

### 39. Khirbet el-Masterah

*The Hebrews entered the Land. But how? In one conquest, as the Book of Joshua says? Or gradually, as Alt thought<sup>1</sup> and archaeology confirms?<sup>2</sup>*

The site which archaeology has identified as one early habitation of the Hebrews is called Khirbet el-Masterah. It occupies 2.5 acres, and lies 5 miles north of Jericho, on a hill surrounded by higher hills, and is thus well hidden: ideal for new arrivals to establish themselves, while steadily growing in size. There are house foundations, and traces of an altar.

Becoming stronger, the Hebrews eventually conquered nearby Jericho, and subsequently Ai, another formidable city. In Joshua, both victories are magical, but they also contain hints of a less magical version, suggesting that behind the Joshua story there lies a more plausible historical memory.

#### Jericho

The magical elements are many. The priests march around the city with their music, and at the end, the shouting of the people makes the walls collapse.

**Josh 6:2.** And Yahweh said to Joshua, See, I have given into thy hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valor. [3] And ye shall compass the city, all the men of war, going about the city once. Thus shalt thou do six days. [4] And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark: and the seventh day ye shall compass the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. [5] And it shall be, that, when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when ye hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout: and the wall of the city shall fall down flat, and the people shall go up every man straight before him.

The only hint of a real, remembered battle is this note of enduring hatred:

**Josh 6:26.** And Joshua charged them with an oath at that time, saying, Cursed be the man before Yahweh, that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho; with the loss of his first-born shall he lay the foundation thereof, and with the loss of his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it.<sup>3</sup>

#### Ai

Eight miles northwest of Jericho lay Ai,<sup>4</sup> an outpost city protecting Bethel. In Joshua, the battle is an affair of thousands, but that account retains memories of something smaller. It also shows knowledge of warfare. Ai is not the usual frontal attack, but an *ambush*, into which the enemy are led and slaughtered:

<sup>1</sup>Alt **Settlement** (1925), and in confirmation, Weippert **Settlement** (1967).

<sup>2</sup>See Hawkins (2018), with pictures

<sup>3</sup>This curse was recalled in 1Kgs 16:34, "In [Ahab's] days did Hiel the Bethelite build Jericho; he laid the foundation thereof with the loss of Abiram his first-born . . ."

<sup>4</sup>**Atlas** 50. Usually, but not firmly, identified with Et-Tell, east of Biblical Bethel.

Here is the earlier version:

**Josh 7:2.** And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai . . . and spake unto them, saying, Go up and spy out the land. And the men went up and spied out Ai. [3] And they returned to Joshua and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai . . . [4] So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men; and they fled before the men of Ai. [5] And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men, and they chased them from before the gate . . .

Then an interpolation: Yahweh explains that the people have sinned. The sinner (Achan) is identified and executed. Then the probably earlier account resumes:

**Josh 8:1.** And Yahweh said unto Joshua, Fear not, neither be thou dismayed: take all the people of war with thee, and arise, go up to Ai; see, I have given into thy hand the king of Ai and his people and his city and his land; [2] and thou shalt do to Ai and her king as thou didst unto Jericho and her king; only the spoil thereof, and the cattle thereof, shall ye take for a prey unto yourselves: set thee an ambush for the city behind it . . .

[10] And Joshua arose up early in the morning, and mustered the people, and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai. [11] And all the people, even the men of war that were with him, went up, and drew nigh, and came before the city, and encamped on the north side of Ai; now there was a valley between him and Ai. [12] And he took about five thousand men, and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of the city. [13] So they set the people, even all the host that was on the north of the city, and their liers-in-wait that were on the west of the city; and Joshua went that night into the midst of the valley. [14] And it came to pass, when the king of Ai saw it, that they hasted and rose up early, and the men of the city went out against Israel to battle, he and all his people, at the time appointed, before the Arabah; but he knew not that there was an ambush against him behind the city. [15] And Joshua and all Israel made as if they were beaten before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness. [16] And all the people that were in the city were called together to pursue after them; and they pursued after Joshua, and were drawn away from the city. [17] And there was not a man left in Ai or Bethel, that went not out after Israel, and they left the city open, and pursued after Israel . . . [19] And the ambush arose quickly out of their place . . . and entered into the city and took it, and they hasted and set the city on fire. [20] And when the men of Ai looked behind them, they saw, and behold, the smoke of the city ascended up to heaven, and they had no power to flee this way or that way, and the people that fled to the wilderness turned back upon the pursuers. [21] And when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city, and that the smoke of the city ascended, then they turned again, and slew the men of Ai. [22] And others came forth out of the city against them, so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side, and some on that side; and they smote them, so that they let none of them remain or escape.

Those familiar with the art of war will recognize this very effective device.

If these passages are based on memories of actual battles, how much more of it can we find in the Book of Joshua? Maybe a lot: exaggerating something which is even dimly remembered will be more convincing to one's audience than any outright invention.

### A Gradual Conquest Scenario

Jericho and Ai were great cities, not a plausible first target for a small band of newcomers. The conquest probably began more modestly. Atlas 50 gives a possible sequence: first, the small towns which are the support zone for Jericho, and only then Jericho itself.<sup>5</sup> Here are those towns, paired with *Joshua entries*:

- Gibeon and its cities. *Josh 9:3-27. the ruse of the Gibeonites*
    - Beeroth
    - Kephirah
    - Kireath Jearim
  - Upper Beth Horon
  - Aijalon
  - Jarmuth *Josh 10/3. King of Jarmuth will fight Hebrews<sup>6</sup>*
  - Azekah
  - Libnah
  - Lachish *Josh 10/3. King of Lachish will fight Hebrews*
  - Eglon *Josh 10/3. King of Eglon will fight Hebrews*
  - Makkedah
  - Hebron *Josh 10/3. King of Hebron will fight Hebrews*
  - Debir *Josh 10/3. "Debir King of Eglon . . ."*
- Josh 10:28. Magic conquest of Makkedah*  
*Josh 10:29-30. Magic conquest of Libnah*  
*Josh 10:31-32. Magic conquest of Lachish*  
*Josh 10:33. Magic conquest of Gezer<sup>7</sup>*  
*Josh 10:34-35. Magic conquest of Eglon*  
*Josh 10:36-37. Magic conquest of Hebron*  
*Josh 10: 38-39 Magic conquest of Debir*

The summary in Josh 10:40-43 makes Joshua conqueror of "all the land, the hill-country, and the slopes, and all their kings . . . Joshua smote them from Kadesh-barnea even unto Gaza and all the country of Goshen, even unto Gibeon." This is mere exaggeration. What makes military sense is the Atlas 50 scenario, except that Jericho, and following it Ai, must be late rather than early.

So far, so good. But next comes something preposterous:

**Josh 11:1.** And it came to pass, when Jabin king of Hazor heard thereof, that he sent to Jobab king of Madon, and to the king of Shimron, and to the king of Achshaph, [2] and to the kings that were on the north, in the hill-country, and in the Arabah south of Chinneroth, and in the lowland . . . [5] And all these kings . . . encamped together at the waters of Merom to fight with Israel.

This extends the conquered area into Galilee, but Israel *never occupied Galilee*. It is the Atlas 50 sequence that is more likely to reflect the real conquest.

<sup>5</sup>Joshua makes Jericho and Ai the first conquests. For reasons given above, No.

<sup>6</sup>At the request of the King of Jerusalem (Josh 10:3); so also the others.

<sup>7</sup>Not in the Atlas 50 list, and lying somewhat outside that area. It is said in Joshua that the king of Gezer *came to aid Lachish*, not that he was a target in his own right.