



DOES SECULAR ARCHAEOLOGY SUPPORT BIBLICAL HISTORY?

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INTRODUCTION

From a secular perspective, archaeology is a popular facet of science that is used to give details about the past – particularly human pre-history and past civilizations – and is commonly defined as follows:

“The study of human activity in the past, primarily through the recovery and analysis of the material culture and environmental data that has been left behind by past human populations, which includes artifacts, architecture, and cultural landscapes (the archaeological record)”¹

Although modern archaeology has been instrumental in unlocking and illuminating many of the details of past civilizations such as the ancient cultures of Egypt, Greece and Rome, it has played a controversial and often contentious role in verifying and/or challenging the accuracy of biblical history. As an example, many secular archaeologists and scientists have confidently stated that the Bible is full of errors because no independent historic evidence has been found to confirm many of the historical claims of the Bible. This is clearly emphasized by the following secular quote:

“The Bible, as History, Flunks New Archaeological Tests

Archaeologists working at excavation sites like Megiddo in northern Israel, say that no evidence has been found to confirm biblical stories about a united monarchy ruling over a

large area from Jerusalem or about the wanderings of the Jews in the desert during the Exodus. Yet, what if the Bible's account doesn't fit the evidence in the ground? What if David's Jerusalem was really a rural backwater – and the greatness of Israel and Judah lay far in the future? King David's Jerusalem was no more than a poor village at the time. Biblical accounts of early Israel, including the stories of David and Solomon, have little, if any, basis in history”²

Specifically, and as indicated by the previous quote, archaeologists have long believed there was a lack of evidence for many of the names and events within the one thousand years of biblical history from the time of King David to the time of Jesus. However, after approximately two hundred years of archaeological excavations resulting in numerous discoveries, prudent archaeologists have had to put a damper on their previous negative beliefs and statements (silence is typically the solution to this dilemma). Today, archaeology has provided us with captivating affirmations of the accuracy and trustworthiness of biblical Scripture.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

Some of the many examples of discoveries that verify the existence of historical biblical events, and have also *reversed* secular archaeological assertions and/or beliefs are:

- **The Pilate Stone**

In 1961 a limestone block was discovered at a Roman amphitheater in the coastal town of Caesarea with an inscription Pontius Pilate,³ a prefect of the Roman controlled province of Judaea from 26-36 AD (Figure 1). This stone



Figure 1. The Pilate Stone

is the only widely accepted archaeological find, to date, of an authentic 1st Century Roman inscription that mentions the name “Pontius Pilatus.”

Scholars that questioned the existence of Pilate’s existence – and the accuracy of the gospels accounts – were silenced with this discovery

- **The Tel Dan Stele**

A *stèle* is a type of an upright wood or stone monument that was erected to commemorate an important event or achievement. These steles were typically inscribed with related details and were frequently used in ancient Israel, Egypt, across Mesopotamia, the Far East and Central America and the large number of surviving steles constitutes one of the largest and most significant sources of information on those civilizations. The Tel Dan Stele⁴ is extraordinary because the expression “*House of David*” (in white) is carved on its stone face (Figure 2) that confirms the United Monarchy under King David existed in biblical history. This inscription also completely contradicts the opinions of secular archaeology that previously denied that King David ever existed as delineated by biblical scripture and Jewish historical accounts



Figure 2. The Tel Dan Stele

- **The Meesha Stele (or Mesha Stele)**

For many years, secular archaeologists did not believe the true history of the kings of Israel and their interactions with foreign kings. Also known as the Moabite Stone, the Meesha Stele (Figure 3) mentions Omri – a King of Israel, David of the United Monarchy, revolt of Meesha, and the King of Moab against Israel. Of particular importance, the stele also mentions Yahweh that is the unique name of the God of Israel⁵



Figure 3. The Meesha Stele

- **Caiaphas Ossuary**

In the Peace Forest section of Jerusalem (a forest south-southeast of Jerusalem), a burial cave was discovered in 1990 that contained twelve



Figure 4. The Caiaphas Ossuary

ossuaries (small burial boxes) that were used to hold the bones of the dead following their decomposition. One of the ossuaries belonged to Caiaphas (Figure 4), the high priest who presided over the arrest and trial of Jesus. This discovery validates the events involving Caiaphas as described in Matthew, Mark and John of the New Testament⁶

- **The Nabonidus Cylinder**

For many years, Bible critics claimed the account of King Nabonidus of Babylonia was inaccurate due to a lack of archaeological evidence, particularly since Nabonidus is not mentioned in the Bible but his son Belshazzar is mentioned in the 5th chapter of Daniel. However, in 1854, an archeologist found four clay cuneiform cylinders in the foundation of a ziggurat at Ur that are referred to as the four Nabonidus Cylinders from Ur.⁷

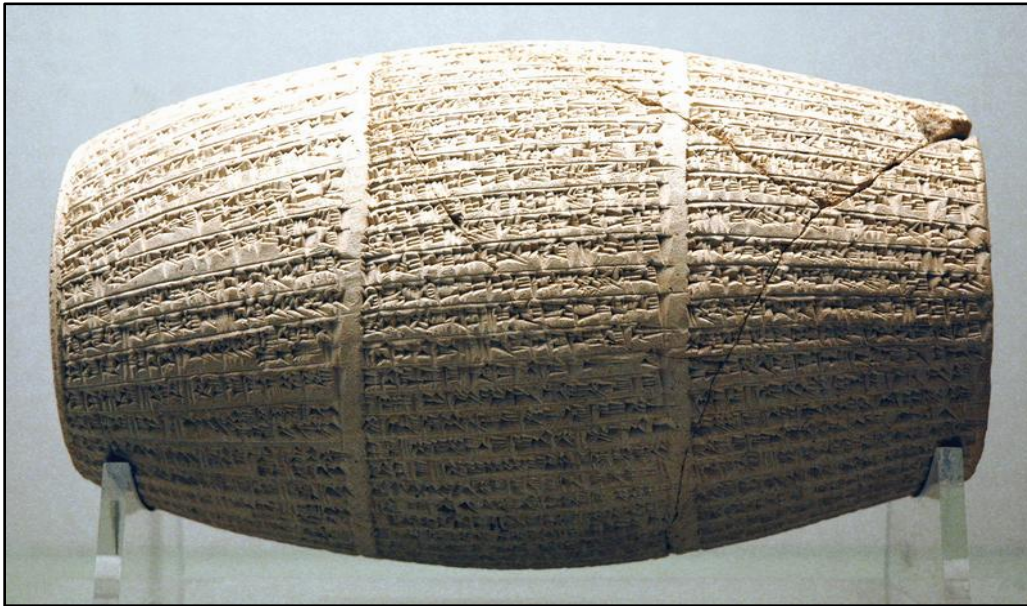


Figure 5. The Nabonidus Cylinder

These cylinders are noteworthy from the perspective they mention a son of Nabonidus named Belshazzar who is mentioned in the book of Daniel. The inscriptions on the cylinder in Figure 5 state:

“As for me, Nabonidus, king of Babylon, save me from sinning against your great godhead and grant me as a present a life long of days, and for Belshazzar, the eldest son – my offspring – instill reverence for your great godhead in his heart and may he not commit any cultic mistake, may he be sated with a life of plenitude”

- **The Pool of Bethesda**

The pool of Bethesda mentioned in John 5:1-9 recounts the miracle of Jesus curing a crippled man who had been lying on a mat for 38 years. John 5:2

states; *“Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porticoes”* (or colonnades). The apparently odd description of five porticoes baffled scholars and archaeologists for years, as the description of a five-sided pool was believed to be symbolic and/or representative of the five books of the Torah. However, multiple excavations



Figure 6. The Pool Of Bethesda

in the 1800's have uncovered the pool of Bethesda mentioned in John 5 and have also exposed a rectangular pool with a wall in the middle that divided it in two (Figure 6). With porticoes on the four sides of the pool and on the central wall, the pool was “five-sided” exactly as described in scripture⁸

- **The Merneptah Stele**

Also known as the Israel Stele or Victory Stele of Merneptah, the Merneptah Stele is an inscription by the Ancient Egyptian king Merneptah who reigned from 1213 to 1203 BC. The inscriptions appear on the reverse side of a granite stele erected by Egyptian king Amenhotep III and was discovered by the renowned archaeologist Sir Flinders Petrie in 1896 at Thebes.⁹ The black granite stele primarily commemorates a victory in a campaign against the Libu and Meshwesh Libyans and their Sea People allies, but its final two lines refer to a prior military campaign in Canaan in which Merneptah states that he defeated Ashkelon, Gezer, Yanoam and Israel among others. This stele has gained much fame and notoriety for containing the earliest undisputed extra-

biblical reference to "Isrir" or "Israel." The mention of Israel in this 3,200-year-old document suggests, at the time of its inscription, the nation of Israel was an established power and not a nomadic people who had just recently entered the land of Canaan. Before the discovery of this stele, many dated the Exodus much later, but are now forced to reconcile with the fact that Israel was already an established power in Canaan in 1207 BC that is commensurate with biblical Scripture and also proves Israel's 3,200 year existence



Figure 7. The Merneptah Stele

Although there are numerous other examples of discoveries by secular archaeology that have verified the inerrancy of historical biblical Scripture (and has also caused a significant amount of embarrassment to people who have doubted the accuracy of Scriptural history), the detailed biblical account of the conquest and resultant collapse of the walls of Jericho is an in depth biblical account of the power of God over the enemies of Israel, yet is also a well-defined example of current ridicule and disbelief by skeptics. Consider the following quote about Jericho by skeptical secular archaeological scientists:

“It is a sad fact that of the town walls of the Late Bronze age, within which period the attack by the Israelites must fall by any dating, not a trace remains.....The excavation of Jericho, therefore, has thrown no light on the walls of Jericho of which the destruction is so vividly described in the Book of Joshua”¹⁰

Other than the account of Adam and Eve, the biblical account of the battle of Jericho is arguably the most well known, evidenced by the African-American spiritual song “Joshua Fit De Battle Of Jericho”¹¹ and its companion phraseology of “and the walls came tumbling down” that most people are familiar with. So, due to the graphic biblical detail about the conquest of Jericho by Israel, lets specifically consider A Historical Overview, The Biblical Account, Archaeological Discoveries, and then What Can We Apply From Jericho.

JERICH0

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

- Jericho is also known as Tell es-Sultan. The word *tell* is derived from Hebrew and defined as a type of archaeological mound created by many generations of people living and rebuilding on the same location. Excavations have revealed evidence of 23 layers of ancient civilizations at the site
- The size of the excavated site is about 9 to 10 acres in an oblong configuration as evidenced in the aerial photo in Figure 8
- It is about one mile around the city
- Jericho is considered as the lowest (670’ below sea level) and oldest city on earth according to *secular* dating methods
- Geographically, Jericho is located between Mt. Nebo in the east and the Dead Sea in the south. Underground tributaries were responsible for the general area being called “*The Land of Palms.*” Additionally, there was a noteworthy spring within the city that was capable of supplying water to the inhabitants without the need for external sources
- Next to Jerusalem, Jericho is the second most excavated city in Israel



Figure 8. Excavated Site Of Jericho

- Many archaeological excavations of Jericho have occurred as follows:
 - 1868
 - 1907-1911
 - 1930-1936
 - 1952-1958
 - Early 1997
 - Late 1997
- Jericho was heavily fortified and used a Double Redoubtable Wall type of construction system (invoking fear, formidable, etc) that resulted in the city being virtually impenetrable to external invaders. This configuration was also

later used to construct fortresses in Europe during the Medieval Age. As depicted in Figure 9, the Jericho Redoubtable Wall system was constructed as follows:

- The mound (or tell) was surrounded by a large earthen embankment with a 12' high stone retaining wall at its base (lower wall)
- On top of the stone retaining wall was a 26' high wall made from mud-bricks, forming an outer and lower wall configuration
- At the crest of the sloping 35-degree embankment was another mud-brick wall about 26' high and whose *base* was about 46' above the lower exterior grade level where the Israelites would have marched around the city

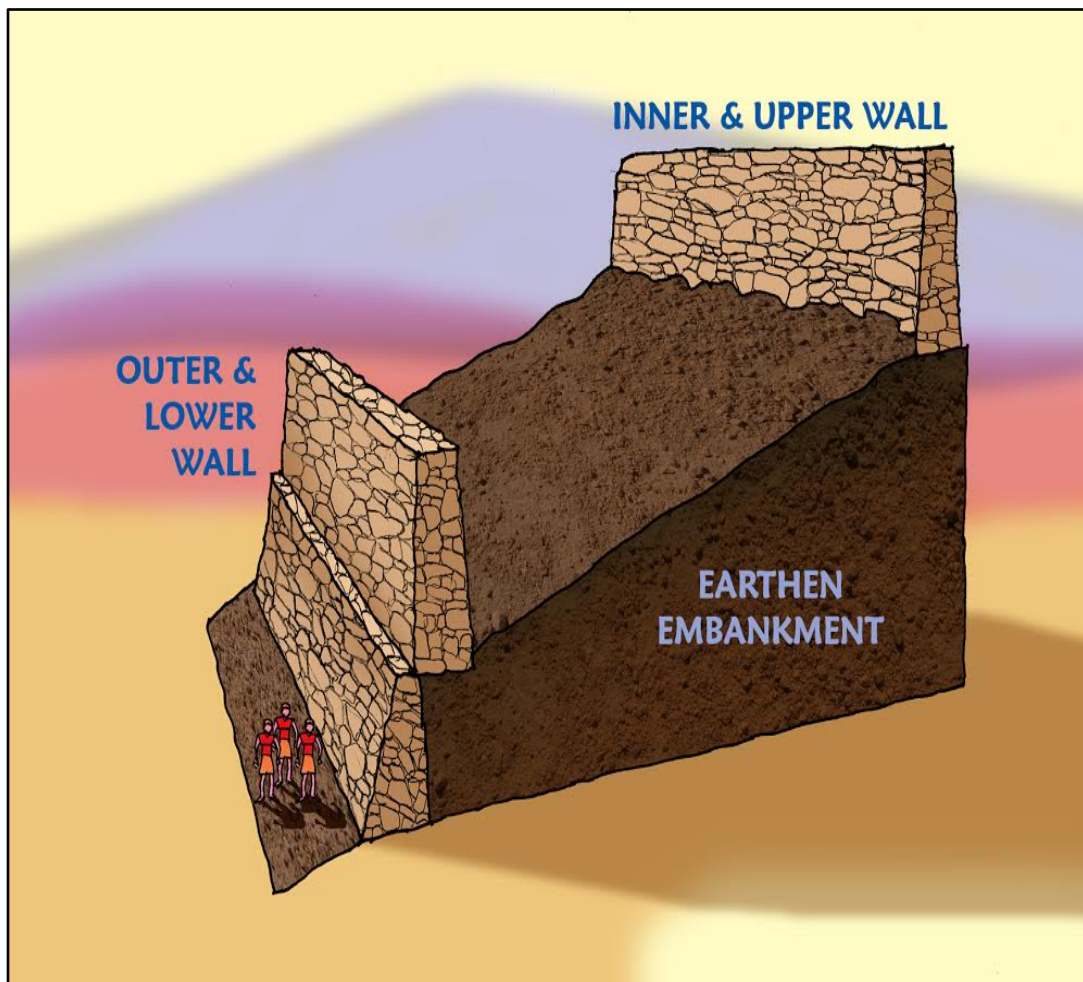


Figure 9. The Jericho Redoubtable Wall Configuration

- During the siege of the Israelites it is assumed that the population of Jericho would have consisted of several thousand people. Several Israelites are depicted next to the bottom of the lower wall system in Figure 9 to illustrate what the people of Israel would have encountered (and visualized) during

their thirteen trips around the city (6+7=13). It is estimated that about 40,000 Israelites were ready for the invasion

THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT

The account of the destruction of Jericho by the Israelites is found in the sixth chapter of Joshua. However, the complete account actually begins in the second chapter of Joshua, so let's begin there.

Note: Segments that will be important to our discussion will be highlighted in bold italics.

Joshua 2

In this chapter we learn that Israel was preparing to cross the Jordan River to enter (and conquer) the Promised Land. Prior to the crossing, Joshua sends two scouts to view the land (especially Jericho) and report back on topography features, food, drinking water, defenses, etc. The two scouts went and came to Jericho and ultimately the house of Rahab who was a harlot. Because the king of Jericho was informed scouts were lodged in the house of Rahab, scouts were sent to Rahab's house. As a result, she hid the scouts and gave the men of Jericho false directions to pursue the scouts. Rahab then asked the Israeli scouts to show favor and spare her family from death when the Israelites conquered Jericho. She then let the scouts down by a rope through the window *as her house was on the city wall; she dwelt on the city wall*. After the scouts departed, *Rahab bound a scarlet cord in the window so her family and house would be spared*.

Joshua 3

As the Israelites prepared to cross over the Jordan River, *the river was overflowing its banks due to the time of harvest*. As a side note, God caused the water in the Jordan River to stand still and rise in a heap at Adam, a city 15 miles north of the crossing. As the Israelites *crossed over on dry ground*, this indicates that God also stopped the flow of water in the tributaries that flowed into the Jordan River from the Israelite crossing to the city of Adam.

Joshua 5

As a fascinating point of interest; Joshua 5:11 states that prior to the invasion of Jericho, the Israelites ate of the produce of the land and then the manna (that they had received for over 40 years wandering the Sinai desert) *ceased on the day after they had eaten the produce of the land*. As the manna had ceased, the Israelites were now dependent on the Promised Land for their sustenance.

Joshua 6

As this chapter of Joshua gives the definitive account of the destruction of Jericho, let's specifically look at selected verses in 1-27:

(1-5) Now Jericho was securely shut up because of the children of Israel; none went out, and none went in. And the Lord said to Joshua, "See! I have given Jericho into your

*hand, its king, and the mighty men of valor. You shall march around the city, all you men of war; you shall go all around the city once. This you shall do **six days**. And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark. But the seventh day you shall march around the city **seven times**, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. It shall come to pass, when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, that all the people shall shout with a great shout; **then the wall of the city will fall down flat**. And the people shall **go up every man straight before him**"*

(6-7) Then Joshua, the son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the Ark of the Covenant, and let seven priests bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark of the Lord." And he said to the people, "Proceed, and march around the city and let him who is armed advance before the ark of the Lord"

(8-9) So it was, when Joshua had spoken to the people, that the seven priests bearing the seven trumpets of ram's horns before the Lord advanced and blew the trumpets; and the ark of the covenant of the Lord followed them. The armed men went before the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard came after the ark, while the priests continued blowing the trumpets

(10-11) Now Joshua had commanded the people, saying, "You shall not shout or make any noise with your voice, nor shall a word proceed out of your mouth, until the day I say to you, Shout! Then you shall shout." So he had the ark of the Lord circle the city, going around it once. Then they came into the camp and lodged in the camp

(12-14) And Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the Lord. Then seven priests bearing seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark of the Lord went on continually and blew with the trumpets. And the armed men went before them. But the rear guard came after the ark of the Lord, while the priests continued blowing the trumpets. And the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. So they did six days

*(15-19) But it came to pass on the seventh day, that they rose early, about the dawning of the day, and marched around the city seven times in the same manner. On that day only, they marched around the city seven times. And the seventh time it happened, when the priests blew the trumpets, that Joshua said to the people: "Shout for the Lord has given you the city! Now the city shall be doomed by the Lord to destruction, it and all who are in it. Only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all who are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent. And you, by all means **abstain from the accursed things**, lest you become accursed when you take of the accursed things, and make the*

camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are consecrated to the Lord; they shall come into the treasury of the Lord"

*(20-21) So the people shouted when the priests blew the trumpets. And it happened when the people heard the sound of the trumpet; and the people shouted with a great shout, that **the wall fell down flat**. Then **the people went up into the city, every man straight before him**, and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed all that was the city, both man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword*

*(22-25) But Joshua had said to the two men who had spied out the country, "Go into the harlot's house, and from there bring out the woman and all that she has, as you swore to her." And the young men who had been spies went in **and brought out Rahab**, her father, her mother, her brother, and all that she had. So they brought out all her relatives and left them outside the camp of Israel. But they **burned the city and all that was in it with fire**. **Only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord**. And Joshua spared Rahab the harlot, **her father's household, and all that she had**. So she dwells in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho*

*(26) Then Joshua charged them at that time saying, "**Cursed be the man before the Lord who rises up and builds this city Jericho**; he shall lay its foundations with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates." So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout all the country*

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

As previously mentioned, the city of Jericho has been excavated numerous times with various results. However, it must be remembered that there is a common cynicism by Bible skeptics that do not believe the biblical account as evidenced by the quote on page 8 and the following quote in Wikipedia:

"The story of the battle is not supported by the archaeological evidence, and almost all scholars agree that the Book of Joshua holds little historical value. It was written by authors far removed from the times it predicts, and was intended to illustrate a theological scheme in which Israel and her leaders are judged by their obedience to the teachings and laws set down in the Book of Deuteronomy, rather than as history in the modern sense. The story of Jericho, and the conquest generally, probably represents the nationalist propaganda of the kings of Judah and their claims to the territory of the Kingdom of Israel after 722 BCE"¹²

Obviously there is a noteworthy amount of negative criticism and disbelief that stands in direct contrast to the inerrancy of biblical scripture but numerous excavations have typically uncovered various remains along with bits

and pieces of the history of Jericho that substantiate the fact that the walls of Jericho collapsed, the city was destroyed and then burned. With these thoughts in mind, let's overview the archaeological findings and evidences that substantiate the biblical account of the destruction of Jericho, as the correlation between the archaeological evidence and the biblical narrative is substantial.

Note: Most archaeologists agree that the walls of Jericho fell down but do not agree on the date (which is one source of the cynicism). However, the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in Palestine has examined over 100,000 pottery fragments from the excavated site of Jericho and has dated them to 1400 BC. This corresponds to the biblical dating of Joshua and the Israelites conquest of Jericho.

The City Was Well Fortified

Jericho used a Double Redoubtable Wall type of construction system that resulted in the city being virtually impenetrable to external invaders

- Consider that every time the Israelites marched around the city the walls must have grown higher and higher with each imposing trip
- A large interior spring supplied adequate water and the inhabitants were well stocked with food

The Siege Occurred Just After The Spring Harvest

Joshua 3:15 states that; *"the Jordan river was overflowing its banks due to the time of harvest."* This is important from the following perspectives:

- The Israelites crossed the swollen river on *dry* ground. ***God is a God of details***
- Rahab was drying flax on the roof of her house (Joshua 2:6)
- A large grain supply was found in virtually every house in the excavated remains of the burned debris of the city

The Attack Was Of Short Duration

Sieges were typically of long duration as starvation was a common method used to weaken the besieged inhabitants

- Jericho was conquered in only **7 days**. This was evidenced by the large amount of grain discovered in the ruins (had not been all eaten)

The Walls Collapsed Outward

Joshua 6:20 states that; *"the wall fell down flat. Then the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city."* Excavations have verified two important conclusions:

- The upper and lower walls fell outward (or downward). The Hebrew phraseology carries the suggestion that it *"fell beneath itself"*
- This type of collapse formed ramps for the invading Israelites and allowed them *to go upward into the city* (refer to Figure 6) as indicated by scripture

Rahabs House Was Built On The City Wall

Excavations have shown that some houses were built against the city wall

- Joshua 2:15 indicates that Rahabs house was *on the city wall*
- This would have allowed a ready escape route for the spies who escaped to the hills of the nearby Judean wilderness
- The German excavation of 1907-1909 found that a portion of the north wall did not collapse as everywhere else, which is an indicator this was the location of Rahabs house

Jericho Was Not Plundered

Joshua 6:19 states the Israelites were directed by God to remove; *“all the silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron they were to put into the treasury of the Lord”*

- Excavations found numerous storage jars full of grain in virtually every house that had been in the fiery destruction
- This is unique as grain was not only a source of food but also a commodity that could be bartered
- Under normal circumstances, valuables such as grain would have been taken by the conquerors. In this case, Joshua instructed the Israelites that only the silver, gold, and vessels of bronze and iron were to be taken for the treasury of the Lord

Jericho Was Burned

Joshua 6:24 states that – *“they burned the city and all that was within it with fire”*

- Excavations down to the layer of Jericho found a layer of burned ash and debris about 3' thick

The Curse

Verse 26 indicates that God put a curse on whoever would rebuild Jericho

- In Ahab's reign, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho and experienced the curse by losing his eldest and youngest sons (I Kings 16:34)

WHAT CAN WE APPLY FROM JERICHO

Every person has or will experience a Jericho that appears to be monumental and/or without a practical solution. However, the biblical account of Jericho vividly demonstrates that God is in control, the capability of His miraculous power, and the results of steadfast faith. The strategy to conquer an unconquerable city was unique from three perspectives. One, the Israelites was given an opportunity to trust God for success. Two, God directed the overall strategical and tactical battle plan. Three, the successful result of faithful obedience to God's directions even though God's strategy was seemingly an irrational plan.

Romans 15:4 states; *“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”* This verse is a reminder that the complete destruction of Jericho was recorded in scripture to teach us some key lessons. Lets consider five lessons from Jericho that is directly applicable to the commonplace trials and tribulations of every believer:

Power

The walls of Jericho *instantly* collapsed as God controlled the events of the battle. The power and resultant capability of God – who is also the creator of the universe – is without equal and beyond our comprehension (Job 38:4-6, Daniel 4:35 and Psalm 18:13-15).

Trust

We can trust that God will keep His promises. The walls of Jericho fell because God promised they would (Colossians 3:24 and Hebrews 6:12-19/10:36). Even when the directives of God are not our desires, it requires trust in God and his direction for our life.

Methodology

There is a vast difference between the ways of God and the ways of mankind (Isaiah 55:8-9). The battle of Jericho was not a *typical* battle plan yet it was God who was in control of the successful outcome. We must have faith that God will do what He says He will do (Hebrews 10:23/11:1).

Faith

Hebrews 11:30-31 states; *“By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days,”* and *“By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.”* These verses indicate that the key ingredient for the Israelites is they conquered Jericho by uncompromising faith in God and His specific directions. Obedience is a clear evidence of our faith.

Action

James 2:26 says; *“ So faith without works is dead.”* In the battle of Jericho, it was necessary for Israel to act on the promises of God to attain victory. If we obey God and keep His Commandments, He will give us victory over the Jericho’s in our lives.

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