

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
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Shiur #6f: *Tanakh* and Archaeology (continued) – Yehoshua and the Conquest of the Land

E. The Conquest of the Land

The conquest of the land of Israel is described at length in *Sefer Yehoshua*, and the conventional view, based on a superficial reading of the text, is that the process was completed in a short time, as was the subsequent process of the settlement of the tribes of Israel. However, various archaeological findings cast grave doubts on this view, and in fact a more in-depth reading of the relevant chapters likewise leads to a different conclusion.^[1]

The view of the conquest and settlement as a quick transition was accepted among archaeologists of the previous generation, and especially Albright and Yadin, who noted a wave of destruction that swept over Canaanite cities in the 13th century B.C.E. and effectively ended the Middle Bronze Period. This wave of destruction was explained by Albright and Yadin as the work of the tribes of Israel in their conquest of the land.

One of the most important findings from this period pertains to the city of Chatzor. In *Sefer Yehoshua* we read about Yavin, king of Chatzor, who was the leader of the kings of the north, and about the conquest of the city by Yehoshua:

"And at that time Yehoshua turned back and he took Chatzor, and he smote its king by the sword, for Chatzor had until then been the chief of all of these kingdoms. And he smote all the souls who were in it by the sword; there remained no one breathing in it, and he burned Chatzor with fire... But all the cities that stood upon their mounds – Israel did not burn them, except for Chatzor alone, which Yehoshua burned." ([Yehoshua 11:10-13](#))

The wording here suggests that Chatzor was indeed a large and important center, but at the time of the redaction of *Sefer Yehoshua*, long after the conquest, the city had already lost its glory. Both parts of Chatzor – the lower part and the upper part (acropolis) were excavated by Yigael Yadin, in the years 1955-1958, and again in 1968-1969. The archaeological findings indicated a large city, with impressive public structures, which existed hundreds of years before the conquest by Yehoshua. The importance of the city is attested to in the archives discovered in the city of Mari, which was located on the western bank of the Euphrates, and which maintained correspondence with various other cities through letters. About twenty of these relate to Chatzor – the only city in Eretz Yisrael with which it maintained such correspondence.^[2] Concerning the lower city, Yadin writes:

"We have evidence that this tremendous city, with thousands of inhabitants, came to an end with a sudden fire in the second half of the 13th century, and was not rebuilt... The surprising similarity between the size of Chatzor as revealed in the excavations, on one hand, and its description in the Bible as 'the chief of all these kingdoms,' on the other, and the emphasis of the biblical author that Chatzor alone was destroyed by Yehoshua and set on fire, leave little doubt, to my mind, that we have indeed found the Canaanite city of Yavin, which was destroyed by Yehoshua."^[3]

Likewise, Amichai Mazar states, concerning the definition of Chatzor as "the chief of all these kingdoms," that

"it is difficult to imagine that this definition would have been dreamed up from nowhere by an author in the 7th century, or even later."^[4]

The city was excavated again, starting in 1990, by a delegation led by Amnon Ben-Tor. Both Yadin and Ben-Tor discovered, among the ruins of the palace, fragments of statues whose heads and arms appear to have been destroyed deliberately. Ben-Tor concludes, on the basis of this finding, that "it is only the settling tribes of Israel that could have been responsible for the conquest and destruction of Chatzor."^[5]

However, more recent developments have made clear that the approach that treats the conquest and settlement of the land as a uniform, quick phenomenon, contradicts the archaeological findings in several respects.^[6] In most of the cities mentioned in the process of the conquest, along the coast and in the valleys, such as Megiddo, Afek, and Gezer, no remains of Israelite settlement were found among the ruins of the Canaanite cities. By contrast, in most of the regions of settlement along the mountain range, where the major settlement revolution at that time took place, there are few Canaanite sites. From the evidence we may conclude that the Canaanite centers were not attacked all at the same time, but rather over a long period; also, while the period of settlement in the mountains was already well underway, some Canaanite cities, such as Lakhish,^[7] were still standing.

Actually, these findings offer support for the picture created by a more comprehensive and careful reading of the biblical account of the settlement of the land. Indeed, had *Sefer Yehoshua* been comprised of only its first twelve chapters, we would have been left with the impression of a "uniform military conquest," with a string of victories and the complete annihilation of the Canaanites:

"And Yehoshua smote all of the hill country, and the Negev, and the plain, and the slopes, and all of their kings; he left none remaining, but destroyed completely all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel had commanded. And Yehoshua smote them from Kadesh Barne'a to Aza, and all the country of Goshen, as far as Giv'on. And Yehoshua took all these kings and their land at

one time, because the Lord God of Israel fought for Israel." ([Yehoshua 10:40-42](#))^[8]

However, the text then goes on to paint a picture that is quite different:

"And Yehoshua was old and advanced in age, and God said to him, You are old and advanced in age, yet there remains much of the land still to be possessed." ([Yehoshua13:1](#))

This is followed (verses 2-13) by a long list of the "land that remains" – i.e., places in the land which Bnei Yisrael had yet to conquer and settle. Likewise, throughout the verses detailing the inheritances, the text mentions again and again the places not yet conquered (ibid. 15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13). A similar and even sharper testament to the partial nature of the conquest of the land is to be found in the first chapter of *Sefer Shoftim*, serving as an introduction to the period as a whole, including the problems arising from the fact that Bnei Yisrael had failed, in so many areas of the country, to conquer the Canaanites.^[9]

Hence, we should regard some of the descriptions in the early chapters of *Sefer Yehoshua* as referring to events that occurred later on. The reason for such a literary device that describes events out of chronological order is presumably to attribute these processes to Yehoshua himself, even though he may have been able to oversee only their initiation.

A good example of this understanding may be found in the story of the conquest of Chevron and the inheritance of the '*anakim*' (giants) there. In [Yehoshua 10:36-37](#), in the context of the war against the five kings of the south, the text records that Yehoshua conquered Chevron:

"... And they took it and they smote it with the sword, and its king, and all its cities, and all the souls that were in it; he left none remaining... but destroyed it utterly, and all the souls that were in it."

Later on, however (14:6-15) we read of Kalev's request of Yehoshua that he be given Chevron, in accordance with God's promise following the sin of the spies. Here we find that the city had not yet been conquered, and the '*anakim*' were still there:

"For you heard on that day that the *anakim* were there, and that the cities were great and fortified; if the Lord will be with me, perhaps I shall be able to drive them out, as God has spoken." (verse 12)

And later on we read (15:13-14),

"And to Kalev, son of Yefunneh, he gave a portion amongst the children of Yehuda, at God's command to Yehoshua – the city of Arba, the father of

the *anak* – which is Chevron. And Kalev drove out from there the three sons of the *anak* – Sheshai and Achiman and Talmai, the children of the *anak*."

Likewise we find at the beginning of *Sefer Shoftim* (1:20),

"And they gave Chevron to Kalev, as Moshe had spoken, and he expelled from there the three sons of the *anak*."

This leaves us with the question: when was Chevron conquered, and the giants expelled? Was it during Yehoshua's time, or was it after his death? It would seem that the original conquest was carried out by Kalev,^[10] apparently after the death of Yehoshua. This account appears already in *Yehoshua 15*, but Rashi notes there that these verses were written

"after the death of Yehoshua, for during Yehoshua's time the city of Chevron had not yet been captured, as we are told in *Sefer Shoftim*, and the matter is noted here only for the purposes of the division [of the land]."^[11]

In any event, these verses appear in *Sefer Yehoshua* too, as part of the general literary aim of attributing the entire process of the conquest to Yehoshua, who led the nation at its start of its presence in the land.

It turns out, then, that the two descriptions of the conquest in *Sefer Yehoshua* express "two aspects"^[12] of the conquest of the land. One depicts the ideal picture – a uniform, continuous military conquest, representing God's willingness to give the land to Bnei Yisrael, and crediting Yehoshua, God's servant, with the entire process. The other aspect shows the objective reality in which Bnei Yisrael were in no rush to take on the challenges awaiting them, resulting in the processes taking much longer and lasting several years.^[13]

Alongside the correlation between the complex picture arising from the biblical description of the process of conquest, and the archaeological evidence, we will now examine two significant issues pertaining to two of the better-known narratives in *Sefer Yehoshua* – the conquest of Yericho and of Ai.

1. Yericho

Sefer Yehoshua (chapter 6) describes in great detail the conquest of Yericho, and especially the miraculous collapse of the city walls. Yet the archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon, who was involved in the excavations of Tel Yericho in the 1950s, concluded that Yericho had not been fortified with a wall during the Late Bronze Period,^[14] and this assertion is accepted by many scholars today.

However, the proofs in support of this view are not unequivocal. In excavations carried out in Yericho during the 1930s by the British archaeologist John Garstang,

fortifications were discovered dating back to the Early Bronze Period, and Kenyon herself agreed that "it is possible that this rampart served as fortification for the city from the Late Bronze Period, and it is possible that a new wall was built atop it, of which nothing remains."^[15] Other scholars disagreed with Kenyon's conclusions and argued that a fortified city from this period can indeed be identified.^[16]

It is also possible that the remains of the later city were slowly eroded, through natural phenomena, which have greatly influenced the discoveries in Jericho,^[17] or even through human intervention. Obviously, acceptance of such explanations depends on the scholar's point of departure: while Amichai Mazar argues that "in this instance the archaeological evidence should not be used as unequivocal proof to negate the [biblical] story, as it has been by a number of scholars,"^[18] Zeev Herzog takes the view that such arguments represent "invalid excuses that we would never dream of proposing in relation to any other period in which there are no walls."^[19] Clearly, this again is a controversy based on questions that are not purely academic in nature; rather, it rests on one's fundamental view of the reliability of the biblical account.

In our attempt to weigh up the degree of correlation between the archaeological evidence in Jericho and the biblical description, another perspective must also be taken into account. According to the *Tanakh*, Jericho was completely abandoned under the threat of Yehoshua's curse ([Yehoshua 6:26-27](#)), and was not re-inhabited until the time of King Achav, when it was reestablished by Chiel of Beit El (*Melakhim I* 16:34). This is noteworthy, in view of the fact that Jericho was a central and important city, which had been inhabited for thousands of years, and which had access to convenient sources of water - the spring of Elisha and the spring of Na'aran. The peculiar abandonment of Jericho is backed up by archaeological evidence,^[20] and were it not for the biblical record of Yehoshua's curse, it would be quite inexplicable. In any event, the abandonment of Jericho may well have caused the erosion and erasing of many traces of the city, and for this reason the hypothesis that attributes the absence of remnants of the walls to the city's abandonment does seem reasonable.

2. Ai

A different controversy concerns Ai, whose conquest is likewise described at length in *Sefer Yehoshua* (chapters 7-8). The *Tanakh* offers a few topographical details that help us to identify the location of Ai "beside Beit Aven, to the east of Beit El" ([Yehoshua 7:2](#)), with a valley to its north: "And they encamped to the north of Ai, with a valley between them and Ai" (ibid. 8:11). Archaeological research has identified Ai with Khirbat A-Tel, north-east of Jerusalem, to the east of the biblical Beit El (which itself is identified with the village Bittin).^[21] This identification rests on both the topographical conditions and the name of the place - "Tel" - in the sense of mounds of ruins (it is noteworthy that the conquest of Ai concludes with the words, "Yehoshua burned Ai and made it an eternal mound [*te*], a desolation to this day" - ibid. 28).

The site yields extensive remains of a large city from the Early Bronze Age, which was destroyed about a thousand years before the story in *Sefer Yehoshua*, but

there are no remains from the Late Bronze Age. This led even a moderate scholar like Amichai Mazar to the following conclusion:

"The narrative in *Sefer Yehoshua*, chapter 8, is not anchored in the historical reality matching the period of the conquest, even though the story is filled with topographical and tactical details... In this instance there is no choice but to explain the biblical narrative as an etiological story,^[22] created during a period in which Am Yisrael had already settled in Ai. Such settlement did in fact exist there during the period of the judges; the inhabitants must have realized that their village was built on the ruins of a huge, destroyed city, and over time there developed a legend of the conquest of the city, which was attributed to Yehoshua bin Nun."^[23]

This claim is based entirely on one single assumption, and that is the identification of Ai with Khirbat A-Tel. However, this identification is not proven, and it presents several difficulties. For example, the biblical Giv'on is identified with Tel Giv'on in Al-Jib,^[24] but the area of this mound is about half of that of Khirbat A-Tel, which is the largest archaeological site in the Binyamin region.^[25]

Moreover, Grintz proves^[26] that there is no connection between the name "Ai" and the word "tel" in the sense of ruins. On the other hand, Grintz argues, there does exist a certain connection between the chronology of A-Tel and that of another city that was located close to Ai – Beit Aven. This city was already in ruins during the period of Yehoshua's conquest, and therefore there was no need to conquer it. It is mentioned in the story of the conquest of Ai only for the purposes of marking the site – "Ai which was beside Beit Aven." Grintz offers no alternative location for Ai, but several hypotheses have been raised in recent years:

- a. Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun^[27] proposes that Ai be identified with Khirbat al-Marjama. Excavations undertaken there revealed a fortified Israelite city from the period of the monarchy, but further exploration of a section of the southern wall exposed a layer of habitation from the Later Bronze Age.^[28]
- b. Y. Meitlis^[29] argues that many regions of settlement during the Middle Bronze Age were spread on a slope, rather than at the top of a hill. It is therefore possible that Ai, which was indeed located at Khirbat A-Tel during the Early Bronze Age, and was destroyed, was rebuilt on the slope, by the village of Deir Debwan. An archaeological survey at this site produced a pottery fragment from the Middle Bronze Age.

While neither of these suggestions has been proven, it must be borne in mind that the hypothesis that the account of Ai is an etiological story rather than a historical record is also not a simple matter. The small habitation at Khirbat A-Tel from the time of the judges lasted only a short time. If *Sefer Yehoshua* was indeed written only in the 7th century B.C.E., how would its authors know of the identity of a city named Ai, to the east of Beit El, and provide such an accurate topographical description? Given this, is

the etiological explanation really preferable to the suggestion that Ai was not actually located at Khirbat A-Tel?

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] For a review of the different approaches concerning the processes of conquest and settlement, see M. Weinfeld, *Mi-Yehoshua ve-ad Yoshiyahu*, Jerusalem 5752, pp. 54-65.

[2] See: Y. Yadin, *Chatzor*, Tel Aviv 1975, p. 15.

[3] Yadin, p. 145.

[4] Mazar, p. 105.

[5] A. Ben-Tor, "*Ha-Chafiroi ha-Mechudashot be-Tel Chatzor*," *Kadmoniot* 111, 5756, p. 18. Later on, however, Ben-Tor changed his approach: "We may establish that Chatzor still existed in the 13th century, and that it was destroyed not before the middle of this century. At present there is no archaeological evidence as to the identity of its destroyers" (Ben-Tor, "*Chofrim be-Chatzor*," *Be-Shevil ha-Aretz*, Dec. 2005, p. 24).

[6] For a summary see Y. Finkelstein, *Ha-Archeologia shel Tekufat ha-Hitnachalut ve-ha-Shoftim*, Tel Aviv 1986, pp. 269-275.

[7] Lachish, too, was destroyed, but only during the second half of the 12th century B.C.E., about a hundred years after the destruction of Chatzor. D. Ussishkin, "Levels VII and VI at Tel Lachish and the End of the Bronze Age in Canaan," in: J.N. Tubb (ed.), *Palestine in the Bronze and Iron Ages: Papers in Honor of Olga Tufnell*, London 1985, pp. 213-228.

[8] The same idea is conveyed by the verses summarizing the inheritance of the land, *ibid.* 21:41-42.

[9] The introductory chapters of *Sefer Shoftim* offer no less than four different answers to the question of why the conquest was so incomplete:

1. Because Bnei Yisrael forged a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and did not shatter their altars, they were punished by God: "I shall not drive them out from before you, and they shall be as snares for you, and their gods shall be a trap for you" ([Shoftim 2:3](#));

2. As a punishment for the sins of the nation during the period of the Judges: "Because this nation has violated My covenant which I commanded to their forefathers, and they have not obeyed Me, I shall likewise not continue to drive out from before them any of the nations which Yehoshua left when he died" (*ibid.* 20-21);

3. As a test of Israel's loyalty: "To put Israel to the test, whether they will observe the way of God, to follow it, as their forefathers did, or not" (*ibid.* 22);

4. In order that Bnei Yisrael will learn to fight in the future: "Only that the generations of Israel might know, to teach them war, at least those who did not know of such things previously" (*ibid.* 3:2).

The first two reasons express punishments that come retroactively, while the last two represent a pre-planned reality. To these four reasons we might add a fifth, which is actually the first, as set forth explicitly in the Torah: "I shall not drive them out from before you in a single year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little shall I drive them out from before you, until you grow numerous and inherit the land" ([Shemot 23:29-30](#)).

^[10] It is highly symbolic that it is specifically Kalev who drives out the *anakim*, since it was this aspect of the spies' report that so concerned Am Yisrael ([Bamidbar 13:28, 33](#); [Devarim 1:28](#)). It is Kalev son of Yefunneh, who never feared the children of the *anak* from the outset, who drives three of them out.

^[11] We have discussed previously the matter of the redaction of the Books of the Prophets.

^[12] We have discussed previously the "aspects approach" to seemingly contradictory sources in the biblical text.

^[13] Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, "*Ha-Mikra be-Mabat Histori ve-ha-Hitnachalut ha-Yisraelit be-Eretz Kena'an*," in: *Ha-Pulmus al ha-Emet ha-Historit ba-Mikra*, pp. 13-16, argues that the description of the conquest in *Sefer Yehoshua* reflects not necessarily different literary aspects, but rather a distinction between military victory and conquest with settlement. Following the invasion and the great victories, especially against the kings of the south ([Yehoshua 10](#)) and the north (ibid. 11), there were effectively no kings left, although these victories also prevented other kings from waging war against Israel, and allowed the nation to embark on a decades-long program of settlement, undisturbed – at least in the mountain region. Rabbi Bin-Nun arrives at this understanding on the basis of the difference between Chatzor, which – as noted above – was the only city to be burned (other than Yericho and Ai), and the other cities that remained intact: "But all the cities that stood upon their mounds – Israel did not burn them, except for Chatzor alone, which Yehoshua burned" ([Yehoshua 11:13](#)). Although the text describes Yehoshua as taking and utterly destroying the other cities, too, the reference there is to military victory. For this reason, Yehoshua did not burn Lakhish, as indeed is recorded in the text; its destruction, a hundred years later, appears to have taken place during the period of the judges.

It should be noted that this view does not necessarily contradict the approach maintaining that *Sefer Yehoshua* itself presents its descriptions from two different perspectives, whose practical resolution may well be in accordance with Rabbi Bin-Nun's explanation.

^[14] K.M. Kenyon, *Digging Up Jericho*, London 1957. A different discussion concerns the very existence of any habitation in Yericho during the Late Bronze Period, but a later study showed that the city had indeed been inhabited at this time, although it ceased to exist at the end of the 14th century or beginning of the 13th century B.C.E. See P. Bienkowski, *Jericho in the Late Bronze Age*, Warminster 1986.

^[15] Kenyon, *ibid.*

^[16] See B. G. Wood, *BAR* 16 (1990), 44-58. Wood rejects Kenyon's conclusions and brings various arguments in support of the authenticity of the biblical account. *Inter alia*, he relies on pottery shards from the Late Bronze Age that were found in clay from Jericho. He points to the remains of another brick wall, from around the year 1400 B.C.E., which in his view was destroyed in an earthquake, following which the city was

burned. He also brings many more arguments for the authenticity of the biblical narrative. See also H.J. Bruins, *Radiocarbon* 37,2 (1995), 213-220, who subjected the burned grain from Jericho IV to carbon dating, and concluded that the fire took place at the end of the 14th century B.C.E.

[17] See Kenyon, pp. 197-198.

[18] A. Mazar, "Tekufat ha-Barzel I," *Mavo le-Archeologia shel Eretz Yisrael bi-Tekufat ha-Mikra*, Tel Aviv 5750, p. 43.

[19] Z. Herzog, "Ha-Mahapecha ha-Mada'it be-Archeologia shel Eretz Yisrael," in: *Ha-Pulmus al ha-Emet ha-Historit ba-Mikra*, p. 57.

[20] Kenyon, p. 200

[21] See S. Yeivin, "Ai, ha-Ai," in the *Encyclopedia Mikrait* VI, Jerusalem 5732, columns 169-192.

[22] In other words, a story that explains topographical or other phenomena by attributing them to some event that took place in the distant past, without necessarily having any historical basis. [Mazar himself provides this explanation in a note ad loc.]

[23] Mazar, p.43

[24] See, for example, the entry for "Giv'on" (written by the editorial board), *Encyclopedia Mikrait* II, Jerusalem 5714, columns 417-418.

[25] I heard this argument raised by Prof. Yoel Elitzur.

[26] Grintz, pp. 278-289

[27] Y. Bin-Nun, "Ba al Ayit: Pitaron Chadash le-Zihui ha-Ai," in: Z.H. Ehrlich and Y. Eshel (eds.), *Mechkerei Yehuda ve-Shomron*, Ariel 1993, pp. 63-64.

[28] Some scholars have questioned this possibility: see Y. Elitzur's comments ad loc., pp. 63-64.

[29] Meitlis, pp. 62-64.