

Joshua

Lesson #4

Trouble at Ai

(7: 1– 8: 35)

Review

Once across the Jordan River, the Israelites still had another 5 miles to go, climbing up the sloping plateau to Jericho. Meanwhile, the men of Jericho have had ample time to prepare their defenses: archers were on the walls, hot oil was bubbling and large stones were ready to roll.

In Lesson #3 we learned how Joshua solved this daunting tactical problem.

Preview

After conquering Jericho and putting it under the ban—killing every living thing in it and burning the city to ashes—the Israelites move north-west, up into the central mountain range to attack Ai. Once again, Joshua sends spies to gather intel, and when they come back they report: *“Do not send all the people up; if only about two or three thousand go up, they can attack and overcome Ai”* (7: 3).

The Israelites seriously underestimate the men of Ai, and they get their butts kicked.

Joshua needs a new strategy.



With the Israelite's stunning victory at Jericho, Joshua prepares to attack Ai, the next city on his hit list.

But as Joshua is in his command tent planning strategy with his commanders, we learn of a troubling episode:

“But the Israelites acted treacherously with regard to the ban; Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah of the tribe of Judah, took goods that were under the ban, and the anger of the Lord flared up against the Israelites.”

(7: 1)



When a city was placed “under the ban,” as Jericho was, that meant killing every living thing in it—men and women, children, infants and animals—and totally destroying the city.

Before the attack on Jericho God warned the Israelites:

“Be careful not to covet or take anything that is under the ban; otherwise you will bring upon the camp of Israel this ban and the misery of it. All silver and gold, and the articles of bronze or iron, are holy to the Lord. They shall be put in the treasury of the Lord.”

(6: 18-19)

Learning that Achan “acted treacherously with regard to the ban” (7: 1) and taken some of the plunder, foreshadows big trouble to come.



As Joshua sent two spies into Jericho to gather intel, so does he send spies into Ai to gather intel on it.

“Joshua next sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven and east of Bethel, with the order, ‘Go up and reconnoiter the land.’ When they had explored Ai, they returned to Joshua and advised, ‘Do not send all the people up; if only about two or three thousand go up, they can attack and overcome Ai. You need not tire all the people: the enemy there are few.

(7: 2-3)





Ai [et-Tell], aerial view from the north.



Ai [et-Tell] covered 27 acres. A large structure sits at the summit, perhaps a temple or a palace.

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When the spies return they report that this mission should be easy—only two or three thousand men need to attack Ai. The city is relatively small and it has but few defenders. So . . .

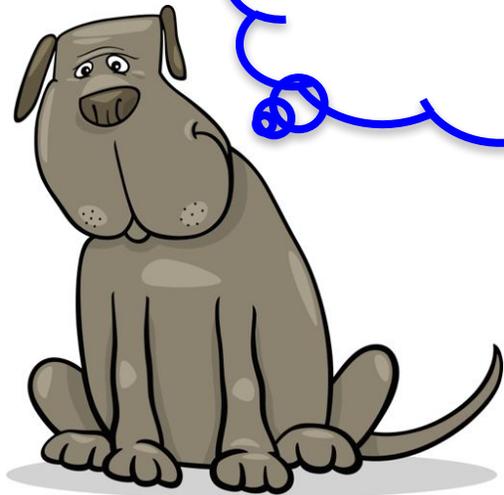
“About three thousand of the people made the attack, but they fled before the army at Ai, who killed some thirty-six of them. They pursued them from the city gate to the [stone quarries], and defeated them on the descent, so that the confidence of the people melted away like water. Joshua, together with the elders of Israel, tore their garments and fell face down before the ark of the Lord until evening; and they threw dust on their heads. ‘Alas, Lord God,’ Joshua prayed, ‘why did you ever allow this people to cross over the Jordan, delivering us into the power of the Amorites, that they might destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell on the other side of the Jordan. Please, Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has turned its back to its enemies? When the Canaanites and the other inhabitants of the land hear of it, they will close in around us and efface our name from the earth. What will you do for your great name?’”

(7: 4-9)

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What wimps! One defeat and Joshua is singing the desert blues! Could it be that the Israelites were grossly overconfident after their victory at Jericho? Or maybe it's something else . . .



Remember Achan?

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“The Lord replied to Joshua: Stand up. Why are you lying there? Israel has sinned: they have transgressed the covenant which I enjoined on them. They have taken goods subject to the ban. They have stolen and lied, placing the goods in their baggage. If the Israelites cannot stand up to their enemies, but must turn their back to them, it is because they are under the ban. I will not continue to be with you unless you remove that which is banned from among you. Get up, sanctify the people. Tell them, ‘Sanctify yourselves before tomorrow, for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: That which is banned is in your midst, Israel. You cannot stand up to your enemies until you remove it from among you . . .

. . . In the morning you must come forward by tribes. The tribe which the Lord designates shall come forward by clans; the clan which the Lord designates shall come forward by families; the family which the Lord designates shall come forward one by one. Whoever is designated as having incurred the ban shall be destroyed by fire, with all that is his, because he has transgressed the covenant of the Lord and has committed a shameful crime in Israel.”

(7: 10-15)



To identify the thief, God resorts to cleromancy, a form of sortition, like casting lots.

In this case, God sorts by tribe, clan, family and individual, with Achan the last man standing. The scene creates escalating tension and drama as the guilty party is gradually exposed.

We have a similar scene when king Saul determines who broke a vow not to eat until Saul avenged himself on his enemies. Sorting through the tribes, clans and families, the lot falls on Jonathan, Saul's son (1 Samuel 14: 24-46).

“Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and the tribe of Judah was designated. Then he had the clans of Judah come forward, and the clan of Zerah was designated. He had the clan of Zerah come forward by families, and Zabdi was designated. Finally he had that family come forward one by one, and Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah of the tribe of Judah, was designated. Joshua said to Achan, ‘My son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and praise him by telling me what you have done; do not hide it from me.’ Achan answered Joshua, ‘I have indeed sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done’

. . . among the spoils, I saw a beautiful Babylonian mantle, two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight; I coveted them and I took them. They are now hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.' Joshua sent messengers and they ran to the tent and there they were, hidden in the tent, with the silver underneath. They took them from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites, and spread them out before the Lord."

(7: 16-23)

“Then Joshua and all Israel took Achan, son of Zerah, with the silver, the mantle, and the bar of gold, and with his sons and daughters, his ox, his donkey and his sheep, his tent, and all his possessions, and led them off to the Valley of Achor. Joshua said, ‘What misery have you caused us? May the Lord bring misery upon you today!’” And all Israel stoned him to death. They burnt them with fire and they stoned them. Over Achan they piled a great heap of stones, which remains to the present day. Then the Lord turned from his anger. That is why the place is called the Valley of Achor to this day.”

(7: 24-26)

**Upper Register:
Joshua defeated at Ai →**



**Lower Left Register:
Achan's sin revealed →**

**← Lower Right Register:
Achan & family stoned**

**“Joshua Defeated at Ai,” *The Crusader Bible* (illumination on parchment, Ms. M.638, fol. 10r), c. 1240s.
The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.**

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Gustave Doré. "Achan Stoned" (engraving) in *La Grande Bible de Tours*, 1866.

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With Achan and his household punished, the Lord orders Joshua to mount another attack on Ai.

This time Joshua will use stealth and surprise to be victorious.

“The Lord then said to Joshua: Do not be afraid or dismayed. Take all the army with you and prepare to attack Ai. I have delivered the king of Ai into your power, with his people, city, and land. Do to Ai and its king what you did to Jericho and its king—except that you may take its spoil and livestock as plunder. Set an ambush behind the city. So Joshua and all the soldiers prepared to attack Ai. Picking out thirty thousand warriors, Joshua sent them off by night with these orders: ‘See that you ambush the city from the rear. Do not be very far from the city. All of you must be ready. The rest of the people and I will come up to the city, and when they make a sortie against us as they did the last time, we will flee from them. They will keep coming out after us until we have drawn them away from the city, for they will think, ‘They are fleeing from us as they did the last time’ . . .

. . . When we flee, then you rise from ambush and take possession of the city, which the Lord, your God, will deliver into your power. When you have taken the city, set it on fire in obedience to the Lord's command. These are my orders to you.' Then Joshua sent them away. They went to the place of ambush, taking up their position to the west of Ai, toward Bethel. Joshua, however, spent that night with the army.

(8: 1-9)



“Early the next morning Joshua mustered the army and went up to Ai at its head, with the elders of Israel. When all the troops he led were drawn up in position before the city, they pitched camp north of Ai, on the other side of the ravine. He took about five thousand warriors and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, west of the city. Thus the people took up their stations, with the main body north of the city and the ambush west of it, and Joshua waited overnight in the valley. The king of Ai saw this, and he and all his army came out very early in the morning to engage Israel in battle at the place in front of the Arabah, not knowing that there was an ambush behind the city . . .

. . . Joshua and the main body of the Israelites fled toward the wilderness, pretending defeat, until the last of the soldiers in the city had been called out to pursue them. Since they were drawn away from the city, with everyone pursuing Joshua, not a soldier remained in Ai or Bethel. They abandoned the city, leaving it open, as they pursued Israel.”

(8: 10-17)



That's a brilliant plan! The men of Ai think that Joshua's 5,000 men will come charging, "high diddle, diddle; straight up the middle" as they did before, and then the Israelites will turn and run, drawing all the men of Ai out of the city to chase them down the hill.

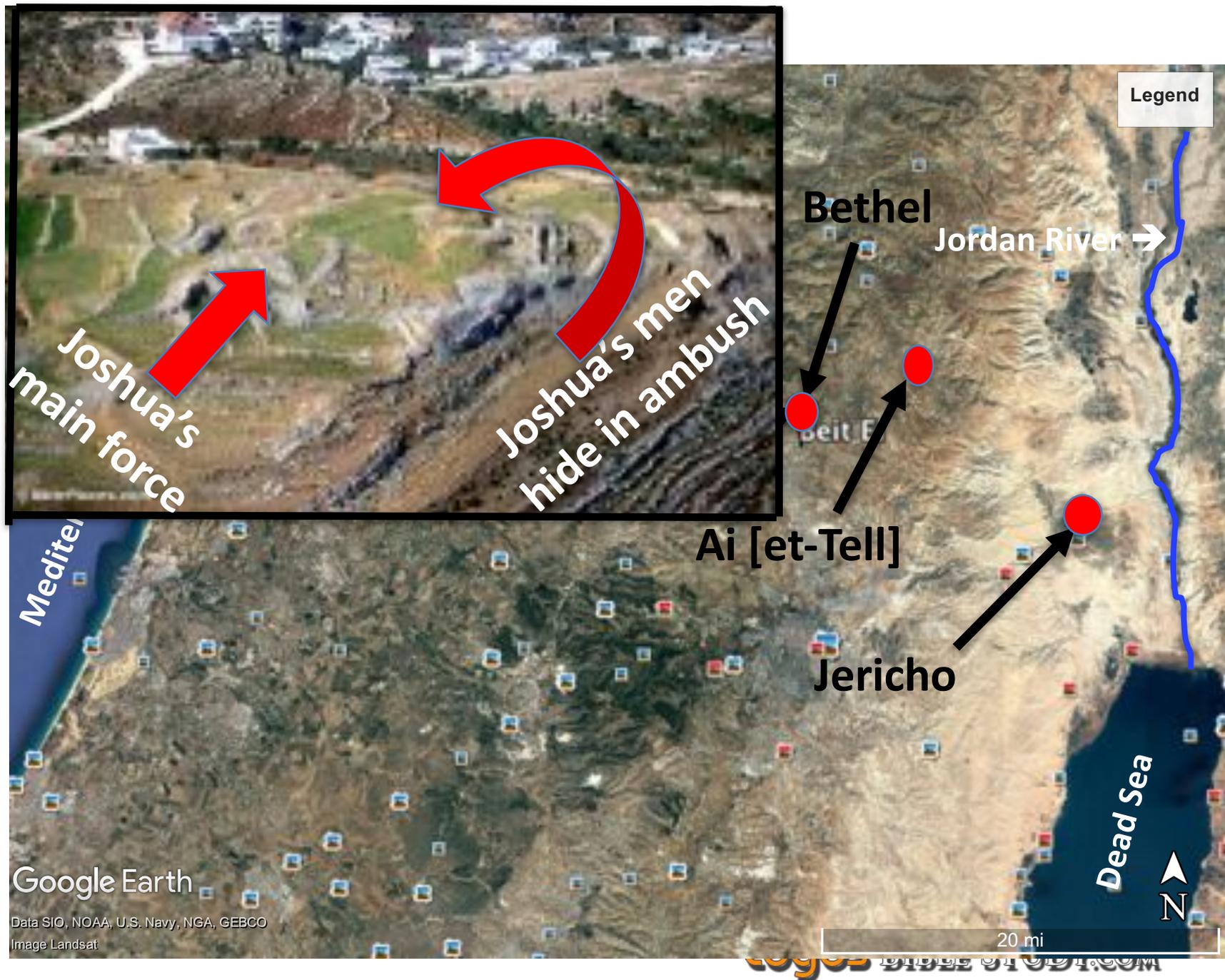


And then Joshua will spring the ambush!



That is clever!

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“Then the Lord directed Joshua: Stretch out the javelin in your hand toward Ai, for I will deliver it into your power. Joshua stretched out the javelin in his hand toward the city, and as soon as he did so, the men in ambush rose from their post, rushed in, captured the city, and immediately set it on fire. By the time the army of Ai looked back, the smoke from the city was going up to the heavens. Escape in any direction was impossible, because the Israelites retreating toward the wilderness now turned on their pursuers; for when Joshua and the main body of Israelites saw that the city had been taken by ambush and was going up in smoke, they struck back at the forces of Ai. Since those in the city came out to intercept them, Ai’s army was hemmed in by Israelites on both sides, who cut them down without any fugitives or survivors except the king, whom they took alive and brought to Joshua.”

(8: 18-23)

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**Upper Register:
Joshua puts Ai
“under the ban” →**

**Lower Register:
The Gibeonite
deception
(Joshua 9: 3-27) →**



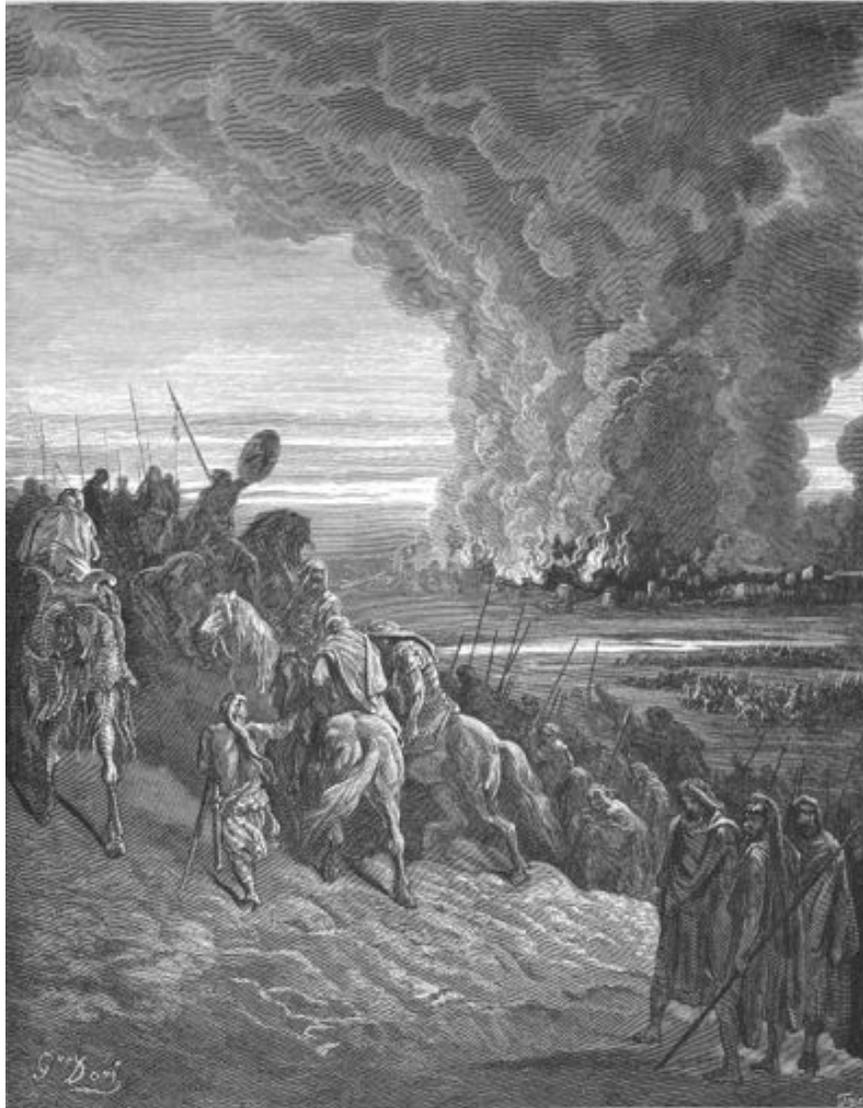
**“Joshua Defeats Ai,” *The Crusader Bible* (illumination on parchment, Ms. M.638, fol. 10v), c. 1240s.
The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.**

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“When Israel finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open, who had pursued them into the wilderness, and all of them to the last man fell by the sword, then all Israel returned and put to the sword those inside the city. There fell that day a total of twelve thousand men and women, the entire population of Ai. Joshua kept the javelin in his hand stretched out until he had carried out the ban on all the inhabitants of Ai. However, the Israelites took for themselves as plunder the livestock and the spoil of that city, according to the command of the Lord issued to Joshua. Then Joshua destroyed Ai by fire, reducing it to an everlasting mound of ruins, as it remains today. He had the king of Ai hanged on a tree until evening; then at sunset Joshua ordered the body removed from the tree and cast at the entrance of the city gate, where a great heap of stones was piled up over it, which remains to the present day.”

(8: 24-29)

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Gustave Doré. “Joshua Burns the Town of Ai” (engraving) in *La Grande Bible de Tours*, 1866.

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The conquest of Ai →



King of Ai brought before Joshua (left), and hanged (right) →



← The Gibeonite Deception (Joshua 9: 3-27)



Panels from a casket that illustrate Joshua's conquest of Ai (Ivory), A.D. c. 900-1000. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



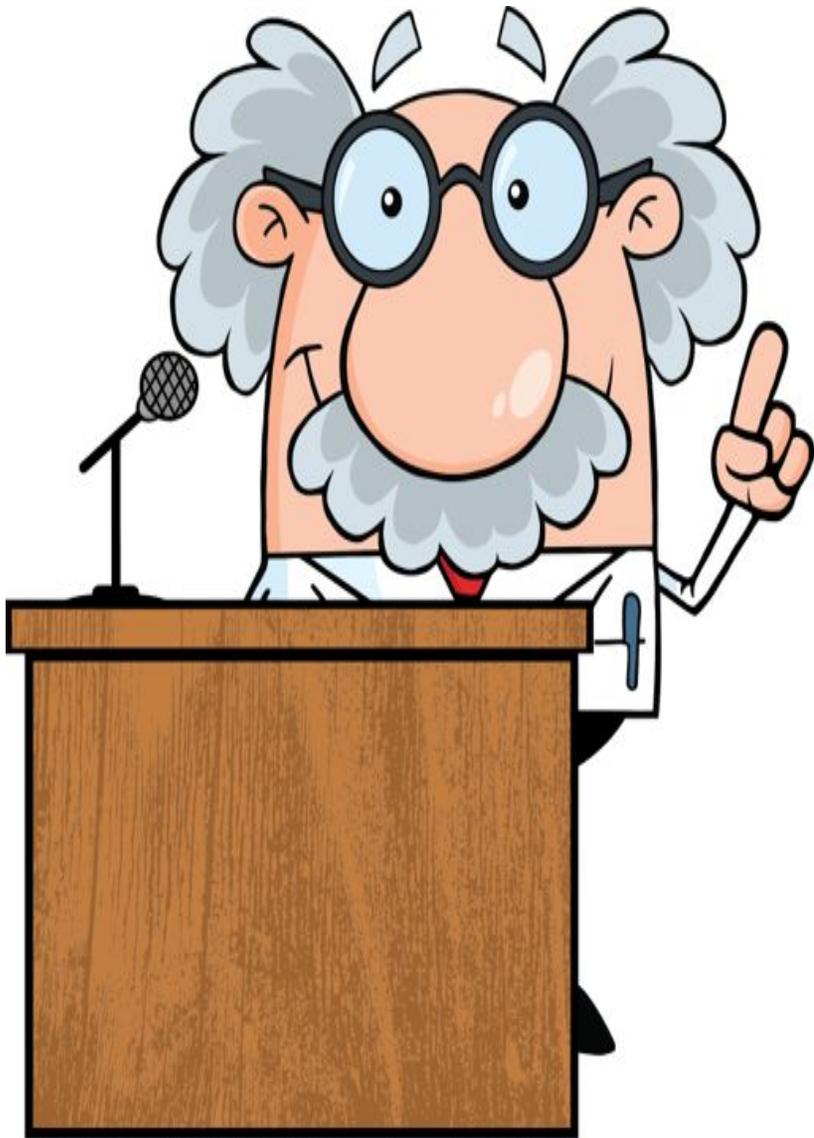
We should be reminded once again that placing a city “under the ban” means the total destruction of everything belonging to the enemy, including the killing of every man, woman and child.

The Hebrew word translated “under the ban” is *herem* [“khe’-rem”], from the Semitic root *H-R-M*, meaning “devoted to God.”

That is God’s command for ALL conquered peoples in the Promised Land, as Deuteronomy makes clear:

“In the cities of these peoples that the Lord, your God, is giving you as a heritage, you shall not leave a single soul alive. You must put them all **under the ban**—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—just as the Lord, your God, has commanded you, so that they do not teach you to do all the abominations that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord, your God.”

(20: 16-18)

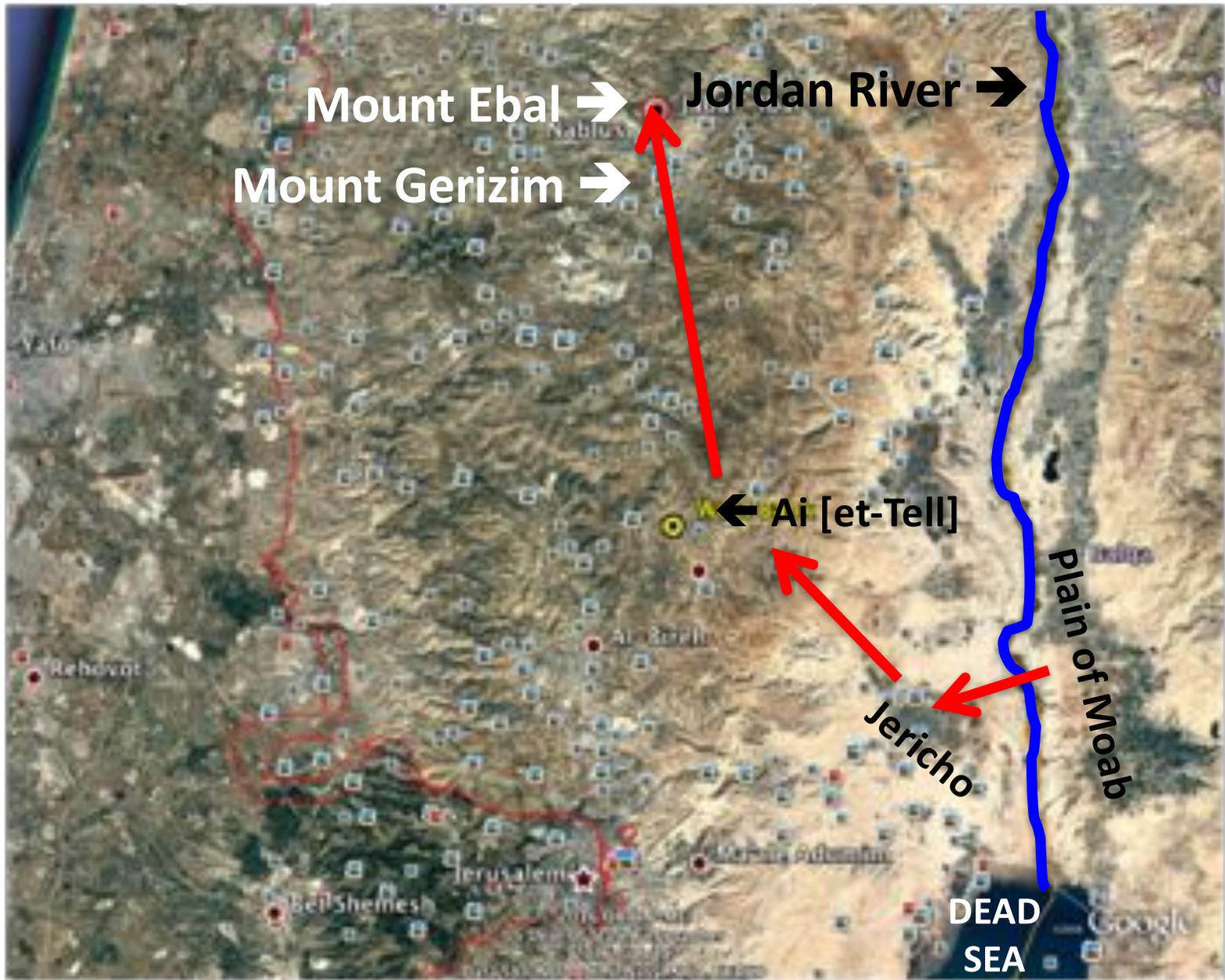


With Jericho and Ai conquered and placed “under the ban,” Joshua moves his troops north to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim to fulfill what Moses commanded in Deuteronomy 27: 9-13.

“Moses, with the levitical priests, then said to all Israel: Be silent, Israel, and listen! This day you have become the people of the Lord, your God. You shall obey the voice of the Lord, your God, and keep his commandments and statutes which I am giving you today.

That same day Moses commanded the people, saying: When you cross the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.”

(27: 9-13)





Biblical Town of Shechem
(Modern-day Nablus)

← **Mount Ebal**
(Curses)

About 3 miles

← **Mount Gerizim**
(Blessings)

“Later, on Mount Ebal, Joshua built to the Lord, the God of Israel, an altar of unhewn stones on which no iron tool had been used, just as Moses, the servant of the Lord, had commanded the Israelites, as recorded in the book of the law. On this altar they sacrificed burnt offerings to the Lord and made communion sacrifices. There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua inscribed upon the stones a copy of the law written by Moses. And all Israel, resident alien and native alike, with their elders, officers, and judges, stood on either side of the ark facing the levitical priests who were carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord. Half of them were facing Mount Gerizim and half Mount Ebal, just as Moses, the servant of the Lord, had first commanded for the blessing of the people of Israel . . .



Stone altar on Mount Ebal.

Source: www.bible.ca

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. . . Then were read aloud all the words of the law, the blessings and the curses, exactly as written in the book of the law. Every single word that Moses had commanded, Joshua read aloud to the entire assembly, including the women and children, and the resident aliens among them.”

(8: 30-35)

Questions for discussion and thought

1. As we begin the story of Ai we read that Achan had stolen items from Jericho, a city that God had placed “under the ban.” Why are we told this in the very first verse of the story?
2. How does Joshua respond to the Israelite’s initial defeat at Ai?
3. Achan, indeed, stole “a beautiful Babylonian mantle, two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight,” but why was his entire family—as well as all his animals and livestock—killed, and not just him?
4. What factors contribute to Joshua’s victory in his second attack on Ai?
5. After his victory at Ai, why does Joshua move the Israelites north to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal?

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