

CITY OF FOUR

Letters from Hebron

1. Source: Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology

The Amarna Letters are a trove of documents found at ancient Amarna in Egypt, dating to the 14th century b.c.e. The “letters”—or rather, clay tablets—are the desperate correspondence from leaders of Canaan to Egypt’s pharaoh, asking urgently for help against the invading “Habiru” nomads that were taking over the land. The linguistic similarities between Habiru and Hebrew are tantalizingly similar—and the dating of the letters fits the general time frame of the Israelites entry into the Promised Land. (These Habiru are also known as Hapiru or ‘Apiru.) There is some debate about whether any of these “letters” came from Hebron.

2. Leibel Reznick for aish.com

One of the more famous set of ancient inscriptions is known as the Egyptian Amarna Letters.



They came to light through the peculiar serendipity that lies behind many archaeological finds. In 1887, an Egyptian woman was digging for compost near the city of El-Amarna, 190 miles south of Cairo. In the earth, she discovered some 350 small clay tablets with curious, wedge-shaped writing on them. Hoping to sell them for a tidy sum, she brought the tablets to several antiquities dealers, only to be told they were worthless fakes. Many of the tablets were destroyed, yet a few specimens came to the attention of E.A. Wallis Budge of the British Museum. Almost immediately, he recognized them as genuine tablets written in Akkadian cuneiform, the language of Babylon, the *lingua franca* of the 14th century BCE. They turned out to be missives sent from various vassal kings to the 14th century BCE pharaohs Amenhotep III and Akhenaten along with copies of the pharaohs' responses. Amenhotep III and Akhenaten were Late Bronze Age pharaohs.

The Amarna Letters are, for the most part, diplomatic correspondences between minor kings and rulers from Syria, Lebanon, and Canaan and their Egyptian overlords. The letters show that, during the reign of Amenhotep III, Egypt had tight political control over Syria and Palestine, but that during the reign of Akhenaten, Egyptian influence was collapsing. Numerous Egyptian outposts were being overrun by invaders and the vassal kings and commanders were powerless to stop them. Chaos was mounting as kings were turning against neighbouring kings; fortresses of former allies became enemy fortresses. There were numerous appeals to Akhenaten for help, but the cries went unanswered.

There are ten surviving correspondences between king Shuwardata and Akhenaten. Shuwardata was the king of the Hebron district, as he himself states in letter EA#281. After the required greetings to Akhenaten, Shuwardata writes:

My cities are rebelling against me... archers are needed... like in the city of Hebron... they trembled before the Pharaoh... I prostrate myself before the Pharaoh... know that the hostilities are great against me... send archers..

3. Sarah is laid to rest, a place with three names

Genesis 23:1-4, 19: And Sara was a hundred and twenty-seven years old: these were the years of Sara’s life. And Sara died in Qiryat-arba; that is Hebron, in the land of Kena’an: and Avraham came to mourn for Sara, and to weep for her. And Avraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heṭ, saying, I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession

of a burying place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.... And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan.

4. First Kiryat Arba, then Hebron

Joshua 14:15 The name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba: [Arba] was the great man among the Anakites.

5. More names

Bereshit Rabbah 58:4: “Sarah died in Kiryat Arba” – it was called by **four names: Eshkol, Mamre, Kiryat Arba, Hebron.**

6. Ten reasons to Kiryat-Arba:

Bereshit Rabbah 58:4: Why does it [the Torah] call it Kiryat Arba?

- a. It is because four [*arba'a*] righteous men resided there: Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, and Abraham, and four righteous men were circumcised there: Abraham, Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre.
- b. Alternatively, it is because four righteous men, patriarchs of the world, were buried there: Adam the first man, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- c. Alternatively, it is because four matriarchs are buried there: Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah.
- d. And [it is called this also] after its lords, who numbered four, the giant and his three sons. (Achiman, Sheshai, Talmai, and their father).
- e. Rabbi Azarya said: It is [so named] because it was from there that our patriarch Abraham departed when he pursued [the armies of] the four kingdoms, who were world leaders.
- f. It is [so named also] because it fell by lottery to four parties: Initially to Judah, then to Caleb, then to the Levites, and then to the priests.
- g. Also, it is one of the four undesirable places in the Land of Israel. What were they? Rabbi Yitzhak and the Rabbis, Rabbi Yitzhak said: Dor, the Dor District, Timnat Serah, and Hebron. The Rabbis say: Dana, Kiryat Sana, Timnat Serah, and Hebron.

h. Synthesis of b and c

Rashi on Genesis 23:2: Another explanation is that it was so called because of the four couples who were buried there, man and wife — Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah (Genesis Rabbah 58:4).

i. Judah the 4th son

Rabbeinu Bahya, Bereshit 23: Because it belonged to the portion of the tribe of Judah, who was the fourth son.

j. The giants father's name

Rashi on Joshua 14:15: The greatest man among the giants. The father of Achimon, Sheishai, and Talmai was Arba.

7. The giants in the Torah

Bamidbar 13, 22: They went up in, the south, and he came to Hebron, and there were Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the descendants of the giant. Now Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan of Egypt.

8. Was Efron the said giant?

Deuteronomy 1:28: What kind of place are we going to? Our brothers have taken the heart out of us, saying, 'We saw there a people stronger and taller than we, large cities with walls sky-high, and even Anakites.'"

Targum Yonatan, ibid: Where are we going up? Our brothers have melted our hearts, saying: a people greater and mightier than we are there, cities great and fortified up to the sky, and also the sons of Efron. the giant, the mighty ones, we saw there."

9. Aner, Eshkol & Mamre

Genesis 14:13: A fugitive brought the news to Abram the Hebrew, who was dwelling in the plain of Mamre the Amorite, kinsman of Eshkol and Aner, these being Abram's allies.

Genesis 14:24 For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the parties who went with me—Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—let them take their share."

10. Where is Mamre?

Genesis 35:27: And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, at Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.

Rashi ibid: MAMRE — the name of the plain. KIRIATH-ARBA— the name of the city.

SIGNS AND OMENS

1. Enchanter

There shall not be found among you anyone who passes his son or daughter through fire, a soothsayer, **Menachesh**, a diviner of [auspicious] times, one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer

Sanhedrin 65b: The Sages taught: The **enchanter** mentioned in the verse (Deuteronomy 18:10) is one who relies on superstitious signs, e.g., **one who says:** If one's **bread fell from his mouth**, that is a bad sign for him; or: If one's **staff fell from his hand**, it is a bad sign; or: If one's **son calls him from behind**, it is a sign that he should return from his journey; or: If **a raven calls to him**, or if **a deer blocks him on the way**, or if **a snake is to his right**, or if **a fox is to his left**, all of these are bad signs. An enchanter is one who relies on these as bad signs and consequently changes his course of action. The term is also referring to one who says to a collector of charity: **Do not collect from me first**, as that is a bad sign for me; or: **Do not collect from me now because it is morning**, and it is a bad sign to begin the day with a loss; or: **Do not collect from me now because it is the New Moon**, and it is a bad sign to begin the month with a loss

1. Unreasonable requests

Taanit 4a: Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said that Rabbi Yonatan said: Three people **entreated** God in an **unreasonable** manner, i.e., in situations where their requests might have received an unfavorable answer. **To two** of them God **responded reasonably**, with a favorable response to their requests, **and to one** God **responded unreasonably**, i.e., unfavorably, in a manner befitting the unreasonable request. **And they are: Eliezer, servant of Abraham; Saul, son of Kish; and Jephthah the Gileadite.** The Gemara clarifies each of these cases in turn: With regard to **Eliezer, servant of Abraham**, he made a request when he prayed beside the well, **as it is written: "That the maiden to whom I shall say: Please let down your pitcher that I may drink; and she shall say: Drink, and I will also give your camels to drink; that she be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac"** (Genesis 24:14). Eliezer entreated God unreasonably, as his request allowed for the possibility that she **might even be lame or even blind**, and yet he had promised to take her to Isaac. Nevertheless, God **responded** to him **reasonably** and the eminently suitable **Rebecca happened** to come **to him**. With regard to **Saul, son of Kish**, he made an offer when Goliath the Philistine challenged the Jews, **as it is written: "And it shall be that the man who kills him, the king will enrich him with great riches, and will give him his daughter"** (I Samuel 17:25). The man who killed Goliath **might even** have been **a slave or a mamzer**, one born from an incestuous or adulterous union, who would be unfit to marry his daughter. Nevertheless, God **responded** to him **reasonably** and **David happened** to come **to him**. By contrast, there is the case of **Jephthah the Gileadite**. Upon leaving for battle he issued a statement, **as it is written: "Then it shall be that whatever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace...it shall be to the Lord and I will bring it up for a burnt-offering"** (Judges 11:31). This **might even** have been **an impure, non-kosher animal**, which he had committed himself to sacrifice. In this instance, God **responded** to him **unreasonably**, and **his daughter happened** to come **to him**.

The three unreasonable men

a. Eliezer – Genesis 24

10The servant then took ten of his master's camels and set out with a document listing all his master's wealth and affirming its transfer to Isaac in his hand. He rose up and made his way to Aram Naharayim, to Charan, the city where Nachor, Abraham's brother, had settled.

11Eliezer made the camels kneel outside the city near a well of water in the afternoon, when women go out to draw water. **12**He said: "God, God of my master Abraham, arrange events for me this day such that You grant a favor to my master, Abraham. **13**Here I stand by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townsmen are coming out to draw water. **14**Let it be that the maiden to whom I say, 'Please tilt your pitcher so that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also give water to your men and camels,' will be the one whom You have designated for Your servant Isaac. I will know through her that You have acted kindly with my master." **15**He had not yet finished speaking to God when Rebecca came out. She had been born to Bethuel son of Milkah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nachor. Her pitcher was on her shoulder. **16**The maiden was of very beautiful appearance. She was a virgin, whom no man had known carnally in any way. She went down to the spring, filled her pitcher, and came back up. **17**The servant ran toward her and said, "If you would, let me sip a little water from your pitcher." **18**She said, "Drink, sir," and quickly lowered her pitcher from her shoulder onto her hand and gave him a drink. **19**When she had finished giving him to drink, she said, "Let me draw water for your camels, too, until they have drunk their fill." **20**She quickly emptied her pitcher into the trough and ran to the well again to draw water, and she drew water for all his camels. **21**The man wondered about her if she would prove to be from Abraham's family. He thought silently, wanting to know whether or not God had made his journey successful. **22** When the camels had drunk their fill, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a beka [half a shekel] and two gold bracelets weighing 10 gold shekels for her arms, and gave them to her. **23** He said, "Whose daughter are you? If you would, tell me if there is room in your father's house for us to spend the night." **24**She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milkah, whom she bore to Nachor." **25**She then said, "We have plenty of straw and fodder, as well as a place to spend many nights." **26**Hearing this, the man bowed his head and prostrated himself to God.... **50**Laban and Bethuel answered, saying, "This has all clearly come forth from God! We, therefore, cannot say anything to refuse you, neither in a bad, disrespectful manner, nor in a nice, polite manner. **51**Rebecca is here in front of you; take her and go, and let her be a wife for your master's son, as God has spoken." **52**When Abraham's servant heard their words, he prostrated himself on the ground to God in thanksgiving.

b. Yiftach, Jewish History – Talks & Tales, Nissin Mindel

Jephthah, who had been expelled from home by his half-brothers, had gone to live in the land of Tob. He was a man of valor, and soon became the leader of a band of brave and fearless men. The elders of Gilead sent for him and asked him to become their leader. ... he was ready for war. He used a successful outflanking maneuver, moving his men through narrow passes in the hills, until he reached the land of the Ammonites. Meeting with little opposition there, since the main army of the Ammonites was in Gilead, Jephthah quickly captured all the strong and fortified cities of Ammon. The Ammonites were forced to withdraw to their own land, but the

fate of the battle had been sealed. Jephthah's victory was complete and overwhelming.... This was not the last unpleasant thing that Jephthah suffered even in his glory. For before Jephthah set out to fight the Ammonites, he had made a vow to sacrifice to G-d whatever would come out first from his house to greet him, if and when he came home victorious. Imagine his shock when upon his return from the war his one and only child, his beloved daughter, came out to greet her victorious father. Jephthah told his daughter of his dreadful vow.

"But Father! Doesn't the [Torah](#) forbid human sacrifices?"

"Alas! I made a vow. I must keep it somehow!"

"Didn't Jacob make a vow to give a tenth part of everything to G-d? And yet, did he offer one of his twelve sons as a sacrifice in fulfillment of his vow?"

Jephthah, however, was sure he could find no release from his vow, and that his daughter would at least have to become a recluse for the rest of her life and devote it entirely to G-d. (This was the only way in which his vow could be fulfilled, since it was against the law of the Torah to offer any human being as a sacrifice.)

Then Jephthah's daughter asked for a period of two months to bewail her youth, and she retired to live in seclusion the life of a hermit. Thus Jephthah's daughter gave up her happy and youthful life so as not to disgrace her father.

c. King David, Jewish History – Talks & Tales, Nissin Mindel

Michal was the second eldest daughter of King Saul. When the king was confronted by Goliath, he promised that the warrior to defeat this giant would be wed to one of his daughters. David came and slew the giant. King Saul proposed that David marry his eldest daughter, Merav. However, at that time, Merav had already been given in marriage to another. King Saul then discovered that his daughter, Michal, wished to marry David. The king requested from David as a wedding dowry to marry Michal, one hundred foreskins from his enemies, the Philistines. King Saul had hoped that David would fall in battle (as he grew fearful of David), but David succeeded and took Michal as his wife.

2. Rav did not eat the meat

Chulin 95b: **Rav was going to the home of Rav Ḥanan, his son-in-law. He saw that the ferry was coming toward him** just when he arrived at the riverbank. **He said: The ferry is coming toward me** even though I did not arrange for it to come now; this is a sign that **a good day**, i.e., a festive meal, awaits me **in** the place where I am going. After crossing the river on the ferry, Rav **went and stood at the gate** of Rav Ḥanan's home. **He looked through a crack in the door and saw an animal that was hanging** and ready to be cooked. **He knocked on the gate**, and **everyone went out to greet him**, and **the butchers also came** out to greet him. **Rav did not remove his eyes from** the meat that the butchers were preparing. **He said to them: If you had eaten the meat based upon the supervision you provided now**, you would have **fed forbidden meat to the sons of my daughter** because no one apart from me was watching the meat when you all came out to greet me. And despite the fact that he had kept the meat in his sight **Rav did not eat from that meat**. The Gemara asks: **What is the reason** that Rav did not eat the meat? **If** one suggests that he was concerned **because** it had been **obscured** from sight, that cannot be the reason, as Rav kept watching it so that it **was not obscured** from sight. **Rather**, Rav did not eat **because he divined**, i.e., he saw the arrival of the ferry as a good omen. This is prohibited, and therefore Rav penalized himself and abstained from the meat.

A. Rashi on Chullin 95b:

Any omen (sign) that one does not rely on completely—like Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, who said: ‘If she gives me water to drink, I will speak to her; and if not, I will not speak to her’ — is not a true omen.

B. Tosafot on Chullin 95b:8:1

Like Eliezer, the servant of Abraham — and if you will ask: how could Eliezer have practiced divination (taken omens)?...

One can answer that this Tanna (sage) holds that Eliezer did not give her the bracelets until after she told him whose daughter she was. And although it is written (Genesis 24) ‘And the man took a golden nose-ring...’ and afterward it says ‘And he said, Whose daughter are you?’ — there is no [necessary] chronological order in the Torah. And this is also proven when he later recounts the story, as it is written: ‘And I asked her and said, Whose daughter are you?’

3. A kind of prayer

a. Sforno on Genesis 24:

this was not a statement but a prayer that things should develop in this fashion. He did not rely on any magic, i.e. that the signs he stipulated would determine his actions. We find a similar occurrence with Yonathan son of King Sha-ul in Samuel I 14,10, where he does not rely on the וַיִּשְׁמַע which he had stipulated, but where he asked G’d in prayer for help, saying that if certain things were to happen he would regard this as a sign that his prayer had been answered favourably (compare Ibn Ezra there) When the Talmud Chulin, the meaning is that “any divination which is not like that of Eliezer or that of Yonatan ben Sha-ul is not a divination,” i.e. is not permissible, but is akin to relying on witchcraft [Unless the person requesting a sign does so as a prayer directed to G’d it is forbidden. Ed.].

b. Ibn Ezra on Genesis 24:14:1

Many are perplexed because they say that the servant expressed his request improperly. I, however, do not see anything wrong in what he said, for had it been another maiden, one not of Abraham’s family, who offered to give him drink and water his camels, he would have left her and nothing would have been lost, for the verse *and said; Whose daughter art thou* means he had previously said, before he gave the ring and bracelets to Rebekah, *whose daughter art thou* ? Scripture similarly states, *And I asked her, and said: Whose daughter art thou? And she said: The daughter of Bethuel...And I put the ring upon her nose, and the bracelets upon her hands* (v. 47). The sum of the matter is the servant prayed that God would appoint for Isaac a young lady from the family of his master, the sign of God’s choice being that the maiden would act graciously as a woman of noble character should. God heard his prayer. However, the case of Jonathan is totally different.