

39. Khirbet el-Masterah¹

This site near Jericho was occupied by the first Hebrews to enter the Land.

It consists of 2.5 acres 5 miles north of Jericho, on a hill surrounded by higher hills, and thus well hidden – perfect for new arrivals to adjust themselves while growing in size. There are house foundations, and traces of an altar.

The Hebrews' takeover of the land was not a series of magical victories, as the Book of Joshua tells us, where Yahweh conquers the foe and exterminates its population,² but something slower and harder-fought. Even Joshua recalls what seem to have been the first two of those battles. First came nearby Jericho, where the element of the fantastical is still prominent:

Josh 6:20 . . . and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, that the people shouted with a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city. [21] And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, both young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass . . .

The battle was difficult enough to have left a legacy of 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.³

After Jericho came a much more closely described battle.

Ai

Eight miles west of Jericho lay Ai,⁴ an outpost city protecting the major Canaanite shrine Bethel. In Joshua, the battle is an affair of thousands, but it retains memories of something smaller. It also shows knowledge of actual warfare, which cannot be said of the standard one-sided Yahweh battle. It is not the usual frontal encounter, but an ambush, into which the enemy are led and slaughtered, with – a realistic touch! – some casualties among the attackers.

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 . . .

¹See in detail Hawkins and Ben-Schlomo (2018), with pictures.

²Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir (Josh 10:28-39).

³This 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, and set up the gates thereof with the loss of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of Yahweh which he spake by Joshua the son of Nun.”

⁴**Atlas 50**; usually (but not certainly) identified with El-Tell.

[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 . . .

Next comes an interpolated Yahweh explanation: the people have sinned. The sinner 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. [18] and Yahweh said unto Joshua, Stretch out the javelin that is in thy hand toward Ai; for I will give it into thy hand And Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city. [19] And the ambush arose quickly out of their place, and they ran as soon as he had stretched out his hand, 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.

The sequence is logical. First came Jericho, 5 miles to the southeast; then Ai, 10 miles west of Jericho; both being significant religious and political centers. Next might have come Shiloh, another 10 miles to the north in Canaan.

But did those early entrants reach Shiloh? Maybe not. As the Book of Joshua perhaps remembered, it was the point at which the still unconquered lands were apportioned by lot – the end of the conquest territory.