**The Promised Land: Jericho and Ai**

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, March 17, 2021

Jericho has long been a consequential city. The residents claim it is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world going back some ten thousand years. There is no way to verify this and we should also note that at least two other cities make the same claim. Aleppo in Syria and Konya or Iconium in Turkey make the same claim. Iconium claims they were originally settled by one of the sons of Noah after the flood.

The archaeologists do confirm that the city is very old. By the time Joshua came through it was already thousands of years old. After Joshua’s time the city was rebuilt and Jericho is one of the places to which Elisha followed Elijah on the journey that led to Elijah’s translation into Heaven (2 Kings 2:4-5). The spring of Elisha is significant because here Elisha made the water sweet by putting in salt (2 Kings 2:18-22). A local ministry run by Tasir Abu Sada is now selling the water of Jericho all through the West Bank.

The city also had a role in New Testament times. Herod the Great had a palace there and Josephus said it is where he died. It was the site of the encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus, the short guy who climbed into the sycamore tree. Mark 10:46-52 has one of the great miracles of Jesus which took place in Jericho. “*Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." 50 Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. 51 "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." 52 "Go," said Jesus, "****your faith*** *has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road*. (NIV)

Bartimaeus had an explosion of faith as verse 50 would seem to indicate. He is suddenly not acting like a blind man. Since when do blind people toss their coat aside as though it would be easy to find later? Only rarely do you see a blind person jump or run, but this one did. There was no doubt in his mind what was going to happen. Jesus acknowledged as much when he said, YOUR faith has healed you. (More particularly, it was his faith in Jesus that healed him. Jesus was the healer but the man’s faith was the catalyst that allowed it to happen.)

I think it is worth noting that this experience did not happen in a vacuum. Jericho was on one of the main routes from Galilee to Jerusalem via the Jordan River Valley. As pilgrims traveled, they naturally told the stories of what was happening around Galilee with Jesus. Each story Bartimaeus heard was a preparation for faith to take hold in his heart.

Going through the city today there is little to remind us of New Testament times other than the Sycamore tree in the center of town.

Yet still today it plays an important role in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. When Israel was involved in trading land for peace two of the first cities turned over to full Palestinian control were Bethlehem and Jericho. Arafat set up a “police” training academy there which was in reality a military training base from which he could attack Israel. One of his soldiers during that time was Tasir Abu Sada whom we will meet a bit later. Since being turned over to the Palestinians there has been an uneven relationship. Presently it is peaceful but for a number of years travel into Jericho was prohibited to us. Even today, our Jewish guides do not always go in and we end up with a local guide for the site if we do not have our own connections.

However, what made Jericho most famous was how Joshua ended up taking the city in the first battle for the Promised Land. The biblical account of the entry into the Promised Land is full of miracles. It was a miracle to cross the Jordan River at flood stage. The appearance of the angel of the Lord to Joshua was supernatural. The promises made to Joshua were sweeping and strong. The first test of those promises came in the first battle at Jericho.

Joshua 5:13-6:5. *“Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" 14 "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" 15 The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. 6 Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. 2 Then the Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. 3 March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. 4 Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. 5 When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in*." NIV

Josh 6:16-24 “*The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the Lord has given you the city! 17 The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. 18 But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. 19 All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury." 20 When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city. 21 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. 22 Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her." 23 So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel. 24 Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the Lord's house.* NIV

It seems impossible that Israel could have marched around any city seven times in one day until you see how small the city actually was. The ancient city was limited to the area which is raised above the valley floor. An eight acre city is tiny to us but ancient cities in 1400 BC were mostly quite small.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jericho was in two main layers. When the trumpets were blown, the walls tumbled outward. The fallen stones became like ramps into the two levels of the city. If you look closely, there are still places where you can see the jumble of mud bricks that were atop the stone walls of Jericho when they came tumbling down. Without the imposing walls, the city was very vulnerable and fell to Israel quickly. It was their first victory as they moved into the land that God had promised them.

The city was to be offered to the Lord. That is, any proceeds from the conquest should not go to anyone in Israel but only to God. The fire destruction was a kind of burnt offering while the metals were a more tangible offering into the Lord’s house.

The city (Tell es-Sultan) has had parts of it excavated over the last many decades. Sir Charles Warren of the British Royal Engineers excavated in 1868 followed by John Garstang from1930 to 1936 uncovering several of the 20 or so layers of civilization at the site. Garstang found Canaanite pottery dating to 1400 BC, the Late Bronze Age, and the time of Joshua’s conquest. In the early 1950’s Kathleen Kenyon excavated. She did not find the right type of pottery where she was digging to be consistent with the time period of Joshua so she felt the city was not even occupied when Joshua came through. Her conclusions, even though they turned out to be in error, set the archaeological tone as relates to the accuracy of the biblical account about Jericho. More recent work by Dr. Bryant Wood, an expert in Late Bronze Age pottery, examined every piece of pottery associated with Jericho and did find pottery consistent with the time period of Joshua’s conquest. As a result, he felt Kenyon took too little notice of all the pottery and thus came to the wrong conclusion. He concluded the Bible was indeed accurate as to Jericho being occupied at the time of Joshua.

**The walls:** The falling walls were miraculous in both the timing and the collapse. Some seem intent on being able to explain every miracle in the Bible through some natural means. They essentially want to gut the Bible of everything miraculous. Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground because upstream an earthquake triggered a landslide blocking the river. The same earthquake weakened the walls of Jericho so minimal vibration produced by the marching feet caused the walls to fall. All these kinds of explanations are only necessary if God cannot do miracles. I don’t find it hard to believe in the miracles of the Bible because I have seen miracles in my own life.

We know those walls fell because we can go and look at them today. What is evident today is the foundation and lower part of the wall are made of stone while the upper part of the wall was made of mud bricks. This use of mud bricks is found elsewhere in Israel with other examples being the mud brick arch at Dan predating Abraham. There were also mud bricks used at Beersheba which can still be seen today and have also been restored. And the mud bricks that came off the upper wall can still be seen in some places in Jericho where erosion hasn’t yet fully wiped them out.

The walls fell in such a way that they formed a ramp up into the city upon which the Israelis charged in to capture the city. The pattern in which the walls fell can also still be seen in the excavation.

**The burning and looting of the city**: Digging through the ruins today several parts of the biblical story are confirmed. A burn layer was found. Three cities, Jericho, Ai, and Hazor, were all said to have been burned and in all three cities archaeologists have found a burn layer. I had a guide once who wanted to be sure I had artifacts from the trip so he literally scraped a bit of the burn layer at Hazor into a plastic bag and gave it to me. Not sure I wanted it, but that is what he did. A further confirmation of the Bible is in the burned jars of grain that they found. That they still had grain indicates a short siege. That the grain was burned indicates the attack was in the time of grain harvest. The spring flooding corresponds to the grain harvest as does the drying of the flax on Rahab’s roof.

Why did God tell Israel not to take any loot from the city for themselves? He allowed them to do it in other places but not there. The first fruits of the Promised Land were to be a kind of tithe to the Lord. That is why what Achan did was dealt with so severely. He had not just taken plunder. He has literally stolen the Lord’s tithe. His wealth was short lived as indeed was his life. The Lord exposed him out of all of Israel and he and his family were stoned to death. That a sin had been committed was discovered by Israel’s humiliating defeat in the battle following Jericho.

Joshua and Israel had the promises of success. God said he would be with them and he was. However, even the promises of God have some conditions attached to them. First, they have to be acted upon in faith or with strength and courage. Second, sin interferes with the promises. These are lessons for us as well.

The second battle for the Promised Land was in the strategic town of Ai. It guarded the northern access into the highlands. The central entry went up to Jerusalem, some ten miles to the south and the southern access went up toward Hebron. From Ai you can look to the south and see Jerusalem so it sits at a high point with great visibility along the spine of the hills and over the Jordan Valley. Belvoir is a similarly situated Crusader castle that overlooks the Jordan valley. So it had country wide defensive significance. From Joshua’s point of view it was the next logical stop on the main road into the mountains and the point from which they could split the country into two parts much like Sherman’s march to the sea in the US Civil War.

When Israel attacked Ai they didn’t even call upon all their forces. The spies said only a few thousand would be needed so 3,000 were sent. The attack would start from the North against the city gate. It wouldn’t have mattered because God allowed the defenders of Ai to inflict damage upon Israel and defeated the first attack killing 36 soldiers. The sin of Achan was responsible for the loss which they dealt with. I have never heard the name Achan except in the Bible but I did defeat a guy named Aiken Blitz for Student Body President at Willamette University.

In any case, Israel attacked and was defeated. At this defeat the Israelis turned into cry babies. Josh 7:5-9 “*At this the hearts of the people melted and became like water. 6 Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. 7 And Joshua said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! 8 O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? 9 The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?"*  As pathetic was that prayer was at least Joshua had the sense to ask God why.

God exposed the “sin in the camp” which was the cause of the defeat. Israel dealt with Achan and his family. The second attack wasalso better planned with an ambush force as well as a frontal feint but more importantly it had the blessing of God.

Ai. Recent archaeology has identified Khirbet el-Maqatir as the location of ancient Ai. That site has several consistencies with the bible. Joshua encamped on the north side Ai with a valley in between. Beyond the recently discovered north gate of the site is such a hill. The ambush force hid out behind the city. A steep valley called Wadi Sheban could fit that bill. The excavated pottery dates to the time period of Joshua and the evidence of a fire destruction is seen in the ruins.

The difference between battle I and II at Ai is the difference between God’s blessing and God’s judgment. The enemy was the same and maybe even stronger with confidence gained from their first victory. Once Israel returned to God’s favor their winning ways also returned.

1. <http://ldolphin.org/Jericho.shtml> argues for the early date of around 1400 BC and not around 1250 BC as some prefer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)