

**Joshua and Judges – Session Four**  
**Ambush, Deception, and War Against the Kings**  
*(Joshua 8 – 12)*



*The Gibeonites come to the Camp of the Israelites,  
1873, Author Unknown (Wikimedia Commons)*

***Ambush Against Ai***  
***Map of the Battle of Ai***  
***Joshua – An Introduction – Part III***

***Ambush Against Ai***

The book of Joshua has two paradigmatic battles against city-states: the first against Jericho and the second against Ai (7:2 – 5; 8:1 – 29). Although the two stories are interwoven in many ways, the battles themselves are very different. The destruction of Jericho consists of a liturgical march around the city with the ark for seven days that takes place in plain view of the city's residents. No war strategy is involved in the story beyond the command for the people to shout on the seventh day at the sound of the trumpets, whose blast brings down the walls of Jericho, allowing the people to rush headlong into the city. The people of Jericho assume a minor role in the story, and the king is not even mentioned; the focus is instead on the fortress itself, especially its walls. The collapse of the walls of Jericho is a miraculous event that is best described as a public theophany. The designation that the ground of the city is holy reinforces the sacred character of the city's destruction.

The war against Ai (8:1 – 29) represents a very different battle from the public procession of the ark around Jericho. All of the liturgical themes from the

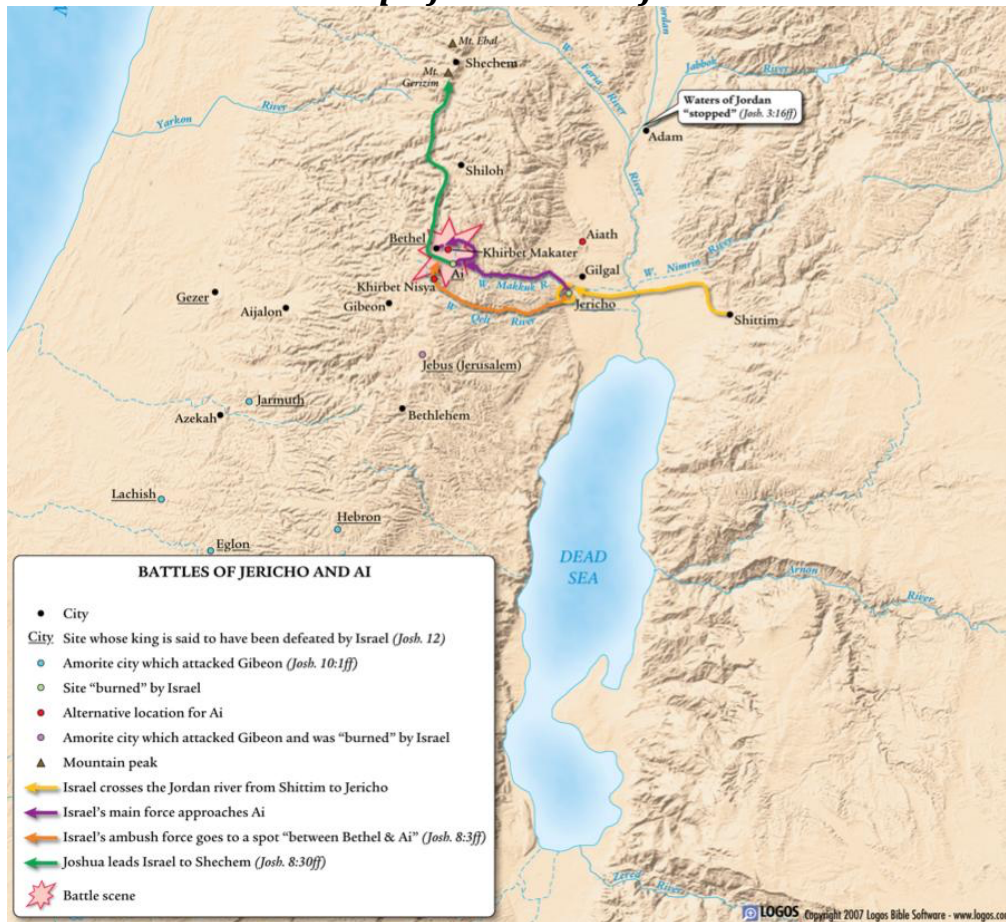
destruction of Jericho are absent, even the ark. Instead, Yahweh instructs Joshua to prepare an ambush (*oreb*) against Ai, signaling not only a change in strategy, but also a change in focus from the fortress of Jericho to the king and the people of Ai. As a result, the defeat of the king and the residents of Ai is a story of subterfuge and complex military strategy. The themes of concealment, strategy, and deception replace the very public and religious procession around the fortress of Jericho.

All war is holy in the book of Joshua, yet the comparison between the destruction of Jericho and the defeat of Ai encourages a contrast between the sacred and the profane in the evaluation of these battles. The destruction of Jericho is a fantastic story about the display of divine power in the collapse of the city walls, while the defeat of Ai presents a more realistic narrative of a strategic military victory over a king and his army. The realistic tone of the war against Ai is underscored by noting that the threat of ambush is a theme already in Egyptian literature. Ambush was a popular military strategy in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

The comparison of the two paradigmatic stories of war in the book of Joshua suggests that the author has constructed a contrast between Jericho and Ai. Both stories represent the execution of the ban against city-states in the promised land, but the focus is different in each. The execution of the ban against Jericho is a liturgical story about the presence of Yahweh in the promised land; the theme of the ban in this account focuses on sacred objects that belong to Yahweh and are banned from human possession. The execution of the ban against Ai is a more profane account of war in which the Israelite people encounter the citizens of Ai directly; here the theme of the ban focuses on the extermination of the citizens of Ai to ensure the absolute separation between Israel and the indigenous population. When combined, the two stories address the sacred and social boundaries that are represented by the ban. The aim of the author in constructing the contrast comes into clearer focus from a comparison the theme of booty that is related to the ban in each story.

– *Thomas B. Dozeman (from Joshua 1 – 12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (The Anchor Bible), Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2015*

## Map of the Battle of Ai



## Joshua – An Introduction – Part III

What should also be observed about the story of the conquest in Joshua is that it is a vision of overwhelming military triumph. It is a triumph that is repeatedly attributed to God's power, not to Israel's marital prowess (though a couple of the reported episodes do show cunning tactical moves on the part of the Israelites). That notion is perfectly in keeping with the Deuteronomistic view of historical causation, in which God causes Israel to prevail when it is loyal to the covenant and brings defeat on the people when Israel betrays its commitment to God. The message, however, of an irresistible sweep of the Israelite forces through the land of Canaan addresses a geopolitical situation of the Israelite nation that was quite the opposite. It was the historical fate of Israel to sit at the bloody crossroads between powerful empires to the east and the south with some dire threats from the north as well. This chronic predicament came to seem much graver in the span of years from the destruction by Assyria of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE to the conquest of the southern kingdom of Judea by Babylonia in 589 BCE – the very period in which the early nucleus of Deuteronomy was formulated and when the book as a whole achieved its first general recension. What must have been in the

minds of a good many Judeans after 721 BCE was that the national existence itself was a highly contingent affair, the people which had come to think of itself as chosen by God for a grand destiny, as the Patriarchal narratives in Genesis repeatedly asserted, could easily suffer disastrous defeat, bitter exile, perhaps even extinction. Whatever the rousing promises and consolations of theology, it would have been difficult to dismiss the awareness of imperial powers that could bring to bear overwhelming force on the tiny Israelite nation. The story of the conquest, then, served as a counter-move in the work of cultural memory: Israel had entered its land in a stirring triumphal drive as a power before which no man could stand. The theological warrant for this vision, antithetical as it was to the historical facts, was that as long as Israel remained faithful to all that its God had enjoined upon it, the people would be invincible.

Against this general background of theological explanation of historical events, the story of Achan in Chapter 7 is meant to play an exemplary role. Achan violates the ban, which is represented as an obligation imposed by God. The direct consequence is military defeat, and Israel cannot continue on its triumphal progress until the transgressor is singled out and punished by death. That punishment grimly extends to his entire family, as if the guilt were a kind of contagion that infected everyone in immediate contact with him and thus had to be ruthlessly expunged. If the transgression of a single person can have such dire widespread effects, how much more so when large numbers of the people backslide. This is the prospect raised by Joshua in his two valedictory addresses (Chapters 23 and 24). The emphasis of both these speeches is heavily Deuteronomistic: Joshua fears that the Israelites will intermarry with the surrounding peoples and worship their gods: he expresses doubts as to whether Israel will be up to the challenge of faithfulness to this demanding God – “You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not put up with your crimes and your offenses” (24:19). Though his audience responds with a solemn pledge of fealty, the somber prospect has been evoked that Israel will betray its God and therefore suffer cataclysmic defeat and exile. In this fashion, there is a tension between the first twelve chapters of Joshua and the conclusion of the book, a contradiction between the vision of a grand conquest and the threat of national disaster.

Some of that tension is also detectable in the discrepancy between the *Book of Conquests* and the *Book of Apportionments*. The function of the elaborate drawing of tribal borders in the second of these two texts is to convey a sense of systematic and orderly division of the land. Because the determination of the tribal territories is made by lot (*goral*), which is a divinely inspired oracular device, the clear implication is that God dictates the boundaries within which the sundry tribes are to live. The aim is to provide theological authentication and solidity to the existing tribal territories. In fact, there were likely to have been ad hoc arrangements marked by a good deal of fluidity, with tribes encroaching on one another's territory, migrating in pursuit of better pastureland and tillable soil, and, at least in the case of Dan, being completely displaced by political circumstances. The mapping of boundaries, however, also incorporates several indications that the conquest of

the land was not as comprehensive as the first twelve chapters of Joshua might lead one to conclude. This chronicle concedes that there were instances in which the Israelites were unable “to dispossess” – which is to say, conquer and destroy – the local Canaanites, an uncomfortable circumstance that the writer seeks to mitigate by noting that these unsubdued populations were reduced to the status of forced laborers as they continued to live alongside the Israelites.

The book of Joshua thus registers a double awareness of Israel’s historical predicament. The people had been promised the land by God, and its success in establishing an autonomous state, which very quickly became two states, over a large portion of Canaan was testimony to the fulfillment of that promise. The fulfillment is inscribed in the first half of the book. The conquest, however, was not total, and its permanency was menaced by a series of foreign powers. The book translates this contradiction into theological terms: Israel in the flush of its military triumph is imagined as staunchly loyal to its God, with the single exception of Achan; Israel, having taken possession of the land and drawn its boundaries, is seen as teetering on the brink of future disloyalties that will entail disastrous consequences. Though the tension between the two halves of the book is arguably an artifact of the redactional process that joined two different sources, the effect is to produce a dialectical perspective on the history of the nation. The Book of Judges follows logically from this because there it is vividly clear that Israel’s tenure in the land before the monarchic period is unstable, that much of the Israelite population is either subject to foreign domination or exposed to the attacks of marauders. Accounting for the incompleteness of the conquest, which is already adumbrated in the latter part of Joshua, will become the task of the book that follows.

– *Robert Alter* (from the introduction to the translation/commentary on the Book of Joshua from *The Hebrew Bible – Translation and Commentary*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 2018

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