

Israel Unveils 2,700-Year-Old Rare Document Written to 'Ishmael'

Michael Foust

Israeli government officials on Friday unveiled a 2,700-year-old document dating to the time of biblical Israel that includes a common name for the period – Ishmael – and likely was circulated during the time of the Old Testament kings.



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The four-line document includes the phrase “to Ishmael send,” likely referencing instructions to the recipient, according to a news release from the [Israel Antiquities Authority](#). It dates to the late seventh or early sixth

century B.C. during the so-called First Temple period – an era that stretches from the construction of the temple under King Solomon to its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) called it an “extremely rare document.” It likely was preserved over the centuries in a cave in the Judean Desert, where the dry climate “enables the preservation of the papyri,” IAA said.

The “Ishmael” in the text references not the son of Abraham – who lived centuries earlier – but instead an Ishamel who lived during the First Temple period. “Ishmael” was a common name.

“It first appears in the Bible as the name of the son of Abraham and Hagar, and it is subsequently the personal name of several individuals in the Bible, including Yishmael ben Netanyahu, who murdered the governor Gedaliah ben Ahikam,” said Shmuel Ahituv, a professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. “It also appears as the name of officials on paleographic finds such as bullae (clay stamp seals) used for sealing royal documents in the administration of the Kingdom of Judah, for example the bulla reading, ‘To Yishmael, son of the king.’ The present document probably certified a dispatchment either to, or from, Yishmael.”

Joe Uziel, director of the Israel Antiquities Authority’s Judean Desert Scrolls Unit, called it a rare find.

“Whilst we have thousands of scroll fragments dating from the Second Temple period, we have only three documents, including this newly found one, from the First Temple period,” Uziel said. “Each new document sheds further light on the literacy and the administration of the First Temple period.”

Incredibly, the document had been in possession of a Montana, U.S.A., family since 1965. The family – who said it was received as a gift during a trip to Israel – even hung it on the wall.

“In order to persuade the owner to transfer the fragile document to Israel, where it would be conserved in climate-controlled conditions, he was invited to visit the Israel Antiquities Authority Judean Desert Scroll Department’s

Conservation Laboratory in Jerusalem,” the news release said. “After the visit, the owner was convinced that here were the best conditions to conserve and research the rare document, and he generously gave it to the Israel Antiquities Authority.”

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