When considering the historicity of the narratives of Joshua, the first thing to re-emphasize is that these are not accounts written by eyewitnesses or by anyone who knew an eyewitness. They were written some 600 years later, and were based on oral traditions that had been in circulation among people in Israel during all those intervening centuries. Moreover, they are clearly molded according to theological assumptions and perspectives. Biblical scholars have long noted that there is almost nothing in the accounts that suggest that the author is trying to be purely descriptive of things that really happened. He is writing an account that appears to be guided by his religious agenda, not by purely historical interests. That is why, when read closely, one finds so many problems with the narratives.

- **Internal discrepancies.** As we have seen, parts of Joshua stress that Joshua was fantastically successful in conquering the land: “Joshua defeated the whole land” (10:40); “Joshua took all that land” (11:16); “Joshua took the whole land” (11:23). If it were true that Joshua took “all” the “whole” land – why are there so many parts of the land that the text admits were not taken? The Deuteronomistic historian later has to acknowledge that when “Joshua was old…the LORD said to him ‘very much of the land still remains to be possessed’” (13:1). And so we are told that Jerusalem had not yet been taken (15:63); or parts of Ephraim (16:10); or parts of Manasseh (17:12-13). At the end of the book Joshua has to persuade the people to drive out the natives living in the land (23:5-13).

- **Tensions with other Accounts.** A similar problem arises between Joshua and other books of the Deuteronomistic history. In ch. 11, for example, the Israelite forces completely annihilate the city of Hazor: “they put to the sword all who were in it, utterly destroying them; there was no one left who breathed, and he burned Hazor with fire.” If that were true, why is it that in the next book, Judges, the Canaanites still very much live in and control Hazor, under their king Jabin, whose powerful army afflicted and oppressed the Israelites (Judges 4)?

- **General Implausibilities.** A number of the stories in Joshua are so chock-full of the miraculous that historians simply cannot deal with them as historical narratives (see the excursus in ch. 1). None of the miracles is more striking than the account in ch. 10, where the Israelite armies are having such a huge success, routing the coalition of kings aligned against them that Joshua cries out to the sun to stop its movement in the sky. And the sun stands still at high noon for twenty-four hours before moving on again, giving the Israelites ample time to complete the slaughter. As readers have long noted, it would be a miracle indeed if the earth suddenly stopped rotating on its axis for a day and then started up again, with no disturbance to the oceans, land masses, and life itself!

- **External Verification and Archaeology.** For biblical scholars, just as significant is the surviving physical evidence (or rather lack of it) for the conquest. Archaeologists have long noted that there is scant support for the kind of violent destruction of the cities of Canaan – especially the ones mentioned in Joshua. Think for a second: if one were to look for archaeological evidence, or other external verification, to support the historical narratives of Joshua, what would one look for?

- References to the invasion and conquest in other written sources outside the Bible.
Evidence that there were indeed walled cities and towns in Canaan at the time.
Archaeological evidence that the cities and towns mentioned actually were destroyed at the time (Jericho, Ai, Heshbon, etc.).
Shift in cultural patterns: that is, evidence of new people taking over from other peoples of a different culture (as you get in the Americas when Europeans came over bringing with them their own culture, different from that of the native Americans).
And what kind of verification do we actually get for the narratives of Joshua? The answer appears to be: none of the above. There are no references in any other ancient source to a massive destruction of the cities of Canaan. Archaeologists have discovered that few of the places mentioned were walled towns at the time. Many of the specific cities cited as places of conquest apparently did not even exist as cities at the time. This includes, most notably, Jericho, which was not inhabited in the late 13th century BCE, as archaeologists have decisively shown (see box 4.2). The same thing applies to Ai and Heshbon. These cities were neither occupied, nor conquered, nor re-inhabited in the days of Joshua. Moreover, there is no evidence of major shifts in cultural patterns taking place at the end of the 13th century in Canaan. There are, to be sure, some indications that some towns in Canaan were destroyed at about that time (two of the twenty places mentioned as being destroyed by Joshua were wiped out at about the right time: Hazor and Bethel) But that is true of virtually every time in antiquity: occasionally towns were destroyed by other towns or burned or otherwise abandoned.

We are left, then, with a very big problem. The accounts in Joshua appear to be non-historical in many respects. This creates a dilemma for historians, since two things are perfectly clear: (a) eventually there was a nation Israel living in the land of Canaan; but (b) there is no evidence that it got there by entering in from the East and destroying all the major cities in a series of violent military campaigns. Where then did Israel come from?

**Where Did Israel Come From?**
**Historical Problems with the Hebrew Bible: The Exodus Narrative**