

Joshua 8:1-35

Victory at Ai

In 2013 an amulet in the form of a scarab or dung beetle was discovered at an archaeological site believed to be Ai. These amulets were also used as official seals. On the underside is inscribed the name of Thutmose III who conquered the area in 1485 B.C., a generation before the Exodus. This shows that Ai was a real place, paying tribute to Egypt at that time.

But before getting into the story, we're confronted with a question: How big was the Israelite army, and how large were the populations of the Canaanite cities?

Biblical Numbers and the Term '*Eleph*'

Languages change and meanings can evolve. Consider the English word "prevent."

- **1 Thessalonians 4:15** - "... we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep."

More than 300 years ago, "prevent" was used in the King James Version above in the literal but obsolete sense of "to come or go before," "to anticipate," not in the modern sense of "to hinder or stop."

We run into another good example of this kind of change in the Hebrew word "*eleph*."

Joshua 8:24-25 says 12,000 men and women, all the people of Ai, fell in this final attack on the city. But Ai was a city of probably less than seven acres, so it likely had less than 1,000 inhabitants.

Is the Bible wrong here? No.

We've discussed before the uncertainty in the Hebrew biblical text about the confusion over the meaning of numbers.

The Hebrew word *elef* or *eleph* is usually translated as 1,000. But it can actually have four different meanings:

- 1. A general reference to one thousand units of any number of objects such as chariots, horsemen, shekels, people, sheep, or goats (1 Sam 13:15; 17:5; 23:23; 25:2)
- 2. A general reference to a thousand soldiers in a military context (1 Sam 4:2, 10; 6:19; 13:2; 15:4; 18:7-8; 21:11; 24:2; 26:2; 29:2, 5)
- 3. A particular reference to a military company or fighting unit (1 Sam 8:12; 17:18; 18:13; 22:7)

- 4. A particular clan or extended family unit that exists as a sub-group within tribes (Judges 6:15; 1 Sam 10:19)

See **Micah 5:2** - "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands (*elephim*) of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

There weren't thousands of towns in Judah. Here *elephim* means "contingents, clans" or "sub-group" without a clear number value. The NIV and others translate it as "clans."

Many scholars believe that at the time of Moses and Joshua, "*eleph*" as a military term meant or stood for something like a platoon, or a fighting unit drawn from each tribe. Many scholars agree that the size could vary depending on the particular tribe, and it usually lies in the range of 5 to 17 men with an average value of approximately 10. But it could also be somewhat larger.

Over centuries the military use of the term "*eleph*" changed, becoming standardized by King David's time to mean 1,000.

Moses's census (preserved in **Numbers 1 and 2**) listed the population of each tribe's fighting men in three categories (see **Numbers 1:18**): by tribe, by family, by the exact number of men.

For example, **Numbers 1:21** lists the number of fighting men of the tribe of Reuben as 46,000. But this can also mean 46 "*elephim*" consisting of 500 men each.

The total of the census in **Numbers 2:32** is "six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty." Properly translated, Moses's census actually adds up to 598 units totaling 5,550 men. The *Bible Background Commentary on the Old Testament* explains: "The total in verse 32 would originally have been written 598 military divisions (*'lp* or *eleph*), [totaling] 5 thousand (*'lp* or *eleph*) and 5 hundred men. But at some point in the transmission of the text the two words were confused and added together to make 603 thousand."

[Other scholars explain the expanded numbers with a different theory - they claim that when Israel is depicted as victorious there is a "divine force multiplier" added in the language of the text either of 10 or 100 to show the invincibility of Israel's army. This still means that the army of Israel was substantially less than the traditional number during the time of Moses.]

Was the Israelite Army Large or Small?

There were 605 "*elephim*" in Israel at the battle of Jericho. Does that mean 605,000 fighting men, which would have been the largest army in the world? No.

Remember that when a new Pharaoh arose who "knew not Joseph," the Egyptians became concerned by the presence of the Hebrews, who lived among them, occupying

a rich area in Goshen, but worshipping a strange God and retaining strange customs. They were afraid "lest they multiply." This did not mean that they were already a large population, only that the Egyptians feared they would become one, and perhaps one day made a deal with their enemies.

In fact **Deuteronomy 7:7** refers to the Hebrews who left Egypt as "the fewest of all peoples." **Exodus 23:29-30** says that one of the reasons God will not drive out the Canaanites all at once is "lest the land become desolate" because the Israelites would need time to "increase...and possess the land."

Deuteronomy 20:1 gives Israel explicit instructions for "when you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you." But if they had an army 605,000, they would never encounter a larger force.

Victories by this smaller-sized Israeli force against powerful Canaanite and Amorite armies would indeed strike awe into the inhabitants, and give God greater glory. Rahab for instance doesn't mention the great size of Israel's army, only that people had heard of the miracles God performed for them.

This is why most scholars place the number in the Exodus from Egypt as more like 30,000 Hebrews instead of the traditional 3 million, with about 6,000 men of fighting age. Or at least, a significantly smaller number than the traditional size.

Jericho had a 10,000 maximum population, probably closer to 5,000 inside the walls. If *eleph* is a platoon, then the Israeli army at Jericho was anywhere from 6,000 up to maybe 18,000 men. That still made it a big army, but a more realistic number.

Joshua 7:3 says Joshua picked about three "*elephim*" to attack Ai, maybe 30-50 men. But they were beaten and chased "unto *Shebarim*" or "until they were broken" by the men of Ai. It specifically says 36 soldiers died. That might have been nearly all of them. This explains Israel's consternation. (The loss of 36 men from a force of 3,000 makes it hard to see how Israel could have been described as totally beaten).

Joshua 8:3-4 says Joshua picked 30,000 men for his second ambush. But 30,000 men would make it impossible to sneak around and ambush anyone. Better to translate it as 30 "fighting units" or *elephim*.

And in **Joshua 8:25**, instead of 12,000 killed at Ai, it is more likely that 12 "*elephim*" were killed - *elephim* here standing in for numbers that would make the total about 1,200 people, the more probable population of Ai.

<https://biblearchaeology.org/research/conquest-of-canaan/3302-testing-the-factuality-of-the-conquest-of-ai-narrative-in-the-book-of-joshua-part-two>

<https://jhvonline.com/did-joshua-really-conquer-jericho-and-ai-p16569-152.htm>

<http://www.reenactingtheway.com/blog/exodus-movie-gods-kings-yes-but-not-400000->

slaves

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/recounting-the-census-a-military-force-of-5500>

Joshua 8:1-2 - "And the LORD said unto Joshua, Fear not, neither be thou dismayed: take all the people of war with thee, and arise, go up to Ai: see, I have given into thy hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land: And thou shalt do to Ai and her king as thou didst unto Jericho and her king: only the spoil thereof, and the cattle thereof, shall ye take for a prey unto yourselves: lay thee an ambush for the city behind it."

The rabbis were puzzled. Since God had now assured Joshua of victory at Ai, why cook up an ambush? Why not just repeat the process as at Jericho and let the walls fall down again?

In his commentary to the Book of Joshua, *Sefer Yehoshua*, Yehudah Kil states that God told Joshua to undertake this tactic because of the talmudic principle that "one should not rely on a miracle." The Talmud derives this from the Torah command, "You should not try the Lord your God." (Yoma 1:4, based on **Deuteronomy 6:16**)

Jesus used the same principle to counter Satan's temptation to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple to prove his divinity:

- **Matthew 4:5-7** - "Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, 'He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.' (quoting **Psalms 91:12**) Jesus said unto him, It is written again, 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.'"

"tempt" meaning "put to the test"

i.e. People should not put themselves in a dangerous situation and rely on God to save them with a miracle. Trust in God is not the same as counting on a miracle. You can hope for a miracle, and be thankful if a miracle occurs, but you do not factor one in to your plans, or try to force one to occur. That would be presumptuous, as if you can manipulate God.

A Failure Transformed

Joshua 8:6 - "(For they will come out after us) till we have drawn them from the city; for they will say, They flee before us, as at the first: therefore we will flee before them."

Since the soldiers of Ai had so easily defeated Israel the first time, Joshua decided to use that to Israel's advantage. His trick depended on the men of Ai being overconfident.

In effect, Israel's previous failure now provided the key to their victory.

Joshua 8:10 - "And Joshua rose up early in the morning, and numbered the people, and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai."

Previously, Joshua had been persuaded to send just a small force. This time, God specifically said to send all the people of war (**verse 1**). That's why he "numbered the people" - took a census - so all available men of war would be part of the attack.

Joshua 8:15 - "And Joshua and all Israel made as if they were beaten before them, and fled by the way of the wilderness."

Subterfuge is a kind of a lie. Is that bad? Like Rahab, who lied to the king of Jericho, some lies are useful. Jacob was a trickster. In fact lying and tricks against Israel's enemies point forward to the great subterfuge of the cross, in which Satan is tricked into arranging for Jesus to be crucified, when His death becomes the means of Satan's ultimate defeat. St. Augustine described the crucifixion as a kind of "mousetrap" to catch the devil.

Joshua 8:18 - "And the LORD said unto Joshua, Stretch out the spear that is in thy hand toward Ai; for I will give it into thine hand. And Joshua stretched out the spear that he had in his hand toward the city."

Stretching out the spear - This kind of action, like Moses raising his staff to split the Red Sea, and raising his staff at the battle with the Amalekites (**Exodus 17:12**), or the shout of the people at Jericho, or later the breaking of the clay vessels and blowing the trumpets by Gideon, serve as a test and a touchstone of faith. Joshua must raise and point his spear as evidence of his inward faith that God will bring them victory, despite appearances. He kept his spear up and pointing toward Ai until the battle was won.

Joshua 8:26 - "For Joshua drew not his hand back, wherewith he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai."

It's a picture of the relationship between faith and works. Real faith leads to and results in action.

When Ai's soldiers rushed out of the city, the trap was sprung. Israeli soldiers entered the city and set it on fire. When Joshua saw the smoke, he signaled the third group of soldiers to attack the men of Ai as his main force turned around to face the pursuers.

'Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree'

The king of Ai is captured, and later Joshua killed him and hung up or impaled him on a tree.

Joshua 8:29 - "And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until eventide: and as soon as the sun was down, Joshua commanded that they should take his carcass down from the

tree, and cast it at the entering of the gate of the city, and raise thereon a great heap of stones, that remaineth unto this day."

Here we see an example of **Deuteronomy 21:22-23** - "And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance."

- **Galatians 3:13** - "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Torah by becoming a curse for us. Because, as it has been written, 'Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree'"

- **Acts 5:30** - "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree."

The act of crucifixion or in this case impaling or hanging from a tree or post was a kind of execution invested eternally with a particular kind of curse in Israel. This is because it was a foreshadowing of the ultimate sacrifice in which the curse on Adam and his world would be taken by Christ. Whenever it was inflicted on someone else, it would infect the whole land with the curse until the curse was finally "put to rest" and taken away by the death of Jesus.

Joshua accordingly takes the king of Ai down from the tree at sunset, and buries him under a pile of stones. Otherwise the whole land would be contaminated by the curse.

So the story of the victory at Ai contains two images of the coming Deliverer. It is a shadow of Christ crucified (pictured in the hanged king of Ai) and Christ victorious and resurrected (in Joshua).

Addendum - The Rabbis on Deuteronomy 21:23

The rabbinical explanation for not leaving a corpse hung up on a tree overnight is out of respect for human dignity. Even the criminal is made in the image of God. Desecrating any corpse desecrates the name of God, and therefore becomes a curse on the land.

Sanhedrin 45b - 46b

MISHNA: How do they hang the corpse of one who was put to death by stoning? They sink a post into the earth with a piece of wood jutting out, forming a T-shaped structure. And the court appointee then places the dead man's two hands one upon the other, ties them, and hangs him by his hands. Rabbi Yosei says: The post is not sunk into the ground; rather, it leans against a wall, and he hangs the corpse on it the way that butchers do with meat. The dead man hangs there for only a very short time, and then they immediately untie him. And if he was left hanging overnight, a prohibition is transgressed, as it is stated: "His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him that day, for he that is hung is a curse of God" (Deuteronomy 21:23). That

is to say: Were the corpse left hanging on the tree overnight, people would ask: For what reason was this one hung after he was put to death? They would be answered: Because he 'blessed' God, a euphemism for blasphemy. And therefore the name of Heaven would be desecrated were the dead man's corpse to remain hanging, reminding everybody of his transgression.

GEMARA: The Sages taught in a baraita: Were it stated: And if a man has committed a sin worthy of death you shall hang him on a tree, I would have said that first they hang him and only afterward they put him to death, the way the gentile government does, executing the transgressor by hanging. Therefore, the verse states: "And if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you shall hang him on a tree" (Deuteronomy 21:22), teaching that first they put him to death, and only afterward they hang him. How so? They delay the verdict until it is near to sunset, and then they conclude his judgment, and they put him to death, and immediately afterward hang him. One ties him to the hanging post, and another immediately unties him, in order to fulfill the mitzva of hanging the corpse of the executed transgressor. The Sages taught: From the verse: "And you shall hang him on a tree," I would derive that the body may be hung either on a tree that has been detached from the ground or on one that is still attached to the ground. Therefore, the verse states: "His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him [kavor tikberennu] that day" (Deuteronomy 21:23). Based on the doubled verb, it is derived that not only must the transgressor's body be buried, but the tree on which it is hung must also be buried. As the verse employs the same term to instruct that both must be buried, the verse teaches that the corpse must be hung on a tree that has already been detached from the ground and is lacking only burial, just as the corpse is lacking only burial. This serves to exclude hanging the corpse on a tree that is still attached to the ground and is lacking both cutting down and burial. Rabbi Yosei says: The tree upon which the corpse is hung is not sunk into the ground; rather, it is leaned against a wall, as the verse teaches that the tree must be lacking only burial. This serves to exclude hanging the corpse on a tree that is lacking both detachment and burial. And the Rabbis say: Detaching from the ground a tree that had already been cut down and was later sunk back into the ground is nothing, i.e., it is an insignificant act.

The mishna teaches: That is to say: Were the dead man's corpse to remain hanging, reminding everyone of his transgression, people would ask: For what reason was this one hung? They would be answered: Because he 'blessed' God, a euphemism for blasphemy, and the name of Heaven would be desecrated. It is taught in a baraita that Rabbi Meir says: The Sages told a parable: To what is this matter comparable? It is comparable to two brothers who were twins and lived in the same city. One was appointed king, while the other went out to engage in banditry. The king commanded that his brother be punished, and they hanged his twin brother for his crimes. Anyone who saw the bandit hanging would say: The king was hanged. The king, therefore, commanded that his brother be taken down, and they took the bandit down. Similarly, people are created in God's image, and therefore God is disgraced when a corpse is hung for a transgression that the person has committed. The mishna teaches that Rabbi Meir said that the phrase "For he that is hung is a curse [kilelat] of God" should be understood as follows: When a man suffers in the wake of his sin, the Divine Presence says: I am distressed [kallani] about My head, I am distressed about My arm. The

Gemara asks: From where is this inferred? How does Rabbi Meir understand the word kilelat? Abaye says: When a man is hung after he is put to death, God is like one who said: I am not light [kal leit], meaning: My head is heavy for Me, My arm is heavy for Me. God is in distress when He has to administer punishment. Rava said to him: If so, he should have said explicitly: My head is heavy for Me, My arm is heavy for Me. Rather, Rava said: When a man is hung after he is put to death, God is like one who said: The world is light for me [kil li alma], meaning: I am light, and therefore the world is heavy for Me, and I am in distress. The Gemara asks: This word "kilelat" is needed for what it itself teaches, namely that a blasphemer is hung after he has been stoned. How, then, can it be interpreted as alluding to God's distress at the death of a transgressor? The Gemara answers: If so, the verse should have stated: One who curses [mekallel]. What is the meaning of kilelat? It serves to teach the statement taught by Rabbi Meir. The Gemara asks: If so, say perhaps that the entire verse comes for this purpose, to underscore the dignity of the transgressor, who was created in God's image, and not to teach the halakha governing a blasphemer.

<https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.46b.2?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en>

The Stones at Mount Ebal

Joshua 8:30 - "Then Joshua built an altar unto the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, As Moses the servant of the LORD commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of whole stones, over which no man hath lift up any iron: and they offered thereon burnt offerings unto the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings."

See **Deuteronomy 27:5**

This is probably referring to a previous event. The rabbis said this happened not after the victory at Ai but on the same day they crossed the Jordan. Others say Joshua waited until later. Josephus says (Antiqu. I. 5. c. 1. sect. 14.) five years after he had entered Canaan, when he had placed the tabernacle at Shiloh, Joshua went from thence and built an altar at Ebal.

Joshua 8:32 - "And he wrote there upon the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he wrote in the presence of the children of Israel."

Not on the stones of the altar itself, but on other stones. "The law" either refers to the Ten Commandments or the blessings and curses from **Deuteronomy 27**.

Joshua 8:33 - "And all Israel, and their elders, and officers, and their judges, stood on this side the ark and on that side before the priests the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, as well the stranger, as he that was born among them; half of them over against mount Gerizim, and half of them over against mount Ebal; as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded before, that they should bless the people of Israel."

See **Deuteronomy 27:12-13**

Joshua 8:35 - "There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them."

Joshua here is a type of Christ, perfectly and completely relaying (and personifying) the word of God to humankind.

Summary

The main theme of the story of the attack on Ai is that God can transform our failures into victory. After that first defeat at Ai, Joshua and the elders of Israel fell on their faces before God. God revealed a sin within Israel. They uprooted it from among them and returned to the same task of taking the city of Ai. But now because of their first failure, Ai's overconfidence opened up a way to defeat it. This transformed and gave *meaning* to their previous failure, but without justifying it.