

The Fall of Jericho

In the heart of Israel, five miles north of the Dead Sea, five miles west of the River Jordan at 670 feet below sea level lies a dry, lifeless mound that was once the mighty Canaanite fortress of Jericho, the world's oldest city.

The fall of Jericho is a well-known story, fascinating children and adults alike. But for all its fascination, the fall of Jericho is also the subject of debate. What happened here thousands of years ago? Did God perform a miracle and bring down the walls of Jericho as the Bible says? Or can natural causes explain the toppling of the city's wall? The answers, previously buried under rubble and dirt for three and a half millennia, are now being uncovered. But are there enough pieces of the puzzle remaining to solve the mystery of what really happened at Jericho?

The story of Jericho begins with the events described in the Old Testament book of Exodus. Here the Bible recounts how Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt only to undertake a forty-year quest through the harsh desert until the time was right for Israel to enter the Promised Land. During those years, the nomadic Israelites witnessed numerous miracles and enjoyed the protection of God from their enemies. The desert experience transformed God's chosen people. They turned from idol-worship and bitterness, and became a people of the promise, ready to occupy the land God prepared for them, a land known as Canaan.

This Promised Land was a fertile tract suitable for agriculture and settlement, “a land flowing with milk and honey.” According to the Scriptures, the Israelites would establish their nation upon the land as led by Joshua, the successor to Moses. But first, what lay before them was the formidable and seemingly impossible task of driving out the inhabitants already living on the land.

[Dr. Bryant Wood, Associates for Biblical Research]

“We know a fair bit about the Canaanites through archaeological findings. Of course, the Bible tells us what they were like, but that’s borne out through archaeological findings. In particular, up in Syria in a place called Ras Shamra and ancient Ugarit, and there they found a great archive of clay tablets, which tell us a lot about the Canaanite civilization, and in particular, their religion. Of course, they were very paganistic. They had temple prostitutions and all sorts of abominations, the Bible calls them. We do know the Canaanites were, indeed, extremely sinful, as described in the Bible, and that part’s of the reason that God took over that land and punished them, judged them, and gave that land to His chosen people, Israel.”

[Dr. Frederick Baltz, Bible Alive Learning Center]

“The way of life of the people in Canaan was in contrast to what God had commanded His to observe through the law He had given them at Mount Sinai. The people of Canaan, were by contrast, a dissolute, an unethical and immoral people.”

The conquest of the land was about to begin, and the first city standing in Israel's way was the fortified city of Jericho. The city was built at a crossroads north of the Dead Sea. The heavy traffic of east to west travelers increased Jericho's size and importance and created many opportunities for trade. But it also increased Jericho's chances for danger. The successive walls built around Jericho over several generations were a response to the increased threats from robbers and armies brought on by the well-traveled roadways.

The city of Jericho stood on a hill. The city itself was oblong; its length roughly twice its width, covering a total of about nine acres. Jericho's most notable feature was its mighty wall. Many cities of comparable size had defensive walls, but Jericho's walls were exceptional. Excavations at the site revealed that a stone retaining wall rose from the ground at the base of the hill or "tell" on which Jericho was built. On top of this was a freestanding mud brick wall. A sloping bank covered with hard plaster extended upward from the lower wall, creating steep and slippery conditions, making the approach all the more difficult for those who managed to breach the first wall. Atop the embankment was a second mud brick wall. The combined effect of these defensive structures made for a single, impregnable barrier that encircled and protected the city.

As Joshua and the Israelites approached Jericho, the city's king showed no interest in negotiating for peace. It must have appeared to him that a siege was about to begin, and Jericho was undoubtedly prepared to endure a long siege with stored grain and

a spring inside the city wall to counter the effects of a military blockade. In that time and place, a long battle of resources often came before a final battle with weapons.

[Dr. Bryant Wood, Associates for Biblical Research]

“One of the unique discoveries at Jericho is large jars full of grain. Both John Garstang, who dug there in the 1930’s - found every house with jars full of grain, many jars full of grain – Kathleen Kenyon, when she worked there in the 1950’s, found exactly the same thing in the buildings that she excavated. On the lower floor, the ground floor, many jars full of grain. Well, this grain tells us a number of things about the final days of Jericho. First of all, it indicates that it was harvest time. And it was, indeed, harvest time according to the Bible, because when the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, it was in flood stage, which happens at harvest time. Rahab hid the spies under the stalks of flax drying on her roof, which is the first thing you do after you harvest flax. And the Passover was celebrated, which is in the springtime, which is time for harvesting there in the Southern Jordan valley. So that’s the first thing that we learn, that harvest had just been taken in, just as the Bible describes.

Also, the jars were full. And so this indicates the siege of the city was very short. Normally, a fortified city like Jericho, when it was under siege, would hold out for months and even years, if they had some food inside, if they had some water, as Jericho did. They can hold out for years, and we have examples in the Egyptian records where they came into Canaan with their mighty army, the greatest army in the world’s history, and they would lay siege to the these

Canaanite cities. And it would take them months and months and, in one case, three years before the city finally fell. Here, the Israelites went against this very strongly fortified city, and were able to capture it in just one week. Of course, God was involved in that, and a miracle took place. But normally it would take a long period of time, and the jars of grain verify that the siege was very short. The jars were full. They didn't have to use hardly any of that grain at all.

The third thing that it demonstrates to us is that the Israelites, for the most part, obeyed God with regard to not plundering the city because grain was valuable, and you just don't leave grain in a city to be burned up in the fire. You would take it as plunder, and again, when we look at the Egyptian records, when they conquered these Canaanite cities, they plundered the city, took anything of value including the grain. They were very careful to tally up the number of the bushels of grain that they had captured from that city. And so, if you didn't want it for food, you could barter with it. It was like money. And yet, here we find at Jericho, those jars, all of them, full of grain. A very unique discovery. We have not found this at any other site that's been excavated in the Middle East because when a city is conquered, the conqueror takes the plunder, including the grain. But it was left there at Jericho. Why? Because God told the Israelites, 'Do not plunder Jericho, except those precious metals which were to be put in the Lord's treasury.' The Israelites obeyed. They left that grain there."

It may sound simple, but in practice, a successful siege could prove difficult to sustain. The defenders would send raiding parties to harass the besieging army, which

would have to spread itself thin to surround the city. Added to which the defenders would also have the decided advantage of choosing when and where such conflicts would take place. The besieging army, on the other hand, would face difficulties securing provisions once they had ravaged the surrounding farmlands. Furthermore, a well-planned, perfectly executed siege could be thwarted by the arrival of another army. Armies travel slowly, but the time required for a successful siege allows for messengers to reach allies, and for allies to make preparations and march to the city's rescue. The Israelites were a conquering people in a foreign land. Their presence would have united cities and kingdoms. If Jericho's inhabitants had sent for help, their plea would almost certainly be answered.

A direct attack on a city like Jericho would likely prove pointless and costly. The Israelites might try to build an earth ramp, allowing attackers to pour over the wall. This was perilous, as the defenders of the city would attack the ramp builders from the wall with ranged weapons including arrows, spears, and stones. The weapons would be more effective, with the range and force of impact increased due to being released from an elevated position. In opposition, projectiles released from the ground would have stunted range and weak impact when directed against targets above. And if any Israelite warriors survived the hail of missiles from the outer wall defenders before coming close enough to threaten the city itself, they would have faced hand-to-hand tactics against fresh fighters defending the second wall.

[Dr. Frederick Baltz, Bible Alive Learning Center]

“Warfare in the time of Joshua was a face to face, hand to hand, very bloody affair. There was no equivalent to West Point. There weren’t strategies, there weren’t trained armies. The only strategies were that sometimes kings were able to deceive their opponents and lure them into traps. The fighting was done with edged weapons. Here’s an example of one of those. This is called a Kopesh. This would be found in Egypt and elsewhere. It’s, I would say, rather doubtful whether Joshua had weapons just like this. His swords would have been longer, straight swords. But that’s what the fighting consisted of. People facing one another with edged weapons.”

[Dr. Bryant Wood, Associates for Biblical Research]

“Warfare in the late bronze age, the time of the conquest, was fairly primitive. But yet we do know that they had metal weapons, they had swords, spears, even bows and arrows at that time. Now, the Israelites having come out of the wilderness, probably didn’t have the latest in technology, but yet I think they had the advantage in numbers, for one thing, and of course, they had the God of the universe on their side directing them, leading them, and just going before them, and doing what needed to be done for them to occupy the Promised Land.

One of the interesting weapons that we find evidence for is the sling, and we think today of a sling shot, but it wasn’t that at all. It was the kind of a sling that you hurl around and then let go of one end of the string. And it propels this stone missile at a very rapid rate of speed. It’s a very effective weapon. The sling

stones that we find are about the size of a hardball, maybe a little bigger than a tennis ball. And they were the long-range artillery of that day. And then, as I mentioned, there were the swords and the spears that were used. And that was pretty much the extent of the weaponry in the late Bronze period, the time of the conquest.”

Given the fortifications of the city and the Israelites lack of sophistication in warfare, it was clear that any attempt to capture Jericho by force would have proved devastating to the Israelite army, leaving them disabled or destroyed at the battle’s end. A long siege, perilous as it was for Israel, appeared the only way. But there would be no siege of Jericho, nor any direct assault on its ominous wall. Jericho’s fall would be sudden, complete, and for the defenders of the city, unexpected.

As Joshua prepared to assume command of the Israelites after the death of Moses, he received the challenge from God during his commissioning to “be strong and of good courage.” Joshua and his followers would need such courage for the impending battle ahead.

The Old Testament book of Joshua chronicles the events leading up to and including the battle of Jericho. The early chapters describe Joshua making preparations for war. First, Joshua would send spies into the city to survey the enemy’s positions and fortifications. Second, he would lead the Israelites across the Jordan River, a river the Lord dried up for the passage, a miracle reminiscent of the Red Sea parting. After the

crossing, the Israelites set up an offensive position at Gilgal on Jericho's eastern border. Third, Joshua would prepare his heart and mind, and those of his people, for the battle ahead. The leader took time to circumcise those who were born during the wandering in the wilderness and all the Israelites set aside time to keep the Passover. Finally, Joshua would begin to gather provisions from the land of Canaan to replace the now ceased manna that sustained the Israelites during their wanderings.

Joshua's last remaining need was a plan for victory. This would come from God Himself. The Captain of the Host of the Lord came and gave Joshua the details of God's battle plan.

[Dr. Bryant Wood, Associates for Biblical Research]

“One of the interesting aspects of the story of Jericho is this heavenly individual that appeared to Joshua just before the battle, is recorded toward the end of chapter five of the book of Joshua. In it, it tells us that Joshua looked up, and he saw a man standing opposite him with a sword drawn in his hand. And Joshua went up to this individual and said, ‘Are you for us or for our adversaries?’ And the man said, ‘No. Rather I come now as captain.’ So this is very interesting. ‘Captain of the Host of the Lord.’ And so Joshua fell on his face to the earth, bowed down, and he said to him, ‘What has my Lord to say to His servant?’ And then the Captain of the Lord, the Lord's Host, said to Joshua, ‘Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is

holy.’ And Joshua did so. Well, this is very much like the appearance of the angel to Moses at the burning bush, and the angel said the exact same thing.”

Imagine the sight of Israel’s warriors marching around the walled city of Jericho, led by priests blowing their ram’s horn trumpets and carrying the gleaming Ark of the Covenant. All without saying a word. This strange display would have certainly unnerved even the fiercest defenders.

[Dr. Bryant Wood, Associates for Biblical Research]

“Many people wonder why God told the Israelites to march around the city those seven days. What was the purpose of that? Well, maybe part of it was to test the faith of the Israelites to see if they would be obedient. That might have been part of it. But I think a large part of it was siege warfare and psychological warfare.”

The remnants of Jericho that are visible today are about 1000 feet long and 500 feet wide. Assuming the ancient city was roughly that size, the Hebrews would have to march over a mile to encircle it just once. Considering that the Israelites were marching in desert heat on an uneven terrain of desert rocks and sand without shade or rest, it most likely took an hour to march one time around the wall.

For six days, Joshua and the Israelites marched silently around the city. The time had come for their battle plan to play out to its dramatic conclusion.

It was day seven of the Jericho offensive, and according to the instructions given to Joshua by the commander of the Lord's armies, the priests and Israelites were to circle the city seven times. Seven miles and at least seven hours of non-stop marching, a brutal test of endurance that left many soldiers dehydrated and exhausted. The Canaanites in Jericho must have watched with an apprehensive curiosity as the day wore on and Israel kept marching.

Then Israel stopped, the ram's horns signaled, and the people shouted. The Book of Joshua says that the walls of Jericho came down, and then the Israelites ran straight into the city to claim it and destroy its inhabitants, both people and livestock. None were spared except a woman named Rahab and her family. Rahab was a prostitute, a common profession in Jericho as the religion of Canaan depended on temple prostitution. For her role in hiding the two spies sent by Joshua into the city before the attack, Rahab was spared along with her family. Her house was built against the city's outer wall. She marked her house with a red rope, a prearranged signal telling the Israelites which household should be spared.

[Dr. Frederick Baltz, Bible Alive Learning Center]

“Well, the story of Rahab is an essential part of this larger story of Jericho. The participation of Rahab was necessary to taking the city. She marked her house by a red cord, or a red string, so that the Israelites, in storming the city, would realize this was the one place that they were supposed to spare. Now, the

fact that her house is against the wall in the story comports with what's been discovered there in the archaeological evidence.”

[Dr. Bryant Wood, Associates for Biblical Research]

“You looked at the Hebrew words used here, it says her house was built against the vertical surface of the city wall. *Qiyir chowmah* are the Hebrew words that are used there. And so, her house was built up against that lower mud brick wall. It was the back wall of her house, and that's why she could let the spies out through her window in that wall. There was some kind of an opening there that she had to let a little light there into her house, and that's how the spies escaped. And that's why if she put that red rope out, they could see that, even from outside the city. And the interesting thing is the archaeologists found these houses on that embankment, up against the city wall. Where? On the north side of the tell. Well, the north side is the closest to the hills of Judah, and so it would be very easy for them to run from her house, after they had climbed down the rope from her window, run from there to the hills of Judah quickly so they could hide there. And so, we see the archaeology matches the Biblical story.

There were houses that were preserved. There was a section of the wall that stood, that did not fall. Just on the north side. Everywhere else, all around the city, every place the archaeologists excavated, they found the walls had fallen, had collapsed, had gone down to the base of the tell, but if you look at the Hebrew, it says, ‘The walls fell beneath themselves.’ And that, again, is a very precise description. It's an eyewitness account of somebody observing what

happened because the archaeology has shown that the walls were built up a little bit on top of the stone retaining wall, and then again, at the crest of the embankment, built up there. When those mud brick walls fell, they fell down to the base of the stone retaining wall. And that's where the archaeologists found them.

Another aspect of that is we still have this fifteen-foot high retaining wall that is holding this embankment in place. How were the Israelites going to get over that? Well, the mud brick walls, when they fell down at the base of the tell, they fell in a big pile and formed a ramp that the Israelites merely climbed up over and were able to get over that stone retaining wall, up the embankment, and into the city. Again, the Bible is very precise. After the walls fell, it says the Israelites went up into the city, every man straight before him, up into the city.

You know, the critics claim this story was written hundreds of years later. It was made up to explain ruins. It never really happened historically. Well, how did the writer know these little details?"

British explorer, Sir Charles Warren, was the first to excavate the site of ancient Jericho in 1868. Since then, several researchers have followed in his footsteps, excavating the ruins of the ancient city. From these expeditions, there remains a wealth of archaeological evidence to support the Biblical account of the wall's collapse and the timing and events of the siege.

[Dr. Bryant Wood, Associates for Biblical Research]

“Radio carbon is used for dating in archaeological excavations, but it is generally used for very old material. If an archaeologist has pottery in his excavation, he will use the pottery because it is more accurate, actually, than the radio carbon dating. A good example of the problems inherent in radio carbon dating is the eruption of Thira which is modern Santorini in the Mediterranean. There is a big debate going on between those who have used the carbon-14 method to date that event, versus those who are using historical dating to date the event. And there are about 150 years difference between the two of them. And this is significant for Jericho because this event happened maybe 100 years or so prior to the conquest, so it’s in the same time range. And so we see very clearly there about 150 years difference between radio carbon dating and historical dating. And at Jericho, in fact, they have done some radiocarbon dates from grain, from charred wood, and other things, and they have found exactly the same problem. They are earlier than our historical dating determined from the pottery. But this is true not only of Jericho, but of Santorini and of other archaeological sites that have been excavated that have material from that time period.”

There are still issues to be addressed and further discoveries to be made regarding Joshua’s attack on Jericho. The archaeological evidence that has been uncovered is remarkably consistent with the Joshua account of events.

The Israelites were given strict instructions for the military action immediately following the wall's collapse. Jericho's goods and riches would not be divided among the soldiers, as was tradition. Fine metals from the city were to be added to the Lord's treasury. Everything else was to be destroyed and burned.

One of the mysteries of Jericho concerns the holy war that immediately followed the city's destruction. It is the most difficult part of the story because God commanded the utter destruction of all living things in the city. How can this be from the God that the New Testament calls the God of love?

[Dr. Frederick Baltz, Bible Alive Learning Center]

“The fact remains, though, that people today who consider themselves Christians, many of them have difficulty with this particular part of the Bible. And, in one way, that's as it should be, because where the Bible has led from that time so long ago, the time of Joshua, is through centuries and centuries of revelation, culminating in what we have in Jesus. So, we have the unfolding of God's dealing with us, and to look back to a time so long ago and somehow find fault, isn't right.”

First, there is evidence in the Bible itself that God gave Jericho and the other cities of Canaan a long opportunity to repent of what had become a corrupt, reprehensible way of life. The prophetic tradition of the Old Testament bears witness to the same opportunity given to Israel later when its land was occupied by corrupt kings.

Second, the religion of Canaan was not one in which morality and ethics played any significant part. The Canaanite religion was about nature. Men would visit temple prostitutes to start the fertility cycle in agriculture. During this period a god known as Molech was worshipped in Canaan and beyond. Molech was a bronze idol, part human and part bull, and was really an oven with a roaring fire inside. Children were given into the arms of Molech as a human sacrifice. Surviving children would some day kill their own children. The society of Canaan had become so corrupt that God completely erased it.

A third factor to be kept in mind is the societal principle of blood revenge. If Israel had not fully and finally conquered Jericho, an eternal thirst for vengeance would have lived within its survivors.

Jericho's fall at the hands of the Israelites is an important event in Biblical history. Archaeological evidence is consistent with the Joshua story and challenges other explanations for one of the most memorable battles of the Bible. Today, the story of Jericho still speaks of God's faithfulness to His people, of the peril of a society that exchanges good for evil, and of the power of God Himself, for whom all things are possible.