill. As was common then, the letter was probably dictated to a scribe, reflecting the author’s train of thought. Thus, having mentioned a task he had to fulfill, the person composing the letter veers to another issue, resulting in a somewhat convoluted text that uses pronouns to designate different people and includes several parenthetical phrases. Nevertheless, being familiar with its context, the letter’s recipient is likely to have easily understood the author’s intentions.

In order to facilitate the suggested reading of the letter, I cite it below in a manner that manifests its hierarchal structure and use various font styles to indicate names and their associated pronouns (Begin and Grushka 1999; Begin 2000: 125; 2002: 172). It should be noted that in the Hebrew text, the names Bēt haRapīd, Semakyāhū, and Šema‘yāhū are followed by their adverb (*there*) and by their pronouns (*him* and *he*) while keeping their order of appearance in the text. The text below is rendered according to Aḥituv (2008: 70), except for my translation of וַיֵּדַע in the last sentence.

May YHWH cause my [lord] to hear, this very day, tidings of good. And now,

According to everything which my lord has sent, this has your servant done.

I wrote on the sheet according to everything which [you] sent t[o] me.

And inasmuch as my lord sent to me

concerning the matter of Bēt ha-Rapīd,

there is no one there.

And as for Š^cmak^yāhū,

Šema‘yāhū took *him* and brought him up to the city.

and your servant is not sending *him* there

any [more ---], but when morning comes around [---].

And now **he** knows that

we are watching out for the signals of Lachish

according to all the signs which my lord has given,

because we cannot see Azekah.

Arranged this way, it is clear that the letter's author did not consider the message about Azekah urgent. In Jeremiah (34:7), it is noted that "... the king of Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem, and against all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and against Azekah; for these alone remained of the cities of Judah as fortified cities" (Mechon Mamre). Thus, the fall of Azekah would have been a crucial event for the western outer defense line of the Kingdom of Judah, and it is unlikely that the Lachish commander would be indirectly informed of such an event in a sub-article at the end of a rather intricate letter.

So, how should we understand the letter? Seeking a down-to-earth explanation, we look for keys to solve this conundrum. One such key is where Lachish Letter 4 was sent from. Jack (1938), Reider (1939), and Thomas (1939) suggested that the Lachish Letters were sent from the Maresha Fortress, 5 km northeast of Lachish, but offered no explanation for this. Lemaire (1977: 115) supported this proposition by noting that while Maresha has no line-of-sight with Azekah, it does have one with Lachish, as described in the letter's last sentence. This assertion was later bolstered by a detailed computerized, regional topographic analysis (Begin 2000: Figs. 61, 62), which also demonstrated that this peculiarity of Maresha's viewshed does not apply to any other fortress of that time along the Judean foothills (Begin 2000: 139). Hence, the last sentence in Lachish Letter 4 simply reflects the local topography. It is not an alarming report but a routine correspondence from a subordinate to his superior concerning the fulfillment of several instructions he had been ordered to carry out.

The possibility that the letter was sent from Maresha can also be examined by attempting to locate Bēt ha-Rapīd. The letter says, "And inasmuch as my lord sent to me concerning the matter of Bēt ha-Rapīd, there is no one there," probably pertaining to a site in Maresha's vicinity. Lemaire (1977: 117) suggested it may have been Tel Burna, 3 km northwest of Maresha, from which Azekah, Maresha, and Lachish are visible. This site is also a candidate for Libnah (Suriano, Shai, and Uziel 2021). A 4th-century BCE inscription on a small sherd from Khirbet el-Kôm, 15 km east of Lachish, carries the names "Maresha and *Rpd Glyt*" (מרשה ורפד גלית) (Lemaire 1996: 84–85). As I proposed elsewhere (Begin 2000: 159), 4th-century BCE *Rpd* was 6th-century BCE Bēt ha-Rapīd mentioned in Lachish Letter 4. Thus, Lachish Letter 4 was indeed sent from Maresha, as noted by Dobbs-Allsop et al. (2005: 316) and Ahituv (2008: 58).

Given the above, we may read the second item in the letter as follows. Having been instructed to check whether the nearby post of Bēt ha-Rapīd was occupied, the letter's author, probably the commander of Maresha, reported that "there is no one there." Presumably, the author was ordered that under these

circumstances, he should send some soldiers under Semakyāhū to garrison the place as a small secondary post (Misgav 2016: 136) under Maresha's command. However, Semakyāhū was unavailable because he had been ordered to go up to Jerusalem ("Šema'yāhū took him and brought him up to the city"). The writer is "not sending him there," to Bēt ha-Rapīd, on that day but promises to send him on the next so that the mission would be accomplished then.

Lachish Letter 4 is a military report in which a subordinate informed his superior about the progress of two tasks: writing "on the sheet" and sending Semakyāhū to Bēt ha-Rapīd. The latter was only partly achieved with the promise that this mission shall be completed "when the morning comes around." I suggest that the letter's final long sentence was dictated through association. Having mentioned Šema'yāhū as the person who had prevented the fulfillment of the second assignment, the writer continued to report that during his stay in Maresha, Šema'yāhū learned ("and now he knows") that there is no line-of-sight between Maresha and Azekah and, therefore, the Maresha garrison had been watching towards Lachish: "we are watching out for the signals of Lachish according to all the signs which my lord has given, because we cannot see Azekah."

It should be noted, however, that Aḥituv (2008: 76) explicitly rejected the suggestion that *וַיִּדַע* refers to Šema'yāhū. Instead, Aḥituv (2008: 70) suggested that the word should be read as *וַיִּדַע* and that its object was the commander of Lachish. However, this reading can hardly be accepted. Firstly, following Albright (1936), it requires the artificial insertion of the Lachish commander into the sentence, rendering line 10 as "and may (my lord) be apprised that we are watching for the beacons of Lachish..." Secondly, it implies that the Lachish commander does not know that Azekah is not visible from Maresha, which is improbable for someone of his standing stationed in close proximity to Maresha.

Šema'yāhū had to be sufficiently high ranking to order Semakyāhū, a soldier stationed in Maresha, to go up to Jerusalem without the approval of the regional commander in Lachish, who would learn about it only after the fact. Šema'yāhū's importance is also indicated by the fact that his briefing was found worthy of inclusion in the report. Hence, Šema'yāhū must have been a high-ranking officer at the Judahite army's headquarters in Jerusalem, who visited Maresha in the course of a study mission to the western defenses of the vulnerable kingdom. He may have been a new appointment, maybe following the exile of many elite soldiers in 597 BCE. This explains why he needed to be briefed on the military significance of the region's topography. That the higher echelons in Jerusalem were directly updated by field commanders is also attested by the roughly contemporaneous Arad Ostrakon 40, where it is written, "May the King of Judah be apprised that..." (Aḥituv 2008: 142).

4. Understanding the Last Sentence in Lachish Letter 4

This reading of Lachish Letter 4 still leaves a peculiarity in its last sentence. Stating, “We are watching out for the signals of Lachish... *because* we do not see Azekah” (emphasis added), indicates that the Maresha commander actually sought signals from Azekah, for which Lachish served as a substitute. Maresha’s field of vision to the north was partially obstructed, and the danger of an enemy approaching from that direction was a contingency that Maresha’s commander had to be ready for. If the memory of Sennacherib’s 701 BCE campaign was part of the region’s military heritage, it is likely to have included the Assyrian conquest of Azekah (Na’aman 1974) and its advance south to Lachish, probably through Maresha. Furthermore, placed on a hilltop at the western edge of the upper Judean foothills, Azekah afforded a distant view to the west and north, making it an excellent premonitory post.

Maresha and Azekah are only 12 km apart. Still, their line of sight is blocked by Avishur Hill, which is 40 m higher than Azekah (Fig. 1). Consequently, although farther south, Lachish functioned as a relay station between the two sites: A fire signal lit in Azekah would be observed at night in Lachish, wherefrom the signal would then be transmitted northeast to Maresha, 5 km away (Fig. 1). Thus, the last sentence in Lachish Letter 4 indicates that in order to receive messages from the north, the soldiers in Maresha were looking south: “Because we cannot see Azekah” north of us, “we are watching out for the signals of Lachish” south of us. Following Šema’yāhū’s briefing in Maresha, the commanders of the Judahite army in Jerusalem probably also learned of this militarily important fact.

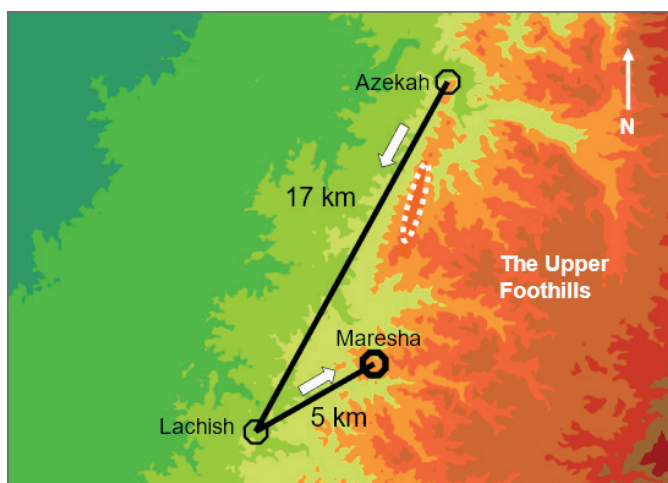


Fig. 1. A topographic map demonstrating the obstructed view between Azekah and Maresha, illustrating how the latter relied on Lachish to receive signals from the former. The broken line ellipse marks the Avishur Hill.

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