

JOSHUA 6

JERICHO TAKEN AND DESTROYED

The first city conquered by the Israelites in their campaign to take the land of promise was Jericho. The capture of the city is memorably recorded in Joshua 6, the first of a series of narratives describing how the Israelites executed a divine *blitzkrieg* in Canaan (see Joshua 6–11). The narrative presents Jericho as a walled and fortified city that would have been beyond the Israelite’s natural means to capture (6:1), thus necessitating the Lord’s instruction on how to conquer it (verses 2–5). These instructions are carried out in verses 6–27, the bulk of the chapter. The thrust of the narrative is to portray God as ultimately the one behind Israel’s victories, not any human ingenuity.

Beyond the memorable narrative of the capture of Jericho, which has inspired readers’ imaginations for centuries,¹ two crucial matters have dogged interpreters. The first is how, if possible, to reconcile the description of Jericho as a walled city with the current archaeological portrait of the site (today known as Tell es-Sultan or Tel Jericho). Based on current evidence, the site did not appear to be fortified or walled at the time of the Israelite conquest in the Late Bronze Age (circa 1500–1000 BC). This has led most scholars to abandon or at least question the historicity of the battle of Jericho as described in Joshua 6, with a minority of scholars arguing against this negative consensus.²

1 The African-American spiritual “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho,” with its lyrics “and the walls came a-tumbling down,” is just one of the more famous examples of how this story has influenced Western culture.

2 See the representative negative and positive assessments for the historicity of Jericho and its “a-tumbling” walls, respectively, in Maura Sala, “The Walls of Jericho,” Bible Odyssey, <https://bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/walls-of-jericho>; and Richard S. Hess, “The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua,” in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, ed. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 33–46.

The second issue is the moral question that arises from the Lord’s commanding Joshua to put the city and its inhabitants (and the rest of the land of Canaan) under a *herem* (see verses 17–18). This Hebrew word (sometimes translated as a “ban” or “accursed thing”) denotes something that has been forbidden or proscribed³ or otherwise designated to be set apart for cultic or ritual purposes. In the conquest narrative, the Israelites put the land, beginning with Jericho, under this ban (*herem*), which included both the confiscation of property and the systematic slaying of the Canaanites.⁴ Only the prostitute Rahab, the heroine of Joshua 2 who aided the Israelite scouts, was spared from this *herem* as it applied to Jericho (5:25). Suffice it to say that readers have struggled for centuries with how to reconcile this violent, ghastly portrayal—to say nothing of its moral implications—with other passages that depict God’s mercy and forbearance.

Credits

Author: Stephen O. Smoot

General Editor: Taylor Halverson

Associate Editor: Morgan Tanner

Senior Editor: Sarah Whitney Johnson

Assistant Editor: Verlanne Johnson

ScripturePlus Design: Jasmin Gimenez Rapple

3 Compare the modern Arabic word *ḥarām*, used in Islam to describe sinful conduct or unclean products.

4 See, generally, Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical Herem: A Window in Israel’s Religious Experience* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1991). Compare Joshua 6:21; 8:26; 10:1, 28, 35, 37, 39; 11:11, 20.