

The following article in the WP library provides material to introduce readers of the EHV to the archaeological disputes about Jericho and Ai. The purpose of this collection is to summarize the current state of the debate. Citation of these articles does not imply endorsement of all of their conclusions, many of which are hotly disputed.

Jericho and Ai: The Archaeological Problems

The sites of Jericho and Ai present two different problems for scholars who believe that the biblical accounts about Jericho and Ai are accurate historical accounts.

Everyone agrees on the location of Jericho at Tell es-Sultan, but some prominent archaeologists claim that there was no inhabited city at Jericho to be destroyed by Joshua and Israel, regardless of whether that destruction is placed in the 1400s or the 1200s BC.

The archaeological problem concerning Ai is about the location of the site. There are no ruins from Joshua's time at the site first identified as Ai. So the question here is whether biblical Ai lies at a different site.

The Dating of Biblical Jericho

The following is a summary of the consensus view of most archaeologists on the dating of Jericho as summarized in Wikipedia.

The Excavations

The first excavations of the site were made by Charles Warren in 1868. Ernst Sellin and Carl Watzinger excavated Tell es-Sultan and Tulul Abu el-'Alayiq between 1907 and 1909, and in 1911. John Garstang excavated between 1930 and 1936. Extensive investigations using more modern techniques were made by Kathleen Kenyon between 1952 and 1958. Lorenzo Nigro and Nicolò Marchetti conducted excavations in 1997–2000. Since 2009 the Italian-Palestinian archaeological project of excavation and restoration was resumed by Rome La Sapienza University and Palestinian MOTA-DACH under the direction of Lorenzo Nigro and Hamdan Taha, and Jihad Yasine since 2015. The Italian-Palestinian Expedition carried out 13 seasons in 20 years (1997–2017).

The Findings

In 1868, Charles Warren identified Tell es-Sultan as the site of Jericho. In 1930–36, John Garstang conducted excavations there and discovered the remains of a network of collapsed walls, which he dated to about 1400 BC, the time of Joshua. Kathleen Kenyon re-excavated the site from 1952–1958 and claimed that the destruction occurred about 1500 BC during a well-attested Egyptian campaign of that period, and that Jericho had been deserted throughout the mid-late 13th century BC. In 1995, Kenyon's conclusion was supported by radiocarbon tests which dated the destruction level to the late 17th or 16th centuries. A small unwallled

settlement was rebuilt in the 15th century, but the tell was unoccupied from the late 15th century until the 10th/9th centuries.

On this basis, many scholars cast doubt on the historicity of the Book of Joshua. They speculate that its origin lies in a time far removed from the times it depicts, and that its intention is primarily theological, detailing how Israel and her leaders are judged by their obedience to the teachings and laws (the covenant) set down in the book of Deuteronomy, rather than as history in the modern sense. One theory holds that 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. These chapters were later allegedly incorporated into an early form of Joshua, written late in the reign of King Josiah (reigned 640–609 BCE), and the book was revised and completed after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586, and possibly after the return from the Babylonian exile in 538. Scholarly doubts about the historicity of the conquest, including the battle of Jericho in particular, depend on contested assumptions about the dating of the evidence from the second millennium BC.

The following article by the Associates for Biblical Research is a rebuttal of the consensus view that Jericho was uninhabited at the time of Joshua around 1400 BC.

The main reason for denying that Jericho was inhabited at the time of Joshua is the excavations at the site carried out in the 1950s under the direction of British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon. She concluded,

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.

Thomas A. Holland, who was editor and co-author of Kenyon's excavation reports, summarized the apparent results as follows:

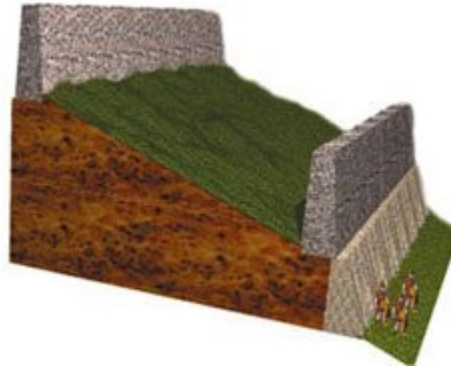
Kenyon concluded, with reference to the military conquest theory and the LB [Late Bronze Age] walls, that there was no archaeological data to support the thesis that the town had been surrounded by a wall at the end of LB I [ca. 1400 B.C.]."

However, a careful examination of the archaeological evidence collected throughout this century leads to quite another conclusion.

Fortifications of Jericho

Before the Israelites entered the promised land, Moses told them that they were now about to cross the Jordan river, to dispossess nations which were greater and stronger than themselves, with large cities having walls that reached, as it were, to the sky (Deuteronomy 9:1). The meticulous work of Kenyon showed that Jericho was indeed heavily fortified and that it had been burned by fire. Unfortunately, she misdated her finds, resulting in what seemed to be a discrepancy between the discoveries of archaeology and the Bible. She concluded that the Bronze Age city of Jericho was destroyed about 1550 B.C. by the Egyptians. An in-depth

analysis of the evidence, however, reveals that the destruction took place around 1400 B.C. (end of the Late Bronze I period), exactly when the Bible says the conquest occurred.



Schematic cross-section diagram of the fortification system at Jericho based on Kenyon's west trench.

The mound or “tell” of Jericho was surrounded by a great earthen rampart or embankment, with a stone retaining wall at its base. The retaining wall was some four to five meters (12–15 feet) high. On top of that was a mudbrick wall two meters (six feet) thick and about six to eight meters (20–26 feet) high. At the crest of the embankment was a similar mudbrick wall whose base was roughly 14 meters (46 feet) above the ground level outside the retaining wall (see diagram). This is what loomed high above the Israelites as they marched around the city each day for seven days. Humanly speaking, it was impossible for the Israelites to penetrate the impregnable bastion of Jericho.

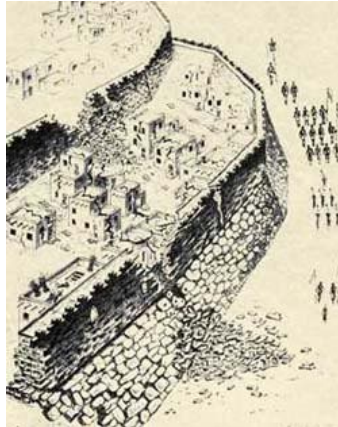
Within the upper wall was an area of approximately six acres, while the total area of the upper city and fortification system was 50% larger, or about nine acres. Based on the archaeologist’s rule of thumb of 200 persons per acre, the population of the upper city would have been about 1,200. However, from excavations carried out by a German team in the first decade of this century, we know that people were also living on the embankment between the upper and lower city walls. In addition, those Canaanites living in surrounding villages would have fled to Jericho for safety. Thus, we can assume that there were several thousand people inside the walls when the Israelites came against the city.

The fallen walls

The citizens of Jericho were well prepared for a siege. A copious spring which provided water for ancient, as well as modern, Jericho lay inside the city walls. At the time of the attack, the harvest had just been taken in (Joshua 3:15), so the citizens had an abundant supply of food. This has been borne out by many large jars full of grain found in the Canaanite homes by John Garstang in his excavation in the 1930s and also by Kenyon. With a plentiful food supply and ample water, the inhabitants of Jericho could have held out for perhaps several years.

After the seventh trip around the city on the seventh day, Scripture tells us that the wall “fell down flat” (Joshua 6:20). The Hebrew here carries the suggestion that it “fell beneath itself.” Is there evidence for such an event at Jericho? It turns out that there is ample evidence that the mudbrick city wall collapsed and was deposited at the base of the stone retaining wall at the time the city met its end.

Kenyon's work was the most detailed. On the west side of the tell, at the base of the retaining, or revetment, wall, she found, "fallen red bricks piling nearly to the top of the revetment. These probably came from the wall on the summit of the bank [and/or] ... the brickwork above the revetment." In other words, she found a heap of bricks from the fallen city walls! An Italian team excavating at the southern end of the mound in 1997 found exactly the same thing.



Artist's reconstruction of the north side of ancient Jericho, based on the German excavations of 1907-1909.

Note the houses built against the mud brick city wall, which rests on top of the stone retaining wall. The Bible says that Rahab's house was built against the city wall (Joshua 2:15).

According to the Bible, Rahab's house was incorporated into the fortification system (Joshua 2:15). If the walls fell, how was her house spared? As you recall, the spies had instructed Rahab to bring her family into her house and they would be rescued. When the Israelites stormed the city, Rahab and her family were saved as promised (Joshua 2:12–21, 6:17, 22–23). At the north end of the tell of Jericho, archaeologists made some astounding discoveries that seem to relate to Rahab.

The German excavation of 1907–1909 found that on the north a short stretch of the lower city wall did not fall as everywhere else. A portion of that mudbrick wall was still standing to a height of over two meters (eight feet). What is more, there were houses built against the wall! It is quite possible that this is where Rahab's house was. Since the city wall formed the back wall of the houses, the spies could have readily escaped. From this location on the north side of the city it was only a short distance to the hills of the Judean wilderness where the spies hid for three days (Joshua 2:16, 22). Real estate values must have been low here, since the houses were positioned on the embankment between the upper and lower city walls. Not the best place to live in time of war! This area was no doubt the overflow from the upper city and the poor part of town, perhaps even a slum district.

After the city walls fell, how did the Israelites surmount the four to five meter (12–15 foot) high retaining wall at the base of the tell? Excavations have shown that the bricks from the collapsed walls formed a ramp against the retaining wall so that the Israelites could merely climb up over the top. The Bible is very precise in its description of how the Israelites entered the city: "the people went up into the city, every man straight before him [i.e., straight up and over]," (Joshua 6:20). The Israelites had to go up, and that is what archaeology has revealed. They had to go from ground level at the base of the tell to the top of the rampart in order to enter the city.

Destruction by fire

The Israelites burned the city and everything in it (Joshua 6:24). Once again, the discoveries of archaeology have verified the truth of this record. A portion of the city destroyed by the Israelites was excavated on the east side of the tell. Wherever the archaeologists reached this level they found a layer of burned ash and debris about one meter (three feet) thick. Kenyon described the massive devastation as follows.

“The destruction was complete. Walls and floors were blackened or reddened by fire, and every room was filled with fallen bricks, timbers, and household utensils; in most rooms the fallen debris was heavily burnt, but the collapse of the walls of the eastern rooms seems to have taken place before they were affected by the fire.”⁹

Both Garstang and Kenyon found many storage jars full of grain that had been caught in the fiery destruction. This is a unique find in the annals of archaeology. Grain was valuable, not only as a source of food, but also as a commodity which could be bartered. Under normal circumstances, valuables such as grain would have been plundered by the conquerors. Why was the grain left at Jericho? The Bible provides the answer. Joshua commanded the Israelites that the city and all that is in it were to be dedicated to the Lord (Joshua 6:17, lit. Heb.).



Dr Bryant Wood is at the base of the stone retaining wall uncovered by Italian archaeologists at the southern end of Jericho in 1997. The Israelites marched around this wall when they attacked the city as described in Joshua 6.

The grain left at Jericho and found by archaeologists in modern times gives graphic testimony to the obedience of the Israelites nearly three-and-a-half millennia ago. Only Achan disobeyed, leading to the debacle at Ai described in Joshua

Such a large quantity of grain left untouched gives silent testimony to the truth of yet another aspect of the biblical account. A heavily fortified city with an abundant supply of food and water would normally take many months, even years, to subdue. The Bible says that Jericho fell after only seven days. The jars found in the ruins of Jericho were full, showing that the siege was short since the people inside the walls consumed very little of the grain.

Lessons of Jericho

Jericho was once thought to be a “Bible problem” because of the seeming disagreement between archaeology and the Bible. When the archaeology is correctly interpreted, however, just

the opposite is the case. The archaeological evidence supports the historical accuracy of the biblical account in every detail. Every aspect of the story that could possibly be verified by the findings of archaeology is, in fact, verified.

There are many ideas as to how the walls of Jericho came down. Both Garstang and Kenyon found evidence of earthquake activity at the time the city met its end. If God did use an earthquake to accomplish His purposes that day, it was still a miracle since it happened at precisely the right moment, and was manifested in such a way as to protect Rahab's house. No matter what agency God used, it was ultimately He who, through the faith of the Israelites, brought the walls down. After the people had marched around them for seven days, it was "by faith the walls of Jericho fell down" (Hebrews 11:30).

Although most archaeologists today think that the story of Joshua's conquest of Jericho cannot be true, their reasoning is based on a mistaken chronology. As *Time* magazine recently put it, "Did Joshua conquer the city of Jericho? The walls of this Canaanite city did come tumbling down, say most historians, but centuries before Moses' protégé could have arrived." This assessment is based on the conclusions of Kathleen Kenyon, who in the 1950s dated Jericho's fall to around 1500 BC while assuming a late date of around 1200 BC for the Conquest. The issue here, then, is one of chronology. The bottom line is that "the walls" did, in fact, "come a tumblin'down," just as the Bible says, although the current archaeological convention does not date the event to the period indicated by the Bible.

It would be unreasonable to insist that we be able to prove every detail of an account of events occurring more than three thousand years ago. However, it is rather surprising how much evidence we actually have to corroborate or confirm the account of the Conquest. The skeptic's claim that it never occurred would seem to be the view that should be on the defensive.

The Associates for Biblical Research, PO Box 356, Landisville, PA 17538 (or call 800.430.0008).

These two excerpts summarize the arguments of both sides of this archaeological dispute.

The location of Biblical Ai

The archaeological problem at Ai is the location of the site. There are no ruins from Joshua's time at the first site identified as Ai. The question is whether biblical Ai lies at a different site.

The current state of the debate is summarized by an article in *Bible and Spade*, a periodical devoted to demonstrating the historical accuracy of the Bible. Citation of the article in the WP Library does not constitute endorsement of all its contents, but it is an aid to those who wish to study the topic further.

The Problem of Joshua's Ai: Solved

Bible and Spade, Vol 31 No 2, Spring 2018.

SYNOPSIS:

The Biblical City of Ai Located and Matches Joshua's Story – A key dispute in biblical archaeology has surrounded the location of the Conquest site of Ai. Did Joshua and the Israelites really conquer this city as the Bible claims? This update features the first of a two-part article by Scott Stripling and Mark Hassler that ran in *Bible and Spade*, Vol 31 No 2, Spring 2018. BIBLE and SPADE is a quarterly publication published by the Associates for Biblical Research.

After conquering Jericho, Joshua and the Israelites destroyed Ai, the second stronghold of the conquest (Jos 7–8). Everyone agrees on the location of Jericho, but the location of Ai continues to puzzle researchers. The issue garners attention because of its profound implications for biblical studies.

The debate over the location of Ai intertwines with the excavation of Jericho. Kathleen Kenyon excavated Jericho from 1952 to 1956. She concluded that the archaeological evidence at Jericho contradicts the biblical account. In 1961, Joseph Callaway studied with Kenyon in London and three years later, on behalf of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, began excavations at et-Tell, 10 mi (16 km) north of Jerusalem (the City of David). Et-Tell had long prevailed as the leading candidate for Ai because of the endorsement by W. F. Albright, the father of biblical archaeology and one of Callaway's mentors. When Callaway ceased excavations in 1972, he concluded that et-Tell sat unoccupied at the time of the biblical conquest. Together, the interpretations of Kenyon, Callaway, and Albright eroded the evangelical belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.

In response to this erosion, David Livingston formed the Associates for Biblical Research (ABR) in order to investigate the "problem" of Ai. In a personal letter dated February 23, 1970, Albright assured Livingston that Ai belongs at et-Tell:

You can take it from me, and from Callaway and others, that there just isn't any other possibility for Ai than et-Tell and that Bethel can only have been modern Beitin. Since 1921 we have examined and reexamined the whole countryside, and there just isn't any archaeologically viable identification.

Undeterred, Livingston began excavations at Khirbet Nisya, his candidate for the Ai of Joshua 7–8. He excavated there from 1979 to 2002, during which time he completed his doctor of philosophy degree at Andrews University. The findings at Khirbet Nisya illuminated the background of the Old and New Testaments, but a positive correlation with Ai proved elusive.

In 1994, ABR colleague Bryant Wood identified Khirbet el-Maqatir as another candidate for Ai, and the following year he launched excavations at the new site, 0.6 mi (1 km) west of et-Tell, and 10 mi (16 km) north of Jerusalem. Excavations continued at Khirbet el-Maqatir through 2016, with the final three years under the direction of Scott Stripling. Thus, from Livingston to Wood to Stripling, ABR has conducted excavations in search of Ai for nearly 40 years, 37 to be precise.

Various lines of reasoning allow for the possibility that the fortress of Ai in Joshua's day stood at Khirbet el-Maqatir. For one, local tradition in the 1800s equated the sites. Moreover, a

monastery from the Byzantine Age once graced the locale. The placement of the monastery seems deliberate in that monasteries often memorialized biblical events. Unfortunately, the excavation did not yield any mosaics or other clues as to what the monastery may have memorialized. Regardless, the geographical and archaeological indicators in Joshua 7–8 correspond to the evidence unearthed at Khirbet el-Maqatir. This study summarizes the correspondences and proposes a viable solution to the “problem” of Ai.

Geographical Indicators for the Site

The book of Joshua provides specific geographical indicators for the location of Ai. The geographical indicators appear as follows:

Strategic Location

When Joshua entered Cisjordan [the area west of the Jordan], he set into motion a brilliant military strategy: divide and conquer. The decision of where to divide the land was not arbitrary. It appears that he divided the land at a logical and strategic location—the Wadi el-Gāyeh, a west-east drainage, 10 mi (16 km) north of Jerusalem. The wadi formed a natural and political boundary between the southern territory governed by the city-state of Jerusalem and the central territory governed by the city-state of Shechem. Even after the conquest, the wadi functioned as the border between Benjamin and Ephraim (Jos 18:12–13). As Wood suggests, the military outpost there, visible from Jerusalem, guarded the northern border for the league of Amorites in the south (cf. 7:7; 10:1–6). On the north side of the wadi, just 1 mi (1.5 km) away, stood a fortress at Beitin, probably the southern border fortress for the Shechem league, says Wood. Khirbet el-Maqatir and et-Tell both sit near the southern embankment of the Wadi el-Gāyeh.

Near Beth-Aven

Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven, east of Bethel, and said to them, “Go up and spy out the land.” And the men went up and spied out Ai. – Joshua 2:7 (ESV)



Location of Khirbet el-Maqatir

Joshua locates Ai “near [‘im] Beth-Aven” (Jos 7:2). The preposition ‘im designates general proximity, whereas the synonym ’ēt (near) signals immediate proximity. The most suitable locale for Beth-Aven is Beitin, a site often identified as Bethel. [??] Khirbet el-Maqatir sits 1 mi (1.5 km) southeast of Beitin. Scholars who place Bethel at Beitin and Ai at et-Tell have yet to propose a feasible location for Beth-Aven. A feasible location must yield evidence of habitation at the time of the conquest.

Near and East of Bethel

The list of conquered rulers in Joshua 12 places Ai “near Bethel” (v. 9). The men of Bethel aided the men of Ai in their pursuit of the Israelites, a fact that confirms the proximity of the sites (8:17). Livingston and others situate Bethel at el-Bireh rather than the usual site of Beitin. A distance of 2.2 mi (3.5 km) separates Khirbet el-Maqatir and el-Bireh.

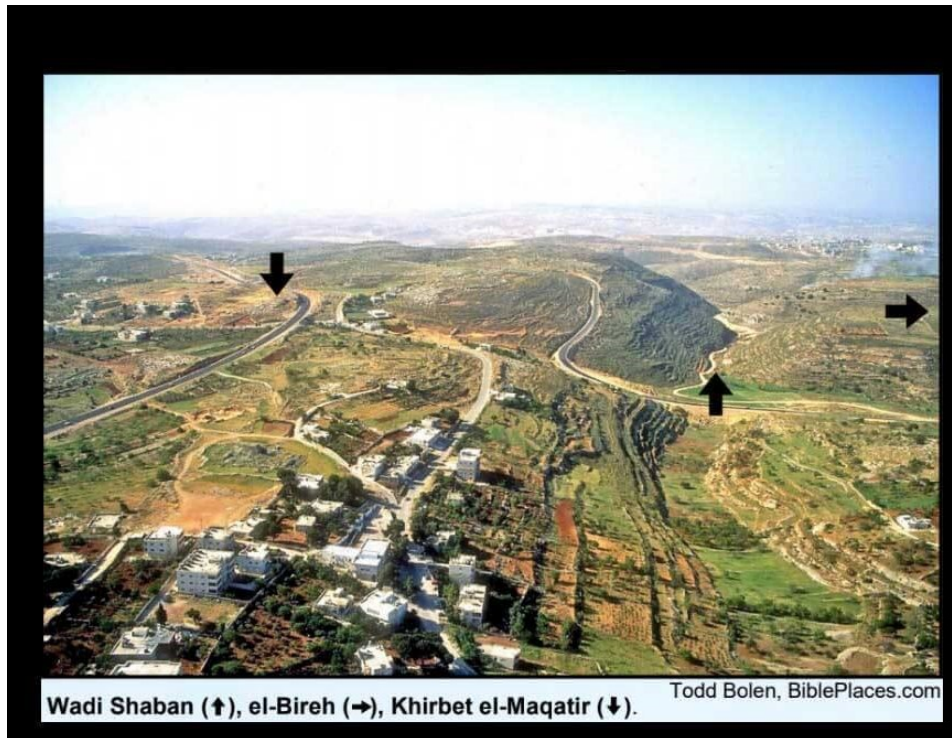
The Bethel equals Beitin formula has its drawbacks, two of which shall receive brief mention. First, the equation of Bethel and Beitin contradicts the idea that the fortress at Bethel served the Shechem alliance [??]. If Bethel constituted el-Bireh, no contradiction exists because el-Bireh lies south of the Wadi el-Gāyeh, positioning it with the southern alliance. Second, the equation contradicts the work of Eusebius. As Rupert Chapman points out, “Eusebius’ statement that Gibeon was four miles west of Bethel is wholly incompatible with the currently accepted identification of Bethel with Beitin.”⁶

The fortress of Ai stood “east of Bethel” (Jos 7:2). The leading candidates for Ai, Khirbet el-Maqatir and et-Tell, both lie east of the leading candidates for Bethel, el-Bireh and Beitin.

Near and East of an Ambush Site

Prior to the battle, Joshua positioned his troops at an ambush site “not...very far from the fortress” (Jos 8:4). In 2015, three members of the ABR excavation team ran from the lip of the Wadi Sheban to the fortress gate at Khirbet el-Maqatir in only five minutes, while carrying backpacks.

The ambush site rested “behind” or “west” (‘ahar) of the fortress (vv. 2, 4, 14), that is, “between Bethel and Ai, west of Ai” (vv. 9, 12). The Wadi Sheban runs between el-Bireh and Khirbet el-Maqatir. This deep ravine could easily conceal numerous troops from watchers at Khirbet el-Maqatir or el-Bireh. The image below [looking south] shows the geographical relationship of the sites, with el-Bireh positioned to the right of the photo. Et-Tell, however, lacks an ambush site on the west. Israelite troops could have hidden behind the hill to the northwest, but the allies of Ai at Bethel (Beitin in this model) could have spotted them easily and blown their cover.



South of a Valley and Ridge

Joshua stationed soldiers “north of Ai” (Jos 8:11). And the very next statement explains, “There was a valley between him and Ai.” Khirbet el-Maqtir sits near the southern slope of a west-east valley, the Wadi el-Gāyeh. If the commander of Ai could see Joshua and his men in the valley, as verse 14 might imply, then the valley lacked depth. The bottom of Wadi el-Gāyeh is readily visible from Khirbet el-Maqtir.

The presence of a valley infers the existence of a ridge. Approximately 0.9 mi (1.4 km) north of Khirbet el-Maqtir, beyond the Wadi el-Gāyeh, stands Jebel Abu Ammar, the highest elevation in the area. It provides excellent visibility and a west-east ridgeline.

The geography and topography of Khirbet el-Maqtir meets the criteria revealed in Joshua 7–8. The discussion now shifts to the archaeological indicators.

Final Words From Patterns of Evidence: Biblical City of Ai Located

Stay tuned for Part 2 of this article from Scott Stripling and Mark Hassler in the weeks ahead. Keep Thinking!

See the original documents for endnotes and original documents.

Three Approaches to the Questions of Jericho and Ai

- Historical skeptics: the whole biblical account is an artificial invention. Miller, Alt, Noth, Zevit, Kenyon.

- Biblical revisionists: the Bible is basically correct. We need to correct the details. Albright.
- Archaeological revisionists. The Bible is right. Find the right sites and date them correctly. Bimson, Wood, Livingstone, Stripling.

The above two articles summarize the views of “archaeological revisionists.” Citation of these articles in the Wartburg Project library does not imply acceptance of all their conclusions, but it provides readers with a starting point for evaluating the issues. Those interested in investigating further can find many online articles on both sides of the debate.