THE LACHISH LETTERS AND THEIR BIBLICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Thomas J. Smith

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Twenty-five mile southwest of Jerusalem and twenty miles inland from Ashkelon lies Tell ed-Duweir, the site of the ancient city of Lachish. For centuries this city-fortress commanded its strategic position on the eastern edge of the Shephelah, the rolling Judean foothills. The armies of many empires came to realize the importance of Lachish. For like a sentinal, Lachish stood guard over the southern approach through the Judean hills to Jerusalem.

Lachish has a long history--a history colored blood-red by the thousands of men who fought and died there--a history which, if it could, would spring to life from the pages of stale, yellowing books with a deafening warcry and the clanging of sword and shield. The history of Lachish is a continual saga of seige, conquest, and resettlement. The Bible and archaeological finds allow us to piece together the history of this city.

Sifting through the debris of centuries, archaeologists have uncovered nine levels of settlement at Tell ed-Duweir. The earliest occupation dates back to the middle of the third millenium B.C. The 18th to 16th centuries B.C. strata reveal an occupation by the Hyksos, the mysterious "foreigners" of Egypt. "In the Canaanite level--end of the 13th century B.C.--archaeologists found the remains of a city, including a temple, which had been violently destroyed, evidently by the Israelites" (Jos 10: 31-32).[1]

Early in the 10th century B.C. David made Lachish a provincial administrative center--laying the foundations for the first fortified palace. David's grandson, Rehoboam, in about the year 920 B.C., streng-

thened the defences of the city and provisioned it with food and weapons to enable it to withstand a long seige (II Chr 11:5-12).[2] The remains of double walls with towers encircling the city are thought to belong to this period.

Between 900 and 700 B.C. Lachish grew to one of the largest and most important cities in Judah. The flat summit of the tell--covering an impressive 18 acres--bears silent testimony to its past glory. The actual climax of the city's history came in 701 B.C., when the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib came up against the walled cities of Judah and took them--as a prelude to marching on Jerusalem. Once more Lachish fell before an advancing army. Sennacherib's victory, however, was short-lived. When he moved against Jerusalem, his army met the Angel of the Lord, and in one night 85,000 Assyrian soldiers were slain (II Kgs 19:25). Nevertheless, when Sennacherib returned home, he ordered the walls of his palace to be decorated with the highlights of his campaign. The battle scenes at Lachish were among those portrayed.

Another empire quickly gained dominance in Syria-Palestine--the Babylonians. The tiny kingdom of Judah became a vassal of this mighty empire (the ~~late~~ early 6th century B.C.). Judah repeatedly rebelled against Babylonian control. Each time Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, invaded and tightened his grip on the country. In his invasion of 598/597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar beseiged the resettled Lachish and partially destroyed it. Several years later, when King Zedekiah led Judah to revolt again, the Babylonian armies returned and utterly destroyed Lachish (587/586 B.C.).

The city of Lachish is mentioned once more in connection with the return from captivity (Ne 9:30), but it never regained its former place as one of the chief cities of Judah. "With the Roman destruction of Jeru-

salem (70 A.D.) and the great exile of the Jews from the country, Lachish fell into ruin."[3]

It was to this mound of rubble, Tell ed-Duweir, that the Wellcome-Marston Archaeological Research Expedition turned its attention in 1932. James L. Starkey, the noted British archaeologist, suggested the site, in part, because up to that time the site had not been investigated. From 1932 to 1938 the Wellcome-Marston Expedition, under Starkey's leadership, spent an average of six months a year at the site. During the third season of digging (1935), Starkey unearthed a find which sent shock waves rippling through the world of the archaeologist and Bible scholar alike.

Among the burnt debris in a guard room of the outer city gate eighteen ostraca, broken pieces of pottery with writing on them--the "notepads" of the day--, were uncovered. The inscriptions on the ostraca were written with a reed pen and iron carbon ink in ancient Hebrew. The level at which the ostraca were found suggested the period of time between Nebuchadnezzar's first and second attack on Lachish. In 1938, three more ostraca, short and fragmentary, and of uncertain date, turned up elsewhere on the site. Of the ostraca found in 1935, only about a third are legible enough to allow an intelligible translation; "problems of decipherment still remain."[4] Yet the ostraca which are readable are of great significance in understanding this period of Judah's history.

For the most part the ostraca are letters,

> reports written in the year 589 or 588 B.C. by the liason officer between Lachish and Jerusalem to the commander of the Lachish fortress, one of the last Judean cities to fall to the Babylonians before the conquest of Jerusalem.[5]

In the letters in which the recipient is named, he is identified as Jaosh, the military governor of Lachish. In only one of the letters is the sender named; he is Hoshaiah, a subordinate officer stationed at an outpost

north of Lachish. In these letters to his superior, Hoshaiah appears to be defending himself against certain charges which were made against him.

> Throughout the letters Hoshaiah insists that he has been carrying out Jaosh's orders in full. In Letter 3 he tries to justify or excuse himself in the face of accusations that he has read some secret documents, sent from Jerusalem to the commander at Lachish, and revealed their contents to others.[6]

Some scholars draw from this the conclusion that Hoshaiah's loyalty was in question. These letters may have been collected as evidence for court marshal proceedings against Hoshaiah. "Unfortunately, we don't understand Hoshaiah's predicament, so interpreting these letters is a problem."[7]

Yet far from being dull military correspondance, the "Lachish Letters," as they have come to be known, are of great significance. They provide us with a description of the general social and political situation of the time--a time also described in the book of Jeremiah. This discovery, therefore, has relevance both for the archaeologist and the student of the Bible. For here, in these letters, is a corroberating report from one of the most important periods of Israelite history. A brief overview of their Biblical import is in order.

Jeremiah's Detractors

> "Then the officals said to the king, 'This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers (lit. "weakening the hands of the men of war") who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin.'"
> --Jeremiah 38:4

The prophet Jeremiah had desperately warned King Zedekiah not to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar. But Zedekiah, lured by the promise of military help from Egypt, revolted against the Babylonians--a move which would prove disasterous to Judah. Nebuchadnezzar's armies moved swiftly

against Judah and beseiged its fortified cities (among them, Lachish and Jerusalem).

As the fall of Jerusalem approached, Jeremiah continued to warn of the impending disaster: the Babylonians would attack, capture, and burn the city of Jerusalem (Jer 37:8). Zedekiah's royal advisors, the sarim, who had ill-advised the king in the first place, now denounced Jeremiah to the king. They asked that Jeremiah be put to death for "weakening the hands of the men of war" (AV Jer 38:4) --"presumably because his prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem would give a defeatist complex to the soldiers fighting against the Babylonian army."[8]

These same royal advisors, the sarim, who denounced Jeremiah find their way into the Lachish Letters. In Letter 6 Hoshaiah complains about the messages circulated by the sarim because "they weaken the hands of the people." It appears from this letter as if these officials were not held in high regard, especially by some of the military.

It has also been pointed out that the same expression: "weaken the hands" is used in the Biblical text and this letter.

> The army officer who wrote this Lachish Letter used the same expression, "weaken the hands," to describe the effect of the over-optimism of the royal officals, whereas the officals, referred to in the book of Jeremiah (38:4), in turn had used the same expression in describing the effect of Jeremiah's realistic prophecy concerning the approaching fall of Jerusalem. The royal officials were deemed guilty of the very action which they sought to ascribe to Jeremiah.[9]

Lachish and Azekah

> "Then Jeremiah the prophet told all this to the Zedekiah the king of Judah, in Jerusalem, while the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah that were still holding out--Lachish and Azekah. These were the only fortified cities left in Judah."
> --Jeremiah 34:6,7

Jeremiah links together these two cities, Lachish and Azekah. He speaks of them as the last two fortresses to hold out against the Babylonian army. These two cities formed part of the complex defense system that crisscrossed Judah. In II Chronicles 11:9 they are mentioned side-by-side in the list of towns which Rehoboam fortified during his reign. Years later, following the exile, people returned to live in "Lachish and its fields, and in Azekah and its settlements" (Ne 11:30). That these two cities were closely tied together, sharing a somewhat common history, can be clearly seen from Scripture.

The Lachish Letters provide striking confirmation of that link between Lachish and Azekah. The letters also reinforce Jeremiah's statement (34:7) that these two cities were among the last to hold out. In Letter 4 Hoshaiah writes to Jaosh: "We are watching for the signals of Lachish according to all indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah." Hoshaiah's outpost is figured to be about 4 miles north of Lachish, with a clear view of Azekah not more than 8 miles in the distance. The fact that Hoshaiah could no longer see the signal fires of Azekah may well indicate that that fortress had already fallen or was being taken at the writing of the letter.

> It is a tense moment for the defenders of the outpost. Azekah had either just been overrun or was so close to defeat that the signal fires had gone out. Anxious eyes now looked toward Lachish. "We are watching for the signal stations of Lachish," writes the anxious commander, "according to all the signs which my lord gives, because we do not see (the signals of) Azekah.[10]

Biblical Names in the Lachish Letters

The Lachish Letters contain a number of names which also appear in the Bible. Whether the names in the letters refer to the same people mentioned in the Bible, no one can say. However, "it is significant that

at least three of the names in the letters appear in the Old Testament only in the days of Jeremiah: Gemariah (Jer 36:10, 29:3), Jaazaniah (Jer 35:3), and Neriah (Jer 36:4)."[11] The name "Hoshaiah" itself is Biblical and occurs in Jeremiah 42:1 and Nehemiah 12:32. Jaosh is a shortened form of the name "Josiah."

> All words and phrases are characteristically Biblical, and God is referred to by the tetragrammaton YHWH (the consonants of the name Yahweh or Jehovah). Many of the names, too, are good Biblical compounds of Yahweh.[12]

The letters also mention the name "Jeremiah," although this name is not limited in the Old Testament to the time of the prophet Jeremiah, and need not refer to him. Another name, likewise not limited to this period, is Mattaniah--which was Zedekiah's name before he became king. Though again, it is doubtful that reference is being made to the king.

Letters 3 and 6 curiously speak of "the prophet." Various commentators have identified this unnamed prophet as Jeremiah, or Uriah (a prophet at the time of King Jehoiakim, cf. Jer 26:20,21). In Letter 6 the king is said to have accused "the prophet" of demoralizing the country--the same charges leveled against Jeremiah (Jer 38:1-4). However, the circumstances could fit the prophet Uriah equally well.

> Like Jeremiah, Uriah prophesied against Judah, and King Jehoiakim wanted Uriah put to death. Uriah fled for his life to Egypt, and may have been pursued there by "Achbor" and "Hodavish" whose names and campaign are mentioned in Letter 3.[13]

One thing is certain: the description in the letters is so uncertain that no positive identification can be made. There were many prophets contemporary with Jeremiah, e.g. the false prophets: Hannaniah (Jer 28: iff), Zedekiah (Jer 29:21), and Shemaiah (Jer 29:31). Yet, as Unger points out...

> What is important is not the identification of "the prophet"

> but the intimate contact here made with the inner life of Israel and that "here for the first time outside the Old Testament we find mention of a 'prophet' of the class which played so large a part in Hebrew history."[14]

The Philological Importance of the Lachish Letters

The letters uncovered at Tell ed-Duweir reveal much about the writing of this particular time. It is in this respect that the Lachish Letters prove probably the most value to us. The letters...

> are of paramount importance in providing independant witness to the kind of Hebrew language and script Judeans were using in the time of Jeremiah, the language being in all essentials identical with the Hebrew of the Old Testament.[15]

The syntax and vocabulary are reminiscient of much of the Old Testament. Gleason Archer summarizes the contributions of the Lachish Letters in this way:

> The most significant light cast upon the period of Jeremiah by the Lachish correspondance is to be found in the linguistic field. The type of Hebrew employed bears a very marked similarity to that which appears in the writings of Jeremiah, and serves to confirm the genuineness of his prophecies as stemming from the beginning of the sixth century B.C.[16]

The letters are also important to scholars for the script in which they are written--the Old Hebrew cursive script. These letters were the first personal documents found in Palestine written in the Hebrew script used before the Judean exile began in 586 B.C. "They provide much more extensive examples of this script than any other inscription now known from the same period."[17] It was in this script that much of the Old Testament--the historical books and large parts of the prophetic books--would have been originally written.

Finally, the Lachish Letters answer the critics' charge that writing was late in developing and only a few people were actually literate.

> They show that writing was the skill of not a very few highly trained persons, but enjoyed wider usage, certainly at least

> among those in the royal service. These letters are not from or to Jerusalem, but originate in a provincial context and, although dealing mostly with one man, are from a number of hands.[18]

The Integrity of the Book of Jeremiah and the Lachish Letters

Of all the books of the Old Testament, Jeremiah ranks as one of the most inconsistent in following a logical pattern. Parts of Jeremiah follow a chronological order, while other sections are grouped according to subject matter. This, together with the fact that the Septuagint's text of Jeremiah is approximately 1/8 shorter than the Masoretic text, has given the negative critics a field-day.

Some have seen in the Lachish Letters a quite plausible explanation for the "disjointed" nature of Jeremiah.

> These ostraca may provide a clue to how the book of Jeremiah was composed. Scholars have long lamented the fragmentary nature of Jeremiah and the absence of any consistent organization. Perhaps when the prophet spoke, his words were originally preserved on ostraca like these letters, and were only later collected and arranged by an editor. Does that explain why the book of Jeremiah seems to be put together from disconnected pieces of text?[19]

Of course, Scripture itself provides an insight into the composition of the Book of Jeremiah. When King Jehoiakim burned the scroll containing Jeremiah's pronouncements, at the dictation of Jeremiah, Baruch (Jeremiah's secretary) made a new copy of all that was written on the original and "many similar words were added to them" (Jer 36:32).

In the Lachish Letters we have another glimpse, a very personal glimpse, into the period of time immediately prior to the final conquest of Judah by the Babylonians. In addition, in these letters we've gained a more complete knowledge of the classical Hebrew of this time. The

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discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and more recent finds vie for our attention. Yet, the original evaluation of the letters uncovered at Tell ed-Duweir still holds true--in the Lachish Letters "we have virtually a new section of Old Testament literature: a supplement to Jeremiah."[20] And although the Lachish Letters have now been studied for nearly 50 years, "there is still much to learn from these documents that speak to us so personally in the words of people who lived more than 2500 years ago."[21]

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ENDNOTES

[1]Pearlman, Moshe, and Yaacov Yannai, Historical Sites in Israel, (Givatayim, Israel: Peli Printing Works Ltd., 1981), p. 186.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Thomas, D. Winton, Documents from Old Testament Times, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1958), p. 212.

[5]Pearlman and Yannai, op. cit., pp. 186,188.

[6]Cornfeld, Gaalyahu, Archaeology and the Bible: Book By Book, (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 174,175.

[7]Wright, Rodney, "Lachish and Azekah Were the Only Fortified Cities of Judah that Remained." Biblical Archaeology Review, vol. VIII, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1982), p. 73.

[8]Free, Joseph P, Archaeology and Bible History, (Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press Publications, 1969), p. 222.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Frank, Harry Thomas, An Archaeological Companion to the Bible, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972), p. 208.

[11]Free, op. cit., p. 223.

[12]Unger, Merrill, Archaeology and the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), p. 286.

[13]Wright, op. cit., p. 73.

[14]Unger, op. cit., p. 287.

[15]Thomas, D. Winton, Archaeology and Old Testament Study, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 305.

[16]Archer, Gleason L., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 365.

[17]Wright, op. cit., p. 73.

[18]Frank, op. cit., p. 206.

[19]Wright, op. cit., p. 73.

[20]Haupert, Raymond S., "Lachish--Frontier Fortress of Judah," The Biblical Archaeologist, vol. 1, no. 4 (Dec. 1938), p. 32.

[21]Wright, op. cit., p. 73.

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