



GENTILES: KEEP OUT. Found in 1935 in Jerusalem's Old City, this fragmentary limestone slab (above) was once part of a balustrade that surrounded the inner courts of Herod's Temple. The slab bore a Greek inscription warning Gentiles not to enter, since the inner courts were reserved exclusively for Jews. The full text of the inscription read: "No foreigner may enter within the railing and enclosure that surround the Temple. Anyone apprehended shall have himself to blame for his consequent death!" (The text was reconstructed from a more complete copy now in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul.) Obviously, the authorities who posted the sign in the Temple expected Gentile visitors to be able to read it.

Though stone was the preferred material for official inscriptions in the ancient world, it was too heavy and expensive for everyday use. Far cheaper and more convenient were pottery sherds, which could be picked up for free anywhere, scribbled on and discarded. If they are inscribed, pottery sherds are called ostraca (singular: ostracon). An ostracon (at right) from Qumran displays rows of Hebrew letters, many of them repeated—the handiwork of a pupil learning to write.

MHOENAMOTENHEITTOPEYEGAL ENTOCTOYTEPITOLEPONTPY PAKTOYKANTEPIBOAOYOCAAN AH PGHAYTOLAITIOCECTAL ALATOEZAKOAOYOEIN GANATON

but many were made of stone and survive. On stone ossuaries the names of the dead were often scratched with something pointed, perhaps a nail, or they were scribbled in charcoal. The way the names are written makes it clear these notices were, for the most part, not the work of professional scribes, but of family members wishing to identify their relatives for posterity.

These ossuary inscriptions, especially the so-called graffiti inscriptions that were scrawled by non-professionals, testify to a higher level of literacy in Jesus' Israel than is sometimes supposed. Even those people who had difficulty writing plainly and clearly knew how to read and were prepared to make a stab at writing, even on something as important as the ossuary of a family member.

While most materials that were written on—leather, papyrus and ossuaries—were expensive, one writing material was free and readily available: the potsherd. Ancient crockery was usually simple earthenware (terracotta), which broke easily. Pieces lay scattered in the streets and courtyards of towns and villages—free scrap paper. You could scribble a note on a suitable sherd, then throw it away once you were finished. A Hebrew alphabet found on a potsherd at Qumran is a good specimen of a pupil's attempt at learning his letters.

