WHY THE WALLS OF JERICHO CAME TUMBLING DOWN

SHUBERT SPERO

What follows is an attempt to give a rational explanation for the fall of the walls of Jericho following the siege of the city by the Israelite forces led by Joshua. The theory I wish to propose is designed not to replace the textual account but to complement it. That is, to suggest a reality that does not contradict the official version but which may have been behind it and for whose actual occurrence several hints may be found in the text. The fall of the walls of Jericho was indeed a wondrous event and the text properly sees God as the agent in the sense that it was He who inspired Joshua to come up with his ingenious plan.

Our theory suggests a connection between the two outstanding features of the story: (1) The adventure of the two Israelite spies in the house of Rahab the inn-keeper, before the Israelites crossed the Jordan, and (2) the mystifying circling of the city by the priestly procession for the seven days preceding the tumbling down of the walls.

Let us first review the salient facts involved in the incident of the spies. We are told that Rahab’s dwelling was part of the city wall and that in the wall she dwelt (Josh. 2:15) with a window that looked out on the area outside the city. The spies avoid capture by the Canaanite authorities through the efforts of Rahab and, in gratitude, they promise the woman that she and her family will not be harmed during the impending attack, and instruct her to gather them all into her house and hang scarlet threads in the window. She then lets the spies down by a rope through the window enabling them to escape. After returning to Joshua, they report that the morale of the Canaanites within the city is rather low and that the city is ripe for conquest.

What was the intended purpose of the scarlet threads in the window which, it will be recalled, faced outward from the city? Clearly, the spies did not know then of the plan to take the city. Certainly, they did not know of one

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which would bring down the walls of the city, inasmuch as Rahab's house was inside the city wall! They believed that the Israelite attack would be a conventional one, with an attempt to scale or breach the walls from the outside, and that the scarlet threads in the window would serve to deflect the attack from that section of the wall.

In the text, the rescue of Rahab and her group, described as having taken place after the walls have fallen and the city is conquered, is recounted as follows:

*And Joshua said to the two men that had spied out the land, 'Go to the house of the woman innkeeper and bring her out of there, the woman and all that she has.' And the young men, the spies, went and brought out Rahab and her father and mother and brothers (6:22-23).*

Even on the assumption that the section of the wall in which Rahab's dwelling was situated remained standing, it is hard to believe that during all of the hard, brutal fighting that went on within the city Rahab's house could have remained untouched, particularly when the only identifying mark was the scarlet threads which faced outside the walls. I, therefore, wish to suggest that while Joshua 6:22-23 is an accurate account of what was said and what happened, the events actually occurred at an earlier time when the Israelites were still in their camp at Shittim on the east side of the Jordan River and before Jericho became tightly shut up (6:1)

In order to appreciate the plan that developed, we must remind ourselves that in that period defensive systems had the edge over what was available in offensive weapons and equipment. That is to say, the conquest of fortified cities posed a formidable problem for an attacking army, particularly if it was a "people's army" without specialized equipment. Of the five different methods discussed by Yadin for overcoming fortified – that is, walled – cities, the only feasible one open to Joshua was by "ruse." So what happened was this:

After receiving the detailed report from the spies on the low morale of the Canaanites and the strategic location of the house of Rahab, Joshua realized that the wall, whose upper portion was made of mud dried bricks, might not be very thick at that point. Probably her "house" had been built originally as a dwelling and later incorporated as part of the city wall. Therefore, given suf-
ficient time, a few experienced people working quietly from the inside could undermine that section of the wall so that it could be made to collapse at a given signal. Thus, during some dark night the spies retraced the steps of their escape route, entered Rahab's house through the window with the scarlet threads and in small groups evacuated her and her family, and brought in a number of special forces – a kind of engineering corps – with orders to begin undermining that section of the wall.

According to the text, the precise instructions for the procession which circumambulated the city and the promise that the walls would then fall, were given by God to Joshua as the Israelites surrounded the city (6:2-5). This is completely consistent with the theory that after Joshua put the special unit in place in Rahab's house in the wall, a particular plan began to take shape in his mind which was to turn out to be quite effective. True to the principles of prophetic historiography, the text in 6:2-5 describes what happened as being inspired by God. This has been called the doctrine of "double causation" for which clear examples can be found in the Bible itself. Thus, while the splitting of the Sea of Reeds is an overt miracle attributed to God (Ex. 14:30-31), the text makes it clear that the immediate cause was a strong east wind that blew all night (14:21).

Similarly, the prediction of the providential crossing of the Jordan by the Israelites in which the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, even the waters that come down from above which shall stand in one heap (Josh. 3:13) first comes as an announcement from Joshua to be prepared for wonders from the Lord (3:5), followed by a statement from God to Joshua that on that day, he (Joshua) will be magnified in the eyes of all Israel (3:7). However, the prediction of what precisely is going to happen comes from Joshua (3:13). Thus, the texts are perfectly compatible with the possibility that Joshua was able to dam temporarily the waters upriver near Adam, perhaps by pulling down some overhanging cliff. As a general rule, then, this means that when the occurrence of a particular event or condition is attributed to God, that does not preclude the possibility of finding a natural explanation as well, and vice versa.

Whether devised by God or Joshua, what was the purpose of having the procession parade around the city daily for six days? There is no evidence either in our text or other sources that the procession itself was supposed to
exert a magical effect; that is, that the walls were somehow brought down by Divine power in the Ark carrying the Tablets of the Covenant, aroused by the shofar blasts of the priests and focused by the seven circumambulations. Therefore, what was the purpose of these marches?

Of what was this procession comprised? It was led by a vanguard [halutz] of 40,000 fighting men, followed by seven priests with ram's horns, followed by the Ark of the Covenant carried by priests, followed by a rear guard of armed men, each equipped with a shofar. They were to make an identical circuit of the city for six days, with the climax to come some time during the seventh day at some point during the seventh circuit with a loud sustained sounding of the shofars, followed by a tremendous shout by all the Israelites!

Herzog and Gichon cite several instances from later military history in which particular troop movements are conducted which appear to the enemy to be preparations for a large attack. At that point, they quickly mobilize and concentrate their forces so as not to be caught unprepared. This is done repeatedly, but no attack comes. Concluding that those particular troop movements are not threatening, the enemy stops responding with a general mobilization and relaxes its guard, only to be disastrously surprised the next time.

The already demoralized defenders of Jericho watched the slow moving procession from the walls with a mixture of fear and puzzlement, not knowing whether this was a religious ceremony designed to cast a spell upon them or the prologue to an attack by the armed men with the priests there for spiritual support. Initially, as the fighting men circled the city, the main body of the city's defenders circled the ramparts in tandem to be directly opposite the halutz should they suddenly attack that section of the wall. However, when after six days there had not been an attack, the civilian population gradually resumed their regular routine. The bulk of the defenders returned to their barracks while lookouts kept watch on the procession.

Like so many other military strategies, Joshua's plan depended for its success upon timing, coordination and the element of surprise. The crucial element was that on the seventh day the Israelites inside the house of Rahab were to collapse that section of the wall precisely at the moment when the halutz was passing directly opposite, facing the window with the scarlet threads. That is exactly what happened! As the ram's horns were sounded and that section of the wall collapsed in a cloud of dust and debris and the Israe-
lites shouted with a deafening roar, the men of the halutz raced straight ahead to enter through the breached wall to battle the surprised and disorganized enemy.

At the same time, the rest of the Israelite fighting men, who were in their positions all around the city, advanced in a general attack threatening every part of the wall. This diverted the attention of the defenders from the breach in the wall as they were now called to their assigned positions along the ramparts. This more detailed account fits into the general description in the text:

> And it came to pass when the people heard the sound of the shofar, that the people shouted with a great shout and the wall fell down flat [literally "under itself"] and the people went up into the city, every man straight before him and they conquered the city (6:20).

The word used to describe the fall of the wall suggests that it did not fall over but collapsed in on itself; that is, sank down in its place, which is what would have happened if it was a brick wall which had been undermined.

Ruse or deception or an unexpected stratagem has been used in one form or another in almost all of the wars of history, ancient and modern. They have been particularly useful for the side lacking conventional weaponry or adequate manpower, which was precisely the situation in which the not always united tribes of Israel found themselves during the period of Joshua and the Judges. With a meager material culture which might have been adequate for a people moving through the barren lands of the Sinai and the deserts of east of the Jordan, they were no match against fortified cities, professional armies, or newly developed weapons. And so, recourse was had to the innovative and unconventional.

In the case of the conquest of Jericho, the stratagem may have been conceived in the mind of Joshua bin-Nun, but the inspiration emanated from the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel (5:13-15) Such was the outlook of the men who wrote the scriptural history of the people of Israel.

NOTES
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2. It is possible that the "plan" came to Joshua during the mysterious vision he had of the Captain of the hosts of the Lord (5:13-15) which, immediately after in the text, is presented as specific instructions from God to Joshua (6:2-6).

3. It is significant that Rahab placed the scarlet threads in the window as soon as she let the spies down. See 2:21.

4. David Kimchi (d. 1235) one of the classical commentators, observes that since according to the text the spies found Rahab and her family safe in her "house" after the conquest of the city we are compelled to say that not all of the walls of Jericho tumbled down.


6. Ibid p.16

7. Something very similar actually happened in that area in 1927. See the discussion in Herzog and Gichon, p.30.

8. This was the force sent by the two-and-a-half tribes (Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh) that received their land on the east side of the Jordan, to help the other tribes, conquer their portions.


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**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR**

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2006

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