

**board, tablet**

לִיָּהּ

**1. Statistics**

Torah: 31. Nebiim: 6. Ketubim: 4. Total: 41.

**2a. Literal Use**

The basic meaning of לִיָּהּ is ‘board, plank’. Wooden planks were used to build a temporary altar (Exod. 27:8; 38:7) or the hull of a ship (Ezek. 27:5), or to board up a door (Song 8:9). In Isa. 30:8 and Hab. 2:2 a wooden writing board (so e.g. Galling 1971, 209), perhaps provided with a layer of wax (→ הַלְקָה, section 3; Stol 1978; Watson 2007, 49), may have been meant, or even a papyrus scroll (Blenkinsopp 2000, 415). Others argue in favour of a tablet of stone or clay (e.g. Young 1969, 343; De Moor 1997, 158, the latter also for *spr* as designation of a clay tablet) which accords better with the verbs  $\sqrt{\text{חקק}}$  (Isa. 30:8) and  $\text{חרת}$  (see below), both ‘to engrave’, and with the durable nature of the document (לְעַד עַד-עוֹלָם, ‘as a witness for ever’, Isa. 30:8; see also 1QH<sup>a</sup> IX. 24). These considerations also argue against the proposal to interpret לִיָּהּ as ‘ostrakon’ here (Smelik 1990). Alphabetic and syllabic clay tablets have been found in many sites in Israel and the countries surrounding it (see e.g. Dietrich, Loretz & Sanmartín, *KTU*; Horowitz & Oshima 2006).

In a specific sense לִיָּהּ is used of the two ‘tablets of the testimony (treaty)’ (לְחֹת הַעֵדוּת) which occur in Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29. According to Exod. 24:12; 31:18; 34:1, 4; Deut. 4:13; 5:22; 9:9, 10, 11; 10:1; 1 Kgs 8:9 these tablets were made of natural stone (אֲבָן). It has been suggested that this is a later development and that originally clay tablets were used (Korpel 1990, 471-3), as was the case with Hittite and Assyrian vassal treaties. Indeed Exod. 24:12 (J) seems to presuppose a longer text than that of the Decalogue (Himbaza 2004, 16; for other suggestions see Houtman 2000, 300-1). The present context of Exod. 32:19; Deut. 9:17; 10:2, 3, however, indicates stone. Whereas the verb שָׁבַר, ‘to shatter’, might also be used of clay tablets, פָּסַל definitely suggests hewn stones. On the other hand it is remarkable that 2 Chron. 5:10 does not have the אֲבָן of its parallel 1 Kgs 8:9. In Exod. 32:15 it is related that the text was written on both

sides of these tablets. To emphasise the supernatural origin of the script it is stated that it was the אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים, ‘finger of God’, that by way of stylus inscribed the first set of tablets (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). The writing is described as ‘engraving’ (חָרַח, Exod. 32:16). The same verb is used in Sir. 45:11 for the incising of letters in the precious stones of the breastpiece of Aaron.

In the difficult verse 1 Kgs 7:36 חָלָחֶהָ seems to refer to the flat surfaces of the wheeled laver stand in the Salomonic temple (compare the use of Akkad. *lēʾu*, ‘board’, as part of a wagon, *CAD* [L], 156-7). These surfaces were adorned with reliefs of sphinxes, lions and palms, surrounded by wreaths (for a picture of a similar object from Cyprus, see Fohrer, *BHH*, Bd. 2, 945).

## 2b. Figurative Use

In a metaphorical sense לִּיָּהּ becomes the writing tablet of the heart (לֵב) on which the sins of Judah are engraved with an iron stylus (→ טַּבַּח, Jer. 17:1). The image is used in a positive sense in Prov. 3:3 and 7:3 where a son is encouraged to write the teachings of his wise father on his heart.

## 3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

## 4. Cognates

SEMITIC: It is difficult to say what came first, the meaning ‘board (of wood)’, or the meaning ‘tablet’ (for the latter, cf. König, *HAWAT*, 196). In the oldest Semitic language we know, Akkadian, the etymologically related word *lēʾu* means ‘wooden board, writing board’ (see below). However, this may be due to a narrowing of meaning because in mainstream Akkadian the Sumerian loanword *tuppu* < DUB became the normal designation of a writing tablet of (moist) clay (*CAD* (T), 129). Derivatives of the  $\sqrt{lh}$  designate moisture and moisturing in several Northwest Semitic languages.

Whatever the etymological origin of the word לִּיָּהּ, the noun became ‘table, tablet, board’ in almost all Semitic languages. Cf. Leslau, *CDG*, 320; Klein, *CEDHL*. 296; *HAHAT*, 600-1.

AKKADIAN: Akkad. *lēʾu* (var. *lēhu* [Amarna], *lû*) primarily means

‘wooden board’, then also ‘writing board, document, list’. Only rarely different materials like stone or metal are mentioned and also the determinative GIŠ of the various pseudo-ideographic writings points in the direction of wood as the normal material (Von Soden, *AHw*, 546; *CAD* (L), 156-9; Tawil, *ALCBH*, 187).

UGARITIC: According to Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, *DULAT*, 494-5 s.v. *lh* (II) ‘missive, message’ < ‘(letter-)tablets’. According to others (e.g. Bordreuil & Pardee 2004, 178) simply ‘writing tablet’ used metonymically.

PHOENICIAN, PUNIC: *lh* ‘tablet’, also used metonymically (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, *DNSI*, 570; Krahmalkov, *PPD*, 254).

OLD AND IMPERIAL ARAMAIC: Possibly *lwh* ‘board, tablet’ (?) (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, *DNSI*, 569; Porten & Lund, *ADE*, 206).

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: לוח, ‘board, tablet’ (Levy, *WTM*, Bd. 2, 481-2; Jastrow, *DTT*, 696). For the texts from the Judean Desert see section 6 below.

JEWISH ARAMAIC: For the texts from the Judean Desert see section 6 below.

SAMARITAN ARAMAIC: *lwh* ‘board, plank, tablet (of the Covenant)’ (Tal, *DSA*, 428).

NABATEAN: Possibly *lwh* ‘board, tablet’ (?) (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, *DNSI*, 569).

SYRIAC: *lwh* ‘tablet, writing-tablet’ (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], *CSD*, 237).

MANDAIC: *luha* ‘tablet’ (Macuch, *MD*, 232).

CLASSICAL ARABIC: *lawh* ‘board, plank, writing-tablet’ (Lane, *AEL*, 2679-80; Maraqtan 1998).

MODERN SOUTH ARABIC: Mehri *lawh* ‘board’ (Johnstone, *ML*, 258).

ETHIOPIIC: Geez *lawh* ‘board, table, parchment’ (Leslau, *CDG*, 320); Amharic *luk* ‘legal size paper’, *lakä* to send’ (Leslau, *CAmhD*, 10).

## 5. Ancient Versions

6 and other Greek versions: The standard rendering for the Tab-

lets of the Law is *πλάξ*, ‘flat stone’ (32x). Thrice *Ϡ* has *πυξίον* ‘tablet’ (in Classical Greek always of wood) for the writing-tablets in Isa. 30:8; Hab. 2:2 and Exod. 24:12. Twice we find *πλάτος* ‘width, plane surface’ for the metaphorical use in Prov. 3:4(3); 7:3, and in the plus as compared to *π* of 1 Kgs 3:35 (*πλάτος καρδίας*). *α’*, *σ’* and *θ’* also *πλάξ* in Exod. 24:12. *θ’* also in Prov. 3:3. In Ezek. 27:5 and Song 8:9 *Ϡ* opts for *σανίς* ‘board, plank’ which may have been the source of the *hapax legomenon* *σανιδωτος*, probably a neologism, in Exod. 24:12. In 1 Kgs 7:35 (36) תבֿל־לעֿ is rendered freely as ἐπὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς τῶν χειρῶν αὐτῆς.

ⲱ<sup>T</sup>: See section 4 under Samaritan Aramaic.

Ⲅ: Usually *Ⲅ* simply replaces Hebrew תבֿל by Aramaic ⲛⲧⲓⲗ. Only in Hab. 2:2 the Targumist opts for ⲛⲉⲣⲥ and in Ezek. 27:5 for ⲛⲉⲣⲥⲓ ‘board, joist, bridge’.

ⲥ: Mostly *lūhā* ‘writing tablet’, but in Exod. 27:8; 38:7; Ezek. 27:5 *dafā* ‘board, tablet’, Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *CSD*, 96.

ⲡ: The standard rendering is *tabula*, the basic meaning of which is ‘board, plank’ but which also in Latin acquired different meanings like ‘writing-tablet’, ‘record’, ‘document’ (Lewis & Short, *LD*, 1833). In Isa. 30:8 *ⲡ* has *buxum* which means ‘wood of the boxtree’, but in later Latin can also acquire the meaning ‘writing-tablet’ (Lewis & Short, *LD*, 256).

## 6. Judaic Sources

In the texts from the Judean Desert the Hebrew noun תבֿל occurs several times which various meanings: 1) ‘board, plank’ of wood (11Q19 [11QT<sup>a</sup>] VII.1; VII.3; partially reconstructed in 11Q19 [11QT<sup>a</sup>] VII.5); 2) ‘writing tablet’ (1QpHab VI.15 on Hab. 2:2); 3) ‘tablet (of bronze)’, reconstructed in 11QT<sup>a</sup> VII.2 and XXXIV.1; 4) ‘tablets (of the Law)’, reconstructed in 4Q364 (4QRPb) Frag., 26b, e II.5 (elaboration of Deut. 10:2b); II.8 (elaboration of Deut. 10:4); 4Q216 (4QJub<sup>a</sup>) I, 3, 6 (= Jub. 1:3, 6); 4Q364 (4QRP<sup>b</sup>) Frag. 14, 3 (elaboration of Exod. 24:12), and more often; 5) ‘tablet (listing names)’, a kind of Book of Life mentioned in 4Q177 (4QCatena<sup>a</sup> = 4QMidrEschat<sup>b</sup>) III.12 which is possibly identical

to the לוחות עולם, ‘eternal tablets’, that occur in 4Q512 Frags. 1-3, 4 (others: Frags. 1-6, XII.4).

The Aramaic word לוח occurs several times in the meaning of ‘tablet’ in 2Q26 (= 2QEnGiants ar) Frag.1; furthermore in 4Q203 (= 4QEnGiants<sup>a</sup> ar) Frag. 7:II.6; Frag. 8:3; 4Q537 (= 4QAJa or 4QTJacob ar) and probably also in 1Q23 (= 1QEnGiants<sup>a</sup> ar) Frag. 31:2.

In later rabbinic writings the word almost always refers to the Tablets of the Law, a tendency already visible in the Hebrew Bible itself.

### 7. Illustrations

No suggestions.

### 8. Archaeological Remarks

Although many writing tablets have been found none bears the designation *lwh* in Hebrew characters.

### 9. Conclusion

The meaning ‘writing-tablet’, attested in many Semitic languages and supported by the ancient versions and as well as early Judaic sources, is undisputed. Originally it may have been a wooden board or plank. This basic meaning occurs a few times in the Hebrew Bible, but ‘tablet’ became the dominant designation of the two ‘Tablets of the Law’. According to the canonical text these tablets were hewn from natural stone in which the lettering of the Ten Commandments was incised, at first by the finger of God himself. In an older version of the tradition the tablets may have been of clay and may have contained a longer text stipulating the rules of the covenant between God and his people.

### 10. Bibliography

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