

Ai and Old Testament Chronology:

WHO CARES?



By Eugene H. Merrill

Introduction

The term “chronology” in the minds of many is redolent of images of stuffy old eccentrics deep in rumination in some musty study over trivia that have no practical relevance to everyday life and well-being. Who cares when Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem or when Hannibal crossed the Rubicon or when Betsy Ross sewed together the first American flag or even when Nixon left the White House in disgrace? These tidbits may be of interest to historians who write and sell books to other cranks or to professors of history who find that though their students are bored stiff learning about men and battles and dates of the long ago, they themselves are content in their own little cocoons of idiosyncrasy. Besides that, everyone has to do something to make a living.

However, all husbands (and more than a few wives) who have lost track of a birthday or wedding anniversary soon discover that if dates and the proper sequence of events “slip the mind,” suddenly chronology—if not the most important thing in the world—begins to make a great leap upward on the scale of priorities. It *does* matter when she was born and under what circumstances and it *is* critical for him never to forget the happiest day in her life, the day she married him and now, curiously, why?

The Significance of Biblical Chronology

A common but adequate and accurate analogy to historiography is that of anatomy. Just as the human skeleton is the indispensable “framework” around and upon which the body with all its parts are suspended, so chronology is the equally indispensable framework upon or against which the flow and facts of history find proper arrangement, relationship, function, and meaning. The medical student might as well take the scattered parts of a cadaver, piece them back together randomly, and call it anatomy and physiology as for a seminarian to cut the Bible to shreds and then re-assemble it any way he chose

and call the result biblical history. One would reasonably expect both to flunk and to look to some other vocation where cause and effect and temporal sequence have no intrinsic or even practical value. In short, anyone who takes the Bible seriously as the very Word of God in everything it intends to say—even about science and history—is forced to confront the chronology-history issue as one whose facets are of necessity mutually integrative and informative.

Was the Tower of Babel episode pre-Flood or afterward? Did Abraham live in the EB-MB era or Iron Age I? Are the lists of the kings of Israel and Judah accurate and do they arrange their respective reigns in the right order? Does it really matter when Joshua conquered Ai? Is it not of little or no consequence as long as one believes it really took place, as did all the other events just listed? The almost intuitive response of the reflective and logical mind is affirmative: Yes, it does matter. But then come other questions, such as “Why?” How does the answer affect doctrine and theology? What is in it for me as a believer who wants to live a more godly everyday life if I know precisely when the battle for Ai took place, who was engaged in it, and where and why? This article intends to address these questions and to provide evidence that the battle for Ai was waged by Israel led by Joshua, that it was against the Amorites, that it quite likely took place at a site in the so-called West Bank currently named Khirbet el-Maqtir, and that it occurred ca. 1400 BC. Of equal importance are questions like, “Why does it matter? Who really cares?” The paper will conclude with proposed answers to these questions and others.

The Establishment of a Dating System

Space permits only a brief survey here of the means by which solid benchmarks have been achieved that permit the construction of a reliable chronology of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East.¹

Inner-Biblical Data

First, the Bible itself is replete with chronological data, but

the dates of biblical events until the last century or so could be accessed only in a closed system in which conclusions were drawn almost exclusively by inner-biblical relationships. Thus, for example, the dates of Abraham could be determined by adding up the years of all persons and events succeeding him until the New Testament period and then working back from them. A major problem, however, was the lack of a clear chronological record connecting the end of the Old Testament period with the beginning of the more-solid dates of the New Testament. The most famous attempt to create an inner-biblical chronology was that of Archbishop Ussher of Ireland in 1650. In many respects his efforts were remarkably accurate given the absence of secular texts that later refined his system.²



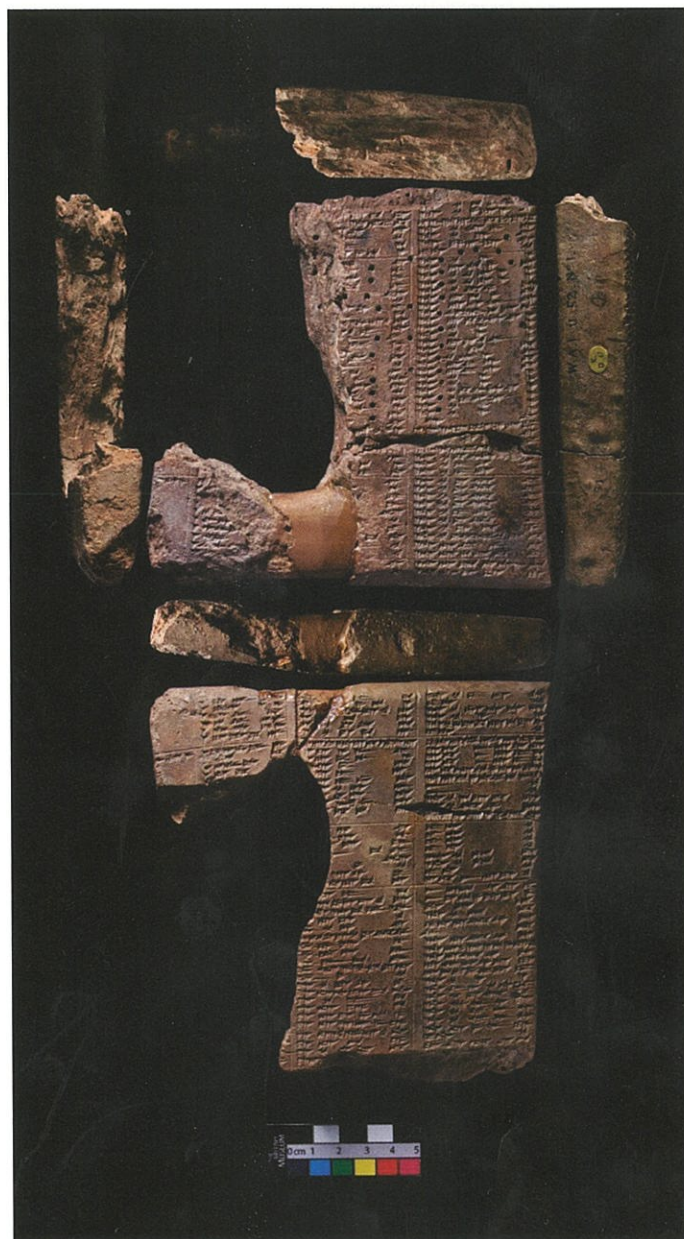
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Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1686 AD) was a prolific scholar who developed an internal chronology of the Bible that was remarkably accurate overall. Ussher's chronology has since been refined and updated by others, including Edwin Thiele and ABR Associate Rodger Young. Archaeological and historical research since the days of Ussher has greatly assisted in helping refine secular chronology from the time of Abraham to the Fall of Jerusalem, and finding correlations with the chronology of Scripture.

Ancient Near Eastern Data

Commencing in the mid-19th century, a flurry of archaeological excavation took place throughout the Middle East, particularly in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Thousands of inscriptions came to light, including many of chronological significance.³ Most famous for Old Testament purposes is the (Assyrian) Eponym

Canon which lists all the names of years between 910-649 BC. The reliability of the dates of kings and events in these years has been put on solid ground thanks to the discovery of the occurrence of an eclipse of the sun over Nineveh in 763 BC, a date recovered with exactness by astronomical calculations.⁴ Many of these texts make reference to Israel and Judah and their respective rulers, thus tying the latter into the Assyrian Canon and thereby bringing a high degree of certainty to the Old Testament dates of the early Divided Monarchy as late as the reign of Manasseh of Judah (696-642). In addition to the Assyrian material, many other sources of chronological value have been unearthed, further establishing a sound biblical chronology. Among these are king lists that trace the lines of pharaohs from 3000 BC to the age of the Achaemenids (ca. 550 BC).⁵



The British Museum

A tablet of the Assyrian Eponym Canon from the library of Ashurbanipal, excavated by Sir Austen Henry Layard.

Historic, Contemporary, and Competing Points of View

Pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment Periods (ca. 1650–1800)

Pre-Enlightenment considerations of the Conquest and its details, including the question of Ai, were essentially faith-driven; that is, the Bible presented these narratives as historical fact and there was no perceived need for anyone to prove their actuality or even to work out a system of dating. Israel had left Egypt through a miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, wandered in the Sinai for 40 years, and then invaded and eventually occupied Canaan under Joshua's leadership. "The Bible said it, I believe it, and that settles it!" To the contrary, the ascendancy of Rationalism attendant to the Enlightenment viewed things differently: The miraculous, it was said, cannot (and therefore did not) occur, the story of the Conquest was essentially legend and myth, and the overthrow of Ai, whether historically verifiable or not, was of little or no moment.⁶ It followed, then, that chronology played no important role, and that the location of Ai could never be determined, nor did it matter.

The Historical-Critical Method (ca. 1800–present)

The so-called "Historical-Critical" method—an offspring of Rationalism—and its method of doing biblical scholarship rejects virtually all traditional understandings of the Old Testament, especially its credibility as historiography. Thus, whether the Conquest, including that of Ai, even took place at all is considered moot.⁷ More important to the rationalistic school is not the historicity of biblical accounts, but why and under what circumstances they were composed in the first place, i.e., their *Sitz im Leben*. What matters is "truth," not facts, as though the two can be separated. Israel's recollection and theologizing of the past, not the Bible's own assertion by divine revelation as to what really happened in Israel's earliest years, is considered what matters most.

Modern Approaches

The advent of modern archaeological method, concomitant with renewed interest in the Old Testament in the latter 19th century,

led to a rash of excavations in the Holy Land including a search for the location of biblical Ai.⁸ In 1924 William F. Albright wrote an influential article placing Ai at et-Tell.⁹ This location has become almost enshrined as the proper place for ancient Ai. Joseph Callaway excavated et-Tell from 1964 to 1970 and correctly concluded that no evidence exists as to its being occupied between EB II (2400 BC) and the beginning of the Iron I period ca. 1200 BC.¹⁰ This seems at first glance to prove conclusively that the Conquest must have taken place at 1200 or later.

The Present Approach: Archaeological

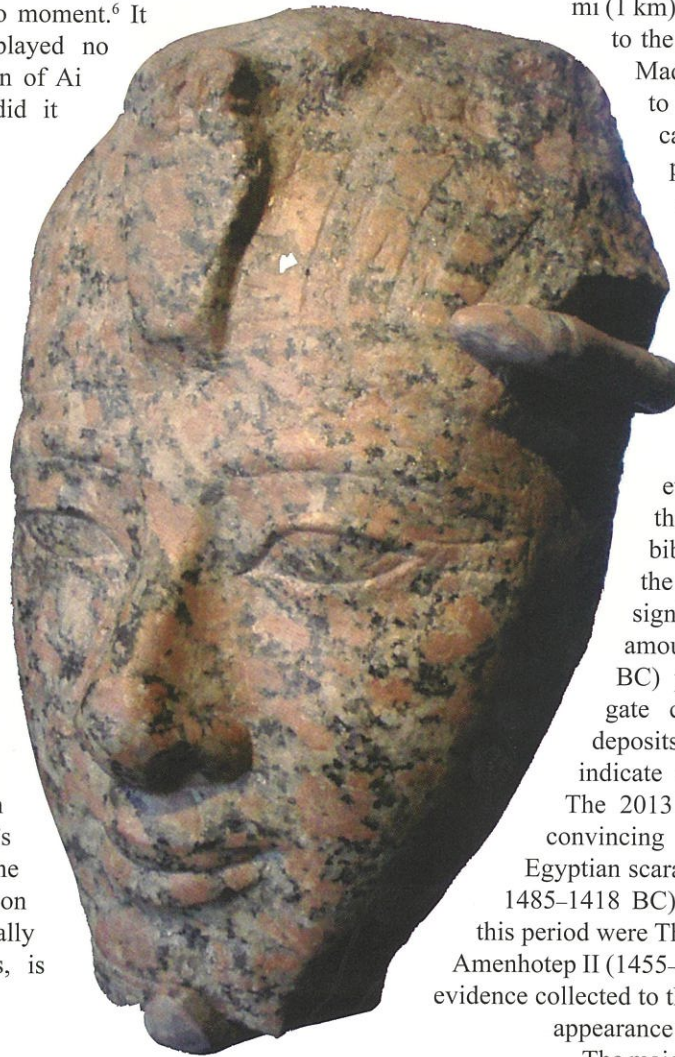
In 1979 David Livingston, dissatisfied with Albright's identification of Ai with et-Tell, undertook excavations at Khirbet Nisya, just outside El-Bireh in the so-called West Bank.¹¹ After several years of disappointment by the lack of confirming finds, the Associates for Biblical Research, under

Bryant Wood, resumed the search in 1995 at a site 5/8 mi (1 km) west of et-Tell, a place known

to the residents there as Khirbet el-Maqatir.¹² Fair-minded visitors to the site who have studied carefully the account of Ai's place in the Conquest record of Joshua 7–8 can hardly doubt that its immediate and more distant setting is by far more compatible with the biblical description than is et-Tell or any other suggested place.¹³ Moreover,

excavation thus far has yielded unmistakable evidence of occupation there nearly throughout the biblical period and as late as the Byzantine era. Especially significant is the massive amount of LB I (ca. 1500–1400 BC) pottery; a finely constructed gate chamber, fortification walls, deposits of ash and sling-stones indicate a fortification under attack. The 2013 season uncovered the most convincing evidence of all so far: an Egyptian scarab from the 18th Dynasty (ca. 1485–1418 BC).¹⁴ The pharaohs included in this period were Thutmosis III (1506–1452), and Amenhotep II (1455–1418).¹⁵ In short, based on the evidence collected to this point, Maqatir gives every appearance of being ancient Ai.

The major objection raised by late-date adherents, however, is precisely the very fact that the principal diagnostic findings are from the LB I period, thus enhancing the so-called "Early Date" for Joshua's Conquest as opposed to the "Late Date"



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Large statue head of Amenhotep II on display at the Brooklyn Museum. ABR has identified him as the strongest candidate for the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

of Calloway and the majority of scholars allegedly supported archaeologically by et-Tell. The upshot is that if Wood's dates and analyses hold up, the Conquest must be dated at 1406 rather than 1230. At this point, a domino effect takes place. For at least 75 years a near consensus—even in Neo-Conservative circles—has posited that the Exodus, if historical at all, occurred ca. 1270 BC.¹⁶ The OT itself, moreover, insists that the Conquest was 40 years later than the Exodus, hence, ca. 1230. On the other hand, if the Exodus took place at 1446, as the Masoretic chronology as a whole demands, the Conquest must be dated at 1406, precisely the period favored by the Maqatir excavations.

The Present Approach: Historical and Biblical

The domino does not stop with the question of the dating of Ai alone. Granting acceptance of the data in canonically preceding texts, principally the genealogical numbers of Genesis, the entire era of the great Patriarchs must also be shifted back so that Abraham is no longer a denizen of the MB (1973–1500) period but of the EB IV (2176–1973). The whole realm of evangelical scholarship, our concern at this juncture, must then stop defending the indefensible connection of Abraham with Dynasty 12 Egypt (ca. 1973–1801), Joseph under the Hyksos (1668–1560), servitude under the Amarna kings (1369–1349), a Mosaic Exodus and the Conquest in the Ramesside era (ca. 1307–1069). See Table I.

Table I: Masoretic Text Dates of Major Persons and Events Preceding a 1400 BC Conquest

1. Seven-year Conquest (1406–1400; Dt 1:3; Jos 14:7–10)
2. Forty-year Sinai wandering (1446–1406; Nm 14:33–34; Dt 1:3)
3. Exodus occurred in 1446 (1 Kgs 6:1; Jgs 11:26)
4. Egyptian sojourn of 430 years (1876–1446; Ex 12:40)
5. Joseph's lifespan (1915–1805; Gn 30:22–24; 50:26)
6. Jacob's descent to Egypt (1876, when he was 130 years old; Gn 47:9)
7. Jacob's lifespan (147 years: 2006–1859; Gn 47:28; cf. 25:26)
8. Isaac's lifespan (2066–1886; Gn 35:28)
9. Abraham's lifespan (2166–1991; Gn 25:7; cf. 17:17; 18:14)

Inner-biblical testimony supporting an early Conquest rests primarily on two passages: 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26. The former states in no uncertain terms that Solomon laid the foundations of the great temple in Jerusalem in his fourth year, that is, in 967, that year being precisely the 480th year after the Exodus. Basic arithmetic yields an Exodus date of 1446. It follows that the Conquest commenced ca. 1406 since it followed 40 years of Israel's sojourn in the Sinai deserts. Judges 11:26 affirms this date in Jephthah's statement to the king of Ammon to the effect that the Ammonites had 300 years in which to contest Israel's occupation of the Transjordan so why should it now be an issue? The Transjordan had been conquered by Moses

and Israel before the Canaanite campaigns began, thus as early as 1406. Again, 300 years prior to 1106, the date of Jephthah's judgeship, yields 1446.¹⁷ K.A. Kitchen has disposed of the 300 year embarrassment by dismissing it as the wild guess of an ignorant old man, namely, Jephthah.¹⁸ *Ad hominem* of this sort, even against an ancient, hardly bespeaks objectivity and seems at best to be an evasion of the implications of the text.

As to the 480th year figure, since no major textual evidence exists to challenge the MT,¹⁹ some conservative scholars, in an attempt to bolster a late date for the Exodus, propose that it is an artificial number consisting of 12 generations of 40 years each, the 40 representing an ideal generation. In reality, it is argued, a generation is closer to 25 years; hence, 12 such periods would yield a 300 year span between the Exodus and the laying of the foundations of the Solomonic temple or a date for the Exodus of ca. 1267 BC (967+300).²⁰ The sleight of hand of arbitrarily factoring 480 into multiples of 40 and 12 is a marriage of convenience. Nothing *in the text* itself suggests anything but a serious attempt by the author of Kings to spell out precisely when the temple was begun. His purpose was not to date the Exodus but to use it as a chronological benchmark by which to correlate other dates. In other words, the Exodus date seems to have been recognized by the community as firm and standard. This seems to preclude the possibility that a "manufactured" or manipulated number would be employed as a point of chronological departure.

The impetus behind the resort to factoring 480 is a reading of archaeological data that seem to demand a 13th–12th century date. Besides the assumption that the place name Rameses in Exodus 1:11 attests to an Exodus in the Ramesside era, evidence of massive destruction and sociological disruption in Canaan at the end of the Late Bronze period seems by "late daters" to be explained best by the biblical Conquest. However, two textual factors nullify this interpretation:

1. Moses' instruction to Joshua on the eve of the Conquest was that he must refrain from destroying the sub-structures of Canaanite cities, leaving them intact to be occupied by the victorious Israelites (Dt 6:10–11; 19:1), a plan that came to fruition under Joshua (Jos 24:11–13). Thus, no evidence exists of major, widespread destruction at the end of the 15th century (1406–1400).

2. The dates asserted by opponents of the early Conquest (1230–1100) square nicely with the dates of the judges of Israel who contended with enemies that did considerable damage to the land before they were defeated and routed. First, the Canaanite King Jabin of Hazor "strongly" (רָחַץ) oppressed Israel for 20 years (ca. 1240–1220) until Deborah and Barak drove them out (Jgs 4:3), but not before they had forced the Israelites into hiding and brought ordinary life to a standstill (Jgs 5:6–7). From ca. 1187–1180 the Midianites invaded from the east, forcing the Israelites to abandon their homes and to take refuge in dens and caves (Jgs 6:2). They then destroyed Israel's farmlands and livestock (6:4–5) until Israel was "brought very low" (וַיִּדָּלּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מְאֹד), a situation that most likely implies destruction of properties.

The mushrooming of the construction of the famous “four-room” houses of this period could be explained by Israel’s rebuilding of dwellings after the terrible days of the judges. Found in both the Transjordan and Canaan—and even in South Egypt—these unique structures can clearly be linked to Israel both before and after the Conquest.²¹

Ai and Old Testament Chronology

The importance of Kh. el-Maqatir is now self-evident, for the Conquest began with its destruction following that of Jericho. The record shows that only Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were placed under *cherem* (חֶרֶם, devoted to destruction), the remaining cities of Canaan were to remain intact with only their occupants put to the sword (Jos 6:17, 21, 24; 8:1–28, 24, 26, 28; 11:11, 13). Wood has demonstrated clearly that Jericho fell in the LB period and the evidence is still strong that Hazor also was destroyed at this time.²² However, Ai was not laid waste at that time if it is to be identified with et-Tell. On the other hand, el-Maqatir was beyond doubt thriving in the LB I period until it too was destroyed in a time frame compatible with the early Conquest date of 1406. The evidence so far indicates that it was reoccupied in the Early Iron Age and even beyond into Roman and Byzantine times.

Conclusion

Though no inscription or other hard data have so far been found to identify el-Maqatir with Ai with absolute certainty, pottery and other chronological markers point in that direction. If the identification can be solidified, the early Conquest and Exodus dates will find strong confirmation and thus will follow compelling evidence to put the whole matter of pre-Monarchic biblical chronology on an even sounder footing.

Thus, in answer to the question, “Does Ai matter?” It certainly does!

Notes

¹ See especially the important works by Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998; Andrew Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology*. St. Louis: Concordia, 2011.

² On Ussher and his chronology, see Eugene H. Merrill, “Chronology,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003, pp. 113–22.

³ Joel Drinkard, *Benchmarks in Time and Cultures: An Introduction to the History and Methodology of Syro-Palestinian Archaeology*. Atlanta: Scholars, 1988; *One Hundred Years of American Archaeology in the Middle East*. Ed. Douglas R. Clark and Victor H. Matthews. Boston: ASOR, 2003. For classical “eyewitness” accounts by the excavator, see Austen H. Layard, *The Monuments of Nineveh*. London: John Murray, 1849; and *A Popular Account of the Discoveries at Nineveh*. New York: J.C. Derby, 1854.

⁴ For a good rendition of the Eponym, see *The Context of Scripture*. Volume One. ed. W.W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger. Leiden: Brill, pp. 465–66. Its importance for the history of both Assyria and Israel is evident in its many citations in *The Cambridge Ancient History*. Second ed. Vol. III/Part 2, ed. John Boardman, et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 73, 75, 83, 85, 97, 105, 143, 322–23, 325–26, 338–39.

⁵ These are the Karmak List, the Abydos List, the Sakkara King List, and (most important) the Turin Canon; cf. *COS II*, 2000, pp. 461–70; James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955, pp. 227–321.

⁶ An important history of Rationalism and its impact on biblical faith and scholarship to this day is that of William Manchester, *A World Lit only by Fire*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1992.

⁷ A recent history of the method is that of Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Roeker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Nashville: B&H, 2011, pp. 130–36.

⁸ For a brief history and critique of the so-called biblical archaeology movement, see William G. Dever, *Archaeology and Biblical Studies: Retrospects and Prospects*. Evanston, IL: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1974.

⁹ William F. Albright, “Ai and Beth-Aven,” pp. 141–49 in *Excavations and Results at Tell el-Ful (Gibeath of Saul), The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research 4*, ed. Benjamin W. Bacon. New Haven CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1924.

¹⁰ Joseph A. Callaway, “Excavating Ai (et-Tell): 1964–1972,” *BA* 39/1 (1976): 18–30; *The Early Bronze Age Citadel and Lower City at Ai (et-Tell)*. Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1980.

¹¹ David Livingstone, *Khirbet Nisya: The Search for Biblical Ai, 1979–2002*. Manheim PA: Executive, 2003.

¹² The name of the site appears to be related to the (Hebrew) root *qtr*; “to burn incense.”

¹³ For a catalog of all the criteria required by the biblical text and that comport with Maqatir’s location and setting, see Bryant G. Wood, “The Search for Joshua’s Ai,” pp. 205–40 in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, eds. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil and Paul J. Ray Jr. Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008.

¹⁴ Bryant G. Wood, “The Remarkable 2013 Season at Khirbet el-Maqatir,” *Bible and Spade* 26 (2013): 91–93.

¹⁵ According to the early date held here, Moses, who was born in 1526, was contemporary to Thutmose III (reigned 1506–1452), Amenhotep II, the pharaoh of the Exodus (r. 1455–1418), Thutmose IV (r. 1418–1408), and even Amenhotep III (1408–1369), the pharaoh of the Conquest. Thus Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 58.

¹⁶ See, for example, the arguments for a late date by as eminent a scholar as K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, pp. 310–12. See also James Hoffmeier, “What Is the Biblical Date for the Exodus?: A Response to Bryant Wood,” *JETS* 50 (2007): 225–47; Bryant G. Wood, “The Biblical Date for the Exodus is 1446 B. C.: A Response to James Hoffmeier,” *JETS* 50 (2007): 249–58.

¹⁷ For support of this date for Jephthah’s tenure, see Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 167–69, 190–92.

¹⁸ Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

¹⁹ With the exception of L, G reads 440 for 480, but the difference does not affect the overall argument, except it weakens the “factoring” solution by having only 11 generations of 40 years each rather than the desired 12.

²⁰ This was proposed somewhat tentatively by R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969, pp. 315–325.

²¹ For the four-room house in general, see Gary A. Byers, “Living Like a Judge,” *Bible and Spade* 26/4 (2013): 94–97. For the idea that destruction of the Early Iron Age period can be explained by the ravagings of the times of the judges, see Eugene H. Merrill, “Palestinian Archaeology and the Date of the Conquest: Do Tells Tell Tales?” *GTTJ* 3 (1982): 107–121.

²² Bryant G. Wood, “Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho? A New Look at the Archaeological Evidence,” *BAR* 16/2 (1990):44–58. Douglas Petrovich, “The Dating of Hazor’s Destruction in Joshua 11 by way of Biblical, Archaeological, and Epigraphic Evidence,” *JETS* 51 (2008): 489–512.

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