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The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua

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Abstract

Since the excavations of Kenyon at Jericho and Callaway at et-Tell, these sites have been sources of contention regarding the relationship of the descriptions in the book of Joshua to the archaeological realities of the Late Bronze Age. Indeed, the sites have often been the proving ground for demonstrations of the highly redacted nature of the book of Joshua. The purpose of this study will be to examine the biblical text and to consider what it actually reports. In so doing, effort will be made to lay aside assumptions that the long tradition of interpretation, both popular and scholarly, has assigned to these sites. Instead, the language of the text of Joshua and the latitude that the text allows will be examined. Consideration will then be given to both the extrabiblical textual and material-culture evidence that might be relevant to these ancient traditions and their place in the story and history of early Israel.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the biblical text, the book of Joshua in particular, in order to determine what it actually claims about the sites of Jericho and Ai and how its claims relate to the actual account of the book of Joshua and to the extrabiblical evidence.

Few sites have been studied as much and debated as intensively as Tell es-Sultan and et-Tell, traditionally identified as Jericho and Ai, respectively. The archaeology of these two sites reveals little from the time of Israel's entrance into the promised land from east of the Jordan. This is true whether one accepts an earlier, 15th-century B.C.E. date for the exodus and entrance into the land or whether one posits a 13th-century date for these events as recorded in the biblical text. In both cases, there remains little at Tell es-Sultan and virtually nothing at et-Tell that can be identified with these periods of time. In the case of Tell es-Sultan, Garstang's walls of Jericho were long ago reassigned to an earlier time. Among her discoveries, Dame Kenyon identified a few remains

on the tell and more in nearby tombs but did not identify the city of Jericho as envisioned by so many for so long. There was no vast city with impregnable walls that miraculously fell. Ai is no less a problem. Although some would relocate the city (see the essay by Wood in this volume), the tendency to connect Tell Beitin with Bethel makes possible the identification of et-Tell with Ai. Nevertheless, there is no city from the expected time period of Joshua.

This collection of data has led to a widespread rejection of the biblical account as envisioned by archaeologists and biblical scholars. It is not the purpose of this essay to resolve these questions. Rather, the study will turn in a different direction. For many years, editors of Old Testament commentary series have often chosen archaeologists or, less frequently, ancient Near Eastern textual scholars to write commentaries on the book of Joshua. This has been entirely appropriate, given the numerous issues of historical geography, site identification, ancient warfare, and other matters that are properly the domain of these sorts of scholars. Further, the explorations of Jericho and Ai seemed to provide the best possible resources for the study of the first eight chapters of the book, the chapters most often consulted and referred to by adults and children alike. The people who could interpret this information best were deemed to be the archaeologists who had thoroughly studied these remains. Thus, it is no surprise that John Garstang (1931) himself contributed a commentary, as did the well-known American archaeologist of the middle of the 20th century, George Ernest Wright (Boling and Wright 1982). In German, Martin Noth's (1953) study of the book reflected his own abiding commitment to archaeology, as is true of the recent successor in the same series by Volkmar Fritz (1994).

These contributions, however valuable they have been, have tended to spend less time on a close study of the text itself, and they have instead emphasized the historical issues. However, a careful textual study is necessary if there is ever to be success in understanding exactly what the book says about the world of Canaan at the time of the appearance of early Israel in the land. Indeed, the controversy that has raged around the book can only gain successful solutions if very serious study is devoted to what the text actually says. The popularity of the stories circulated about Jericho has been the single greatest threat to recovering the truth of what the biblical text actually has to say. Generations of Sabbath or Sunday school classes, followed now by movies and other media, have caused one of the most exciting stories of the Bible to evolve, to provide the maximum effect when relating the account.

Jericho

Thus, we turn first to Jericho and the popular myths that surround it. The following account of Jericho is not an unreasonable recitation of what lingers

in the minds of many adults who have been exposed to the story of Joshua and Jericho:

Joshua led the Israelite army against the huge city of Jericho. Its gate and walls were impregnable, of vast, multistoried height, and reaching far around the great city. Rahab alone among the citizens of the city believed in Israel's God and was delivered from the assault. The king refused to submit to Israel, nor did he allow any of his citizens to do so. Jericho's Canaanite army, probably of many hundreds or even thousands, opposed Joshua's advance until the walls collapsed, and the army was destroyed by the miracle of God and the invasion of the Israelites. The defenders had mocked the daily march of the Israelites around the city, but they now saw the unparalleled collapse of the walls. From a political and military standpoint, the most important outcome of this event was the defeat of a large city.

Every one of the sentences in this description is incorrect. In most cases, this can be shown by the evidence available only from an accurate reading of the biblical text. In other examples, a judicious consideration of the extrabiblical literature will inform the events. In looking at the story of Jericho, it will be essential to examine the questions related to what is meant by "city," what sorts of walls and gate are envisioned, the degree to which citizens such as Rahab reflect the population of Jericho, the role of the "king," the likely size of his army, and the implications of the strategy described in Joshua 2 and 6.

City of Jericho

The first issue is what it means for Jericho to be called an *‘ir*, often translated "city." This term possesses the more general meaning, "population center." The noun occurs 13 times in the 6th chapter of Joshua to describe Jericho, both with and without the definite article. The term does not always describe a large metropolis. Its first appearance in the book of Joshua describes the small town of Adam in 3:16 as the point where the waters were stopped so that Israel could cross the Jordan River. It describes the village of Bethlehem south of Jerusalem (1 Sam 20:6). Elsewhere, it is used to identify tent encampments (Judg 10:4, 1 Chr 2:22–23). Of special interest, however, is the connection of *‘ir* with the fortress. At Rabbah of Ammon, the term is used to designate the citadel (2 Sam 12:26), and the same term is used to describe the fortress of Zion in Jerusalem that David captured (2 Sam 5:7, 9; 1 Chr 11:5, 7). The evidence suggests that *‘ir* can at times designate what is primarily a fort.

Is this the case for Jericho? The biblical picture suggests that Jericho was small enough that the Israelites could march around it seven times in one day and then have sufficient energy to fight a battle against it (Josh 6:15–20). The actual site of Tell es-Sultan was not a vast city but a small settlement. Thus, there is no reason to believe that Jericho was a city of large size or, for that

matter, of large population. Furthermore, who are the people who are mentioned specifically in the account? The text refers to Rahab with her family. She is involved with the inn. However, no other noncombatants are singled out. In fact, only the king and his agents who pursue the Israelite spies are mentioned otherwise. Thus, the text itself specifies no one else who would function as a noncombatant. Furthermore, in Joshua 2, the king appears to be informed and quickly to send his guards after the Israelite spies. The guards then exit the city in their pursuit. All of this coincides with the portrait of a small and militarized center.

In this regard, it is also significant to note the strategic position of the site. Jericho is situated at the beginning of several of the main roads that run from the Jordan Valley into the central hill country. The most famous of these roads is the southern road that reaches Jerusalem. Another more northern route leads to Ophrah. Between them, two roads run westward to Bethel (Dorsey 1992: 201–6).¹ For our purposes, this suggests a strategic value for Jericho that would encourage a military presence there. Perhaps the fort was maintained by hill country sites such as Bethel and Jerusalem. It could have guarded the passes to these cities and also provided a means of monitoring and perhaps collecting taxes from those traveling in the Jordan Valley. In the story of Ehud and Eglon, Jericho appears as the city of the Palms. In this story, it also provides a strategic center for conflict between Israel and Moab (Judg 3:12–30).

It is important to note that Jericho is never designated as anything other than an *‘îr*. It never receives a note about the greatness of its size. However, notes of this sort do appear in the book of Joshua and are used to describe other cities. Thus, Gibeon is described as an *‘îr gēdôlâ*, “a great city” (Josh 10:2), and Hazor is placed at “the head of all these kingdoms” (Josh 11:10). In contrast, Jericho receives no such accolade. It was not the kind of major fortified city that the author of the book recognized Hazor and Gibeon to be. Thus, it may be concluded that the *‘îr* of Jericho was not a metropolitan center but more likely primarily a fort.

Walls and Gates

The walls and gate of Jericho also reveal something about this fortified location. The common term for wall, *hômāh*, appears three times in the story of Jericho found in Joshua 2 and 6. It always refers to a defensive wall around Jericho. In the first instance of its appearance, in Josh 2:15, it forms the *nomen rectum* of a construct chain with another word for “wall,” *qîr*. The gate, on the other hand, is mentioned twice in Josh 2:5, 7 and once in chap. 6, where it summarizes the plot in v. 1 and symbolizes the refusal of Jericho to open its gates to

1. Dorsey’s own study deals specifically with Iron Age roads. However, there is no reason to doubt that these tracks existed in the Bronze Age as well.

the Israelites and the ark of God. The only further definition of the defenses of Jericho occurs in Josh 2:15, where it is affirmed that Rahab's house was on the wall of Jericho, so she could let the spies down from her window, thereby allowing them to exit the town without requiring them to wait for the gate to open.

Two types of walls are known that would allow someone to dwell within the fortification wall itself. One is a casemate wall that functions, in effect, as two parallel walls with cross sections spaced intermittently to connect the two. The resultant spaces between the walls are either filled in with rubble or used as houses. While this is possibly the type of wall that surrounded Jericho, one would expect to have located remnants of stone walls of this sort on the site.²

A second type of wall is "a single line of unbaked mudbricks" or better, a small circle of mud-brick houses that form a continuous wall around the center (Merling 1997b: 251; Kitchen 2003c: 187–88).³ A circle of houses of this sort could include an inn such as Rahab's, as well as structures that served government or military purposes. The Late Bronze Age instructions to Hittite tower commanders forbid the building of an inn housing prostitutes near the fortress wall (Weinfeld 1993: 142–43). Thus, Rahab's compromise of Jericho's security was not a phenomenon with which other cultures of the period were unacquainted. Her ability to let the Israelite spies down from her window with a rope may suggest a descent of two stories to the ground level, or it may suggest a strategic position of that part of the city wall in which the natural height of the tell supplemented the height of the wall and added distance to the ground level. In either case, nothing in the text requires the wall of Jericho to have been taller than two stories.

In fact, the failure to discover Late Bronze Age walls at Jericho does not in itself say anything about the occupation of the site at that time, a fact that is noted by A. Mazar (1990: 331): "the archaeological data cannot serve as decisive evidence to deny a historical nucleus in the Book of Joshua concerning the conquest of this city." It should also be noted that the archaeological absence of Late Bronze Age walls at major Canaanite sites is not limited to Jericho. For example, Gonen has observed that, whereas both Megiddo and Hazor possessed monumental gates during this period, in neither case was the gate found

2. The same difficulty applies to the view of Kenyon (1978: 38) that the inhabitants of Jericho may have reused Middle Bronze Age walls.

3. Callaway and Miller (1999: 66) disagree with this interpretation because the houses from the 16th-century destruction were not reused and no Late Bronze Age artifacts have been found. However, the Late Bronze Age site, if it is a small fort, may not have been detected yet in the excavations. Further, a simple and poor site in the Jordan Valley might possess only common pottery rather than the only pottery that is diagnostically identifiable as being from the Late Bronze Age, which belonged to the elite. Compare the later but nearby site of Khirbet Qumran, where elite wares are also a rarity. Finally, it is not true that no Late Bronze Age artifacts have been found at the site.

to be attached to a wall (Gonen 1984: 69–70). Indeed, excavators of Late Bronze Age Megiddo have found no evidence for a destruction level, despite the Egyptian account of Thutmose III, who claims that he conquered it (Finkelstein and Ussishkin 1994: 26–43). Gonen suggests that in Megiddo there may have been a fortified palace, or the gate may have been ceremonial. In any case, a parallel contemporary problem exists and the archaeological evidence remains as much in dispute with the Egyptian scribes as it does with the scribe of Joshua. The answer in both cases may be that the archaeological evidence is inadequate. In the case of Jericho, it may be that the remnants of the fallen mud-brick perimeter wall were eroded away during the three to five centuries of occupational gap between the Jericho of Joshua and the Jericho that was rebuilt by Hiel in the 9th century (1 Kgs 16:34).

Rahab

Rahab is the only figure from Jericho named in the story. However, she is not the only person rescued; her family is delivered as well (Josh 2:17, 22–23, 25). In fact, this is no minor matter to the author or to Rahab. In chap. 2, as she negotiates with the Israelite spies, the salvation she seeks is for her family even more than for herself. Thus, she speaks in vv. 12–13:

Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death.

Notice that Rahab specifies other members of her family rather than herself. Although she certainly includes herself in the first-common-plural pronoun “us” at the end of her request, her list of members of her family nowhere mentions Rahab herself. It is her family that is most important to her. In chap. 6, a comparison of the author’s actual story of the conquest of Jericho by the Israelites after the walls have fallen with the attention devoted to Rahab and her family is remarkable. The destruction of Jericho in vv. 16–25 is described with 102 words. Not many fewer, some 86, are used in the same verses to describe the salvation of Rahab and her family (Hess 1996b: 134). In light of this, it is fair to say that the author placed about the same worth on the salvation of the family of Rahab as on the destruction of Jericho. Thus, our Sabbath and Sunday school stories, as well as modern media presentations, distort the picture when they do not also emphasize salvation in contrast to the destruction.

If Rahab is the only noncombatant named in the story, does this mean that there were no others? Excluding her family, none are specifically named. There is, however, an important verse, 6:21, that states:

They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

This text appears to include women, children, and the aged in this mass destruction. However, is this really the case? The actual expression is translated, “men and women,” literally, “from man (and) unto woman.” The phrase occurs elsewhere seven times, referring to the inhabitants of Ai (Josh 8:25), Amalek (1 Sam 15:3, here without the *war*), Nob (1 Sam 22:19), Jerusalem during David’s time (2 Sam 6:19 = 1 Chr 16:3), Jerusalem during Ezra’s time (Neh 8:2), and Israel (2 Chr 15:13). In 2 Sam 6:19 (= 1 Chr 16:3) it describes the joyful occasion of David’s entrance into Jerusalem with the ark of the covenant and his distributing food to all the onlookers. Except for Saul’s extermination of the inhabitants of Nob in 1 Sam 22:19, where children are specifically mentioned (unlike the texts about Jericho, Ai, and elsewhere), all other appearances of the phrase precede or follow the Hebrew *kol* “all, everyone.” Thus, the phrase appears to be stereotypical for describing all the inhabitants of a town or region, without predisposing the reader to assume anything further about their ages or even their genders. It is synonymous with “all, everyone.”

If Jericho was a fort, then the “all” who were slain in the Israelite attack would have been warriors. Rahab, as an innkeeper, may have been an exceptional noncombatant who, with her family, lived in what was an otherwise militarized camp.

The King

The strongest textual objection to the image of Jericho as a fort occurs with the appearance of the king of Jericho. The king, Hebrew *melek*, is mentioned three times in Joshua 2:2, 3 and 6:2. Jericho’s king is referred to five additional times in the book of Joshua (8:2; 10:1, 28, 30; 12:9). It is possible that a traditional king is intended in this account. If this is the case, Jericho was the center of the king’s domain, his castle or fort. The subjects of his kingdom would have lived outside Jericho in the Jordan Valley and the region around it. However, they are nowhere mentioned. The picture is of a region largely uninhabited, from Adam in the north to the Dead Sea. The only exception is Jericho with its occupants. No other person or site is mentioned in the text. If this is so, then how is *melek* to be understood?

Fortunately, we have more than 300 preserved letters between rulers of Canaan and the pharaoh in the middle of the 14th century. This correspondence, written in Akkadian cuneiform, often mentions the term “king,” either as the Akkadian *šarru* or as the logogram LUGAL. The most frequent recipient of this title is the pharaoh who is addressed by the princes of Canaan at the beginning of their letters, *ana šarri bêliya*, “to the king my lord.” The leader of Jerusalem begins all six of his letters in this manner (EA 285–90), as do many other princes. However, the term is not applied to the pharaoh alone. The leader of Hazor, Abdi-Tirshi, uses this appellation of himself in his letter to the pharaoh. He begins, “To the king my lord,” addressing the pharaoh in his customary

manner. However, this is immediately followed in line three by “a message from the king of Hazor,” where the term for “king” is a construct form of *šarru*.⁴ This is followed by the customary form of obeissance for a vassal, “I fall at the feet of my lord.” The remainder of the brief letter expresses joy at the anticipation of the coming of the pharaoh for a royal visit. Thus, although Abdi-Tirshi is the king of Hazor, he recognizes the superiority of the pharaoh as a kind of king of kings. The term for “king” in the Canaan of Joshua’s time could envision a local leader who recognized the sovereignty of a leader of many towns and cities, such as the pharaoh. The same may be true for the *melek* of Jericho. He may also have maintained his position at the pleasure of city-state rulers in the hill country, whether of Bethel, of Jerusalem, or a coalition such as Joshua 10 describes. In his capacity as the governor of a fort, he would have held primarily military responsibilities to govern the troops placed at his disposal and to maintain security against possible enemies (Joshua 6) and their agents (Josh 2:2–7).

However, the evidence concerning the nature of this king goes beyond the mere semantic equivalence between Hebrew *melek* and Akkadian *šarru*. The Late Bronze Age cuneiform archives of the West Semitic world, especially Ugarit and Amarna, preserve attested forms of the West Semitic root, *mlk*. The *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* observes distinctive West Semitic uses of verbal forms of *malāku*. In the Amarna correspondence, it often appears with the sense of caring for someone or something. Thus, a precative use of this verb by Abimilki of Tyre, *li-im-li-ik*, appears as part of the appeal, “the king should care for his servant.”⁵ Moran (1992: 236) translates this as “May the king give thought to his servant.” Whichever translation is followed, the sense is taking responsibility for the well-being of those with whom one is charged. This sense is not far removed from the image of the *melek* of Jericho. He also takes care to protect Jericho by hunting the Israelite spies and by making the ultimate and ill-fated decision to refuse admittance to the Israelites.

We can, however, go further than this in defining the term. At Ugarit, this verbal root carries the sense of “rule” or “hold power,” similar to the general Hebrew sense of the term. However, it is used not only of sovereigns but also of anyone holding influence over others. Thus, at Ugarit in the 13th century, there appeared the phrase, *ḥazannu āli u akil eqlāti la i-ma-li-ik*: the town’s mayor and the overseer of the field do not have authority over him (Sivan 1984: 248).⁶ Thus, this root may have appeared as a verb in West Semitic during the

4. It is the CVC sign read as *šar*.

5. *CAD M/1*, p. 156, citing EA 149.8, 54 et al.

6. See Sivan (1984: 248) for possible additional usages, especially in personal names from Ugarit and Alalakh. However, these *mlk* forms may appear in some cases as the divine name *Milku/Malik*. See also Hess (1993a: 239) and bibliography there.

14th and 13th centuries, with the sense of a ruler or administrator, though not necessarily the sole king who answers to no one.

There is also evidence for the *mlk* root used as a noun at this time with the sense of a bureaucratic administrator. In one of his many letters, Rib-Addi of Byblos refers to the murder of Piwuri, a commissioner of the pharaoh (EA 131.21–24). The term that describes Piwuri is LÚ.*ma-lik* LUGAL. Piwuri was known to have control over an Egyptian garrison of troops and he exercised official roles as the pharaoh's representative in Gaza, Jerusalem, and Byblos.⁷ In other words, he served as a powerful royal administrator throughout most of Canaan. To leave no doubt, Rib-Addi introduces his concern about Piwuri with a general statement that his enemies have attacked the commissioners of the king (Moran 1992: 213 n. 5).⁸ What is significant about this line is that the word for “commissioner,” written logographically as MAŠKIM, is followed by a *Glossenkeil* and the term *ma-lik* (Knudtson 1964: 2.557; Moran 1992: 212).⁹ As with many of the examples of the gloss marker in the Amarna correspondence, what follows is a synonym of the preceding logogram (Rainey 1996: 1.36). Often, the synonym is a West Semitic word, and this appears to be the case in the Piwuri text. Thus, a noun from the root *mlk* carries the sense of a commissioner responsible to his overlord for the military security of a region. This is identical to the *melek* of Jericho, who was responsible for the security of the region but was also answerable to his superiors in the hill country.

Army

Very little is known of the soldiers behind Jericho's walls. Chapters 2 and 6 of the book of Joshua give no indication how large or small the army was that guarded this fort. In fact, no numbers are ever given. The agents of Jericho's commissioner (or king) who come to Rahab's dwelling are only described with plural nouns. The same is true everywhere else the army is mentioned in the text. Certainly, there were more than two soldiers, but is the reader justified to assume that the defenses numbered in the hundreds or thousands?

This seems unlikely. The evidence comes once again from the Amarna correspondence of the Late Bronze Age. Rib-Addi of Byblos requests various levels of support from the pharaoh. At one point, he asks for 200 infantry soldiers to attack his enemy in Shigata (EA 71.23–25). The number is doubled to 400 elsewhere (EA 76.26), and this is the number Rib-Addi cites for the forces

7. Cf. EA 124.44–47; 287.43–52, 71–78; 289.30–40; 362.66–69 and Hess 1993a: 126.

8. EA 131.21. For *qarbu* with the sense of approaching with hostility, see Moran.

9. CAD M/1, p. 163 reads [*ma*]-*lik*, although Knudtson notes that clear traces of the *ma* sign remain. The decision of CAD to group this with the regular Akkadian lexeme, *māliku*, is unwarranted. The meaning “counselor, advisor” does not apply here. Like the verbal form, the West Semitic usage is distinctive.

necessary to defend his city (85.19–22; 131.11–13). Often, various types of soldiers are specified and horses and chariots are also requested. However, the pharaoh is not forthcoming with this aid. At one point, Rib-Addi allows for a fluctuating number in his request (EA 132.53–59):

Send ships to fetch the Lady's property and me. [Sen]d 50–100 men and 50–100 m[en fro]m [Meluh]ha, 50 chariots, [to guard] [the city] for you. Se[nd] archers and bring peace to the land. (Moran 1992: 214)

Elsewhere, Rib-Addi requests a mere 40 soldiers to defend Byblos (EA 108.66–68). Perhaps this is more realistic in terms of expectation and actual need. Abimilki of Tyre requests half this number to defend his island fortress (EA 151.14–16). In neither of these two examples are the type of soldiers specified. They are presumably infantry. Biridiya requests a larger number of soldiers, 100 (EA 244.34–36). However, he is defending the strategic city of Megiddo against a major threat brought about by Labaya. Biriawaza of Damascus requests 200 men to guard the cities of the pharaoh (EA 196.33–43). Note that this larger number is for the defense of multiple population centers—a fact that is confirmed by Biriawaza's apparent position as administrative representative of the region of Upe around Damascus (Hess 1993a: 61). Geographically, the town closest to Jericho that is also mentioned in the Amarna correspondence remains Jerusalem. The leader of Jerusalem requests a level of defense at 50 men (EA 289.42), a number similar to the request of Rib-Addi of Byblos and 30 more than the number requested by Abimilki of Tyre.

As already noted, these numbers probably indicate forces supplemental to the existing garrison in a city. No Amarna letter specifies the actual number of forces in a city. However, if a commissioner asks for 40 or 50 additional troops, it only makes sense if the existing garrison holds no more than three or four times this number of troops. If there were 500 or 1,000 troops defending a city, a five or ten percent increase would make little difference, especially given the desperate nature of these requests. A reasonable conclusion assumes that these cities were probably protected by forces of a few hundred, quite possibly even fewer.

Given that Jericho was smaller than any of the cities named and that it was likely a fort, this survey suggests that the actual number of soldiers defending it was probably fewer than the number defending any of the Amarna cities. It would not seem preposterous if the number of men defending Jericho was about 100 or fewer.

Strategy

It appears that strategy plays no role in the biblical story of the conquest of Jericho.¹⁰ The Israelites obey their God, who delivers the fort into their hands.

10. The material presented in this section draws from Hess 1996b: 28, 129–37.

However, there are three aspects of the plot that have significant implications for understanding the nature of Jericho.

First of all, the seven-day, sevenfold march around Jericho (Josh 6:1–17) serves as a prelude to the invasion of the fort. The army of Jericho may have understood it as a prelude in two ways. The first is exemplified by the verb used to identify the march around Jericho, *nqp*, which also occurs in Ps 48:12 and 2 Kgs 6:14. In Psalm 48, a pilgrim walks around Jerusalem in order to admire its gates and defenses. In 2 Kings, the Arameans surround Dothan in order to capture Elisha. In Joshua 6, the Israelite army, unable to surround Jericho, symbolically does so each day for seven days. As the army marches each day, it inspects the defenses and especially the gates to learn whether the fort's leader has relented and decided to open Jericho to the army. On each day for seven days the Israelites prepare to enter if the leader will allow it. The sevenfold refusal, a number of perfection and completion in the West Semitic world, indicates to everyone that they will never find a peaceful settlement because the leader of Jericho remains adamant.

The second way that the army of Jericho may have understood the seven-day march as a prelude to an invasion involves the seven-day period and the role that it plays. For Israel, this particular week was the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The nation had just celebrated Passover (Josh 5:10–12) on the 14th day of the first month. The Feast of Unleavened Bread followed as a sign of Israel's holiness before its God (Exod 12:14–20). The first Passover was celebrated with the defeat of the army of Egypt. This Passover and the following seven-day festival would serve a new generation that also experienced a miraculous crossing of water (Joshua 3–4; see Exodus 14–15) as a demonstration of their God's power. Special periods and festivals of seven days were not unique to Israel. Discoveries from the Syrian city of Emar have revealed a West Semitic population not unlike the Israelites in a number of ways (Fleming 1999a; 1999e; 2000b; 2004b: 233–53). Texts from the 13th century and earlier describe a seven-day festival that began on the 15th day of the first month, just like the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Twilight was a critical time, a lamb was roasted, and distinctive bread was eaten. All these features parallel Israel's Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. Identical feasts across the West Semitic world suggest a common heritage, whatever the distinctive elements. If so, then perhaps the army of Jericho also knew that this time was special, propitious in relationship to the activities of the God of Israel on behalf of his people. The text of Rahab's confession implies that the people of the land of Canaan, including Jericho, knew how God had defeated Egypt in the exodus. Thus, the book of Joshua and Late Bronze Age texts from Emar come together to suggest that the defenders of Jericho understood the ominous implications of the events of those seven days. There was nothing silly about the ceremony, and there is no suggestion that the army of Jericho mocked the Israelites. The whole matter was much too serious.

The second aspect of the biblical plot that affects how we understand Jericho is the fate of the walls. Nothing in the account of Jericho has achieved more fame than the act of God in bringing down the walls of Jericho (Josh 6:20). Yet this also has a parallel in the Late Bronze Age culture of the Hittites. A Hittite text describes the conquest of a fort with the miraculous assistance of the deity Shaushga (Liverani 1990: 155; *KUB* 6.2: 29–33):

Shaushga of Shamuha, my lady, revealed also then her divine justice: in the very moment I reached him, the wooden fortifications fell down to the length of one *gippešar*.

God's means of destroying Jericho's defenses was not unparalleled, nor does the biblical text claim that it was. Instead, it represented an effective means of demonstrating to the surrounding West Semitic population divine favor for Israel and against Jericho.

The third aspect of the account that affects our understanding of Jericho has to do with the degree of attention that the story receives in the book of Joshua. Including chaps. 2 and 6, the author of the book has penned more words regarding the destruction of this fort than any other city in the book. Not even the great city of Hazor receives as much attention. If this was not a major fortress or city, why does the author devote so much attention to it? The answer lies in the fact that this battle was the first in which Joshua was the leader. A close study of Joshua 1 reveals the lengths to which God went to make clear to the people that he had made Joshua his chosen successor to Moses. The author reinforced this at the time of the crossing of the Jordan River, when God says to Joshua (3:7):

Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.

The same concern remained with the leader's first battle. So important was the outcome of a leader's first campaign in the ancient Near East that a Hittite king wrote to a newly enthroned Assyrian ruler with the following advice:

On whatever campaign he goes for the first time, where he is three or four times superior, or which is some overpowered place, let him go for the first time against such a place. (Liverani 1990: 133; *KUB* 23 no. 103: 12–18)

Success in a first battle played a key role in establishing leadership. A victory of this sort secured respect for Joshua, not only among the Israelites but also among the Canaanites. Therefore, this text was designed to present the case of Joshua's leadership and so to make an argument to the rulers of Canaan that Israel would not be defeated.

This represents the most likely reason behind the episode of Jericho. It is appropriate both to the context of the ancient Near East of the Late Bronze Age and to the context of the opening chapters of the book of Joshua. Taken

out of this context, the emphasis on the account and the accompanying miracle have been misinterpreted to suggest a huge city with vast fortifications and a great army. This popular perception, unfortunate because of its failure to appreciate the place of this story within the whole book, has also fueled popular and, at times, scholarly misunderstanding of the interpretation of the archaeological and biblical evidence.

Ai

The story of the conquest of Ai appears in Joshua 7–8. Although less prominent in the popular imagination than Jericho, it remains just as problematic in terms of the archaeological evidence and its relation to the biblical account. Once again, it is important to read the biblical text and to gather from it an accurate description of the author's understanding of Ai before moving on to interpret the texts of Joshua in light of the material culture.

In fact, the textual picture of Ai remains surprisingly similar to the picture of Jericho. Like Jericho, the author identifies Ai as an *'ir*.¹¹ Here as well, it was probably not what modern people would consider to be a city but was more likely a fort. In fact, four times, the larger and better-known population center of Bethel appears in proximity to Ai in the story (Josh 7:2; 8:9, 12, 17), and it appears a fifth time in the list of 12:9. In light of the earlier-mentioned routes available to travelers venturing westward from the Jordan Valley, it is possible that Ai was positioned as a fortified outpost to protect Bethel. This would explain the close connection between the two and the reason that the soldiers of Bethel supported Ai in its attack against the Israelites (Josh 8:17): the soldiers of Bethel were the soldiers of Ai. Fortified outposts of this sort may have parallels with Iron Age Jerusalem, where possible forts have been found in the modern suburbs of French Hill and Giloh.

Like Jericho, Ai also had a *melek*, walls, an army, and no specific mention of noncombatants. Like the king of Jericho, there is no reason not to understand the *melek* as a local commander responsible for Ai but reporting to superiors elsewhere. The walls are even less defined at Ai than at Jericho in terms of what the text has to say about them. However, one may assume that they too were mud-brick constructions or possibly a makeshift assemblage, built from earlier walls. This is suggested by the etymology of the name Ai itself, which means "a ruin." As at Jericho, the possible noncombatants, here only mentioned as "men and women" (Josh 8:25), are not distinguished from the combatants and may

11. The same is true in my commentary on Joshua (1996b), where I address identical issues in the Ai material where they first appear in the story of Jericho. Grabbe's (2002: 174–93) failure to appreciate this customary aspect of commentaries, along with an apparent failure to read the book that he criticizes, has led to odd and unfounded charges that these issues are not addressed.

serve as a stereotypical expression for the destruction of all human life in the fort, presumably composed entirely of combatants.

Unlike Jericho, however, the author does supply the reader with a population figure at Ai. In Josh 8:25, we read that “Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai.” In light of what has already been said regarding the likely size of the force guarding Jericho and the evidence from the Canaanite cities in the Amarna letters, this appears to be an inflated figure. In fact, population size is not the most likely interpretation of the number in this verse. The Hebrew for “thousand” is *’elep*. An *’elep* can refer to a clan or a military unit, as well as 1,000 individuals. In Num 31:5 it is translated by the NIV as “clans”:

So twelve thousand men armed for battle, a thousand from each tribe, were supplied from the clans of Israel.

Using this translation, it is possible to understand the *’elep* as a force of undetermined number. This is a realistic solution for the number of fighting males of Israel in the wilderness census (Num 1:46). Rather than more than 603,000 males, this can be understood as 603 squads, each comprised of many fewer than a thousand. The resultant lower numbers satisfies both the external archaeological evidence for populations in the second millennium B.C.E. and the internal biblical evidence (Humphreys 1998; 2000).¹² This solution does not resolve all the problems with large numbers, but it goes further than any other and is legitimate from a philological perspective. For Ai, this means 12 squads of combatants that the Israelites defeated. In this case, each squad may have included about 10 warriors, so that the total sum was between 100 and 150.

Given these conclusions for both Jericho and Ai, it is possible to understand the biblical accounts in a more realistic manner. God is no less divine, whatever the size of these populations or their nature as forts instead of cities. Rather, an assessment of this sort allows for a better understanding of these ancient texts and their role in preserving authentic traditions from the earliest generations of Israel’s life.

12. An example of internal problems within the biblical text is Num 3:43, which states that the number of firstborn males in Israel was 22,273. If the total number of fighting males was 603,273 (Num 1:46) and the total number of all males was one million, then the average mother must have had about 50 sons (and 50 daughters).