

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Joshua: Jericho, Ai, Gibeon, War Session 19, 6-min. Video Overview

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You know the story, right? It's legendary. The trumpets blare, the people give this massive shout, and the walls of a mighty city just come crashing down. But what if the story of Joshua at Jericho isn't just a simple tale of faith? What if it's actually a gateway to understanding how we wrestle with ancient history itself? Today, we're going to use this famous battle to explore the really fascinating, and often conflicting, relationship between ancient texts, modern archaeology, and some seriously tough moral questions.

Okay, so here's our roadmap. First, we'll revisit that famous story of Jericho's walls. Then, we're going to get our hands dirty with the archaeologists and see what their, uh, conflicting evidence actually tells us.

After that, we'll tackle a pretty wild celestial puzzle—did the sun really stand still? And finally, we're going to confront the toughest question of all—the morality of the whole thing. Alright, first up, the account that's been told for millennia. I mean, this is a story of absolute faith leading to a miraculous victory, where the Israelites are told to march around this heavily fortified city for seven days, following a very specific—and, let's be honest, kind of strange—set of divine instructions.

And this is the climax. It's such a powerful cinematic moment, isn't it? Where sound and faith literally bring down massive stone fortifications. It's presented as this clear, undeniable sign of divine intervention—a moment that just completely defies all the conventional rules of warfare.

And right here, this is where a simple story just explodes into a really complex historical investigation. This question gets right to the heart of what we're exploring today. What happens when the physical evidence you dig up from the ground seems to directly contradict what the ancient text says? So, let's dig into that evidence.

You know, the ground at Jericho has basically been a scientific battlefield for over a hundred years. With experts changing their minds, fiercely debating what they found, it's a real saga. Now, this is so interesting because it just demolishes the idea that science gives us one simple, final answer.

Think about it. In the 30s, an archaeologist says, I've proven the Bible. Then by the 60s, the world's leading expert says, nope, I've disproven it.

And then in the 90s, another scholar comes along and basically accuses her of cooking the books. It's a total rollercoaster. So here's the core of the fight.

Dame Kenyon concluded the walls that were found were from a much, much earlier period. But then, decades later, Bryant Wood reexamines her notes and argues she had a fudge

factor. He claims she ignored key evidence, like very specific pottery styles and stuff found in nearby cemeteries, that pointed to a later date, all because it didn't fit her theory.

So, what's the big takeaway from all this? Well, it's that we have to be incredibly careful. Archaeology gives us invaluable clues, for sure. But it's an interpretive science, working with super incomplete data.

It's not a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down machine for ancient stories. Okay, on to our second puzzle, and it is a famous one. Later in the Book of Joshua, he supposedly commands the sun and the moon to stop in the sky.

What in the world could that actually mean? Before we even get to the miracle part, you have to put yourself in their shoes. These soldiers just pulled an all-nighter, marching 20 miles straight uphill. That's a climb of over 3,000 feet.

They are completely and utterly spent. So why on earth would their leader ask for a longer day of brutal, hand-to-hand combat? It just doesn't seem to make any sense. And this is where it gets really cool.

So, view number one is the classic one. A massive cosmic miracle. But the original Hebrew word for stand still can also mean be silent.

And that opens up a second view. Maybe Joshua was pleading for relief from the blazing sun, asking God to silence its heat with clouds and hailstones, which the story actually says did appear. And a third, really creative idea suggests Joshua was asking for a bad omen in the sky that would, according to ancient beliefs, just terrify the enemy into running away.

One lecturer actually assigned these probabilities, which is pretty funny. And yeah, the math is intentionally wrong. His point was to show that, you know, while the literal view is the standard one, these other ideas are really compelling because they fit the context of an exhausted army that needed a break, not more time to fight.

All right, let's move on to our final topic. And it is by far the most difficult part of the story. Trying to understand the command to completely destroy the city of Jericho.

The key concept here is a Hebrew word, harem. It doesn't just mean destroy. It has this idea that something is devoted entirely to God.

And in this case, that devotion happens through its complete destruction. And this applied to everything. People, animals, even the treasure.

Now, for centuries, theologians have really wrestled with this. They don't frame it as just a simple military conquest. Instead, they try to understand it as a form of divine judgment, or maybe a really radical act to prevent religious corruption from seeping into Israel, or even as an expression of God's ultimate authority over life and death.

Now, these aren't easy answers, but they are attempts to make sense of a deeply troubling command. And this right here is a crucial piece of context that often gets missed. Despite its absolutely brutal reputation, this practice of harem was not the standard operating procedure for the Israelite army.

The text only commands it in a handful of very specific cases. This suggests that even back then, it was seen as an extreme, exceptional act, not just a general license for total war. Which, of course, leaves us right here.

This is the question that really sits at the heart of the entire debate. And it forces every single reader to grapple with this vast cultural and ethical gulf between their world and ours. So, after all this, what have we learned? It's that engaging with a story like Jericho means you have to embrace its complexity.

It's not about finding simple proofs or disproofs. It's about digging into the debates, weighing the different kinds of evidence, and understanding that history is this living, breathing process of interpretation. And that's the real puzzle, isn't it? The one the walls of Jericho leave for us today.

It's a question about how we fit together the different ways we have of knowing our world, through ancient texts, through faith, and through science. And frankly, that is a question that's much, much bigger than any one ancient city.