ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE
AT HEZEKIAH'S LACHISH

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The publication of David Ussishkin's beautiful new large-format book *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Publications of The Institute of Archaeology, no. 6 [1982]; 135 pages, 13 × 13 inches) coincided appropriately enough with the fiftieth anniversary of the commencement in 1932 of archaeological excavation at Tell ed-Duweir, the site now generally thought to be ancient Lachish. Since that time three expeditions have worked at the site: From 1932 to 1938 the Wellcome-Marston Expedition mounted a major effort under James Starkey, with the assistance of Olga Tufnell, Lankester Harding, and others. In 1966 and 1968, Yohanan Aharoni headed an Israeli team that reexcavated a temple known as the Solar Shrine. And since 1973 Ussishkin has been involved in a long-term systematic study of the site under the auspices of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University and the Israel Exploration Society.

When a biblical archaeologist thinks of Lachish, at least three key "problems" come immediately to mind: (1) Can the ancient site really be located at Tell ed-Duweir? (2) Is the massive destruction first uncovered by Starkey in his Level III to be associated with the conquest of Sennacherib, presumably in 701 B.C., or with that of Nebuchadnezzar, presumably in 597 B.C.? (3) Was Sennacherib involved in two campaigns or only one campaign into Palestine? In this essay I shall first address these three problems, and then provide an overview of Ussishkin's volume, noting the lines of well-documented evidence that he provides regarding Lachish.

1. *Key "Problems" Regarding Lachish*

It seems to me that Ussishkin has come close to settling once-for-all at least the first two of the three vexed issues mentioned above. His assumption concerning the third "problem" is, in my

view, incorrect; he himself does not, in fact, deal with the evidence for two campaigns.

Is Tell ed-Duweir the Site of Lachish?

With regard to the site of Lachish, it was Albright back in 1929 who first proposed the identification of Tell ed-Duweir with Lachish on the basis not only of its impressive size but also of its location. Eusebius had said that Lachish was a village in the 7th (Roman) mile from Eleutheropolis (Arabic Beit Jibrin) on the way to the Daroma (south). A few scholars have questioned this identification, the most recent being G. W. Ahlström,[1] who says Tell ed-Duweir is only 4.3 Roman miles from Eleutheropolis and not even on the road to the Daroma. He even questions the tell's strategic importance in the Iron Age. Furthermore, he infers from the famous Lachish Letter IV that this ostracon was a message sent about Lachish and Azekah to a third place, i.e. Tell ed-Duweir. Granted that this is a possible interpretation of the text so that, as D. W. Thomas once said, Ostracon IV "does not in itself provide sufficient evidence to prove that Tell ed-Duweir marks the site of ancient Lachish,"[2] yet it is not the *only* possible interpretation.

In a direct response to Ahlström, G. I. Davies has argued that nothing in the Hebrew text excludes the possibility that Tell ed-Duweir, where the ostracon was found, is in fact Lachish.[3] Furthermore, Davies says excavation has shown that the Judeans must have thought the site was strategically important or they would not have gone to all the trouble of fortifying it! He also suggests that the British excavation found evidence that there may have been a road to Gaza that branched off the Eleutheropolis-Daroma road and by that route it would be 7 Roman miles from Eleutheropolis to Tell ed-Duweir/Lachish. Davies concludes:

> Whether or not it is possible to base an argument on a detailed correlation of the reliefs with the excavations at Tell ed-Duweir, this latter site demands identification with a city of the magnitude of Lachish and there is really no other name that comes seriously

[1] G. W. Ahlström, "Is Tell Ed-Duweir Ancient Lachish?" *PEQ* 112 (1980): 7-9.

[2] D. W. Thomas, "The Site of Ancient Lachish, The Evidence of Ostrakon IV from Tell ed-Duweir," *PEQ* 72 (1940): 148-149.

[3] G. I. Davies, "Tell Ed-Duweir = Ancient Lachish: A Response to G. W. Ahlström," *PEQ* 114 (1982): 25-28.

into the reckoning. Moreover, the archaeological listing of Tell ed-Duweir matches exactly the requirements of texts, biblical and other, which refer to Lachish. . . . [4]

In my opinion, Ussishkin has made a very compelling case in his new book for the location of Lachish at Tell ed-Duweir. He has done this through his detailed correlation of the latter's topography and the results of the British and Israeli excavations there with what is seen on Sennacherib's reliefs.

Who Destroyed Lachish—Nebuchadnezzar or Sennacherib?

If Ussishkin is correct on the first "problem," it follows, I think, that it will be very difficult to refute his arguments on the second key "problem," arguments which favor Level III being destroyed by Sennacherib rather than by Nebuchadnezzar. Starkey had favored the latter because Level II, the city-remains stratigraphically just above Level III, seemed securely dated to the Babylonian destruction of 588/6 B.C. on the basis of comparison with Albright's dating of Stratum A2 at nearby Tell Beit Mirsim. And the pottery found in both those contemporaneous levels so closely resembled what was found in Level III that he felt the latter could not have been brought to a fiery end more than a decade or so before. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian campaign of 597 B.C. described in 2 Kgs 24:10-17 seemed the perfect correlation, even though admittedly it mentions only Jerusalem and not Lachish.

After Starkey's untimely death in 1938, Olga Tufnell worked on the Lachish material, including some discovered after his death, and came to a different conclusion. She found a clear typological distinction between the pottery from Levels II and III. Furthermore, she discerned two phases in the Level-II gate, both brought to an end by fire. A decade just did not seem enough time to account for the new data, so she assigned the end of Level III to the next available major military invasion: Sennacherib's campaign of 701 B.C.

In the years since Tufnell published her conclusions, most Israeli scholars have sided with her, while most American and British scholars were still persuaded by Starkey's arguments. Ussishkin's excavation has produced abundant data, both stratigraphic and typological, to support Tufnell's interpretation that the evidence

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[4]Ibid., p. 27.

requires more than a decade to have elapsed before the Babylonian destruction of Level II. It must now be said that a destruction date of 701 B.C. for Level III fits the findings in the city-gate area better than a date of 597 B.C. One of the implications of this conclusion is a recognition that pottery styles often evolved along *different* lines in the northern and southern regions of the country during the biblical period of the Divided Monarchy.

Were There Two Campaigns by Sennacherib?

Sennacherib's campaign against Hezekiah in 701 B.C. is well known and accepted by OT scholars and Assyriologists because we have unusually complete accounts of the episode from both sides. The third key "problem" mentioned above is whether or not these accounts indeed refer to only a single episode. As I have already mentioned, Ussishkin assumes that they do so without arguing the case.

It is generally agreed by OT specialists that 2 Kgs 18:13-16 and Sennacherib's annals of his third campaign in 701 refer to the same event. They correspond in date, in the scope of the conquest of Judah, and in the tribute exacted from Hezekiah, who is mentioned by name. The question is whether the continuation of the biblical story in 2 Kgs 18:17-19:36 describes a continuation of the same campaign or whether it reports a later campaign by Sennacherib. The annal in question ends, as far as Judah is concerned, with Hezekiah's payment of tribute; strangely, Lachish is never mentioned.

But the narrative in 2 Kgs 18 goes on at great length with an account that appears to conflict with the information in vss. 13-16 if the same event is described. Instead of being satisfied with the tribute as both the earlier verses and the annal imply, Sennacherib, through an emissary sent from Lachish to Jerusalem, demands unconditional surrender. In the meantime, "Tirhakah, king of Ethiopia," appeared on the scene to help Judah. We know from Egyptian chronology that Tirhakah did not begin his reign till 690/689 B.C. For this and other reasons many biblical scholars feel the records of two campaigns by Sennacherib have been joined together in the biblical text.[5] Although the annals for Sennacherib's

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[5]Cf., e.g., Siegfried H. Horn, "Did Sennacherib Campaign Once or Twice Against Hezekiah?" *AUSS* 4 (1966): 1-28.

last eight years have so far not been discovered, and hence the argument is one from silence, most Assyriologists tend to see only one invasion, because the second apparently does not exist in an Assyrian source—or does it?

In a brilliant piece of detective work, Nadav Na²aman published in 1974 a hitherto unrecognized account of Sennacherib's campaign in Judah during the reign of Hezekiah.[6] The fragmentary inscription records the conquest of Azekah (10 miles north of Lachish) as well as the conquest of a royal Philistine city that Hezekiah had *previously* annexed to his kingdom—possibly Gath but more probably Ekron. As my former Andrews University colleague William H. Shea has pointed out, Hezekiah was *not* in possession of Ekron in 701 B.C.[7] It was the Ekronites themselves who had sent their pro-Assyrian king Padi to Hezekiah. But Sennacherib punished them according to his 701-B.C. annal and put Padi back on the throne, dividing Judahite territory among the kings in the Philistine cities of Ekron, Ashdod, and Gaza. Gath is not mentioned because it was possibly uninhabited by this time, according to Shea (cf. 2 Chron 26:6 and Amos 6:2). When Sennacherib was busy subduing Babylon in 694-689 B.C., the Palestinian kings took the opportunity to rebel against Assyria. Hezekiah would naturally have tried to reclaim his territory lost to the Philistines. Thus, when Sennacherib returned on a second campaign to deal with Hezekiah—if we posit a second campaign based on the biblical narrative and this new Assyrian text—he found Ekron in Hezekiah's hands and had to reconquer it. This second invasion would most likely have been after 689 B.C., when Sennacherib's extant annals end, but before 686 B.C., the year of Hezekiah's death.

This reconstruction based on Shea's suggestions makes sense out of the biblical data: 2 Kgs 18:16-17 marks the dividing line between the account of Sennacherib's first campaign of 701 B.C., when he lifted the siege of Lachish because of Hezekiah's tribute, and the account of his second campaign of 688 B.C. (?), when Lachish was conquered—an event so graphically depicted in the

[6]Nadav Na²aman, "Sennacherib's 'Letter to God' on His Campaign to Judah," *BASOR*, no. 214 (1974), pp. 25-39.

[7]William H. Shea, "One Invasion or Two?" *Ministry* 53 (March 1980), pp. 26-28. This has been elaborated by Shea in his more extensive treatment, "Sennacherib's Second Palestinian Campaign," *JBL* 104 (1985): 401-418.

reliefs from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh. The capture of Lachish was followed by Sennacherib's attack on Libnah (19:8) and then the notice of Tirhakah (19:9), who became pharaoh in 690 B.C. and who came to Hezekiah's aid. The impression gained from 2 Kgs 19:36-37 that Sennacherib died soon after his return to Nineveh would then be correct, for he died in 682 B.C.

This reconstruction makes sense out of the Assyrian data too: It explains why the mention of Lachish is absent from Sennacherib's 701-B.C. annal even though it was *the* most celebrated victory of his Palestinian campaign—according to the central positioning of the reliefs in the palace. Lachish then served the function of a consolation prize for Sennacherib's failure to capture Jerusalem when "the angel of the Lord went forth and slew 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians" (2 Kgs 19:35). Furthermore, in Naʾaman's new inscription, Sennacherib addresses Anshar, the name of a Babylonian god which, according to Shea, does not appear in Sennacherib's other inscriptions until after his conquest of Babylon in 689 B.C.

This reconstruction also makes sense out of the archaeological data. Dating the destruction in Lachish Level III to ca. 688 B.C. has the advantage of a compromise between the greater-than-a-century extremes of 701 B.C. and 597 B.C. from a ceramic typology point of view. It encompasses most of the positive arguments of both positions mentioned earlier (Starkey's and Tufnell's), while avoiding their negative arguments. Furthermore, it easily adopts Naʾaman's more recent insights with regard to the necessity of dating all the royal *lmlk* seal impressions from those areas of Judah that were annexed by Philistia to a time either prior to their annexation in Hezekiah's reign or afterwards in Josiah's reign.[8] Naʾaman, of course, suggested 701 B.C. as a *terminus ante quem* for the manufacture of the *lmlk* jars; for the above reasons I would propose 688 B.C.

2. *An Overview of Ussishkin's Publication*

Obviously, one cannot be dogmatic about the solution to any of the three "problems" discussed above, for the issues are complex and all of the data are not yet in. Ussishkin's publication, however, marshals most of the pertinent available information. Actually,

[8]Nadav Naʾaman, "Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah and the Date of the *LMLK* Stamps," *VT* 29 (1979): 61-86.

what he had available for his task is every archaeologist's dream; and he makes the most of three lines of well-documented, complementary evidence pertinent to Lachish, devoting a section of his *Conquest of Lachish* to each one and finally weaving together the strands to make a cohesive and compelling composition. (In the following overview, in-text page references will be given for citations of his *Conquest of Lachish*.)

Historical Evidence for Lachish

The first section of Ussishkin's book deals with the historical evidence for Lachish, by which he means the literary texts, namely the Bible, the Assyrian annals, and Herodotus. It is both the shortest (six pages) and weakest section.

Perhaps Ussishkin thought that so many books and articles have traversed the same ground that it was pointless for him to attempt another "rehash." But as I have tried to show above, the discovery by Naᵓaman of a new text by Sennacherib does allow us to suggest an interpretation that makes good sense out of *all* the literary data, rather than considering, as Ussishkin does, that the biblical account is "confused and contradictory" (p. 15).

Archaeological Data Pertaining to Lachish

The second (forty-page) section of Ussishkin's *Conquest of Lachish* considers the archaeological data at Lachish. Here Ussishkin really comes into his own. After all, who better than he knows his own excavation site! He first gives a general introduction to the excavations by the British and Aharoni, before coming to his own results achieved in annual seasons since 1973.

Often a contemporary archaeologist must reinterpret and correct the interpretations of a site's previous excavator(s), but Ussishkin notes that in most cases Starkey and his staff understood well and interpreted correctly the excavated data and the history of the mound. As a result, subsequent work has merely refined and supplemented the published conclusions of Olga Tufnell who, after Starkey's death, worked for twenty years on the excavated material, producing a comprehensive and detailed excavation report which Ussishkin calls a model of its kind (p. 23).

In summary, Ussishkin's argument for dating Level III at Lachish to 701 B.C. goes like this (cf. p. 27): On the basis of the historical information from literary texts as well as the Lachish

reliefs of Sennacherib, we must assume that Lachish in 701 B.C. was a strongly fortified city that was conquered and burned. Hence there must be a conspicuous and strongly fortified burnt level that represents this destroyed city. At Tell ed-Duweir (presumed to be Lachish), Level VI was a Canaanite city destroyed in the twelfth century B.C., and Level II was the Judean city razed by Nebuchadnezzar in 588/6 B.C. That leaves three possible "candidates" for the city conquered by Sennacherib—Levels V, IV, and III. The settlement of Level V, possibly unwalled, was hardly a large fortified city; furthermore, it was characterized by tenth-century-B.C. pottery. Although Level IV came to an abrupt end, it seems clear that no fire was involved; moreover, the city walls and gate and certain other structures were not destroyed but continued to function in Level III, so that life seems to have resumed without a break. Thus Level III is the only suitable "candidate" for the city destroyed by Sennacherib. Not only do the absence of literary/relief evidence for the destruction of Lachish by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. and its occurrence for Sennacherib in 701 B.C. (I would say 688 B.C.) argue for the earlier date, but so also does the ceramic evidence discovered by Ussishkin. Particularly noteworthy are two storerooms, one destroyed at the end of Level III and the other at the end of Level II. The repertoire of the crushed pottery assemblage in each storeroom is different enough from the other to require more than a decade to account for the typological changes.

Among the archaeological discoveries of greatest general interest at Lachish was the city's three-acre governmental and royal center. Referred to as the "palace-fort" by Ussishkin (p. 37), it is the largest and most impressive building of the Iron Age yet discovered in Israel. Although only its substructure has been preserved, it still dominates its surroundings from its central location on the mound. Another remarkable and unparalleled find for a biblical site was the discovery in the Level-III gatehouse of the bronze fittings or reinforcements of the gate's acacia wood doors (pp. 33-34).

Ussishkin's careful work, sparked by a suggestion from Yigal Yadin, also rewarded him with an exciting discovery that had been misinterpreted by Starkey: dramatic evidence of the only Assyrian siege ramp so far found anywhere. In fact, it is the best preserved siege ramp from *any* period so far discovered in the Near East (pp. 51-54). Of course, in the 1930s the British had already un-

covered gruesome evidence of the siege—namely, the mass grave of some 1500 individuals. Three of the skulls had been trepanned, meaning that these individuals had undergone operations in which a segment of bone had been removed surgically from the skulls. Amazingly, one man had survived long enough after the operation for the skull to heal (pp. 56-58).

Mention should also be made of the royal Judean storage jars found at Lachish, since the excavations there have produced more than at any other site. As with jars discovered elsewhere, many of these storage jars bear seal impressions with either a four-winged scarab or a double-winged sun disc. Above the emblems is the word *lmlk*, "belonging to the king," while below them appears the name of one of the following towns: Hebron, Sochoh, Ziph, or *mmšt*. Through the years many scholars have debated their purpose and date. Because of their clear stratigraphic context at Lachish, Ussishkin has concluded that no distinction in date can be made among types; all types were being used at one and the same time during the last years of Hezekiah, just before the Assyrian conquest. In fact, these storage jars were probably associated with the king's preparations to meet the anticipated Assyrian siege of the Judean cities under his control (pp. 45-48).

The Assyrian Reliefs

In the third section of Ussishkin's book, and the longest section (sixty-seven pages), Ussishkin deals with the Assyrian reliefs. After an account of how and where they were found in the excavation of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh undertaken by Layard in the last century, together with some of his plans and drawings, Ussishkin describes the Lachish reliefs in helpful detail. His description is considerably aided and enhanced by brand-new photographs of the reliefs taken at the British Museum by Avraham Hay, as well as by new interpretive drawings of the reliefs by Judith Dekel.

Ussishkin is struck by the balanced composition that dominates the entire series of reliefs and that turns them into one coherent panorama carved on a long frieze of slabs (p. 118). The city of Lachish itself is shown in the center, opposite the monumental entrance to the room which was the focal point of a self-contained unit within the huge palace complex. The people in the central scene are rendered in diminished proportions, as if the city

is located farther in the distance. Coming from the left is the attack on the city, with its multitudinous military details, while on the right is an after-the-battle scene along with the cuneiform inscription which identifies what is happening: "Sennacherib, king of all, king of Assyria, sitting on his *nimedu*-throne while the spoil from the city of Lachish passed before him." Thus, the city in the center is associated with both the attack and post-battle scenes, which "overlap" at that point. In this way, the centrally positioned city becomes the element that cleverly integrates the two separate scenes into one harmonious whole.

These reliefs are of particular interest to Bible students, because they form our sole depiction of the people of Judah during the biblical period. They give us an idea of the appearance, attire, and possessions of these people, and they also include a depiction of the only documented Judean chariot.

While R. D. Barnett was the first to make a comparison between the Lachish reliefs and the city of Lachish on the basis of the archaeological data recovered in the British excavations, Ussishkin, with his new data, has further elaborated and refined Barnett's thesis. Ussishkin argues that the reliefs portray the city not only from the southwest but from one particular vantage point on the slope of the neighboring hillock. From a spot now occupied by Moshav Lachish, both Sennacherib and his artist must have watched the progress of the siege and its aftermath now so vividly depicted on the reliefs (p. 119). Based on this insight and taking full account of the archaeological findings and the details in the reliefs, Gert le Grange has painstakingly provided the reader of Ussishkin's book with artistic reconstructions of the Assyrian siege, successfully conveying the heat and the confusion of the battle (pp. 122-124).

Epilogue Summary of the Data

In a brief epilogue, Ussishkin summarizes what happens to the cardinal participants and elements in the drama after this Assyrian siege: to the Assyrian king, to the site of the desolate city, and to its exiled inhabitants. He makes a convincing case for finding some of the exiles, based on their distinctive dress, in the reliefs depicting the building of Sennacherib's palace back in Nineveh.

Random Observations Concerning Ussishkin's Book

Ussishkin's *Conquest of Lachish* closes with a useful selected bibliography on Lachish and the notes which are limited to references to quotations incorporated in the text—though, unfortunately, one does not know from the text that they are there. Dates for the Judean kings differ by a few years from the most widely-used chronologies, but are based on Tadmor's work published in Hebrew.

For a book that is remarkably error-free, it may be worth mentioning the consistent misspelling of eunuch (especially p. 115), a serious haplography in the text at the end of p. 43, and the reference on p. 15 to figure 3, which as a matter of fact contains the Israel Museum copy of Sennacherib's annals (others are at the British Museum and the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute) and not the fragmentary British Museum tablet whose importance Naʾaman has shown.

With the help of excellent photographs, drawings, maps, plans, and charts, as well as a lucid text, Ussishkin has more than succeeded in his goal "to produce a volume which is of scientific value, comprehensible to the layman and attractive to the eye" (p. 9). It is not only a worthy testimony to a unique chapter in the history of ancient Israel, it is a model of publication for every archaeologist to emulate.