

JERICHO

Old Testament Jericho. Jericho, also known as Tel es-Sultan, is located just west of the Jordan River, less than ten miles north of the Dead Sea and about eighteen miles northeast of Jerusalem. Since it is the lowest city on earth, it has semi-tropical weather. In the Old Testament, Jericho is also called “the city of palms” (Judg. 1:16) due to the many palm trees that grow there. It was known for its trade in salt, bitumen, and sulfur, which are all natural products of the Dead Sea. Located near one of the fords of the Jordan River, Jericho was viewed as the gateway from the Transjordan into the land of Canaan. It is considered to be the world’s oldest city (that is still occupied); some archaeologists date the first settlement there to 8000 B.C. In 2010, the city celebrated 10,000 years of existence. (Of course, not all would agree with that dating system, which stretches the biblical data. Among the earliest cities named in the Bible are Enoch, Babylon, and Nineveh [Gen. 4:17; 10:10-11].)

In the Scriptures, Jericho is first mentioned in the book of Numbers where the nation of Israel was in the plains of Moab encamped along the Jordan River. It is not until the book of Joshua that the Israelites crossed the Jordan to start their conquest of the land of Canaan. When they did begin the conquest about 1400 B.C., Jericho was the first city to fall (Josh. 5—6; see 8:2; 10:1, 28, 30). The Israelites marched around the city according to God’s instructions, and on the seventh day he caused the walls to collapse. Rahab the prostitute, along with her family, was spared from destruction because she had hidden the two spies who had scouted the city. It was at Jericho that Achan took the devoted things that had been placed under the ban—a sin which led to the death of his household (Josh. 7:6-26).

The city was not rebuilt until several centuries later. Nevertheless, it was occupied at least some of the time during the intervening years. In the period of the Judges, the Moabites set up a palace there, and King Eglon exacted tribute from the Israelites (Judg. 3:13). God raised up Ehud, a left-handed Benjamite, to throw off Israel’s oppressors. It was later, in the ninth century B.C., that Hiel of Bethel rebuilt the city of Jericho at the cost of his sons’ lives—in fulfillment of Joshua’s curse (1 Kings 16:34; see Josh. 6:26).

After Elijah was translated to heaven, his disciple Elisha stayed at Jericho. The water supply was bad, so Elisha put some salt in a bowl and then threw the salt into the water. The end result was that the water was made pure (2 Kings 2:19-22). Today, the entrance to the Tel has a water supply known as Elisha’s Spring.

Other happenings at Jericho involve the Babylonian captivity of the Jews and the Jews’ return to Judah. When the Babylonians breached the Jerusalem wall in 586 B.C., Zedekiah and

his army fled Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the king was overtaken in the plains of Jericho and made a prisoner (2 Kings 25:5). When the Medo-Persians came to power, some of the Jews returned to Judah, and 345 exiles inhabited Jericho (Ezra 2:34; Neh. 7:36).



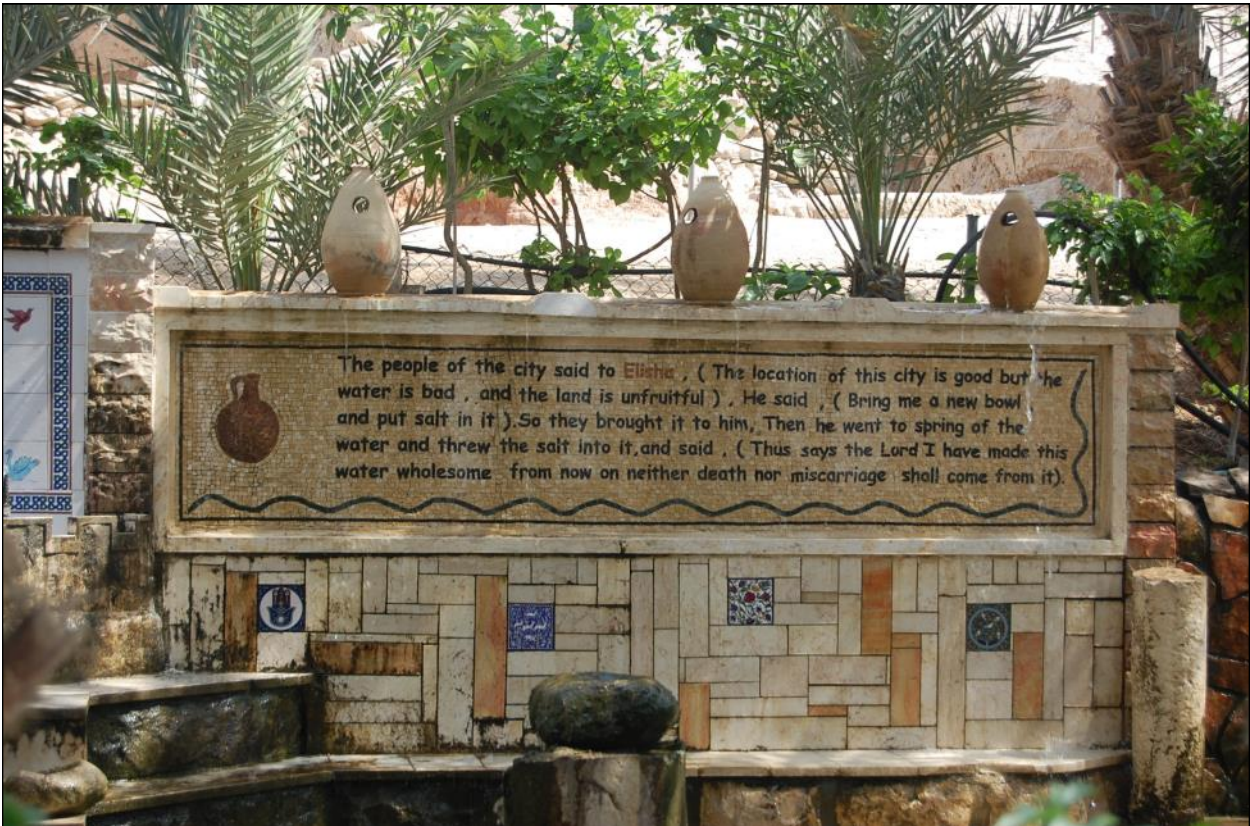
Elisha's Spring Fountain with the Tel in the Background



Jericho is actually about 800 feet below sea level, whereas the Dead Sea shores are 1,300 feet below sea level. Jericho is the lowest city on earth, while the Dead Sea is the lowest place on earth.



Elisha's Spring Water



Excavations of the Tel. The Old Testament tel of Jericho was excavated by John Garstang from 1930 to 1936. He identified a destruction level, known as City IV, which he dated to 1400 B.C. (the beginning of the conquest under Joshua). Later, Kathleen Kenyon undertook further excavations at the site from 1952 to 1958. She concluded from her work that City IV was destroyed about 1550 B.C., not 1400 B.C. as Garstang had figured. She also maintained that no city existed at 1400 B.C., the traditional date of the beginning of the conquest. Most of modern scholarship has accepted Kenyon's analysis, which has caused many to deny the historical account given in the book of Joshua. In more recent years, Dr. Bryant Woods has re-evaluated the evidence (*BAR* [Mar-Apr 1990]: 44-58). Although his conclusions have not been widely accepted, Woods maintains that Garstang's dating was indeed correct. He has presented several insightful parallels between Jericho's excavations and the biblical record.

(1) Jericho was a fortified city (Josh. 2:5, 7, 15; 6:5, 20). The city had a stone retaining wall about fifteen feet high at the base of the tel, with a mud brick wall more than twenty feet high on top of it. Further, another mud brick wall was located at the top of the tel. People not only lived on top of the tel, they also lived between the upper and lower walls. The total population of the city at the time of the attack was likely a few thousand people.

(2) The invasion occurred in the springtime during the harvest season, just after the Passover (Josh. 2:6; 3:15; 5:10). Interestingly, both Garstang and Kenyon discovered large quantities of grain in the ruins of houses, which corresponds to this season.

(3) Jericho was defeated swiftly, in only seven days (Josh. 6:1, 15). The Canaanites had an abundance of grain; hardly any of it had been consumed. The Israelites did not take the grain because the city was under the ban—that is, it was devoted to God (Josh. 6:17-19).

(4) The walls of Jericho fell down flat (Josh. 6:20; Heb. 11:30). Kenyon found a pile of mud bricks at the base of the tel, which had apparently come from the upper wall.

(5) After the Israelites conquered the city, they set it on fire (Josh. 6:24). Kenyon discovered walls and floors of houses that were blackened as the result of fire.

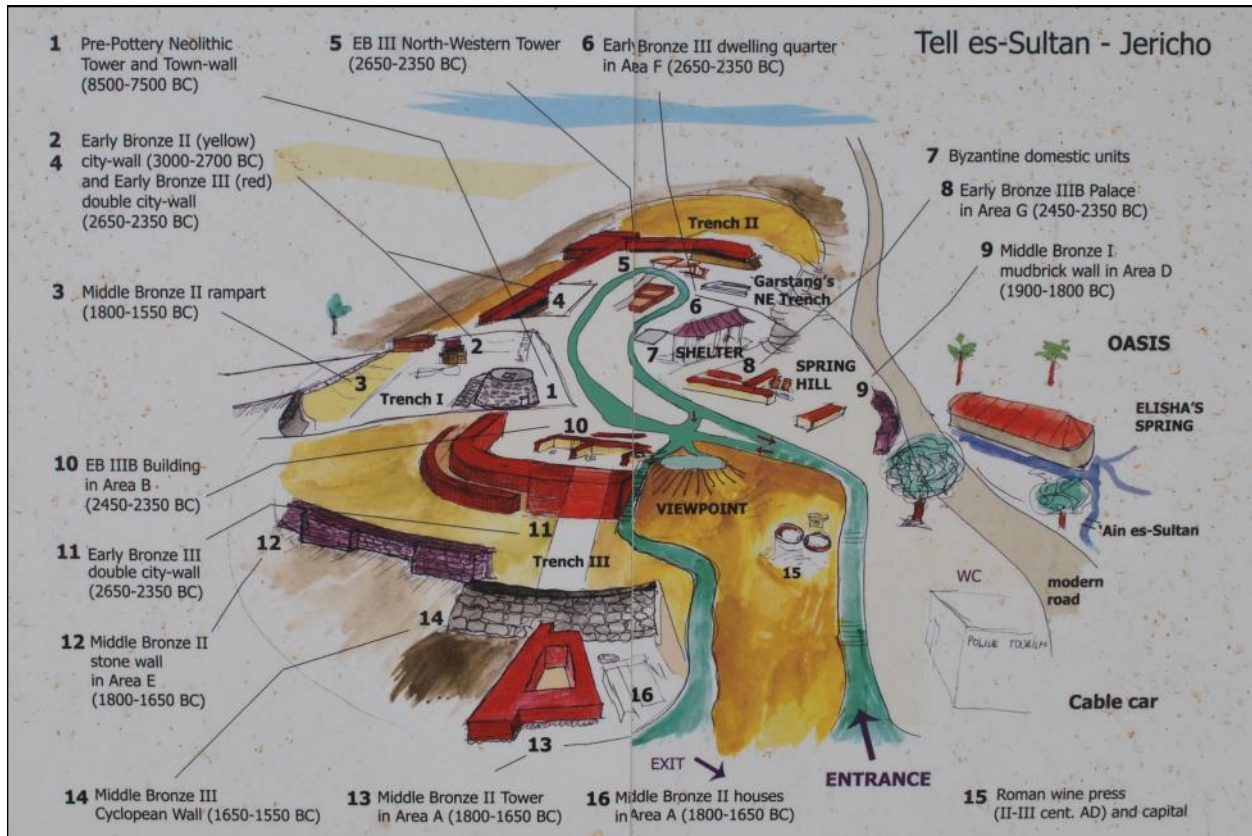
(6) Rahab's house was built either next to or as a part of the city wall (Josh. 2:15). Several houses were discovered that were adjacent to the wall in the lower part of the city. This was likely a poorer section of the city—a place where a prostitute would live.

(7) The tombs outside the city have yielded Egyptian scarabs (small amulets shaped like beetles) dating from the eighteenth to the early fourteenth centuries B.C. This fact challenges Kenyon's contention that Jericho was unoccupied after 1550 B.C.

(8) Excavators at Jericho found evidence of earthquake activity. While the Bible simply attributes the collapse of the wall to divine activity (Josh. 6:2-5), God may have used an earthquake to achieve the results. The Jordan River Valley lies on a major fault line.



Old Testament Jericho (Questionable Dates Below Reflect Kenyon's Research)





This ancient stone tower, which has been dated 8500-7500 B.C., measures about 26 feet high and wide. A staircase led from its bottom to the top.



Excavated in more recent times (1997-1999), this building was devoted to food production. It has been dated to 2450-2350 B.C.



Reconstruction of a Tomb Found at Jericho During Kenyon's Excavations
(Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem)

The original tomb was dated to 2000-1600 B.C. This reconstruction uses the original materials, including skeletal bones, pottery, and even wooden furniture. It was apparently a family tomb, being reused several times. Previous skeletons had been pushed to the sides of the tomb, whereas the preeminent position is a bed of stones and bricks.



Vase Shaped Like a Human Head
17th-16th Century B.C.
(Rockefeller Museum)



Excavations from the Lower Town and Fortifications (Middle Bronze Period)



Mount of the Forty. West of the Old Testament site of Jericho is the traditional Mount of Temptation, also known as Jebel Quarantal (“Mount of the Forty”). The mountain receives its name from the duration of Jesus’ wilderness experience—forty days (Mk. 1:12-13). This location corresponds in latitude with the traditional site of Jesus’ baptism at Qaser el-Yahud. If this mountain is correct, it marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, where he was tempted by Satan. Halfway up the mountain, there is a Greek Orthodox monastery. This mountain is likely the area to which the two spies fled after leaving Rahab’s house (Josh. 2:22).



Mount of the Forty with Greek Orthodox Monastery



New Testament Jericho / Herod's Palace. The New Testament city of Jericho (known today as Tulul Abu el-Alayig) was located about a mile or two southwest of the ancient tel. During the Intertestamental period, the newer site of Jericho was chosen by the Hasmoneans as a place for a winter palace. The climate was much warmer in Jericho than other places, making it a good winter home for wealthy rulers. Compared to Jerusalem's chilly, damp winters, the climate is 20 to 30 degrees warmer in Jericho. The reason for this is that Jerusalem is 2,500 feet above sea level whereas Jericho is more than 800 feet below sea level.

The Hasmoneans built a palace north of Wadi Qelt, southwest of Tel Jericho, probably during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.). Later, Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.) also built palaces in this area. His activity had three phases. (1) Herod rebuilt the Hasmonean palace that was some distance north of the wadi and called it Cypros after his mother (Josephus *Wars* 1.21.4, 9). It had a double swimming pool, which is likely the place where he had his brother-in-law Aristobulus III drowned (Josephus *Antiquities* 15.3.3). (2) His second palace was built to the south of the wadi. (3) Herod later built a more elaborate palace straddling Wadi Qelt. On the northern side of the wadi, the buildings included a reception hall, courtyard, and bathhouse. On the southern side, there were sunken gardens, a huge swimming pool, and a building (perhaps a bathhouse). The northern and southern sides of the palace were connected by a bridge built over the wadi. (See the schematic in McRay, 135.) At new Jericho, Herod also built an aqueduct, a theater, a gymnasium, and a hippodrome (*Antiquities* 17.6.3, 5). The grand palace at Jericho was likely the place where Herod died; his body was then transported in an elaborate funeral procession to Herodium and buried there (*Wars* 1.33.8-9).

The treacherous, winding descent from Jerusalem to Jericho—a drop of over 3,300 feet in elevation—is the background for the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37). In this story, Jesus told about a man who was traveling on that road when he was attacked by bandits. The rough terrain provided many places for such criminals to hide out and to make surprise attacks. This was one reason why people usually traveled in groups, especially Jewish pilgrims going to the feasts in Jerusalem.

The fact that there were two places known by the name Jericho in the first century—the ancient tel and the modern city—explains an apparent contradiction: Mark says Jesus healed a blind man (Bartimaeus) while *leaving* Jericho (Mk. 10:46), whereas Luke says that the Lord was *approaching* Jericho when he healed him (Lk. 18:35). The Lord was leaving Old Testament Jericho and approaching New Testament Jericho on his way up to Jerusalem.

As Jesus entered New Testament Jericho, he encountered Zacchaeus, a short man who had climbed up in a sycamore-fig tree to see Jesus above the crowd (Lk. 19:1-10). The grace of Jesus led this chief tax collector to repent of his fraud and to experience salvation.





Modern Jericho





Muslim Mosque