



Jericho

WALTER WANGERIN, JR.

*Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana*

I.

THE KINGS IN CANAAN RULED SMALL CITIES SET ON HILLS, FIVE TO TEN ACRES crowded with buildings and surrounded by a wider skirt of farmland and fields outside the wall. They ruled a population that lived in the second stories of a well-built house, a people that drove its livestock inside the wall every night, into the ground level of their own houses.

Twice annually the Canaanite kings petitioned their gods for rich crops. It was the necessary ceremony of a sedentary race: if one could not go forth to find goodness, goodness must be coaxed home. Of Ba'al, the god of the thunderclouds, the kings prayed rain; of Astarte, his consort, they pleaded fertility and a fruitful harvest.

But in the spring of a particularly wonderful abundance—precisely at the harvest when northern rains and the melting snows had swelled the river Jordan to an impassable flood—the king of Jericho was praying a different prayer. One of desperation.

“O you who mountest the clouds,” he cried. “O great storm-god, Ba'al!”

He had been watching a new people massed on the eastern shores of the Jordan, a desert-hardened lot who, like locusts, seemed capable of eating the countryside. Already they had devoured the kings of the Amorites and the

Taken from The Book of God by Walter Wangerin, Jr. Copyright © 1995 by Walter Wangerin, Jr. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. Available by calling 800-727-3480.

In Wangerin's book, the Bible is retold as a novel. The setting remains the biblical period, though the retelling is modern, appealing to the reader in a new way.

Moabites. The king of Jericho had considered his city protected by the river. There simply were no fords in the Jordan at full flood. But this morning his outposts brought word that this people had crossed anyway. Suddenly they were at Gilgal on the west side, building altars. Men and women and children. All of them!

“O great storm-god Ba'al, stride the skyways, shake your spear of thunderbolt—and fight for us! Save us from this wild, dry, and swarming plague of the desert!”

II.

Joshua the son of Nun was picking his way through the darkness toward the city of Jericho. Step, step, he went by slow steps. He was a nearsighted man. He peered intently at things in order to choose where to set his foot.

But the night was dark by design. Joshua had chosen a moonless night because he planned to steal right up to the city walls and touch them.

Jericho had to be defeated first if Israel would enter Canaan to dwell there. In fact, Joshua was not going there for information. He had already dispatched two spies into the city. Their report had been remarkably accurate because a prostitute named Rahab had given them room and protection. *A canny choice, they had laughed at their return. A whore's not likely to ask questions, right?—but no one's able to answer them better than her.*

No, he needn't spy. Joshua was making his solitary way to Jericho in order to touch its spirit and assess its strength before the children of Israel began to take the land their God had promised to their ancestors.

It was in this land that the Lord God had required of Abraham that he circumcise the males of his household, in this land that God had attached promises to that sign of the covenant. And now Israel was about to receive more than words and more than signs; Israel was about to receive the soil itself!

Therefore, as soon as Israel had crossed the Jordan, Joshua, too, had required every male born in the wilderness to be circumcised in accordance with the covenant. They used flint knives, the same as Abraham had in the beginning.

Next he ordered the people to keep the Passover, and so they did on the fourteenth day of the month. On the fifteenth day, Israel ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain—and on that day manna ceased falling forever.

There! Close before him Joshua saw the huge black shadow of Jericho, its wall a high, wide absence of stars. Joshua the son of Nun paused. *O Israel, how will you breach such stone?*

But Israel had crossed the Red Sea dry-shod.

And Israel had again, in these latter days, crossed also the Jordan River on a dry bed because the Lord had blocked its waters in the north and all the water south had drained away.

Why should not Israel cross this hard wall, too?

Then step, step: Joshua resumed his slow progress toward the wall, staring

straight ahead, straining his poor eyes, raising his hands, preparing to touch the stones of the powers of Canaan.

Suddenly Joshua saw with terrible clarity a man standing with a drawn sword before him.

Joshua dropped his arms and gaped a moment. Then he whispered, "Are you for us—or for our adversaries?"

The man with the sword said, "No, but as commander of the armies of the Lord have I come."

Immediately Joshua fell face-down on the earth and worshiped.

He said, "What does my lord bid his servant?"

The commander of the Lord's armies said, "Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place you stand is holy."

Joshua did so.

And then it was that Joshua the son of Nun, the leader of the forces of Israel after Moses, learned how the stones of the walls of Jericho might be breached.

III.

The king of Jericho had shut the gates of his city and barred them with timber. Citizens, farmers, soldiers, all were inside. Sheep and goats and cattle; mattocks, rakes, and weapons—everything the city owned had been gathered in. The spring that watered Jericho, the best such spring in all of Canaan, ran bright and unabated. Moreover, the greatest part of an excellent barley harvest had already been stored. Not only were the new stone granaries full, but food had overflowed as well into the ancient underground silos of the first farmers of Jericho.

Jericho was ready for the longest siege. Jericho would endure.

In the middle of the night the king of Jericho climbed his wall in order to inspect its readiness for a direct attack.

There were jars of oil arranged at intervals along the top. And sluices cut through the stone. The king put his finger in these. There were smoking smudgepots ready to ignite the oil for a rain of fire. And short arrows, the sharp bronze bolts of Jericho, bristled in the narrow stone cavities. Spears stood at the corners for men whose arms were mighty, whose eyes were accurate. And loose stones were piled here and there for the older men and the angry women to push upon the heads of the Israelites who came too near with ladders.

The king inspected everything personally. Yes: whether for siege or assault, Jericho was ready.

And the wall he stood upon was doubled. Two walls, one inside the other, connected by intermediate stone and a strong lattice of timber. Previous regencies had permitted the building of rooms between the walls. The poorest people lived there. Outcasts and whores. And stores were kept in the spaces. And though the stones had only been hammer-trimmed and laid in clay mortar, this king had himself commanded the outside wall to be coated with a thick yellow plaster up to

fifteen feet high. That was his own contribution. It would require ladders to climb the wall these days. Yes: Jericho was ready.

But the king paced his wall the whole night through and prayed.

Asherah, consort of El, mother of seventy gods and of Ba'al—He was restless. He had heard rumors regarding the might and the fury of this desert breed, this flinty nation come from Egypt. They worshiped a mountain God.

—*O Asherah, beg the bloodiest of your children to protect us from the deity that can dry the sea for the feet of its people!*

There was a moment that night when the king thought he heard the gentlest of murmurings outside the wall, almost womanly in solicitude. But it was a quick word quickly gone, and he was left with a deeper sense of loneliness— as though Asherah had stolen away to love another better than he.

At dawn, as the sky began to gather a grey light, the king could see the forms of his watchmen standing at the corners and in the towers by the gate. People stirred in the city. Smells of old sleep arose. A few sticks crackled into flames.

Families began muffled conversations.

The king had just decided to descend and wash himself, when a distant sound arrested him. It came from the northeast, almost inaudible, a soft rhythmic beating. But the guards were not reacting. Perhaps there was no sound after all. Yet he seemed to feel a vast pulsing in the earth and in his bones.

There!

“Guards!” cried the king of Jericho. “Captains,” he roared down to the city. “Rouse your warriors! Archers, get up! Get up! Get ready!”

There was motion at the northeast horizon. A dusty motion, like a cloud billowing up from the distant earth.

Now Jericho broke into a hectic activity. The wall sprouted warriors, rushing to their posts and their weapons.

The eastern sky streaked red. An angry boil burst at the horizon, and that northeastern cloud caught fire of the sun.

It was the armies of Israel! The entire force of the nation was marching hither in perfect order. No one hurried. All came in a wide file, a very long line.

Jericho watched. Jericho fell into a waiting silence. Jericho crouched on the wall and watched.

Now the king would learn what strategy he'd have to contend with. He glanced swiftly at his archers and the spearmen. They knew exactly their killing distances. They would not release an arrow till the enemy was within reach.

But Israel never came that close.

While the line of Israelites was still at a safe range, horns began to blare and the vanguard soldiers turned. They turned parallel to the city wall. They kept marching in a measured step, gazing straight ahead. They would not even *look* at Jericho. The entire file of Israel's army circled the city. The trumpets snarled and tore the air and did not cease.

Archers on Jericho's walls shivered, so strong was their desire to shoot. But

their captains, glancing at the king, commanded patience. And the king kept twitching his eyes left and right along the strange procession that now surrounded his city.

Where would the attack come from? From everywhere at once?

The faces of Israel revealed nothing. They were grim, controlled, fixed and unforthcoming. Every warrior stared straight ahead.

There: in the very middle of the march. The king saw seven men in priest's robes of stunning luxury, gold and blue and purple and scarlet, fine twined linen. Each man held a hollow ram's horn to his lips, and all were blowing together brutal harmonies, causing the flesh on Jericho's neck to shiver. There: that's where the orders were coming from, from that sound!

And immediately behind these seven men came four more carrying a box of beaten gold by means of two long staves, two men before and two men after it.

So the file of the hosts of Israel passed round the city all that day. Not one arrow was released between the enemies. Not a word was exchanged. No, not so much as a glance from the eyes of one to the eyes of the other. And when one slow circumference had been accomplished, Israel turned back to Gilgal. The ram's horns ceased their sounding. And in silence the host departed again.

The men of Jericho were exhausted, drenched in an acid sweat. But the king could not console them. He sent them down from the wall, commanding them to eat and to sleep and to prepare for the attack tomorrow.

Yet even now he did not know what strategy the desert swarm had chosen against him. If this were a siege there was no sense to it. Or perhaps it was some ritual by which to bind the city's strength and soul. If so, the assault would come tomorrow at daylight. Therefore, the king was on his wall the following dawn.

All his warriors accompanied him.

And Israel came out of Gilgal as before. But—precisely as before—Israel marched once around the city, blowing seven horns, displaying its mysterious golden box, and returning to camp by the setting of the sun.

So it was the third day. And the fourth: Israel encircled the city once and departed.

On the fifth day the king of Jericho began to shout from the top of his wall. All morning long he shouted taunts and execrations. It heartened his people a while. He gave his words the bite of bitter poetry. He pronounced vile maledictions on the heads of Israel. But Israel's eyes remained forever forward. Israel's horns did not cease to blow.

By afternoon the king despaired of cursings and of his gods as well. A suffocation was overcoming his city. People trembled. They could neither eat nor sleep. Children had long since ceased to cry.

On the sixth day the king cracked a door in the city wall and, flanked by four bodyguards, boldly approached the head of Israel's marching column in order to attempt negotiations. There he saw a small man whose eyes were bent over to the ground, a shuffling fellow given to much thought. A reasonable man, perhaps. The king tried to engage him in conversation, but the studious man didn't answer. He

looked up at the king. He squinted fiercely and finally produced an other-worldly stare as if the king were but a phantom. The horns blew and blew, while all Israel passed his personage with no acknowledgment. He might have been a beggar.

So the king of Jericho returned to his city, to his wall, to his ignorance and his futile observation.

The seventh day was different.

On this day, Israel circled Jericho not once, but seven times, from dawn to late afternoon. Suddenly, in the midst of their seventh passage, the sound of the ram's horns changed. It rose to the shrieks of eagles. And all the voices, all the throats of Israel opened. Ten thousand warriors turned inward, roaring, and charged the city. The city walls themselves began to shudder. The king felt a terrible agitation in the stones beneath his feet. His archers leaped up. Spearmen reached for spears. Women brought smudge-pots to ignite the oil in sheets of fire. But just as Israel entered the range of Jericho's arrows, the city walls rose three feet into the air, bellowed like a living thing, cracked at every join and mortar, then collapsed—a great crush of stones on all the people below.

The king of Jericho tumbled down into his dying city. The burning oil spilled inward. Fire and timber and rock fell with him. And the final vision vouchsafed unto the king was of a piece of wall which neither crumbled nor burned, a slim finger of stone with one window two stories up, from which hung a scarlet cord.

In his last instant of life all the world seemed to the king a bitter joke—for why should that one live at last and not another? The window belonged to an out-cast! A whore named Rahab. ⊕