DO HISTORICAL MATTERS MATTER TO FAITH?

A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture

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ENTER JOSHUA

The "Mother of Current Debates" in Biblical Archaeology

JOHN M. MONSON

Introduction

The God of the Bible acts in time and space. But readers of Scripture are far removed from the times and places of events that the Bible records. Modern readers, like previous generations of scholars in both the church and the academy, seek to harmonize these two statements with the philosophical and theological thinking of their day. They rely in large part upon historical criticism, a scientific method committed to determining the historicity and original meaning of the text. Over the past century this method brought not only a range of helpful tools for the study of the Bible but also challenges to more traditional views of Scripture. Decades of rising skepticism toward the Bible in both intellectual circles and the culture at large yielded a "hermeneutic of suspicion" that is the norm today.[1] The God of the Bible, it is argued, if he exists at all, is attested just as powerfully—or more so—in theological constructs and personal experience as he is in ancient texts, rife with potential inconsistencies and contradictions.

Many contemporary readers of the Bible therefore face an apparent obstacle around which they must navigate: How do we understand the truth claims of Scripture in light of the historical-critical method and empirical evidence from archaeology and ancient sources? Some evangelical academics confront the issue head on and in public. Others ignore it altogether in their professional work but maintain a private faith. Most recently, "progressive evangelicals"

[1] P. Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semia* 4 (1975): 27–48; Jon Levenson, "The Bible: Unexamined Commitments of Criticism," *First Things* 30 (1993): 24–33.

are calling upon scholars of traditional and biblically conservative views to embrace more intentionally the historical-critical method, as well as some of its more radical presuppositions. There is underway a migration of some evangelicals toward positions that challenge the Bible as a consistently reliable historical document. Some even give tacit approval to the "minimalist" approaches concerning biblical persons and events.[2] This is occurring at the very time that the exponential increase in textual and archaeological data from the ancient Near East is only just beginning to have a voice in biblical and theological studies at large.

In ancient Near Eastern studies and archaeology the landscape is also changing.[3] From the perspective of the text today one can see the Bible's connection to ancient Near Eastern thought and modes of expression more clearly than ever before.[4] From the perspective of archaeology, the increasing use of technology, widespread surveys, and ongoing excavation continues to yield spectacular and sometimes surprising results. Some of these finds shed new light on biblical characters or episodes that in previous years were discounted altogether.[5] The combined use of linguistic, geographical, and archaeological data—what I call "contextual criticism"—makes it possible to situate the biblical record more confidently within its own spatial, temporal, and cultural setting than ever before.[6]

In light of these issues it seems fitting to revisit briefly Israel's entry into Canaan since it lies at the intersection of the Bible, history, archaeology, and theology—adding the necessary component of geography. This "mother of

[2]Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 356; Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

[3]Good methods and sober expectations characterize the new generation of archaeologists, religious and secular, and there is gradually more willingness to invoke anthropology and history in tandem. See the new book *Historical Biblical Archaeology and the Future: The New Pragmatism*, ed. Thomas Levy (New York: Equinox, 2010).

[4]K. Lawson Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990); John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study Of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005).

[5]Note most recently the Davidic era fort at Qeiyafa, the Iron Age mines in Transjordan, and the compelling parallels to Solomon's temple: Yosef Garfinkel and Saar Ganor, *Khirbet Qeiyafa*, vol. 1, *Excavation Report 2007–2008* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009); Erez Ben-Yosef et al., "The Beginning of Iron Age Copper Production in the Southern Levant: New Evidence from Khirbat al-Jariya, Faynan, Jordan," *Antiquity* 84 (2010): 724–46; John Monson, "The Temples of 'Ain Dara and Jerusalem," in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. G. Beckman and T. Lewis (Providence, RI: Brown University Judaic Studies, 2006).

[6]John Monson, "Original Context as a Framework for Biblical Interpretation," in *Ancient Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?*, ed. Daniel I. Block (Nashville: B&H, 2008).

all biblical archaeology debates" has a scholarly literature too vast and issues too numerous to receive even a cursory survey here. It may, however, serve as a touchstone for friendly discussion with those who would attenuate the historicity of the Old Testament and in its place elevate scholarly consensus, theological reflection, and select doctrines.

The Background of the Debate

The so-called "conquest" and settlement of Israel are tied to the history of two major disciplines. The textual issues are governed by the history of biblical studies, whereas the archaeological issues reflect the history of biblical archaeology. Both trajectories are relevant to critical scholarship and evangelical understanding of Scripture in the twenty-first century.[7] Beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exploration and nascent archaeological inquiry brought greater appreciation of the Bible's geographical and cultural setting, even as the biblical text came under the increasingly hostile scrutiny of biblical criticism.[8] It was only natural that some scholars of Judeo-Christian background sought to harness the burgeoning discoveries of the Near East in defense of a literal reading of the Bible.[9]

When in the 1930s a dominant scholar like W. F. Albright came to favor an archaeology-based historical reconstruction of the Bible over the more radical forms of source criticism, many came to trust his judgment on issues of biblical history.[10] Among other things, Albright and his student G. E. Wright argued that already in their day excavations yielded sufficient evidence to posit a focused, widespread, and destructive Israelite conquest of Canaan.[11] On the positive side, Albright grounded biblical study in science and history by making evident the Bible's setting within the geography of the Holy Land,

[7]K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); D. Merling, "The Relationship between Archaeology and the Bible: Expectations and Reality," in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan R. Millard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 29–42; Richard Hess, "Early Israel in Canaan: A Survey of Recent Evidence and Interpretations," *PEQ* 195 (1993): 125–42; Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*.

[8]See especially Thomas W. Davis, *Shifting Sands: The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Edward Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petræa: A Journal of Travels in the Year 1838* (repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2006; Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 3–35. Some of these debates culminated in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy (V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 120–68.

[9]Davis, *Shifting Sands*, 228.

[10]W. F. Albright, *Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible* (New York: Revell, 1932).

[11]This dominant view is expressed forcefully and documented well by J. P. Free and G. E. Wright. See Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, 5th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press, 1956), 124–37; and Wright, "Epic of Conquest," *BA* 3 (1940): 25–40.

its connection to ancient Near Eastern texts, and its rootedness in ancient cultural realities. On the negative side, he described a unified conquest that was more dramatic than even the Bible's description, and he attributed to the Israelites the last destruction phases of Canaanite cities. When it became clear that the destruction and decline of Late Bronze Age cities occurred later than the commonly accepted thirteenth-century-BC date of Joshua, the conclusion followed that this evidence could not be attributed to Israel's entry into Canaan. Moreover, excavations at Jericho and Ai, two cities that Joshua burned with fire, did not yield what was felt to be the necessary evidence of a Late Bronze Age destruction.[12] Thus Albright's famous overreach of biblical archaeology, which was itself a reaction to radical biblical criticism, ironically led to an abandonment of the Joshua narrative as holding any historical value. This clouds the conquest debate to this day.

Subsequent syntheses were also reflective of larger trends in science, social studies, and biblical studies.[13] The "peaceful infiltration" model of Alt envisioned peoples from various locations and backgrounds, including mainly pastoralists, coalescing in the highlands of Canaan around a deity named Yahweh.[14] Among them were tribal elements from Transjordan, Canaan, and Egypt. The conquest narratives of Joshua were regarded as later etiological stories composed during the Israelite monarchy. Just as Albright saw the text of Joshua through the lens of Late Bronze Age destructions in Canaan, so Alt projected the ideas of nomad-farmer coexistence and Greek tribal confederacy onto the emergence of Israel. In both cases a governing model overcame the selectivity and ambiguity of the textual and archaeological data but did so at the cost of creating oversimplified reconstructions.

During the past several decades the conquest debate has been recast within the larger rubric of the findings from archaeological surveys that revealed changes in settlement patterns and culture during the late second millennium BC. This transition from thirteenth-century-BC Late Bronze Age urban city-states to twelfth-century-BC villages on the so-called highland frontier

[12]Josh. 6:24; 8:19, 28; 11:11–13; Carl Rasmussen, "Conquest, Infiltration, Revolt, or Resettlement? What Really Happened During the Exodus–Judges Period?," in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using the Old Testament Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 138–59.

[13]Patrick Mazani, "The Appearance of Israel in Canaan in Recent Scholarship," in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, ed. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr., BBRSup 3 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 95–110; K. Lawson Younger, "Early Israel in Recent Scholarship," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 176–206.

[14]A. Alt, "The Settlement of the Israelites in Palestine," in *Essays in Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 133–69.

seemed to correlate quite well with the local emergence of Israel, however that emergence might be conceived.[15]

Within this broad framework a good number of interpretations were proposed, most of them appealing to sociological and anthropological models. Among them was the peasant-revolt hypothesis, which saw the Israelites as nothing more than Canaanites who rebelled against their overlords.[16] Israel Finkelstein interpreted the cultural change as part of a long-term ebb and flow between pastoralists and a sedentary population in Palestine.[17] Yet another proposal explained Israel's emergence as a ruralization process whereby populations who left the collapsing city-states of Late Bronze Age Canaan built nested housing compounds and villages in the adjacent highlands (Stager, Dever). A more radical (so-called minimalist) view held by scholars such as Thompson saw the demographic changes as a purely local development unrelated to the origins of Israel since they considered Joshua and the majority of the Old Testament to be merely a late fiction.[18]

In sum, the textual aspect of the conquest debate for the most part has become simply a reflection of trends in biblical criticism. For the past few decades all but the most conservative biblical scholars have considered the Joshua account to be historically unreliable.[19] Archaeology, once thought to support the biblical text, has since Albright's day come to be seen as a negative reality check to biblical claims. Archaeology has been given a privileged role of proving or—through assumed lack of evidence—denying the biblical record. Yet archaeological surveys and excavations—past and present—reveal

[15]The villages include, among other new features, houses with four rooms, pillars, and storage silos within small compounds that form a rural culture sharply contrasted with the lowland cities of Late Bronze Canaan. There is, however, also considerable evidence for cultural continuity. See L. Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael Coogan (New York: Oxford, 1998), 123–76, and recent summaries in Hess, Klingbeil, and Ray, *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*. Also, William Dever, "Cultural Continuity, Ethnicity in the Archaeological Record, and the Question of Israelite Origins," *ErIsr* 24 (1993): 22*–33*; asterisks indicate pagination of the English-language section.

[16]Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

[17]*The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988).

[18]Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and Myth of Israel* (London: Basic Books, 1999), 200–228; Niels P. Lemche, *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society before the Monarchy* (Leiden: Brill, 1985).

[19]Max Miller, "Archaeology and the Israelite Conquest of Canaan: Some Methodological Observations," *PEQ* 109 (1977): 87–93; William Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 97–158. In fact, today the battle has shifted to David and Solomon, whose historicity is the subject of spirited debate: Israel Finkelstein and Niel Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 261–85.

a complex picture that requires interpretation if it is to be connected to the Bible. It is clear that there emerged a new phenomenon in the highlands of Palestine during the end of the Late Bronze Age in the latter part of the second millennium BC—and this too requires an explanation. There are hypotheses that rely solely upon local revolt, collapse of larger cities, or the ebb and flow of settlement patterns between pastoralists, city dwellers, and farmers, but none of these explanations is entirely satisfying. Stager is certainly correct when he writes, "It is in this broader framework that we must try to locate the more specific causes that led to the emergence of Israel."[20] When one tries to isolate those specific causes, however, both the archaeological record and the biblical account suggest that Israel's entry into Canaan involved several processes rather than a singular event.[21]

Back to Basics

So much has been written about the so-called "Israelite conquest of Canaan" that it can be a challenge merely to isolate and address the main issues of the debate.[22] Generally speaking, in most contemporary biblical scholarship the text is treated as a tendentious, unreliable reflection on the past. In contrast, archaeological findings are held up as the scientific arbiter. Geography, which features so prominently in the Joshua narrative, is seldom addressed and, if so, only in a cursory manner. The following observations on the text, archaeology, and geography of the conquest narratives are offered not as a summary or update but rather as a selective demonstration that the biblical account of Israel's entry into Canaan should be accepted as a legitimate historical source.[23] The purpose is not to "prove the Bible" per se but rather to make note of the compelling reasons why one should engage rather than dismiss these relevant biblical texts.

[20]Stager, "Forging an Identity," 142.

[21]"We should speak of an Israelite *entry* into Canaan, and settlement: *neither* only a conquest (although raids and attacks were made), *nor* simply an infiltration (although some tribes moved in alongside the Canaanites), *nor* just re-formation of local Canaanites into a new society 'Israel' (although others, as at Shechem, may have joined the Hebrew nucleus; cf. Gibeon). But the elements of several processes can be seen in the biblical narratives." Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 190.

[22]James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3–51, offers an excellent summary. See also the thoughtful update of Gordon McConville and Stephen Williams, *Joshua*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

[23]Geography is given the most attention here because, unlike the textual and archaeological components of the conquest debate, it has received very little attention even though it can provide some of the most compelling material for historical issues related to the conquest.

The Book of Joshua as Ancient Near Eastern Text

The book of Joshua is a highly structured narrative account replete with advanced literary techniques and "complex macro-structures."[24] It is thought to be part of the so-called Deuteronomic History (commonly understood as Deuteronomy—2 Kings) and may reflect the concerns of that work, among them the question of what went wrong with the Israelite monarchies and perhaps why Ephraim and the northern kingdom fell away. But that is another story. The form and content of Joshua, as well as the events that it describes (replete with battles, destructions, and geographical descriptions), are reminiscent of the late second millennium BC, as Younger has shown.[25] These include especially the conquest accounts of chapters 9–12 but also the boundary lists of Joshua 13–19, as well as onomastic evidence, and the use of hyperbole.[26] The latter feature exists in numerous military accounts of the ancient Near East, and it lends further support for tracing part of its content to the late second millennium BC.[27] The key lesson here is that in light of parallel accounts from the ancient Near East there is little justification for dismissing the biblical conquest episodes on account of the miracles, deity, and hyperbole incorporated in the text. These are recognizable and unexceptional features of Near Eastern texts ancient and modern.[28]

A further textual challenge to the authenticity and relevance of the Joshua conquest accounts is the relationship of these passages to the first chapter of the book of Judges. Although many scholars see a contradiction between the claims of success in the Joshua narrative and the partial settlement described in Judges 1, there is precedent in Assyrian texts and elsewhere for conquest

[24]L. Younger, "The Rhetorical Structuring of the Joshua Narratives," in Hess, Klingbeil, and Ray, *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, 3–32.

[25]Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*; Richard Hess, *Joshua*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 35; Gordon McConville, "*Joshua*," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 159.

[26]R. Hess, "Asking Historical Questions of Joshua 13–19: Recent Discussion Concerning the Date of the Boundary Lists," *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, J. Hoffmeier, and D. Baker (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 165–80; Hess, "Fallacies in the Study of Early Israel: An Onomastic Perspective," *TynBul* 45 (1994): 338–54.

[27]Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 208–37. There are those who vociferously disagree, but seldom do they offer conclusive evidence for their own positions. Nadav Na'aman, for example, draws close parallels between the Joshua accounts and Israelite battles of the Assyrian and later periods. "The entire concept of an invasion and conquest of the high lands in the 13th–12th centuries is alien to historical reality." See Nadav Na'aman, "The 'Conquest of Canaan' in Joshua and in History," in *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel*, ed. N. Na'aman and I. Finkelstein (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1990), 250, 284–347.

[28]See, for example, R. Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Hatherleigh), 43–78.

Table 4. Sites attacked but not occupied by Israel

© Biblical Background, Inc. www.bibback.com		לקח *take*	לכד *sieze*	נכה *smite*	שריד *survive*	חרם *wipe out*	שמד *destroy*	שרף *burn*	ירש *possess*	בנה *build*	ישב *settle*
	EDOM										
	MOAB										
Transjordan	**HESHBON** Jahaz Jazer King Sihon										
Transjordan	**EDREI** Ashtaroth King Og of Bashan										
	GILEAD										
	Summary										
	JERICHO										
	AI										
	(SHECHEM)										
	GIBEON										
	MAKKEDAH										
Cisjordan	**LIBNAH**										
Cisjordan	**LACHISH**										
Cisjordan	**King of Gezer**										
Cisjordan	**EGLON**										
	HEBRON										
	DEBIR										
	Summary										
	MEROM										
	HAZOR										
	Tell Cities										
	Summary										

accounts to describe "two aspects of one process."[29] Moreover, the book of Joshua itself records that Israel did not settle the entire land.[30]

There is yet another textual aspect to the Joshua conquest narratives that needs to be addressed, and that is the vocabulary used when Israel captured enemy cities. As noted above, one of the complicating factors in understanding the so-called Israelite conquest is the commonly held belief that the Israelites entered rapidly into Cisjordan (the land west of the Jordan River), destroyed

[29]L. Younger "Judges 1 in Its Near Eastern Literary Context," in Millard, Hoffmeier, and Baker, *Faith, Tradition, and History*, 207–28.

[30]Josh. 13:1–7, 29–31; 17:5–6, 11–18.

the majority of Canaanite cities, possessed the cities, built or rebuilt them, and settled down in place of the former population.[31] This view, however, is derived from a misunderstanding of the vocabulary associated with city assaults in Joshua 6–11, for which one can consult table 4. Whereas cities in Transjordan are "possessed" and "settled," all but three of the cities in Cisjordan are "taken," "seized," "wiped out," or such, but they were not "burned with fire" (שרף באש). The reports of battles in the book of Joshua make no claim that these cities were possessed upon Israel's entry into Canaan! This fact is paramount to the "conquest" debate! In light of the vocabulary, Joshua's campaigns in Cisjordan may well have been only raids or responses to those who resisted Israel's growing presence (such as the king of Jerusalem and his allies). The modern reader must adjust his or her expectations of the text and let it speak for itself.[32]

> When Joshua is viewed as a piece of Near Eastern military writing, and its literary character is properly understood, the idea of a group of tribes coming to Canaan, using some military force, partially taking a number of cities and areas over a period of some years, destroying (burning) just three cities, and coexisting alongside the Canaanites and other ethnic groups for a period of time before the beginnings of monarchy, does not require blind faith.[33]

Archaeology's Changing Role

Archaeology is a relatively young field of study, and its relationship to other disciplines is still very much in flux.[34] As noted above, the twentieth century began with very favorable (though sometimes overstated) interconnections being made between archaeology and the Bible. The conquest narrative played a central role in this synergy of disciplines. By the end of the century, however, critical views of Scripture combined with vast amounts of new material and textual evidence gave rise to new skepticism about the integration of material finds and biblical texts. The Late Bronze–Iron Age I transition, for example, proved to be much more intricate than previously thought. And yet, running throughout the history of biblical archaeology is an especially strong interest in the book of Joshua. As David Merling writes, "No other biblical book has been so thoroughly reviewed by the archaeological community as Joshua.

[31]Had this happened, one would expect this fact to be reflected overtly in the book of Joshua—without clear statements to the contrary, as we stated above.

[32]In contrast to these "eyewitness accounts," the summary reports and boundary lists in Joshua may well have been written later as a frame to the actual battle accounts (e.g., Josh. 11:16; 15–19).

[33]Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 43–44.

[34]A. Burke, "The Archaeology of the Levant in America," in Levy, *Historical Biblical Archaeology and the Future*, 82–87.

The reason for this interest is that no other book of the Bible appears to be as susceptible to archaeological investigation as the book of Joshua."[35]

Most of the debate centers on the three aforementioned cities that, according to the conquest narrative in the book of Joshua, the Israelites "burned . . . with fire"—Hazor, Jericho, and Ai.[36] The Israelites "seized" or "smote" other cities, but the text does not say they burnt them with fire. Moreover, since most Late Bronze Age sites suffered multiple destructions, in most cases it is not possible to associate a single destruction layer with the Israelites.

Hazor

Hazor's archaeological excavations have yielded Late Bronze Age finds that correlate with the book of Joshua very well. The site has destruction layers that fit both the early and late dates of the exodus/conquest, but because Hazor suffered a particularly massive conflagration in the thirteenth century BC, Ben-Tor contends that the Israelites were most likely the people who ransacked this large city, the "head of all those kingdoms." He reaches this conclusion through a process of elimination.[37]

Jericho

Unlike Hazor, Jericho and Ai are sites that are more challenging to harmonize with the biblical account of Israel's entry into Canaan because of apparent incongruities between the archaeological finds and the claims in the book of Joshua that they were "burned with fire." Jericho was the first place that Joshua destroyed in Canaan (Josh. 6:21, 24). Its Late Bronze Age remains have been discussed so extensively elsewhere that for the current purposes we need only quote Amihai Mazar.

> At Jericho, no remains of the Late Bronze fortifications were found; this was taken as evidence against the historical value of the narrative in the Book of Joshua. The finds at Jericho, however, show that there was a settlement there during the Late Bronze Age, though most of its remains were eroded or removed by human activity. Perhaps, as at other sites, the massive Middle Bronze fortifications were reutilized in the Late Bronze Age. The Late Bronze Age settlement at Jericho was followed by an occupation gap in Iron Age I. Thus, in the case

[35]"The Book of Joshua, Part I—Its Evaluation and Evidence," *AUSS* 39 (2001): 61–72.

[36]Josh. 6:24; 11:11; see also 8:28.

[37]Canaanites, it is argued, would not deface their own deities; the Egyptians would not destroy a friendly city; and the Philistines could not have been responsible for the destruction because they had yet to arrive in the Levant (A. Ben-Tor, "The Fall of Canaanite Hazor—the 'Who' and 'When' Questions," in *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition: Thirteenth to Early Tenth Centuries BCE*, ed. S. Gitin, A. Mazar, and E. Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1998), 456–67.

> of Jericho, the archaeological data cannot serve as decisive evidence to deny a historical nucleus in the Book of Joshua concerning the conquest of this city.[38]

Beyond this summary two points must also be noted. First, the presence of tombs nearby confirms that there was a settlement during the period of the Israelite conquest, however small it may have been. Second, whatever walls did exist were constructed atop those of the substantial Middle Bronze Age city structures. When one considers the arid climate of the Jericho region and the intense, sporadic downpours in winter, together with the ban that Joshua placed on the city, the likely erosion of most Late Bronze Age structures atop the ancient mound makes perfect sense.[39]

Ai

Ai, the third city to be "burned with fire," offers even more of a challenge than Jericho. Here also we can rely upon Mazar, but with several caveats to be addressed below. He writes:

> A long gap in occupation followed the large Early Bronze Age city at 'Ai until a small village was established there during the Israelite settlement in the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C.E. This lack of any Late Bronze Canaanite city at the site or in the vicinity contradicts the narrative in Joshua 8 and shows that it was not based on historical reality despite its topographical and tactical plausibility. The 'Ai story can only be explained as being of etiological nature, created at a time when there was an Israelite settlement on the site—which was the case in the period of the Judges.[40]

The apparent gap in occupation at the time of the Israelite entry to Canaan requires comment because the excavations at Ai were extensive, so one would expect to find at least a trace of the Late Bronze city if indeed it was occupied in that period. Numerous explanations have been proposed, but thus far none fully accounts for the specific description of a king and a gate at Ai in Joshua's day. The strongest proposals are (1) that the city of the period was located down the slope underneath the Arab village of Deir Dibwan and (2) that Ai is located at Khirbet Maqatir, a small site excavated by Bryant Wood.[41] Richard Hess has put forth perfectly viable responses to some of the

[38]A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 331.

[39]*The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. E. Stern, 4 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Carta, 1993), 2:679–81.

[40]Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 331–32.

[41]In response to the first proposal, one would expect to find traces of Late Bronze Age pottery near the modern village, but none has been found. The second proposal is very intriguing (Bryant Wood, "Khirbet el-Maqatir, 2000," *IEJ* 51 [2001]: 246–52). But Khirbet Maqatir is very small, and its limited

problems associated with Ai. The term "king" (מלך) can designate not only a conventional king but also a regional officer. Moreover, "wall" (חומה) is a lexeme used for a variety of entities in settlements large and small.[42]

As the quest for biblical Ai continues, simpler solutions should not be rejected out of hand.[43] For all we know, the place was nothing more than a small squatter's settlement in the vicinity of the imposing ruins of the mighty Early Bronze Age city of the third millennium BC. Such a seemingly simplistic proposal would account for the "king" (מלך), "gate" (שער), and burning in the biblical account, as well as the words of the Israelite spies concerning the site and its environs: "they are few" (Josh. 7:3). The question of Ai is addressed again in the case study offered below.

Summary of Archaeology

In dealing with the archaeology of Israel's entry to Canaan one must first place it within the context of the demographic and cultural changes of the Late Bronze–Iron Age I transition. Second, it is crucial to let the text of Joshua speak for itself—and especially the vocabulary concerning Joshua's assault on the cities of Canaan. Problems arise when one discipline or another—whether linguistic study, archaeology, or theology—is allowed to put a straightjacket on the others. Third, the geographical descriptions must be taken seriously and brought into the discussion. Most prior discussions of the topic ignore this component altogether. Finally, archaeological finds must not be treated as a set of objective scientific controls or a "final answer" in the matter.[44]

This last point is crucial, particularly with regard to the three (and there are only three) cities Joshua burned with fire but did not "seize" or "wipe out." For too long archaeologists, biblical scholars, and also people of faith (!) have not adequately taken into account a wide range of relevant studies and possible reconstructions that are available. David Merling writes:

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pottery is contemporary with an early date of the exodus and Israelite entrance into Canaan. Most scholars posit a late date to the exodus (thirteenth century BC), but for many legitimate reasons, biblical and contextual, an early date of the fourteenth century BC should by no means be ruled out.

[42]Richard Hess, "The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua," in Hess, Klingbeil, and Ray, *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, 33–46. In this piece Hess also evaluates most reconstructions offered to date.

[43]In Josh. 7:5 and 8:29 the term *gate*, in Hebrew שער, is an expression that can mean an opening or an architectural entrance. It may well be that in this case the "gate" is nothing more than the narrow ridge by which one ascends to Bethel and the central highland plateau. This is discussed in the case study below. Of course there is no proof of this, but neither can it be ruled out. It is also noteworthy that there are sixteen occurrences of the word *gate* in Hebrew in which it means "dwelling," sometimes metaphorically (e.g., Deut. 5:15; Ps. 100:4). See A. Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher 1981), 1195–97.

[44]Fredric R. Brandfon, "The Limits of Evidence: Archaeology and Objectivity," *Maarav* 4 (1987): 5–43.

> The idea that archaeology is the verifier of ancient literary works has been accepted at face value, and evidence to the contrary is not easily accepted. When the nonevidence is used as data and is assumed within a theory, it becomes destructive because theorists are then obligated to fight for the validity of the nonevidence as though it had an existence.[45]

In fact, most positions that dismiss the book of Joshua's relevance to the archaeological realities of the Late Bronze Age are built upon the "fallacy of the negative proof," which is in effect to say, "If we have not found it, then we know with certainty that it does not exist."[46]

While I disagree with those who believe that the Bible and archaeology offer different kinds of information that for the most part cannot be compared, I am much more optimistic. It is true that archaeological evidence is scattered, random, and incomplete, just as the Bible's record is selective, ancient, and theologically oriented. Any attempt to relate these two sets of information is fraught with challenges—and this is especially so in the case of Israel's entry into Canaan. There are perceived contradictions between text and archaeology but also reasonable congruencies. Every proposal in fact is constrained by limited data and unlimited theories. The debate can become toxic when matters of faith and unbelief are raised. Sadly, there are bitter polemics and "fundamentalists" on all sides of this debate!

But when text and archaeology are brought into a more fluid exchange based upon probabilities and broader patterns of corroboration, a wider, potentially more fruitful range of possibilities presents itself. The challenge is first to interpret the biblical text on its own terms and with its own set of disciplines. In like manner, it is advisable first to study the complicated picture derived from archaeology according to its own interpretive processes before bringing the two into dialogue. In my own view the nexus between physical and linguistic forms of human expression is one of the most promising areas of biblical archaeology. And it can be applied with equal effectiveness to artifacts and historical problems.[47]

In the case of Israel's entry into Canaan, if one paints with broader strokes and looks for general patterns of correspondence, then it is possible to propose historical reconstructions based not upon airtight "proof" but upon

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[45]Merling, "Book of Joshua," 72. In that piece Merling discusses several of the most important studies of the conquest narratives.

[46]Merling discusses the implications of this statement in ibid., 65, where he also quotes Fischer: "This occurs whenever a historian declares that there is no evidence that X is the case, and then proceeds to affirm or assume that not-X is the case." David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 47.

[47]John Monson, "The Temple of Solomon and the Temple of 'Ain Dara, Syria," *Qadmoniot* 29 (1996): 33–38 (Hebrew).

cumulative evidence and probabilities, that is to say, "what is most likely and logical, given available data."[48] When dealing with ancient texts and artifacts, the latter model is no less compelling than the former.

In light of these observations I would suggest that the text of Joshua fits in well linguistically, stylistically, and in terms of its content with the literature of the late second millennium BC, even if it is framed within a larger, later historical work (as noted above). The book of Joshua's account of the Israelite entry into Canaan does overlap with archaeology, albeit in broad strokes. Jericho and Ai are not unsolvable challenges, and they can be harmonized with the biblical text without improperly imposing text or archaeology one upon the other. The larger historical and archaeological context fits very well. And the geographical rootedness of the text points to a real story in a real place. The polemic of the past decade is unnecessary.

Arrival of the Israelites: Geography's Unique Contribution

To this point we have attempted to define textual and archaeological issues that relate to what has been termed the "Israelite conquest of Canaan." It is now possible to address geography, a discipline that is often overlooked but in our view is the most useful resource for studying Israel's entry into Canaan. The first task is to place Joshua's major recorded campaigns within the greater land. Next, we will turn to that part of the land in which Joshua's campaigns to Ai took place, the region that lies between Jericho in the Rift Valley and Bethel in Cisjordan's central hill country.

Events recorded in the book of Joshua include detailed descriptions of regions and terrain that match very precisely the geographical realities of Canaan as a whole and lend credibility to the battle accounts. The Israelite arrival in Transjordan flows logically through known regions. In the area of Medeba and Heshbon instructions are given about settlements and territory, including such graphic terms such as "from the 'lip' of the Arnon" (Deut. 3:16), the precipitous edge of the great Arnon canyon, "to the 'hand' of the Jabbok" (Deut. 2:37), the upper tributaries of the Jabbok, which come together like a "hand at the wrist" at the site of Rabbah (modern Amman).[49] The biblical narrative carefully sets Israel's arrival within the actual geographical context of Transjordan that includes a narrow strip of habitable land in Moab and

[48] I continue to be intrigued by V. P. Long's analogy of a painting versus a portrait, and the reasonableness of cumulative but partial information lending credibility to a text (Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, 106–7, 222–23).

[49] Josh. 12:2–3. For this translation and a full discussion of these verses and the general region, see J. M. Monson and S. P. Lancaster, *Geobasics Study Guide: Central Arena*, part 2 (Rockford, IL: Biblical Backgrounds, 2010): 94–100, http://www.bibback.com.

Edom (adjacent to the vast Arabian plateau), known uplifted parts of Gilead, and specific battlegrounds around Medeba and Edrei.[50]

Once the Israelites entered the land, even more detail is recorded in the book of Joshua. Organizational plans on the Plains of Moab across from Jericho, the crossing of the Jordan and the defeat of Jericho (the backdoor into Canaan), and even the high country behind Jericho as a hiding place for the spies after they left Rahab at Jericho all seem to suggest that the writer is relying on some type of eyewitness account.[51] The geographical data recorded in the campaigns that follow the fall of Jericho in the region of Ai are so specific that they are presented in a case study below.[52]

The next account of geography in the book of Joshua concerns the battle for the strategic plateau that surrounds Gibeon in the central hill country. While it is not possible to know from which "Gilgal" Joshua's forces came,[53] the overall strategy is clear. The ruse of the Gibeonites had left the inhabitants of the plateau in league with Joshua and effectively in control of the local north-south highway through the hill country, as well as direct connections to the east and to the west. The king of Jerusalem and his allies in the southern hill country and the Shephelah in the west organized a defense in the all-important plateau around Gibeon. These kings had all become vulnerable now and could not tolerate this new threat. In response, Joshua raided cities and regions that had confronted Gibeon and in this manner secured the plateau. Remarkably, every geographical aspect of this campaign—from the ascent of Beth-Horon to "turning back to Debir"—fits the geography of the regions in which the events transpired.[54] The later covenant renewal at Shechem points to the fact that the writer of the book of Joshua recognized the importance of this area and accurately situated these events there.[55]

[50]For example, the multitude of biblical references about Bashan suggest that the King of Og at Edrei was an actual figure and that the Israelites sought to expand into parts of his fertile territory that lay beyond the sterile plains of Lower Gilead. These events are covered generally in Num. 21:13–22:1; 32; 33:45–49; Deut. 2:16–3:17; and Josh. 13:7–33.

[51]Joshua 1–6.

[52]Josh. 7:1–8:29.

[53]The Gilgal near Jericho or the Gilgal deep in the hill country of Ephraim near Shiloh?

[54]Joshua 9–10. The strategy followed here reflects the one used after Joshua's day, right down to the invasion of the Romans and the British General Allenby in World War I. The most effective way to occupy the land is to "divide and conquer" by securing this strategic region, which James Monson and his students call the "Central Benjamin Plateau." This plateau is a geographical saddle in the heart of the central hill country, which ultimately was allotted to the tribe of Benjamin and remained a constant battlefield in Israel's history, as reflected in Jacob's "blessing" on Benjamin (Gen. 49:27). For a detailed discussion, see J. Monson, *The Land Between* (Rockford, IL: Biblical Backgrounds, 1996): 171–74.

[55]Josh. 8:30–35; cf. Deut. 11:26–32:27; Josh. 24:1–28. Related events are too numerous to reference here, but they include the hegemony of Labayu in the Amarna Age, as well as events in 1–2 Kings and the Gospels.

The text of Joshua next skips forward to the northern campaign of Merom in the heart of Upper Galilee, which must have taken place sometime later, after the Israelites settled this area. Here again, geography underlies the events and helps to clarify them. The trade route from Gilead in Transjordan ran through the land of Geshur, Hazor, and Kedesh and across the watershed of Upper Galilee before making its way to Tyre on an island just off the mainland of the Mediterranean. Control of this route was crucial for the economies of both Tyre and Hazor.[56] But it was particularly difficult since it passed near remote regions that were vulnerable to attack. Egyptian military activity in the Late Bronze Age highlights the nature of this region, and a letter from the Amarna Age relates tensions between Hazor and Tyre over control of this road between them.[57] Joshua and all his militia with him "came and fell upon them" as they encamped in the valleys along "the waters of Merom" at the foot of steep slopes. The two viable paths of retreat described after the attack, one to the northwest, the other to the northeast, fit precisely the terrain of the area.[58]

In sum, the geographical setting is a vital resource for understanding Israel's entry into Canaan. The locales that are incorporated in the narrative—be they large regions, settlements, or minute geographical features—are recorded with such frequency and specificity that they give the accounts a strong sense of authenticity. One must ask why such details would be recounted were the story merely etiological or contrived. The cumulative effect of geographical indicators becomes even more dramatic when one considers the meticulous report of Joshua's campaign at Ai.

A Case Study: Joshua's Campaigns in the Region of Ai

Joshua's campaigns in the region of Ai present a challenge to the modern reader because of the seeming disconnect between the biblical account and the results of archaeological inquiry. The following case study is intended to demonstrate that the geography of this specific region is the key to interpreting this biblical episode and that it provides the integrative "glue" for understanding both this biblical text and the corresponding archaeological record. When textual and archaeological data are analyzed in tandem and anchored to the

[56] John Monson, "Overlooking a Coveted Commercial Corridor: The Land of Geshur to Tyre via Hazor" (paper presented to the American Schools of Oriental Research, Atlanta, 2010).

[57] Within this region Israelite settlement and expansion in the adjacent highlands appear to have posed a threat to the king of Hazor, who gathered his allies for war at a central position adjacent to Israelite territory in Upper Galilee. See el-Amarna letter 148:41–47, in *The Amarna Letters*, ed. and trans. William L. Moran (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1987).

[58] Josh. 11:1–15.

geographical setting, a better understanding of Joshua's two campaigns into the central hill country is the result (Joshua 7–8).

"The Ruin"

The term *Ai* means "a heap of ruins." In the Hebrew of Joshua 7–8, however, it most often occurs with the definite article to yield הָעַי, (*hā'āy*). Therefore the best way to appreciate the present name of this site is to treat it as a proper noun and translate it as "The Ruin," which is the actual meaning of the expression in the Joshua narrative.[59] The site dominates the entire area in which these campaigns took place. A large Early Bronze Age city arose here centuries before Abraham entered the land, and already in his day the 27.5 acre site had become heaped-up ruins descending eastward from a rocky summit to a small plain on which the Arab village of Deir Dibwan is located today. Whereas most large ancient cities in the land have preserved some form of toponym (place name) over the millennia, The Ruin has not. Perhaps this is because, as noted above, the site was unoccupied from 2400 BC (over a millennium before Joshua) until the late thirteenth century BC (at least a century after the time of Joshua), and then only for a brief time.[60]

The implications of the proper name The Ruin are often ignored or dismissed in discussions about Joshua's two campaigns into the central highlands of Canaan.[61] Some maintain that the name was transferred to a different site somewhere in the area and that such a site could have been a functioning city in the days of Joshua. One wonders, however, what self-respecting community, especially in the honor/shame-based culture of the Near East, would call its city The Ruin! And yet the name persists in the Bible. Whoever recorded this story likely considered the site to be deserted as far back as the days of Abraham.[62] A straightforward and more logical way to account for this odd name with its definite article is to understand that it was an actual ruined site rather than a built-up urban center. Indeed, The Ruin was (and is today) a landmark throughout the entire region and would have served as a natural

[59]The definite article differentiates the word from common nouns. See the masters thesis of my student Jonathan Colby, "Grammatical Geography: An Analysis of Toponyms with the Definite Article in the Historical Books of the Hebrew Bible" (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2011), 84, 114, 139. James Monson coined the expression "The Ruin" in the 1970s during one of many research walks through the region. Robert Boling, who participated on one of the walks, later adopted the expression (R. G. Boling and G. E. Wright, *Joshua*, AB [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982], 216).

[60]To date, no Middle or Late Bronze Age remains have been found at Ai. In this respect it is similar to such sites as Arad in the Negev and Jarmuth in the Shephelah. However, the names of Arad and Jarmuth are preserved in Arabic toponyms, while the name of Ai is not. See Stern, *The New Encyclopedia*, 1:44–45.

[61]Joshua 7–8.

[62]Cf. Gen. 12:8 and 13:3.

gathering point for local inhabitants. An encampment or meeting place called The Ruin may well have existed below the impressive remains of this ancient site. The obvious location of such a place would be within today's Arab village of Deir Dibwan, perhaps at the very center of the village where a mosque now stands (see map 1). By this line of thinking the so-called "king of The Ruin" may well have been a local chieftain (or "sheikh"). Given The Ruin's landmark status and its prominent position on the main route from Jericho into the country's central highlands, the term "The Ruin" can be applied to the immediate vicinity that it dominates, an area we call "the region of Ai."[63]

The Region of Ai (Map 1)

The region of Ai is a relatively low area (a slight geological syncline) situated between the uplifted hill country to the west (a major geological anticline) and a slight geological uplift to the east, above the eroded chalk wilderness (see map 2). The area is relatively flat in comparison to surrounding canyons and scarps, but seen from the air (or with the aid of Google Earth) it appears as a broad, somewhat level and cultivated region. Since biblical Hebrew has no specific lexeme for such a geographical feature, the biblical author employed a simple term "the valley," העמק, which significantly is also a Hebrew noun with a definite article (Josh. 8:13). "The Valley," therefore, is an identifiable subregion within the region of Ai.

The main road from Jericho climbs through the wilderness to reach The Valley and from The Ruin ascends directly to Bethel, only two kilometers (1.2 miles). Thus the historical developments in the region of Ai, The Ruin, and the city of Bethel were closely intertwined. The Ruin and Bethel were in such proximity that it appears only one of them could be an urban center at any given time. Bethel seems to have flourished in the Middle and Late Bronze Age,[64] during which time The Ruin was maintained as a meager outpost or an encampment on the road to Jericho. The words of Joshua's spies concerning those who were living at that time in the region of Ai echo this reality: "for they are but few."[65]

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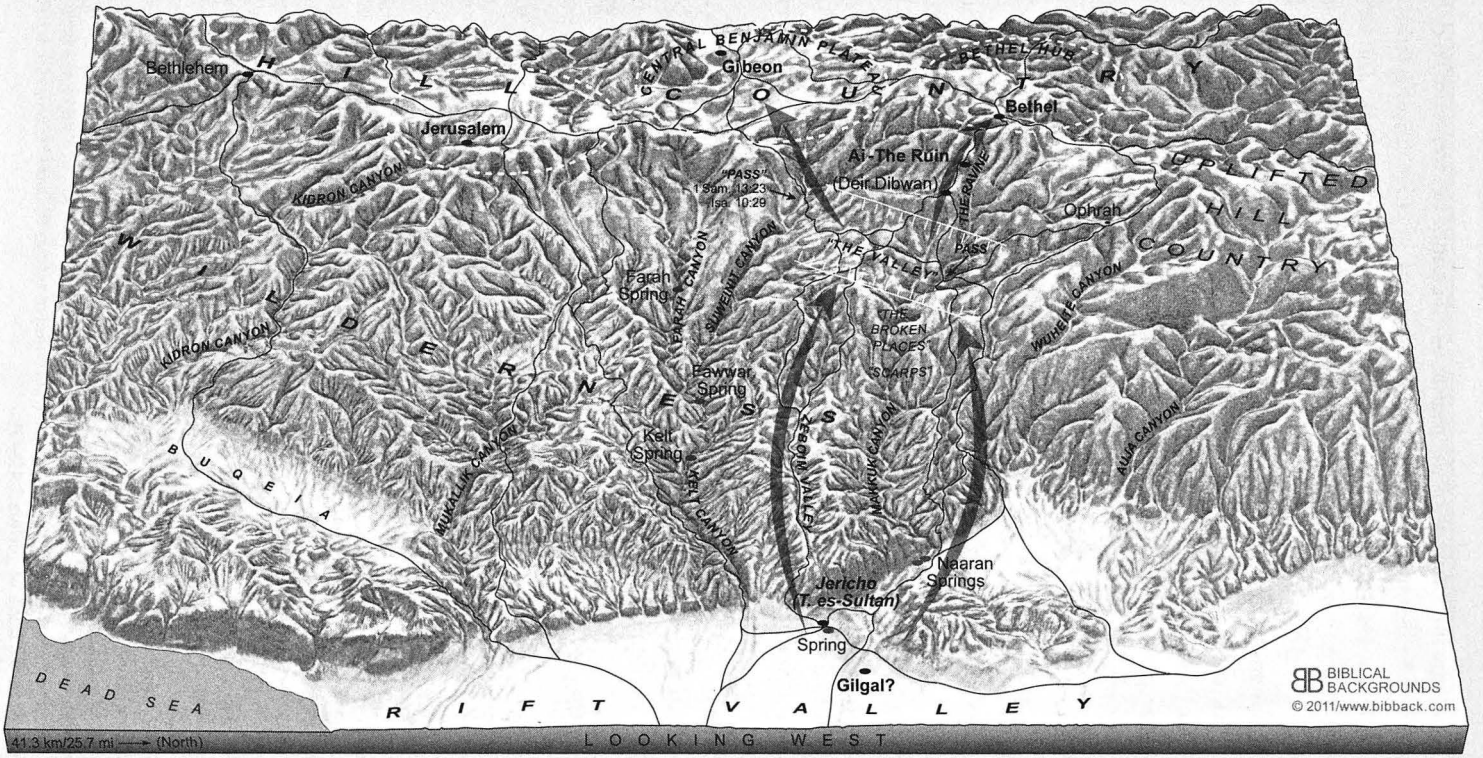
[63]Situated atop tilted beds of limestone, the summit of The Ruin offers a commanding view of the entire eastern horizon. The region of Ai quickly drops off into the chalk wilderness, beyond which one has a stunning view of the Rift Valley, the Dead Sea, and the scarps of Gilead, Moab, and Edom rising in the distance. I have visited the site and region of Ai on numerous occasions and have carefully examined the entire area surrounding the region of Ai (some three hundred square kilometers). On one such visit a United States special forces trainer accompanied me and concluded with vigor that Joshua's strategy as recorded in the biblical account perfectly fits this terrain and represents a cohesive battle plan for any army, ancient or modern.

[64]For the archaeology of Bethel, see Stern, *The New Encyclopedia*, 1:192–94.

[65]Josh. 7:3 (RSV).



MAP 1: JOSHUA'S ENTRY INTO CANAAN: GENERAL SETTING

The strategic importance of the region of Ai cannot be overestimated. Not only was it the all-important springboard for any invader coming from the east and eyeing the nearby pivotal site of Bethel, but it was also the key to the strategic highland region called the Central Benjamin Plateau (see map 1). One reached this plateau via what the Bible calls "a pass" (מעבר).[66] It is clear that anyone invading the hill country from Jericho first had to secure routes within the region of Ai, and in the case of Joshua, specifically the ridge route ascending to Bethel. Control of The Valley beneath The Ruin was an absolute prerequisite to taking Bethel or the Central Benjamin Plateau. This geographical setting is fundamental to understanding Joshua's initial campaigns into the central hill country.[67]

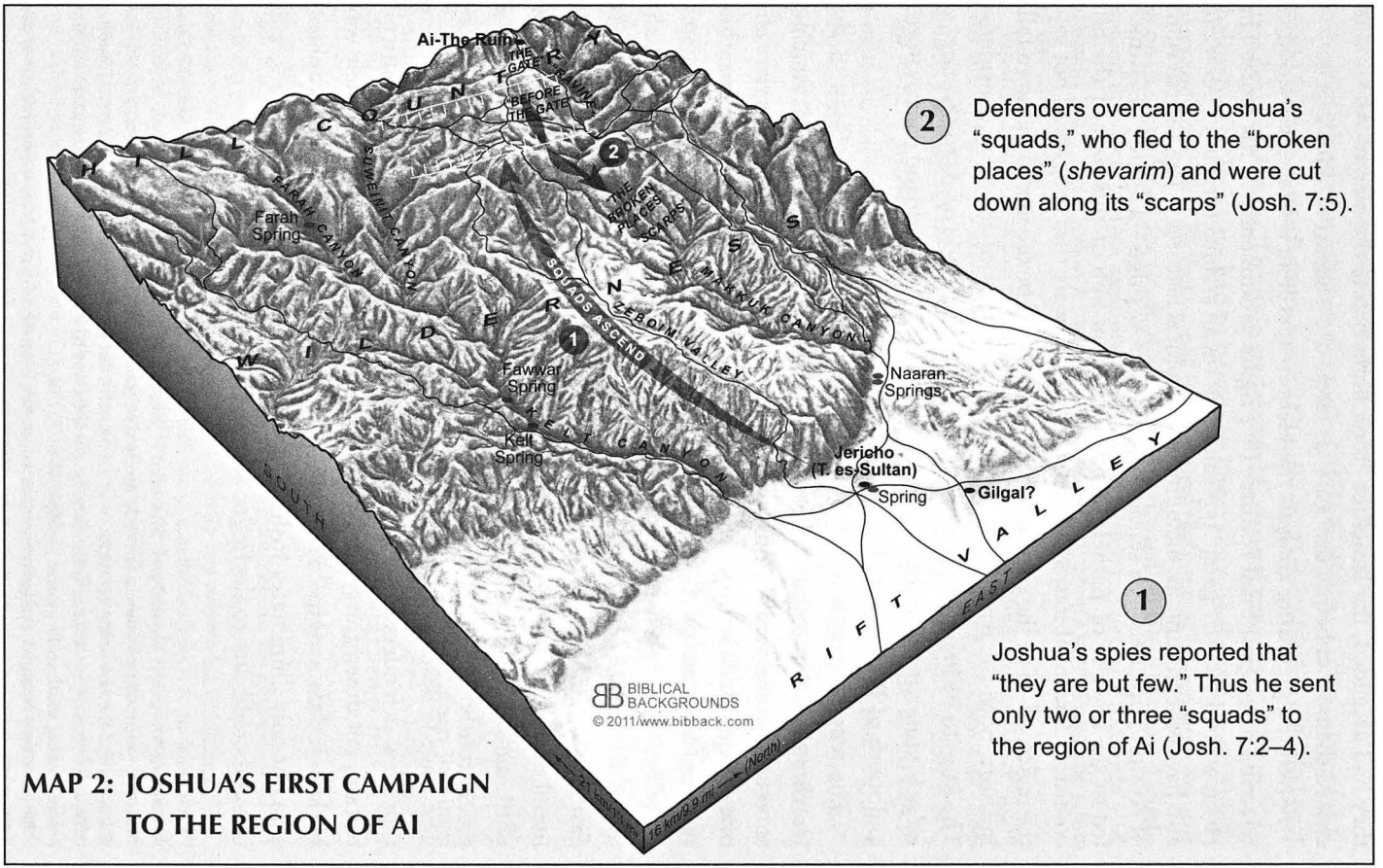
Joshua's First Campaign (Map 2)

The narrative of Joshua's first campaign to the region of Ai is short but highlights this region's geographical setting. The spies returned with a report that accords very well with the scenario described above. Because there were few people living in the area, there was no need for a large Israelite force to make the arduous climb from Gilgal through the wilderness to the region of Ai. It is important to note that the spies did not describe a bustling city, a powerful king, or strong fortifications. Their report seems to describe a small outpost or a group of local herdsmen and regional farmers. Their opinion was that only a small force, a few "squads," would be required to secure the region of Ai.[68] In all likelihood fewer than fifty men climbed the steep scarps to the wilderness and entered the region of Ai to assault the area's inhabitants. They were met by a small but determined force, which had superior knowledge of the terrain (Josh. 7:4). Caught off guard and cut off from the route by which

[66]This pass played a key role in Joshua's subsequent assault on the highlands through the territory of Benjamin (Josh. 10:9) and appears in other biblical texts as well (1 Sam. 13:23; Isa. 10:29). A second pass within this flatter synclinal area leads north.

[67]It also explains why the king of Jerusalem attempted to secure control of the Central Benjamin Plateau after the people of Gibeon (the chief city of that plateau) allied themselves with Joshua (Josh. 10:1–5). Centuries later Isaiah 10:28–32 made the importance of this region crystal clear as it highlighted the strategic nature of the region of Ai (Aiath). A powerful geographical sequence by the prophet describes an attack (imaginary or real) that began in the region of Ai, secured the Central Benjamin Plateau, and dissected the central hill country in two before easily descending upon Jerusalem. In AD 69–70 the Romans employed the same strategy in their campaign against Jerusalem, as did the Israeli army during the 1967 war.

[68]The Hebrew term אלף has various meanings, including "clan," but in this military context it may be translated "squad," or a small group of what one might call "special forces." See Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible*, 78–79. Contemporary soldiers who train such groups claim that the most efficient number for such a group is somewhere from twelve to fifteen troops. Fewer than twelve may not be enough to accomplish the task, while more than fifteen or twenty loses flexibility. "Troop" rather than "thousand" is the preferred translation of אלף, as Richard Hess has shown ("The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua," 41–42).



MAP 2: JOSHUA'S FIRST CAMPAIGN TO THE REGION OF AI

they had ascended, the Israelites "took flight before the men of Ai . . . who chased them from before the 'gate' as far as the 'shebarim'" (Josh. 7:5).

Given the preceding analysis the Hebrew text here is best understood as referring to geographical features that figure prominently in the story. The Hebrew term שער, or "gate," typically denotes an architectural unit, but it can also have other meanings, including geographical features.[69] The ancient ruins of Ai stood precisely as a sentinel on the narrow ridge—a "gate" (!)—which led to the key site of Bethel, the all-important hub of this part of the hill country.[70] The inhabitants of Bethel were well aware that they could not lose the region of Ai to the enemy, for their city could be the next domino to fall. In short, both the Israelite invaders and the author of the story considered The Ruin to be literally *a natural "gate" from the region of Ai to the narrow ridge leading directly to Bethel.* Beyond that "gate" the highland regions north and south of Bethel would lie open to the invader.

The second important Hebrew term used to describe the flight of the Israelite squads in Joshua 7:5 is "the shebarim," in Hebrew, השברים, which is sometimes translated as "quarries."[71] However, this word also takes the definite article, which strongly suggests that it refers not to a random quarry but rather to a distinct, well-known feature (as is the case for the natural "gate" described above). When one explores this area extensively by foot, the meaning of the term becomes quite clear. Three kilometers (1.8 miles) directly east of The Ruin, The Valley gives way to "the Broken Places," which is the literal meaning of "the shebarim." This region is totally hidden from view until one suddenly reaches a point where rugged beds of limestone plunge precipitously into the arid chalk wilderness and the deep Makkuk Canyon. The tragedy described in Joshua 7:5 occurred in these Broken Places. Here those few defenders of the region of Ai, well acquainted with this difficult terrain, cut down thirty-six Israelites; only a few survivors made their way back to Joshua's camp.[72] Pinpointing such a small and obscure geographical area not only illuminates Joshua's initial campaign but also lends stark realism and credibility to the larger account.

[69]Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible*, 1195. See by way of analogy 1 Sam. 17:52, in which both "the gates of Gath" and "Shaaraim" ("two gates") may well denote geographical features.

[70]Bethel's prominent position is not only attested in the days of Abraham, the judges, Samuel, Jeroboam I, and the remaining centuries of the monarchy, but the first-century-AD historian Josephus tells us that in the First Revolt the Romans fought their way to Bethel and established a garrison there before moving south to Jerusalem (*Jewish War* 4:551/ix.9).

[71]This is a very strained and unlikely translation. See Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible*, 1197.

[72]This was indeed a tragedy for Joshua's approximately forty-five troops ("two or three squads").

Joshua's Second Campaign (Map 3)

Joshua's second campaign to the region of Ai had to be foolproof, and this would require a much more substantial force. Defenders from Bethel had already arrived at the The Ruin to defend this natural gateway ("the gate") to their city. The Israelites had to be stopped here since, if the region of Ai fell, everyone knew that Bethel would be next and the central hill country would be open to the Israelites (Josh. 8:13). A sophisticated, well-orchestrated battle ensued in which Joshua exploited every geographic feature of the region and planned every detail, down to the maneuverability of his forces and the time of day to attack.

He first divided his forces into two groups and sent his main army by night into the hill country to set up camp on a mountain slope northeast of The Ruin.[73] They would be in place at the crack of dawn to surprise the defenders, who in turn would focus their attention on that same Israelite camp to the northeast. This particular chain of events could only occur in this region's unique terrain, all of which is carefully noted in the Bible. A deep "ravine" (Heb. גיא)[74] separated the Israelites from their adversaries, such that Joshua's main army was effectively "north" of that canyon, while the defenders were to the south.[75] The defenders could watch the movement of the Israelites, but there was no way they could reach them without circumventing the canyon via a narrow pass some distance away.[76] Meanwhile Joshua secretly sent a small ambush force to make its way to a series of gullies behind the enemy and out of sight. Once positioned, Joshua's ambush was within easy striking distance of the enemy's encampment.[77]

At this point in the battle account the writer provides a key detail: "That night Joshua positioned himself 'within the valley'" (בתוך העמק, Josh. 8:13). If this expression is understood to be The Valley discussed above, then Joshua's position can be identified clearly as a small hill just south of the modern village of Deir Dibwan, a place from which one has an unhindered view of the

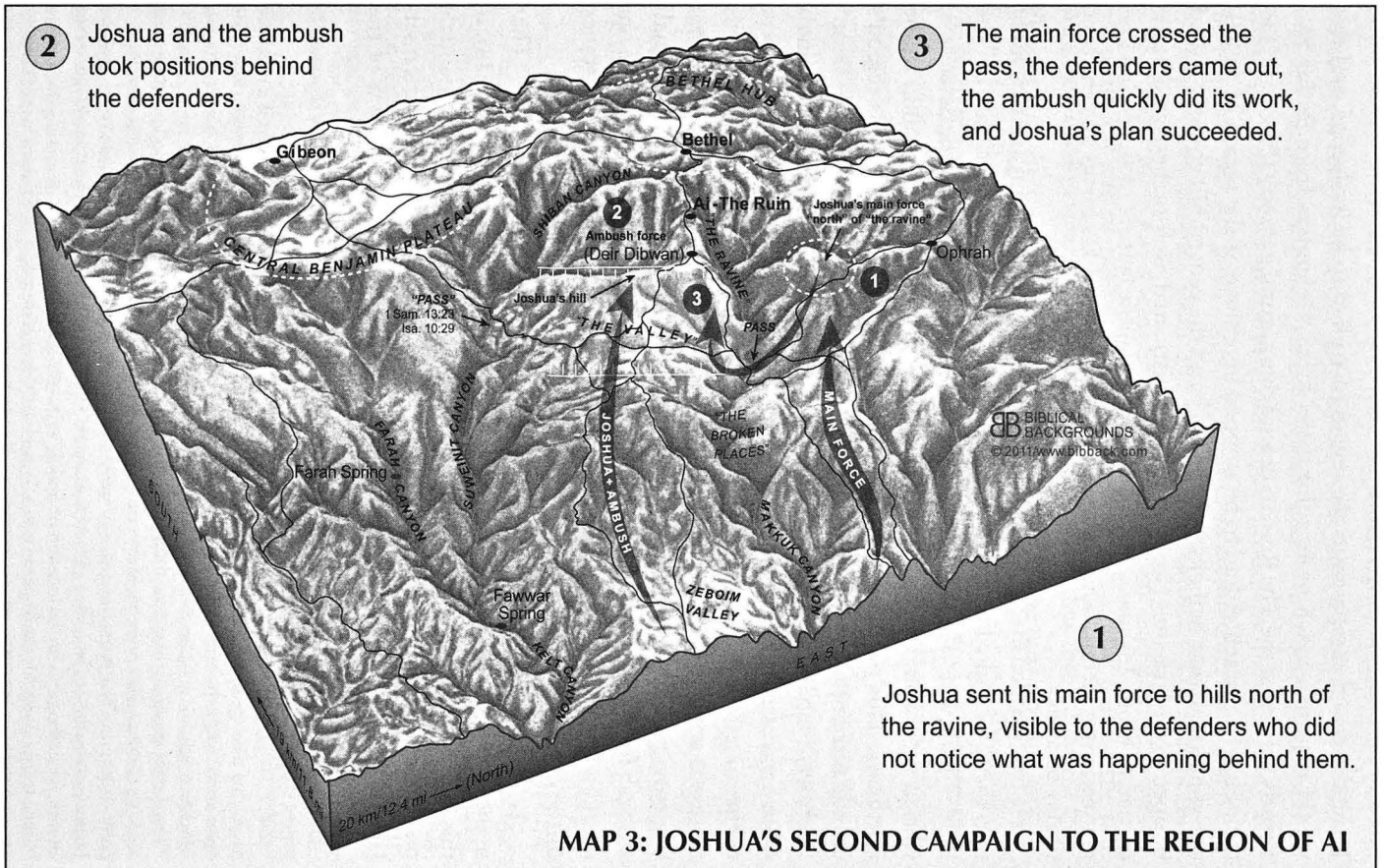
[73]Josh. 8:3. The interpretation of "squad" again brings the number of this main force to some 450 troops rather than thirty thousand.

[74]Josh. 8:11. There is a distinct difference between a גיא and an עמק in Hebrew. The former is a restricted narrowing passage such as one would find at the base of a canyon or a narrowing between two more open areas, while the later portrays a lower and often broader area surrounded by higher ground, which in English is a "valley."

[75]The details being discussed are found in Josh. 8:9–14. Biblical directions do not follow traditional absolute compass directions but rather are "functional" directions, i.e., directions from the reference point of terrain. The main Israelite force need not have been due north of the ruin of Ai, nor did Joshua's ambush need to be due west of the enemy. This "functional" approach is clearly illustrated later in the description of the location of Shiloh in Judg. 21:19.

[76]Some scarps along this canyon drop over 150 meters/500 feet in the midst of adjacent higher hilltops.

[77]The ambush numbered some seventy-five troops (not five thousand), small enough to be concealed in the nearby gullies but large enough to constitute a crack fighting force (Josh. 8:14).



MAP 3: JOSHUA'S SECOND CAMPAIGN TO THE REGION OF AI

entire area. From this hill "within the valley" Joshua could direct the battle, since he had visual contact with both his ambush team and his main force, and he could also see The Ruin, the enemy's camp, and their movements. For its part the enemy remained fixed on the main Israelite camp to the northeast, located on the hills beyond the deep canyon. The strategy and events leading to the actual confrontation—and the battle itself—all fit precisely the geography of the region of Ai.

The ruse that Joshua had planned was working. Within the enemy camp at the foot of The Ruin, all who had come to defend the region thought that they had the advantage because Joshua's main force would have to descend from its elevated position to the north, make its way across a pass some 40 meters/130 feet deep in order to circumvent much deeper ravines and then regroup before it could mount its attack. Moreover, the invaders would have to ascend a steep ridge to meet their enemy descending from higher ground. Obviously, this was no surprise attack but rather a clear diversionary tactic.

At the sight of movement in Joshua's main force, the defenders left their camp below The Ruin and moved to higher ground from whence they could descend quickly down the ridge to engage Joshua's main force, which had been instructed to feign retreat. From his vantage point Joshua gave a signal with his javelin, and the ambush force went into action.[78] It quickly reached the abandoned camp,[79] set it on fire for a signal to Joshua and his main force, and then hastened to the battle below. The defenders were emboldened by the Israelite retreat toward the same Broken Places to which they had chased Joshua's squads of the first, failed campaign (!), but once the ambush force appeared on higher ground behind them and they saw the smoke of their camp rising in the distance, they knew there was no hope. Within this carefully orchestrated sequence Joshua had signaled his main force to halt their retreat and to counterattack. This left the defenders caught between the two Israelite forces. Joshua had directed each move of this campaign, and his ruse had worked. The region of Ai was now in Israelite hands. Such a detailed battle sequence seems far too intricate and extensive to be considered a late

[78]Josh. 8:18.

[79]My earlier use of "few" in the region of Ai comes from Josh. 7:3, but here in Josh. 8:17 we are told specifically that "not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel. They left the city open and pursued Israel." This strongly suggests that the encampment was not a "city" as we understand that term, but was rather a gathering place for all of the defenders, both from the region of Ai and from Bethel. One must understand the language of Josh. 8:28–29 in light of the entire story and its setting. The "king of Ai" was the leader of the locals, and the "gate of the city" was the entrance to some type of settlement or camp, perhaps now beneath the modern village of Deir Dibwan.

etiological story invented to explain to later Israelites the origin of the heaped-up ruins from the Early Bronze Age city.[80]

The Two Campaigns: Conclusions

This case study of Joshua's two campaigns to the region of Ai allows the Bible to speak through the land—and the land to speak through the Bible. The detailed descriptions argue against the idea that the story was manufactured or that its origins can be dated to the first millennium BC.[81] To the contrary, the text of Joshua and its ancient Near Eastern literary setting both showcase the geography and give the sense of a very ancient and authentic battle plan. Why would the Joshua conquest accounts offer such specific and verifiable geographical data were they not reflective of actual historical events? While many other models have been offered—etiological arguments, dating the story to the days of Hezekiah in the late eighth century BC, claiming that the absence of Late Bronze Age ruins at The Ruin discredits the entire account, or simply dismissing it outright as fiction—these invariably introduce more speculation and forced readings than does a plain reading of the text informed first by geography, then by ancient Near Eastern context, and finally by archaeological evidence or the lack thereof.

In sum, it is clear that when geographical analysis is added to the study of Israel's entry into Canaan, and when archaeological data (which remains partial and inconsistent) is prevented from being the final arbiter of all things historical, the most plausible and understandable reconstruction is that the biblical text reflects actual events of the Israelite arrival in Late Bronze Age Canaan. The burden of proof lies with those who would deconstruct these stories or find some alternate explanation for this expansive, geographically focused account.

The "Conquest of Canaan," Historical Criticism, and "Progressive Evangelicals"

Israel's entry into Canaan is the "mother of all biblical archaeology debates" because it is a pivotal event in Israel's history for which there exists a great deal of background material. Over time, this colorful biblical episode came

[80]The "large heap/circle of stones" made an impressive memorial of the event, covering the dead leader. But it certainly did not cover the 27.5 acres of the Early Bronze Age city, as some imply. Such a memorial would have brought home dramatically the fact that, like that of The Ruin nearby, so was the demise of the local chieftain and perhaps the nearby city of Bethel (though it does not feature in this account but only in Judg. 1:22–26). If so, then the second campaign climaxes with a dramatic punch line.

[81]This is true regardless of what date one might assign to the summary passages of Joshua (e.g., 11:21–12:24).

to be understood as a complete and concentrated "Israelite conquest" despite the fact that the Bible does not make this claim. This exaggerated view lies at the heart of longstanding debates over the historicity of the Bible. When archaeological discoveries did not align with this larger-than-life reconstruction, the biblical narrative itself was called into question. In this study we have employed a range of disciplines in order to bring these biblical events back to biblical size. In response to the title of this volume we assert that historical matters indeed matter to faith.

At the beginning of this essay I posed a question: "How do we understand the truth claims of Scripture in light of the historical-critical method and empirical evidence from archaeology and ancient sources?" For people of faith this is a serious question, especially those involved in ministry and academics. Throughout the history of the church every generation has had to interact with the prevailing winds of philosophy, culture, and science. In this era of globalization, modernism and the reaction to it, and the exponential increase in every kind of data, Christian scholars of the Bible do not have the option of being insular. Nor should they feel the need to be defensive. Thankfully, there is a long and distinguished list of evangelical scholars who have made good-faith efforts to work through these issues.

Most recently, Peter Enns and Kenton Sparks have contributed thoughtful and penetrating books that address the question posed above. In *Inspiration and Incarnation*, Enns follows the analogy of the incarnation in order to address the human dimension of Scripture that so often challenges Christian readers. Essentially, "we are to think of the Bible in the same way that Christians think about Jesus."[82] The Bible, he contends, was not an "abstract, otherworldly book, dropped out of heaven."[83] With this in mind, it is understandable—though unfortunate—that in his advocacy for the "incarnational analogy" Enns places most of his emphasis upon the human dimension of Scripture. Some parts of the book have also sparked considerable debate. For example, he allows for the Bible's direct borrowing from ancient cultures: "God *transformed* the ancient myths so that Israel's story would come to focus on its God, the real one."[84] Ultimately, he suggests, the Bible, like the incarnation, "can never be fully understood."[85]

Kenton Sparks's book *God's Word in Human Words* is an invitation to "believing criticism," which represents a rigorous, good-faith effort to embrace

[82]Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 17.
[83]Ibid.
[84]Ibid., 54. It is unclear to me whether Enns understands the God of Scripture and history to be present in the ancient Near Eastern myths before he transformed them, or whether both the original ancient Near Eastern myths and their biblical versions are entirely ahistorical.
[85]Ibid., 168.

historical criticism without also jettisoning the essentials of the Christian faith. In the book Sparks personally navigates this tightrope with a sophisticated engagement of hermeneutical and critical issues, as well as earnest affirmations of orthodox Christian tradition. In the end, however, historical-critical positions appear to win the day on most issues, except those few that, in keeping with (presumably Roman) Catholic tradition, must be considered historical if one is to maintain the validity of the Christian faith.[86] Thus, events like the virgin birth and the resurrection may not pass the test of historical inquiry, but they are nevertheless "theologically reasonable and necessary."[87] Sparks writes:

> Although some and perhaps many of Scripture's narratives are not strictly historical in all respects, there are narratives in Scripture—some of them about miracles—whose historicity is essential to the validity and cogency of the creedal faith. Consequently, in any given case, our judgments on the Bible's historicity will have to weigh not only the relevant contextual evidence but also the philosophical and theological evidence, including especially the theological traditions of the church. One consequence of this approach is that we will sometimes accept the historicity of an event even when it does not pass our everyday litmus tests for history.[88]

He does not spell out how the creeds or a Christ-focused hermeneutic might adjudicate the historical reliability of events recorded in Scripture, much less how they or he might determine a hierarchy of their relative necessity for the Christian faith. If, for example, our belief in the historicity of the exodus must depend upon the "necessity of faith" rather than conventional historical evidence, as Sparks suggests, how is one to decide which parts of the Bible fall under that category and which do not?[89] Is it a creed or a tradition? Or is it the logic and reason of the individual that will determine the historical reliability and relative theological importance of a biblical text and the content it communicates?[90]

At this juncture we may return yet again to the question posed at the beginning of the current essay. Both Enns and Sparks point out that we are "inescapably creatures of time and space" and that when approaching the Bible we have no "absolute point of reference" outside our own cultural context.[91]

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[86]Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 320.
[87]Ibid.
[88]Ibid., 322.
[89]Ibid., 100.
[90]Perhaps N. T. Wright's version of "critical realism" is a helpful alternative (N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 35).
[91]Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 169.

I agree up to a point, but if this is so, should we still not make every effort and use every available resource for the purpose of entering into the time and space—"the real world"—of the biblical authors and the people and things about which they wrote? Anyone who has climbed up the imposing Assyrian siege ramp still visible today at ancient Lachish and stood in the throne room of Sennacherib at the British Museum cannot help but read Isaiah and 2 Kings with an understanding that is quite removed from one's own life circumstances. While I applaud Enns for urging us to place Scripture in its time and place, that endeavor involves a much larger enterprise than comparative analysis of ancient Near Eastern texts. Enns and Sparks are calling us to recognize more fully the human dimension of Scripture at the very moment in history when profound new discoveries are being made that have a direct bearing upon our understanding of Scripture and *its* time and space. Much of this new information lends general support to the picture painted by the Bible as a whole.

In my own view, now is certainly not the time (nor, for that matter, is it ever appropriate) to dismiss biblical texts or events that on the surface do not seem to hold up before the rigors of historical criticism. Rather than navigate around the challenges by downplaying selectively the historicity of biblical events, we should examine with renewed vigor the hard issues because doing so is timely, given the burgeoning body of information available today from the ancient Near East—be it linguistic, cultural, or geographical!

Furthermore, a serious engagement of Scripture's original context must not be hamstrung by a narrow understanding of apostolic hermeneutics. Far from "not engaging the Old Testament in an effort to remain consistent with the original context and intention of the Old Testament author,"[92] Paul the Jew was steeped in the Old Testament, not only from "Christ down," so to speak, but also from "Abraham up." In my own view, Paul and Isaiah are kindred spirits, conversation partners, one might say; Romans and Isaiah go hand in hand. The exodus and the Passover were not mere allegories or theological constructs for the apostolic church, and they should not be so for us today. "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (1 Pet. 1:16).

Israel's entry into Canaan also relates to these questions and has a role to play in addressing them. How might we approach that particular question in light of ancient Near Eastern studies, on the one hand, and the hermeneutics of "progressive evangelicals," on the other? Sparks makes a passing comment on this biblical episode after suggesting that "theological sifting" is necessary

[92]Ibid., 116.

when jarring passages such as the genocide of the Canaanites do not sit well with the Bible's other theological priorities.

> So there *is* something of genuine theological value in the Old Testament conquest account, even if we embrace not the whole text but only aspects of it. Now this modern reading of the Old Testament is by no means an allegory, but its exegetical result is precisely like that of an allegory. Certain dimensions of the text are preserved, while others are set aside.[93]

My view, in contrast, is that we must not take such license with the biblical text. For all its complexity and color the biblical account of Israel's entry into Canaan, when it is placed within its literary, cultural, and geographical context, is more reasonable as a second-millennium historical event than any of the alternatives proposed to date. The Bible's account of Joshua's entry into the land is far more compelling and in line with available evidence than are the stale verdicts of historical criticism. It is not a matter of "proving the Bible" or defending traditional views in knee-jerk fashion. At issue is the degree of openness to reasonable reconstructions even if they challenge the "orthodoxy" of modern criticism that is largely negative toward the historicity of the biblical text. *Cumulative evidence that yields strong probabilities in favor of the biblical text is far more convincing than nonevidence.*

In this context it may be helpful to note N. T. Wright's assertion that despite all the challenges to understanding the events of the first Easter, the prospect that the resurrection stories are "late inventions" is not the best historical explanation. Rather, it is "enormously more probable at the level of sheer history" that the tomb of Christ was empty and that he rose from the dead.[94] If one accepts Wright's statement despite the fact that most of the nonbiblical "evidence" is circumstantial, why would one at the same time dismiss Joshua's entry into Canaan with its abundance of direct and circumstantial data?

The Bible is indeed both human and divine. Despite our best attempts to understand and interpret it, Scripture is, after all, the living word of God that records the Lord's intervention and redemptive work in human history. As believers we must embrace it. "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21).

King Solomon of Israel, in his own time and space, also knew something about these matters. When he became king, he asked for wisdom. In building the temple he borrowed selectively from the common stock of ancient Near

[93]Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 326.

[94]N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 10, 687–96, 736–38.

Eastern culture. But when he also embraced the mindset and religion of his neighbors, he lost his way and never recovered (1 Kings 11:11). May it never be that evangelical scholars of the Bible follow Solomon's tragic path.

In conclusion, Joshua too has something to teach us. A powerful message is embedded within the specific events and historical annals in the book of Joshua. From the opening of the book ("Be strong and courageous!" Josh. 1:9), to its close ("Choose this day whom you will serve!" Josh. 24:15), Joshua ben-Nun remained faithful to his God even as others fell away—from the Israelite entry into Canaan through reaffirming Abraham's and Moses's fidelity on the slopes of Mount Ebal just above Shechem. Over a millennium later, another Joshua walked through this same region. He too remained faithful. If we dismiss the real Joshua ben-Nun and his times, what is to stop us from dismissing the later Joshua, Jesus of Nazareth?