

What is the significance of Jericho in the Bible?

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Jericho is believed to be one of the oldest cities in the world. In the Bible, Jericho is best known as the location of an astonishing miracle God performed. Jericho was the first city conquered by Israel after crossing the Jordan River and occupying the Promised Land (Joshua 5:13–6:23).

Jericho's location was key to its significance. The city was situated in the lower Jordan Valley, just west of the Jordan River and about ten miles northwest of the Dead Sea. It sat in the broadest part of the Jordan plain more than 800 feet below sea level and nearly 3,500 feet below Jerusalem, which was only 17 miles away. This geographical detail explains why Jesus said in His parable that the good Samaritan “went down from Jerusalem to Jericho” (Luke 10:30).

In dramatic contrast to its desert surroundings, Jericho thrived as a fertile, spring-fed oasis. In the Old Testament, it was often called the “City of Palms” for its abundance of palm trees (Deuteronomy 34:3; Judges 1:16; 3:13; 2 Chronicles 28:15). Strategically located as a border city, ancient Jericho controlled important migration routes between the north and south, and the east and west. Eventually, the town became part of the allotment of the tribe of Benjamin (Joshua 18:12, 21).

After the death of Moses, God selected Joshua, son of Nun, to lead the people of Israel. Under the Lord's direction, they entered Canaan and began to take possession of the land. The first city standing in Israel's way was Jericho, a secure fortress with high, formidable walls. Joshua sent spies to investigate the city. Rahab the harlot, knowing

that Israel's God was going to overthrow Jericho, hid the spies and later helped them escape (Joshua 2).

Before the battle of Jericho, God gave Joshua specific instructions for the men of war to march in silence around the city once each day for six days. The priests were to walk with them, blowing ram's horns and carrying the ark of the covenant as a sign of God's presence among them. On the seventh day, they were to march around the city seven times. At the appropriate signal, the priests were to blow their trumpets, and the people were to give a mighty shout. They did exactly as Joshua commanded, and on the seventh day the walls of Jericho crumbled. The soldiers went in and took the city, destroying it completely. Only Rahab and her family were spared.

As the first city to fall in the conquest of Canaan, the whole of it was devoted to the Lord (Joshua 6:17). The people of Israel were to take no spoils of war; Joshua gave a clear command that "all the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury" (verse 19). In this way, Jericho was a "tithe" to the Lord who gave them the victory. God's people were to honor Him with the firstfruits of the conquest. Achan violated this order and brought ruin on himself and his family.

After the destruction of Jericho, Joshua placed a curse on anyone who might rebuild the city (Joshua 6:26). Jericho remained unoccupied until the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, about 500 years later. Then Joshua's word was fulfilled when Hiel of Bethel rebuilt the city, at the cost of the lives of two of his sons (1 Kings 16:34).

Jericho is mentioned briefly in the book of Judges, which says that Jericho served as a

provincial outpost for Eglon the King of Moab who held Israel under tribute for 18 years (Judges 3:13). In 1 Chronicles 19:5, King David sent word for his mistreated delegates to remain in Jericho until their beards regrew. In 2 Kings 2:4-18, Jericho appears to have been the home of a “school of the prophets.”

Also reported at Jericho was Elisha’s miraculous purifying of a spring (2 Kings 2:19-22). During the reign of Ahaz, a group of prisoners was spared, clothed, fed, and cared for at Jericho (2 Chronicles 28:15). The final Old Testament mention of events in Jericho was the capture of King Zedekiah after fleeing the Chaldean army (2 Kings 25:2-7; Jeremiah 39:5; 52:8).

Ezra 2:34 and Nehemiah 7:36 report that the number of Jericho’s inhabitants after the return from exile under Zerubbabel was 345. These “son of Jericho” participated in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Jericho played a minor role in the ministry of Jesus. The Lord healed two blind men near the city of Jericho (Matthew 20:29-34). He also encountered Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, while passing through Jericho (Luke 19:1-10). When Jesus dined in the home of Zacchaeus, He was probably visiting one of the finest houses in Jericho. The gospels seem to indicate that Jericho, an affluent city in Christ’s day, had many beggars (Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43).

The Jericho of New Testament times was built by Herod more than a mile to the south of the Old Testament location, at the mouth of the Wadi Qilt. Today, the modern city of Jericho includes both sites.