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HOW WAS THE CURSE ON JERICHO FULFILLED?

(1 KINGS 16: 34.)

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WHEN Jericho was destroyed, a curse was pronounced upon its rebuilding, to the effect that the man who should do so would lay the foundation in his oldest son and set up the gates in his youngest son (Josh. 6: 26). The verb בָּנָה, "build," evidently implies the restoration of Jericho to its former fortified strength. It was still counted as a city of Benjamin (Josh. 18: 21); it was taken by the Moabites soon after Joshua's death (Judg. 3: 13); David commanded his disgraced officers to remain at Jericho on their way home until their beards had grown again (2 Sam. 10: 5); Elijah and Elisha came to Jericho and found prophets there (2 Kings 2: 5); the citizens of Jericho were with Ezra (Ezra 2: 34) and aided Nehemiah (Neh. 3: 2) in the restoration of Jerusalem. That these Israelite inhabitants did not live on the very space within the walls of Joshua's time is possible, for three sites of the city have been located;¹ but such a favored spot as Josephus describes in glowing terms² could not long have remained uninhabited. The curse was pronounced rather against the rebuilding of its walls and gates, as danger would result to Israel from the likelihood that it would be held by foes.

The curse remained unfulfilled for some five hundred years, until the time of Ahab, when several acts of disobedience to God took place. These are enumerated together as constituting the ground and necessity of the coming upon the scene of Elijah. We read near the close of 1 Kings, chap. 16, that Ahab continued in the sins of Jeroboam; that he married Jezebel of Sidon; that he built a temple for Baal at Samaria; and that he introduced the worship of Ashtoreth. As the climax of this impiety we read that a man of Bethel, no doubt with the approval of the king,

¹*Palestine Exploration Fund, Names and Places.* ²*Antiquities*, V, 1, 8.

made Jericho a defense for the northern kingdom by disobeying the edict and renewing the walls and gates of the "city of palms."

This act of the Bethelite is stated in 1 Kings 16: 34 to have brought the curse upon him, but the manner of its fulfilment is open to question. Did his two sons die of disease or accident, the one at the beginning, the other at the end of the work? Or did he by his own act fulfil the direful prophecy by the sacrifice of his sons, burying them respectively under the corner-stone of the wall and under the last gate constructed? Some have even supposed that several sons died in succession as the work proceeded: "all his children were cut off," says the *Cambridge Bible*. Nothing so imaginative as this needs to be considered; we simply wish to know whether it was a case of penalty inflicted from without or a sacrifice voluntarily made.

Mr. Macalister, excavating at Gezer and finding children buried under foundations, is reminded of Jericho, but considers it "a somewhat doubtful and indefinite instance, capable of bearing other constructions than foundation sacrifice."³ In the same number of the *Quarterly Statement*, however, we have mention of Professor Sellin's work at Taanach, where he found the bodies of children similarly buried.⁴ Writing in Hastings's *Bible Dictionary*, Messrs. Selbie, in the article "Foundation," and Burney, in the article "Hiel," admit the possibility that it was a case of sacrifice at Jericho. In the *Encyclopædia Biblica*, Dr. Cheyne, mainly bent on improving the history, only remarks that the rebuilding was probably done by Jehu. Dr. H. C. Trumbull refers to this case in his work *The Threshold Covenant*,⁵ and cites examples of human foundation sacrifices in other lands; but as to Jericho he seems to hold the common idea, for he quotes the Revised Version soon to be examined. Professor Bennett, in the *Polychrome Bible*,⁶ understands the curse to mean that "the oldest son would die when the foundation was laid, the youngest when the fortifications were completed by setting up the gates." Dr. F. J. Bliss in an excellent article on Jericho in Hastings's

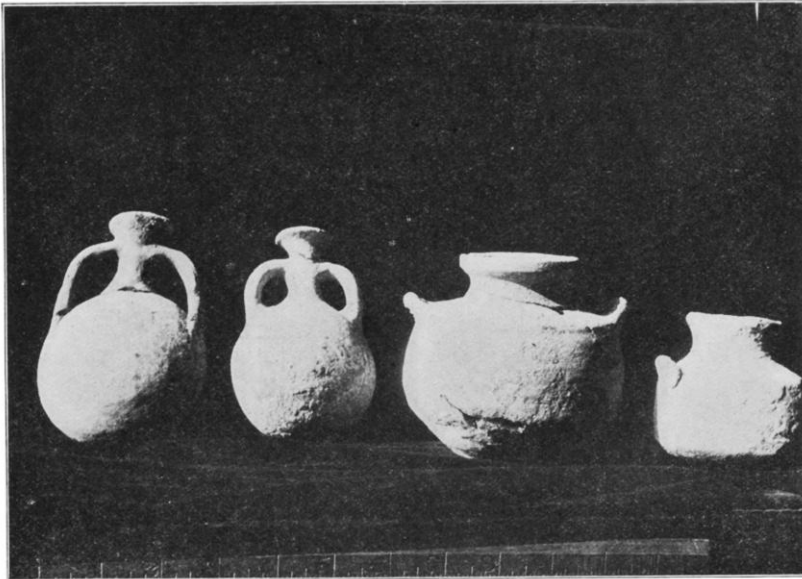
³ *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, July, 1903, p. 224.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 273, quoting *Das heilige Land*, Vol. XLVII, Part I.

⁵ Pp. 46 ff. ⁶ On Josh. 6: 26.

Bible Dictionary, speaks of Joshua's words as "prophesying misfortune."

The Hebrew in both passages has the preposition **בְּ**, meaning "in" or "with," but admitting the idea of accompanying event or cost involved. The Septuagint renders it by the equivalent *ἐν*; the Vulgate has *in*; but the version of Schmidt has *jactura*,



SMALL BURIAL VASES UNEARTHED AT GEZER.

"with the loss of;" Luther has *es kostete*; and the Revisers have changed "in" to "with the loss of" in both passages. This seems to substitute an interpretation for a translation, and goes in the direction of Dean Stanley's assertion that the "architect's" sons died,⁷ for something is said which the text does not exactly state.

If we say simply that "he laid the foundation on Abiram his first born and set up the gates on his youngest son Segul," we are treating the preposition as we must treat it when we read of the glory on the tabernacle (Numb. 14 : 10; Deut. 31 : 15), and

⁷ *Jewish Church*, Scribner's edition, Vol. II, p. 243.

of riding on horses (Isa. 66: 20). Of course, לַי would enforce this understanding, but there is reason to believe that Joshua's words left the meaning somewhat indefinite purposely, and that the writer in 1 Kings 16: 34 was careful to repeat the words of Joshua.

The objection may be raised that voluntary sacrifice of sons would not fulfil this curse, which implies misfortune; but to this the answer is easy that a self-inflicted loss is still a loss, and that if the father was deprived of his sons by his own act, he was still bereaved. The times were degenerate. The northern kingdom was departing far away from the law. Child-sacrifice was a practice of the land, and Israel was adopting it in the worship of Molech. Later it became the usage also in Judah under Ahaz (2 Kings 16: 3). The belief in its efficacy is shown in 2 Kings 3: 27, when the Moabite king openly sacrificed his eldest son, and thereby sent his victorious enemies home in fear and shame. The danger of the rite being introduced is seen from Lev. 20: 2-5. With accumulating evidence of the prevalence of the rite, we shall probably be led to see an instance of it in the case of Jericho, the foundation stones being laid with burial jars beneath them, as we see was done at Gezer, the jar under the beginning of the wall containing the body of Hiel's eldest son, and that under the last gate the body of his youngest son. Mr. Macalister speaks of "infants' bones built under or into ordinary house walls," saying that he has found six or eight instances, all in the Jewish strata which would give a period after Solomon (1 Kings 9: 6), and of course before the exile.