

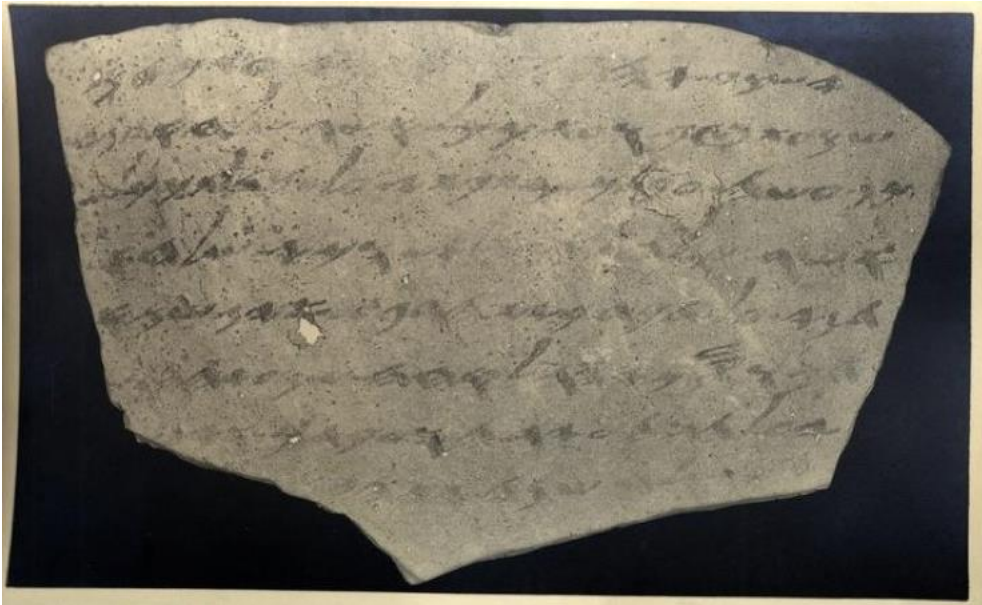
James Leslie Starkey
Archaeologist
PART 2 (iv)
Lachish

By Wendy Slaninka (Granddaughter of James & Marjorie Starkey by their daughter Mary)

This is my eighth article for Filming Antiquity directly following on from my previous articles 'Part 2. Lachish (i),(ii) and (iii). It also links in with earlier articles 'Part 1, Background and Early Career', 'Living at Lachish – Life in Camp', 'First Lady of Lachish – Marjorie Starkey and her family', and 'Olive Starkey – Lady of Lachish' (Leslie's sister), where there is other information and photos of Leslie and Lachish.

'Behold a treasure not made of Gold – in earthen vessels wealth untold'

Father John Foley (Song, 'Earthen Vessels')



Lachish Letter No.IV Postcard (front)

Photo: courtesy of The British Museum

Undoubtedly the major find was the discovery of The Lachish Letters on 29th January 1935.. The discovery, which was made in a small guard room just inside the outer city gate, was a series of ostraca (or Potsherds) with ancient Hebrew script written shortly before the Babylonian conquest by Nebuchadnezzar of 589 BC. The potsherds were the first personal documents inscribed in ink in ancient pre-exilic Hebrew – the first ones yet discovered in that tongue in Palestine, which was outmoded even in the time of Christ (who spoke Aramaic), at least 1,500 years older than the most ancient copy of the Hebrew Scriptures. Sir Charles published in The Daily Mirror *'They are the only personal documents outside the Old Testament that ever been found written by the Jews themselves'*. They were written by local commanders to their officers when Lachish was being threatened, and experts were even able to identify different sets of handwriting on the sherds. The pot sherds were either buff-coloured or red, and the excavating team were able to piece some together to show they originated from one broken vessel. Letter 4 describes how the writer was looking for signal fires of Lachish for the signal fires of Azekah could no longer be seen. The writer of this ostrakon was viewing the destruction of the cities of the Shephelah from the nearby hill country to the west.

Twenty-one letters were found in total under Starkey's directorship, followed by a further three later in 1938 (and more in the later excavations by David Ussishkin), and some of them seemed to be portraying the defence of a military trial at that time. Scholars from Jerusalem were sent for - Dr. Benjamin Mazer Maisler, Dr. Harold Ginsberg, Dr. Samuel Yeivin and Prof Harry Torczyner (Bialik Professor Hebrew Philology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem) - as well as Father Hugues-Louis Vincent, a French Dominican

monk from the École Biblique in Jerusalem and a leading scholar in the archaeology of Jerusalem - and they initially examined the ostraca in camp.



Benjamin Maisler (Mazar) and H.L. Ginsberg examining the Letters

Photo: Wellcome-Marston Expedition Archive, Dept of Middle East, British Museum, copyright UCL Institute of Archaeology, courtesy of the Wellcome Trust and the British Museum

Starkey felt that the decipherers of this discovery should be the descendants of those who wrote the letters and so he entrusted the work to Torczyner. Alkin Lewis, a chemist from King's College, London was invited to Lachish to analyse the ink on the sherds. He then contributed chapters to the Lachish Book I – Lachish Letters. The Daily Herald published this statement by Dr. A.S.E. Yahuda, *'the translations are of the most supreme importance. These discoveries help to refute those who say that the history given in the books of the Bible is nothing but a myth. The inscriptions mention the names of places and people given in the Bible.* Soon after, excited by the discovery, Sir Charles Marston rushed out to Lachish and was reported in The Times *'I returned from Tell Duweir feeling that the Expedition has as yet only touched the fringe of the records of the past that are buried in its ruins'.* Whilst he was there he also published an article in the Palestine Post under the heading *'Century's most important discovery'*. There is a photo of him with Starkey at Lachish in the book *'Man of Wolverhampton'*. Headlines were splashed across all the major newspapers of the day, full of the discovery. Marston later published his book *'The Bible Comes Alive'* giving a full account of the early history and results of the excavations of Lachish. The Book of Jeremiah is confirmed by these Letters and refers to the last days of Lachish in Psalm 12:6,7.

Starkey wrote the Introduction, and after Sir Henry's death in 1936, made the following dedication at the front of Book I, The Lachish Letters: *"This Book – the first fruit of excavation at Lachish is gratefully dedicated to Sir Henry Wellcome whose constant enthusiasm for research into the science and history of man leads on to deeper knowledge"*. The Wellcome Trust also produced a set of postcards depicting a few of the Letters (see image above). Harding did quite a lot of work on the alphabet and lettering and even started teaching some of the workers the ancient script and it seemed they were doing quite well!

Further evidence that the Pentateuch existed in alphabetic script is shown in white writing on a red earthenware bowl 1295-1252 BC which was also uncovered. According to Marston, published in his London Illustrated News article *'it is an inscription of extreme importance'*. This bowl is pictured in his book *'The Bible Comes Alive'*. He concluded that any theory of oral transmission of the earlier books of the Old Testament must be abandoned.

Although Starkey is credited with the discovery of The Letters in general terms as Director of the Expedition, I feel it is only fair to state that it was actually Hasan Awad El Quatshan who first saw them. I have a letter from Olga to Madge who was in England expecting their daughter Jane. The letter (26.2.1935), updating on news in camp, says *"The main excitement is the discovery of the ostraca Hasan Awad was the lucky finder"*. Sadly none of the Lachish books ever publicised this fact though in the first book *'Lachish Letters'* a photograph showing where the Letters were found shows Hasan in the 'posed' shot for the book and names him in the caption but not why? An earlier Wellcome flyer advertising the book with the same photo refers to him only as an arab worker, and also incorrectly stated that it was

Starkey *'he, himself, was the finder of the written sherds'* in a short obituary flyer inserted into Book I on its publication..



Image in Lachish Letters I

Photo: Wellcome-Marston Expedition Archive, Dept of Middle East, British Museum, copyright UCL Institute of Archaeology, courtesy of the Wellcome Trust and the British Museum

It was not until the publication of Lachish IV that Hasan is thanked by name along with the other principal workers, but again no specific reason why. So although it is speculated in various publications that he was the finder and indeed Harding corroborated this, I would like to set the record straight here and give him his due acknowledgement. It stands to reason that many important finds are by the nature of the business found by the workers in the field but at least these days they are given credit for this, or at least one would hope! Hasan Awad was a Hanajreh Bedaway Palestinian archaeologist, learning his trade working for Petrie, and was a close friend of Harding.. He had joined the expedition along with Harding from Petrie's camp and when Harding left in 1936 for Jordan, Hasan again accompanied him. Incidentally, the Department of Antiquities in Jordan had initially approached Starkey for that position, but he naturally declined! – and proposed they ask Harding.

Of course once the Letters had been announced to the world, the floodgates opened and Lachish became very popular with visitors (see my Life in Camp article).



Starkey with a group of visiting scholars from the Hebrew University, Jerusalem – Dr. Sukenik said at a memorial meeting *'Starkey would spend hours with the students explaining everything to them'*

Photo: Prof. Nahman Avigad, courtesy of Prof. David Ussishkin
(also available from CZA, Central Zionist Archive, Jerusalem)

The brown leather-bound Lachish Visitors Book, which is now held at the Wellcome Trust, didn't exist until the middle of the 1934 season but nevertheless it boasts hundreds of signatures (approximately 480), including a royal visit by the Crown Prince of Sweden and his wife Lady Mountbatten. Of note are Olga's mother who visited together with Lady Petrie, Sir Charles Marston (with his wife and daughters, and again later with his mother and sister), Sir Robert Mond, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Sir Charles Close, Margaret Murray, Joan du Plat Taylor, the Garstangs, Albright, the Crowfoots, Dorothy Garrod, Miss Gardner, Father Vincent with 20 other priests in tow!, Johnston-Saint, Guy Brunton, an RAF party of 14, and a party of 100 Newspaper people!! (it definitely says 100, and there is one signature for the group). There is even a Mrs. Simpson, but I doubt it was THE Mrs. Simpson. Many names are not known to me or are illegible, and include scholars, archaeologists, officials, and other personnel representing educational and ecclesiastical establishments as well as the military and government and private parties. Visitors wrote they were from USA, Canada, Mexico, Korea, China, India, Cyprus, France, Spain, Holland, Italy, England, Scotland, Wales and of course many over the middle east region, Jerusalem, Haifa, Hebron, Jaffa, Tel Aviv, Gaza, Transjordan, Egypt. Many had not stated their points of origin which is a shame. An interesting project to track and trace to see who they all were!

Whilst on the subject of Visitor Books, Dr. Nelson Glueck, commented, at the meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research held soon after Starkey's death, *'it is with deep melancholy that I notice his firm signature in our Visitor's Book on 24th December 1937'*. He did have a very distinctive signature and it is most probably in many Visitor Books of other Digs and Institutions at the time.



**Gerald Lankaster Harding, Olga Tufnell, Sir Flinders Petrie, Lady Hilda Petrie,
James Starkey, Lt. D.L. Risdon**

Possibly at UCL after one of Starkey's lectures or perhaps Sir Petrie's?

Photo: Family archive. W. Slaninka

[The quote at the head of this article reminds me rather of the Lachish Camp Chorus – see Part 2 (ii) – and is certainly reminiscent of the 1000 pots filled with sand which Starkey emptied for Petrie at Qua where he found the Coptic script and a horde of gold! – see Part 1, Background and Early Career]

CONTINUED IN PART 2 (v)

Sources/Further Reading/Research: *in addition to those given in Parts (i) - (iii)
Further references will be given at the end of the next and final Part (v)*

Please note that the References listing given in all five parts is relevant to all.

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 David Ussishkin, Excavations at Tel Lachish, 1973-1977, Preliminary Report, Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University, Volume 5, Numbers 1-2, 1978
 Victoria & Albert Museum/Palestine Exploration Fund, World of the Bible, Centenary Exhibition of the Palestine Exploration Fund in cooperation with the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1-28 November 1965
 Dr. A.S.E. Yahuda, 'Explorers Find City Joshua captured', The Daily Herald, 2nd April 1935
 Plus numerous newspaper articles of the day (mostly from originals in family archive)

Much information on camp life throughout these articles has been gleaned from Olga's letters home to her mother (archived at the PEF) and these are soon to be published in a book entitled 'Olga Tufnell's 'Perfect Journey' Letters and Photographs of an archaeologist in the Levant and Mediterranean', edited John Green and Ros Henry, UCL Press, expected April 2021.

Permission has been obtained from the various journals, newspapers and publishers where relevant – many of the original publications of the above are also in the family archive..