

LACHISH: THE JEWEL OF THE SHEPHELAH

Dr. Charles R. Page, II

Jerusalem Institute for Biblical Exploration

One of the most important Iron Age cities of Judah, which many people know very little about, is the city of Lachish. Lachish, known in Arabic as Tell ed-Duweir is located approximately thirty miles (forty-eight kilometers) southwest of Jerusalem in a very important geographical area known as the Shephelah.¹ “However, its history is much older than the Iron Age; archaeologists have dated habitation of the site as early as 8000 BCE. The tel is a large one, measuring some 30 acres in area at the base and 18 acres at the summit.”²

The Canaanite city of Lachish is first mentioned in ancient historical texts in the el-Amarna letters³ from the 14th century BCE. It is better known for its resistance to Joshua and the invading Hebrew army during the period known as the Israelite Conquest. In Joshua 10 we read:

So King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem sent a message to King Hoham of Hebron, to King Piram of Jarmuth, to King Japhia of Lachish, and to King Debir of Eglon, saying, ‘Come up and help me, and let us attack Gibeon; for it has made peace with Joshua and with the Israelites.’ Then the five kings of the Amorites--the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon--gathered their forces, and went up with all their armies and camped against Gibeon, and made war against it. (Joshua 10: 3-5).

Later in Joshua we read:

Next Joshua passed on from Libnah, and all Israel with him, to Lachish, and laid siege to it, and assaulted it. The LORD gave Lachish into the hand of Israel, and he took it on the second day, and struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it, as he had done to Libnah. Then King Horam of Gezer came up to help Lachish; and Joshua struck him and his people, leaving him no survivors. (Joshua 10: 31-33).

This is the first destruction of Lachish mentioned in the Bible. The destruction of Lachish is mentioned three other times in the Bible. In 1 Chronicles 12: 2 ff., we find that the Egyptian pharaoh Shishak attacked and destroyed the fortified cities of Judah following the death of Solomon. In 2 Kings 18 we read that the powerful Assyrian king Sennacherib “came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and

¹ The name Shephelah is translated from Hebrew as “lowland.” This is an area of low foothills between the Philistine coastal plain and the highlands of Judah. It served as a battleground for the twelve tribes of Israel and, later Judah, and Philistines during the period of the judges and early monarchy. A listing of some of the major cities and villages of the Shephelah can be found in Joshua 15:33-41. For an early clarification of Lachish see G. Ernest Wright, “A Problem of Ancient Topography: Lachish and Eglon,,” *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 23 (1971): 437-450.

² For an popular overview of the excavations of James Starkey (1932-1938) and Ussishkin (1973-1987) see David Ussishkin, “Lachish, Key to the Israelite Conquest of Canaan?,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13, no. 1 (1987): 18-39. Or a more detailed report: *Ibid.*, “Lachish” in Ephraim Stern, ed. *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Carta/Israel Exploration Society, 1993), 897-911. Incidentally Starkey—the disciple of the “father of modern Archaeology,” W.M.F. Petrie—was murdered in 1938 on his way to the opening of the Rockefeller Museum and is buried in the Protestant Cemetery on Mt. Zion, across from Petrie. See also Charles R. Page, II and Carl A. Volz, *The Land and the Book*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 147

³ The el-Amarna letters are named for a collection of tablets found in 1887 in el-Amarna, an ancient city of in Egypt. The letters are correspondence between Egyptian Pharaohs Amenophis III and his son Akhenaten and rulers from other 14th century BCE countries and territories in the ancient Middle East.

captured them.” (vs. 13). King Hezekiah sends a party to negotiate a truce with Sennacherib at Lachish (2 Kings 18:14-15).⁴

Finally, in Jeremiah 34: 7, we discover that Nebuchadnezzar, the great Babylonian king conquers Lachish along with Azekah before his destruction of Jerusalem and beginning of the period known as the Babylonian Exile.⁵

“Archaeologists excavating here in 1935 found in one of the guardrooms of the city’s outer gate a collection of eighteen *ostraca* (storage jar fragments) inscribed in black ink; three more were discovered nearby in 1938. These “Lachish Letters,” date to the time of Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion of the city....Letter four contains the following passage: ‘And let [my lord] know that we are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Akezah.’⁶The testimony of this letter indicates that Azekah has already been destroyed and Nebuchadnezzar is now turning to Lachish. Jeremiah reports, “Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem, when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah; for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained.” (34: 6-7).

What is the purpose of Biblical Archaeology? Some might think it is to “prove the Bible is true.” Some might think we are trying to “prove that the Bible is not true.” Actually, both of the answers are wrong. The purpose and value of Biblical Archaeology is to fill in the gaps of the literary record of ancient peoples, kingdoms, cities and cultures. The Bible does not need to be “proved.” And it is always “true.” This does not mean that all of the “facts” reported in the Bible are always correct. Many times people in the West misinterpret metaphors or parables as “facts.” Parables are not facts but they nevertheless contain “truth.”

At times archaeology and the Bible fit together like a comfortable old shoe. At other times archaeological evidence or data cannot confirm certain Biblical stories. For example, there is a beautiful story in the book of Joshua about the walls of Jericho tumbling down. Someone even wrote a nice old spiritual hymn celebrating this event. However, the archaeological record suggests that Jericho was not fortified during the Israelite invasion of Canaan.

In the case of Lachish we have a “comfortable old shoe” fit. The Bible reports four specific destruction's and gives us the dates of these destructions. The archaeological work at Lachish confirms that we have destruction's dating to the 12th century BCE (time of Joshua), 10th-9th centuries BCE (time of Shishak), 8th century BCE (the time of Sennacherib), and the 6th century (time of Nebuchadnezzar). Therefore, in Lachish we have the archaeological record and historical reports of the Bible in impressive harmony.

During the Iron Age Lachish was second only to Jerusalem in its importance and influence. Sadly, due to the lack of tourist visits and its remoteness from any major highway, only scant archeological work has been done in Lachish. For the sake of history let us hope that one day this great city will give up more of its secrets and wonderful history.

⁴ Sennacherib was so pleased with his conquest of Lachish that it is documented on a relief found in the ruins of the king’s palace in ancient Nineveh. A copy of this relief is found today in the Israel Museum of Jerusalem. Sennacherib considered the conquest of Lachish as one of the great accomplishments of his reign. This testifies to the power and grandeur of the city during the Iron Age.

⁵ For a detailed treatment of the Babylonian period in Israel and a discussion of Lachish, see now Ephraim Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods (732-332 B.C.E.), Vol. 2* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

⁶ Page and Volz, page 14.