DID THE WALL OF JERICHO COLLAPSE OR DID THE CITY SURRENDER?

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When the people heard the sound of the horns, the people raised a mighty shout and the wall collapsed (Josh. 6:20). There are many and varied opinions as to when and how the wall of Jericho fell. I will not deal with the chronological issues, but only with the fall of the wall, doing so on the basis of the text and with the intention of showing a different possible interpretation.

The approach of scholars like William Foxwell Albright, John Garstang, Kathleen Kenyon, and others regarding Joshua 6 and the collapse of the wall is well known.[1] Their arguments are based mainly on the exact or approximate dating of the destruction of the wall of Jericho, as well as which wall was destroyed (outer or inner). They did not take up or resolve the mystery of the collapse itself.

The classical commentators Rashi, the Metzudot, and others, ignore the issue of the collapse of the wall, while Radak, Abarbanel, Malbim, and others interpret the phrase *and the wall collapsed* [va'tipol] literally. An exception can be found in the Aramaic translation of *Targum Yonatan*, that translates *nafla tahtehah* as "*V'nafal shura d'keret v'etbala*" – that is, "fell down" and "was swallowed up." Radak tries to solve the problem by explaining that only "a portion of the wall fell," and the soldiers entered through the breach and captured the city. The section of the wall in which Rahab and her family lived remained intact, thus saving them (*for she dwells in the* [casemate] *wall*). In his fifth question to Joshua 6, Abarbanel negates Radak's explanation, explaining his reasoning for doing so.

Perhaps the *Targum Yonatan* and the Talmud were influenced by the episode of Korah and his entourage (Num. 16:31-32), especially where the Torah uses the phrase *bala* [swallowed], which they adopted and ascribed to the story of the collapse of walls (Num. 16:31-33, 26:10; Deut. 11:6.)[2] In the Babylonian Talmud (*Berachot* 54b) there is the following exchange:

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> The wall of Jericho was swallowed up? It fell! – as it is written, *And it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the shofar, the people shouted a mighty shout . . . and the wall collapsed . . .* (Josh. 6:20)! [No!] Because it was the same height and width, it was swallowed up. [Since its height and width were the same, falling would have had no effect. Therefore it was swallowed up.]

See also the commentary of Shlomo Eiger on the above, beginning with the phrase *And the wall. . . .* "This interpretation is tenuous and difficult to accept." It is clear from the above rabbinic sources that the wall did not "collapse." I conclude, rather, that the wall around Jericho neither collapsed nor was it swallowed up!

Joshua 2 serves as the basis for my conclusions. The text is clear that Joshua sent spies to Jericho to get a feeling for the psychological condition of the people in the city*: And Joshua . . . sent out two men as spies secretly, saying to them, 'Go and see the land and Jericho . . .* (2:1). He said nothing more. This should be juxtaposed to the story of the spies in Numbers 13:18-25.

While the goal in Numbers 13 is a detailed military mission, in Joshua it is left vague. Note also the phrases "to scout" and "and they reconnoitered" in Numbers 13:17 and 21, as opposed to "go and see" in our story, indicating the distinctions between the goals of each of the spy missions. Also note how they arrived at the city at night (Josh. 2:2) and left soon thereafter (v. 15) without coming into contact with any one other than Rahab. From the conversation between Rahab and the men (vv. 9-11), during which only Rahab speaks while the men silently listen to her, it becomes clear that the men were sent to discover the psychological state of the people of Jericho.[3]

No doubt, Rahab was answering the questions posed to her by the spies; questions that the editor of Joshua chose, for reasons of his own, not to include in the text. Rahab only realized the identity of her guests after the messengers of the King of Jericho pointed out to her that *'they have come to search out the land'* (v. 3). Knowing who they were, Rahav told them, *'and all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you'* (v. 9).

Furthermore, when Rahab ascends to the roof where she has hidden the spies, she tells them, *'I know!* (v. 9)*'* – that is: "I know who you are." This is probably the beginning of the spies' questioning of Rahab. We learn from her

answers that they are interested in the psyche of the people of Jericho. Note that Rahab does not make a single reference to the army and the security of Jericho. Furthermore, when the spies return to Joshua to relate their mission, they say, *'for the Lord has delivered the entire land into our hands . . . and all the inhabitants of the land melt away before us'* (v. 24). Note that not even one significant piece of military information is mentioned.

This information given to him prompted Joshua to plan the special tactic that is described in Chapter 6, that is divided into two parts: (1) The plan, as described by God in verses 3-5, and (2) the execution of the plan in verses 6-20. The heavenly plan and its implementation was dictated on the basis of the information provided by the spies, and was intended to raise the tension in both the Israelite camp and among the defenders of Jericho, bringing the tension to its apex at the final moment. Note especially verses 11, 14, and 15, and the culmination in verse 20 on the seventh day. After the compassing of the city seven times, when the entire nation is ready for battle, Joshua still stretches his own soldiers' nerves, until finally giving the final orders to *shout . . . and the people shouted* (vv. 17-20).

We must imagine the scene in verse 20 when the entire nation shouted the great shout and sounded the shofars. The tension that had mounted up and overflowed during those seven days and the anxiety over what was about to happen were now to be released. We can only imagine how the sounding of the shofars affected the Canaanite guards on the walls of the city. No doubt, they were taut with tension, fear, and a feeling of helplessness during the seven days the Israelites were marching around the city with the Ark of the Covenant, without understanding the meaning of the mysterious circling or what the enemy was really up to. Then came the blowing of the shofars,[4] intended especially for the effect it would have on the guards and people of Jericho. This effect is echoed by the prophet Amos: *Can the shofar be blasted in the city and the people not tremble* (Amos 3:6)?

Thus, on the seventh day after the seventh time around the city and the great noise made by Joshua's soldiers, *the wall collapsed*. That is: The men defending the wall gave up, and that enabled Joshua's troops to enter the city. Meanwhile, the guards abandoned their posts and fled for their lives. Only Joshua's troops fought the enemy face to face and observed the proscription

of Jericho as he ordered (vv. 17-19) as they *captured the city* (v. 20), *utterly destroying all that was within the city . . . by the sword* (v. 21).

I believe we must understand the issue of the wall of Jericho on two planes: (1) The surrendering of the wall without a fight (as described above), and (2) the conquest of the city in battle. The verb *n-f-l* has multiple meanings, including "surrender." I have found support for the interpretation that the *collapse* [va-yiplu] *of the wall* can mean "surrender" or "capitulation" in the Even Shoshan Dictionary,[5] and in the following verses:

1. Psalms 45:6: *melakhim tahtekha* ***yipolu*** [kings will fall before you]: In his commentary, Samson Raphael Hirsch interprets this to mean that "Nations will surrender to you."

2. Psalms 18:39-40: *I crushed them and they were not able to rise, they fell* [yi-polu] *under my feet. You girded me with strength for battle; You caused my enemy to surrender beneath me.* The commentary *Zimrat Ya* states that verse 40 is a continuation of and complementary to verse 39.

3. Jeremiah 52:15: . . . *and those that fell away* [naflu] *to the King of Babylon*. Rashi in his commentary indicates that these were the ones who capitulated and surrendered.

Furthermore, if we take the verses literally, then the wall fell by way of a miracle, just as we witnessed miracles in Numbers 16:31-33, 26:10; and Deuteronomy 11:6.[6] One might ask why the miracle was delayed for seven days. Why the need for all the intricate preparations and the tactics that Joshua used during that week, and all according to the word of the Lord? Could not the miracle have taken place on the first day? Why did Joshua put it off for seven days? This is tenuous and difficult. (See also the Abarbanel's commentary.)

Finally, we refer to Joshua's curse on Jericho, which was not commanded by God. *'Cursed be the man before the Lord, who rises up and builds this city Jericho. . . '* (6:26). No mention is made here of the wall of Jericho. Later, in the days of Ahab, we read: *In his days, Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho . . .* (I Kgs. 16:34). Here, too, no mention is made of the wall of Jericho. It is reasonable to conclude that the building of the wall was not mentioned in Joshua's oath nor did Hiel build one, because there was no need to do so. The wall was still standing, because it did not collapse. Rather, the city surrendered.

It is clear to this author (as it was to the early commentators), that this episode – the surrender – and the story of the fall of the city was interpreted by the nation as a "great miracle" (see Num. 26:10). Insofar as one can refer to the "miracle" of the collapse of the wall as it is related in Joshua 6, one cannot negate the possibility that it is actually a description of the surrender of the city.

NOTES

1. See Yehezkiel Kaufmann, *Joshua* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1959) pp. 69-71, 115 (Hebrew).

2. In this context one must mention that in the episode of the punishment of Korah there is a full description of the event that is spread through the above sources, describing four steps: (1) *the land cracked,* (2) *the land opened its mouth*; (3).*and it swallowed them,* (4) *and the ground covered them up*. On the other hand, in the story of the collapse of the wall, the editor is content with the brief phrase *and the wall collapsed*, in spite of the fact that there was room for a full and clear description of the event. This is tenuous and difficult to accept.

3. Note especially the final words of her speech: *'. . . and we heard and our hearts melted, and no spirit remained in any man to face you'*.(2:11).

4. Compare this to I Samuel 4:4-8.

5. Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible: Thesaurus of the Language of the Bible, Hebrew and Aramaic, Roots, Words, Proper Names Phrases and Synonyms* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000). Under the root *n-f-l* he has "capitulated [*k'niya*]" (p. 1697) or "surrendered [*nikhna l'fanav*]" (p. 1699).

6. *Come morning and the Lord will make known who is His and who is holy. . .* (Num. 16:5); *And Moses said to Korah '. . . appear before the Lord, you and they and Aaron'* (v. 16); *And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up* [vayihiyu laneis] *and they became an example* (Num. 26:10). This translation follows the Targum and Rashi. However, I prefer to translate this as "miracle."