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Early Israelite Warfare and the Conquest of Canaan

THE FOURTH SACKS LECTURE

OXFORD CENTRE FOR
POSTGRADUATE HEBREW STUDIES
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Ladies and Gentlemen, it has indeed been an honour to have been invited to Oxford as a Visiting Fellow for this past academic year by the Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, and I wish to express my thanks to the Centre, and to its Principal, Dr. Patterson, for the invitation to address you this evening.

In approaching the subject of my lecture — early Israelite warfare and the Conquest of Canaan — allow me to take last things first. For modern research, the Israelite Conquest as documented in the Bible is a most crucial, vexing, even controversial element in the formative period of Israel's history. After examining it as our basis, we shall turn our focus upon the specific modes of warfare adopted by the early Israelites in battle.

It indeed seems appropriate, with Professor James Barr here in the chair, to start with semantics — by referring to the diverse terminology employed by the various scholars for what the Bible calls the "inheritance" of Canaan by the Israelites. Many a scholar has labelled this takeover as a "conquest", pure and simple. In my mind, we ought to tone this down somewhat, to some such phrase as "forced entry" or preferably, "forced entries", in the plural. If subsequently we do use the term "conquest", please regard our "lapse" merely as a matter of convenience.

The German school of Bible research, set in motion by Alt and Noth, has adopted the term *Landnahme*, and this has been accepted widely. This medieval German word, revived in this context by Alt, conveys the notion of a peaceful penetration of the Israelites into Canaan by means of ordinary transhumance — and thereby turns

biblical tradition topsy-turvy. The French term *installation* (but not "conquête") is consistently employed by de Vaux, in the latest comprehensive account of Israel's early history, entitled "L'histoire ancienne d'Israël" (1971) — a somewhat neutral usage which largely sidesteps the issue at hand.

Now this spectrum of terminology — which could readily be augmented — reflects the principal dilemma confronting the student of the Israelite Conquest, or indeed, of Israel's entire proto-history (that is, the period prior to the nation's consolidation, in Palestine in the 12th century B.C., as a concrete, tangible entity). For what degree of historicity can we ascribe to the biblical tradition in Numbers and Deuteronomy concerning the conquest of Trans-Jordan, on the one hand, and in Joshua and Judges 1, concerning Cis-Jordan, on the other? Does this tradition more or less accurately reflect the historical process? Or — granted that it crystallized only after many generations — is it primarily the mere product of the perceptions and deliberations of the later historiographers and redactors (and thus devoid of actual historical worth)? In other words, to quote Sportin' Life, of *Porgy and Bess* fame: "The things you're li'ble to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so."

Our problem becomes acute when it is realized that the numerous extra-biblical sources on Canaan in the 13th century B.C. — generally conceded to be the period of the Israelite Conquest, or at least of its central phase — make no mention of these events. Nevertheless, let us not be led into exaggerated scepticism (an all too common pitfall here), as if the entire episode were concocted. This deficiency can probably be attributed to the fact that the

Israelite Conquest caused but a ripple on the surface of the contemporaneous international scene.

Thus, in reconstructing the history of the Israelite Conquest, the biblical record alone must suffice — imposing all the methodological limitations of an internal source, of self-evidence: that is, subjectiveness, idealisation, aggrandisement, (romanticism . . .). Moreover, two other processes were affecting biblical historiography, gradually obscuring the initial reality.

The first such operant was "reflection", subjecting the Conquest to contemplation as to why and how Canaan fell. This led to a historiosophy within the biblical sources, subservient to an explicit theological doctrine. Whereas in the relatively early, raw depictions of the Israelite wars, the mortal and the divine are concerted, the later redactors (especially the so-called Deuteronomist) brought the role of the Lord of Israel to the fore, suppressing the human element. In this way the ideology of what Bible research has come to denote the "Holy War" or, preferably, the "Yahweh War" crystallised. Such real factors as troop strength or the weaponry involved are irrelevant here, as is any disparity between Israel and her adversaries — as for instance in the Gideon and Deborah episodes. The sacred element increasingly outshines and overshadows the profane: God fights for His people (Joshua 10:14; 11:6) and overwhelms the enemy (cf. "not by your sword and not by your bow", Joshua 24:12). The second operant affecting the biblical recording of the Conquest is "telescoping" — the compression of lengthy, involved campaigns into a relatively brief time-span, thereby creating in retrospect a historical account of artificial simplicity.

Thus, there eventually emerged the culminating level of Israelite consciousness, what I would term the "official" or "canonical" tradition of the Conquest, presenting a generally organic, continuous chain of events: the territory on both sides of the River Jordan was occupied in a swift military operation, all twelve Israelite tribes participating in concert — initially under the leadership of Moses and then under that of Joshua — and with full divine collaboration. Canaan was conquered almost in its entirety, redeeming a divine pledge to the Patriarchs.

Yet, variant traditions remain among the biblical sources, contradicting this contrived version. An instructive example is the conquest of Western Palestine as related in Judges 1, negating the entire depiction of the unified, pan-Israelite conquest advocated by the "official" tradition. Not only are particularistic tribal conquests described in this deviant chapter, but the very geographical direction of conquest is inverted — from the north-central hill-country towards the Negev in the south. Further, the "total conquest" is contradicted by the listing of alien enclaves remaining in the midst of the domains of the individual tribes, areas too strong to be dispossessed.

The actual course of events comprising the Conquest was, therefore, very much more complex than the simplistic, streamlined, pan-Israelite description projected by the "official" tradition.

I have no intention here of attempting a factual reconstruction of the course of the Conquest, *wie es gewesen ist*; but let us embark upon the less pretentious task of

scrutinising the extant Conquest traditions solely from a military point of view. In dealing with this and other facets of Israel's proto-history, we base ourselves on the following working hypothesis: the biblical evidence is basically no more than an ancient model — in our case, one depicting the Conquest, as if the Israelites themselves had sought to formulate a concept of how they had come into possession of Canaan, much like the modern conjectures of biblical research. Despite poetic embellishment and distortion, this ancient "theory" had the clear advantage of an intimate familiarity with the land, its topography, its demography and, last but not least, its military situation. Such an approach, then, might ultimately lead to a more positive appraisal — restoring the tenability of much of the biblical tradition and retrieving it from the clutches of current, mainstream Bible criticism.

In accepting the principal biblical maxim of a military sub-jugation of Canaan as the decisive factor in the Israelite takeover, we are confronted by the cardinal question: how could the semi-nomadic Israelite tribes, emerging from the desert fringes, surmount an adversary of long military experience and possessing a superior technology? How was a horde of foot-soldiery able to overthrow an array of strongly fortified cities and well-trained forces, including fleet chariotry? This obvious disparity was one of the prime motives in weaning many Bible critics away from the traditional view and leading them to hypothesise the peaceful infiltration of Canaan, as we have noted. Granted that such infiltration did occur side-by-side with military actions, it still cannot be considered as the initial or principal factor of the Israelite

occupation. History is too littered with analogous instances of ancient states, and even empires, being overwhelmed by "uncivilized" tribes — two outstanding examples being the Arab conquest of Byzantine Palestine, and the destruction of the Roman Empire by the Germanic tribes.

In seeking a rationale for the Israelite Conquest which is sensible and comprehensible, we must focus upon two essential factors: a true grasping of the Canaanite scene, and the specific mode of warfare employed by the Israelite tribes.

The Canaanites at this stage suffered certain deficiencies which partially compensated for the military inferiority of the Israelites and facilitated a relatively rapid overrunning of the country. The Canaanite population west of the Jordan was not united into an overall, military organization which might have been able to cope with the Israelite invasion. This lack of political cohesion was complemented by a lack of any Canaanite national consciousness. The extensive political fragmentation within Canaan is demonstrated by the scores of Canaanite city-states mentioned in the Amarna Letters, as well as by the list of thirty-one Canaanite kings allegedly defeated by Joshua. Thus, for example, when Jericho or the hill-town of Ai was attacked, there was no one to rush to her aid in the hour of extreme peril. And in the absence of a broad Canaanite territorial defence system, no attempt could be made to stem the Israelites at the fords of the Jordan, before they had penetrated westward. The river was surely a major potential barrier

and could have provided a fine means of forestalling the invasion. That the Jordan could be utilized militarily was demonstrated more than once by the Israelites themselves, later, during the period of the Judges, when on several occasions they seized the fords and thus cut off their enemies' line of retreat.

Crossing the Jordan from east to west, the Israelites soon gained a series of successes, especially in the mountainous regions of Western Palestine, though much less in the lowlands. As has been stressed by the great Clausewitz — and in direct contrast to popular belief — an inferior force (such as the early Israelites) assailing a large body in mountainous terrain holds a relative military advantage, especially in open battle. Indeed, many generations later, a mountain mentality was still ascribed to Israel (by the Arameans): "Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they." [A similar attitude was expressed, centuries later, by the Seleucids concerning the Maccabean fighters.]

Time does not allow here to delve into further facets of Canaanite weakness in this period — such as the decline of the city-state system — archaeological and sociological aspects of considerable interest and significance in themselves. Rather, we shall concentrate on the second factor essential to a rational explanation of the Israelite success — the specific conduct of warfare adopted. The military qualities and abilities of the early Israelites have been touched upon by various experts — both biblical and military — and, in particular, by my colleague in Jerusalem, Professor Yigael Yadin. Our treatment here,

however, regards the Conquest as a subject in itself, focussing upon the relatively new concept in military science termed the "indirect approach".

The notion of the "indirect approach", introduced by Liddell-Hart, is one of those novel conceptual frameworks which promises to bring about a new assessment of well-known, ancient battles, at the same time affording deeper insights into the specific manner in which such engagements were conducted. Liddell-Hart himself traced the course of the "indirect approach" as far back in history as Classical times, but unfortunately he ignored the Bible. For many of the biblical sources, when stripped of their theological varnish, do present a candid record of military lessons and can still serve as exemplars for Liddell-Hart's thesis.

Analysis of the various battles described — particularly in the Books of Joshua and Judges, and to some extent in Samuel — reveals that the early Israelites gained victory over a technologically and numerically superior enemy through efficient application of what can certainly be regarded as the "indirect approach". Indeed, such a manner of action formed the very pith and fibre of Israelite warfare in this period, and we submit that this artful application of "indirect" means was a veritable pinnacle in Military History. But as in their social and political structure, the military practices of the Israelites subsequently underwent a basic change, upon the establishment of a monarchy. With the institutionalization of a regular army, under the kings of Israel, the "indirect" gave way to more direct, conventional modes of warfare, placing greater reliance upon brute force and advanced weaponry.

The acute military problem facing the early Israelites in Canaan was twofold: enemy defences, on the one hand, were based on strongly fortified cities, representing major obstacles even to such mighty, regular forces as the Egyptian army. On the other hand, the Canaanites were able to field a well-trained professional soldiery, the most formidable arm of which was their famed chariotry.

Frontal assaults and siege warfare, not to speak of straightforward encounters in the open field, were exactly what the early Israelites sought to avoid; and it was precisely "indirect" means, independent of the technology of the period, which so effectively suited their needs. Thus, they purposefully exploited the manifold facets of deception in overcoming their enemies — feints, decoys, ambushes, diversions, night attacks — any guile to attain surprise. Doctrinal reliance upon such ruses is even preached in the Book of Proverbs: "By stratagems you shall wage war, and victory (shall come) through much planning" (24:6), and: "For want of stratagems an army falls, but victory (comes) through much planning" (11:14).

Planning, of course, depends upon foreknowledge, and the early biblical episodes demonstrate the developed Israelite awareness of the prerequisite of thorough intelligence. Reconnaissance is frequently noted prior to campaigns, yielding vital information on Canaan, its topography, ethnic and demographic composition, military and political structure, productivity, ecological factors, and the like. This receives full expression in the story of the Twelve Spies despatched by Moses on first approaching Canaan. Their explicit instructions read like a modern intelligence brief: "See what the land is, and

whether . . . [it is] strong or weak, . . . whether the land . . . is good or bad, and whether the cities . . . are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there is wood in it or not" (Numbers 13:18–20). And their eventual reports to Moses have a true, professional ring to them. Despite its poetic-legendary overtones, this episode displays authentic, typical features of early Israelite military practice. In this instance, and in others, the Israelites were aiming at settlement in the conquered areas and thus resorted to broad, strategic reconnaissance to obtain a comprehensive picture of their objective. But where their aim was destruction — as we shall see later, at Jericho and Ai — a more limited scope, of tactical or field intelligence, yielding purely military information was sufficient. The spies sent into Jericho, the first Israelite target within Canaan, found an ideal "contact" in Rahab the harlot, whose house was conveniently located at a vital spot in the city's defences; her profession, too, enabled her to come into contact with a broad public, funnelling further information on the defending forces and on morale within the town.

Although the Books of Joshua and Judges remain unique throughout the literature of the Ancient Near East in the number and variety of battle-schemes assembled, actual collections of stratagems have survived only from Classical times (excluding the Far East, e.g. Sun Tse). The two most comprehensive extant works, both named *Stratagemata* and based on the Greek and Roman wars, are by Frontinus (late 1st century A.D.), containing over 500 stratagems, and the lesser known Polyaenus (late 2nd century A.D.), adducing some 950 examples.

I allude to these collections, for their perusal yields a number of tactical devices closely resembling ruses described in the Bible. These parallels are of considerable importance in bolstering the credibility of the biblical examples.

Among the early wars of the Israelites, we find no actual description of an outright, successful assault upon an enemy city. The adoption of an indirect military approach finds expression in two principal categories of tactics: covert infiltration, thereby neutralising the city-defences (like the Trojan Horse); and enticement, drawing the city-defenders out into the open.

In the former category, the fall of Jericho as described in Joshua 2-6 was a siege culminating in a "miraculous" destruction of the walls (6:20) and a subsequent penetration into the defenceless city. The "official" tradition, however, seems to have preserved an early strand which hints at a true armed conquest of the city. This is represented by the episode of Rahab and the spies, an independent literary source which has been worked into the amalgam of the Jericho cycle. In fact, the story of the spies at Jericho, of a realistic-secular stamp, is quite out of line with the dominant tradition, which ascribed the fall of the city to divine providence. Indeed, an actual battle at Jericho is indicated in the review of Israel's history in Joshua's valediction (24:11): "And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the men of Jericho fought against you . . ."

We may conclude that there had once circulated a more realistic account of the capture of Jericho, including an intelligence mission involving a "fifth column" within the

city. We cannot reconstruct that early version of the conquest of Jericho with certainty, for the suppressed story has been truncated in the extant text and supplanted by the historiographer's *actus Dei.* Nonetheless, Rahab surely played a more active role in the Israelite penetration into the city, which was most likely accomplished by stratagem. The spies had Rahab tie a scarlet cord *outside* her window in the city-wall (Joshua 2:18), certainly not to protect her household from the Israelites rampaging *within* the city, after the collapse of the walls (as the later redactor would have us believe). Rather, this was to mark the way for a stealthy entry into the city.

Could the encircling manoeuvre around the city, the horn blasts and the great battly-cry preceding the miraculous collapse of the walls (Joshua 6:20) also be survivals from a realistic account of the city's fall? The repeated marching around Jericho on six successive days (Joshua 6:3, 14) has been regarded as a psychological device to lower the enemy's guard, preparing the way for a breach into the city. If so, this stratagem was a noted form of attaining surprise, which we may term "conditioning", that is, deceiving the enemy by repeating the same "field exercise" until he has relaxed his vigilance and a decisive blow can suddenly be dealt.

Stratagems of this sort have been employed throughout history, and Frontinus cites quite a few examples, one of which is particularly similar to our case: a Roman general marched his troops regularly around the walls of a well-fortified city in northern Italy, each time returning them to camp. When the vigilance of the defenders had waned, he stormed the walls and forced the city's capitulation (III, 2, 1).

The conquest of the Canaanite city of Bethel was effected by the well-known ruse of penetrating the fortifications by means of a secret ingress. Israelite pickets, keeping the city under surveillance, had learned of its existence through the treachery of one of the citizens. Penetration through a hidden passage at Bethel, also recalling David's later conquest of Jerusalem, achieved two aims at one blow — maximum surprise, and neutralization of the fortifications — leading to a rapid collapse of the city's defences.

The second category of tactics, as we have noted, is the enticement of the city-defenders into the open. In both Joshua and Judges, the most satisfactory accounts of city conquests, as far as planning and execution of operations are concerned, relate to the hill-towns of Ai (Joshua 7-8) and Gibeah of Benjamin (Judges 20:18-44). In both instances, almost identical stratagems are described, leading many commentators to believe that one of the two served as the literary model for the other. Particularly effective stratagems, however, were undoubtedly re-employed in Israelite tactics. The ruse in both instances was based on a diversionary movement intended to decoy the defenders away from their fortifications and onto open ground. Such simulated, controlled flight — which was to be reversed at a specific point upon order — was (and is) a most difficult manoeuvre to execute, involving a certain risk, albeit calculated, and reveals an admirable level of sophistication. To achieve this, the main force was deployed to storm the city-walls, while a secondary force was concealed in ambush behind the city. The main force

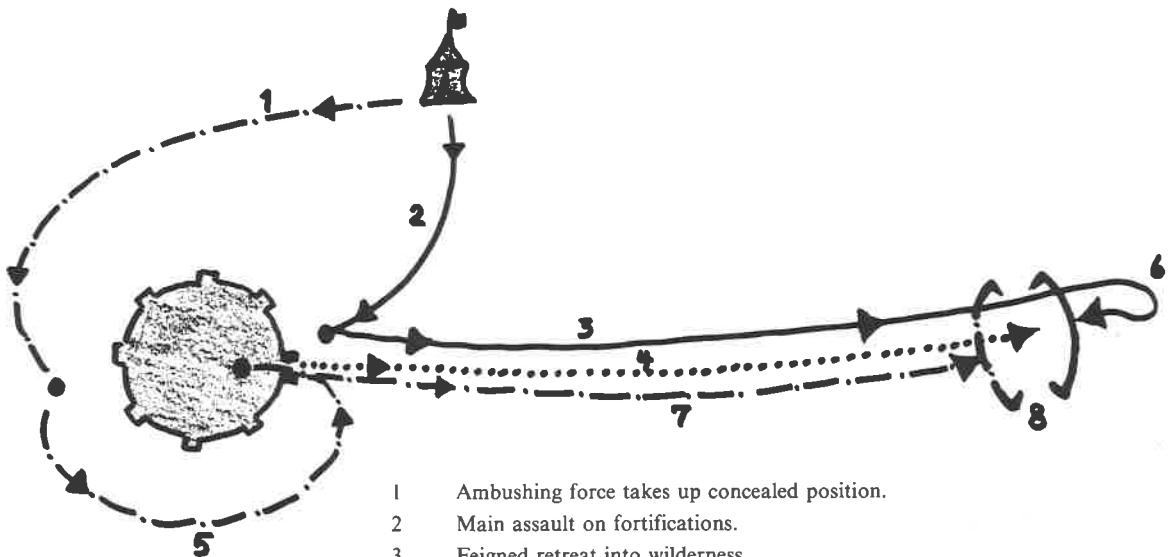
attacked and then feigned retreat into the wilderness, drawing the defenders out after it in hot pursuit. The fate of the battle pivoted upon precise co-ordination between the two Israelite forces, determined by prearranged signals — that is, on mastery of "space and time". The enemy was lured an optimum distance away from the city before the ambushing force seized it and put it to the torch, thus signalling the main force to turn back upon their pursuers. The ambushing force then sallied forth too, to join the fracas from the rear, effectively surrounding the enemy and assuring victory. As it is so poignantly depicted in the Bible:

> So when the men of Ai looked back, behold, the smoke of the city went up to heaven; and they had no power to flee this way or that, for the people [the Israelites] that fled to the wilderness turned back upon the pursuers . . . And the others [of the ambush] came forth from the city against them; so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side, and some on that side; and Israel smote them, until there was left none that survived or escaped (Joshua 8:20-22).

Likewise in the Gibeah episode:

> But when the signal began to rise from the city . . ., the [enemy] looked behind them; and behold, the whole of the city went up in smoke to heaven. Then the men of Israel turned, and the [enemy] were dismayed, for they saw that disaster was close upon them . . . and those from the *city* were in their midst killing them (Judges 20:40-43).

SCHEMATIC PLAN OF THE TAKING OF AI.



1 Ambushing force takes up concealed position.
2 Main assault on fortifications.
3 Feigned retreat into wilderness.
4 Defenders decoyed into sallying forth in pursuit, leaving city undefended.
5 Ambushing force emerges to seize city, putting it to the torch.
6 Main force turns to attack pursuing defenders, upon sighting smoke from city.
7 Ambushing force sallies forth to attack defenders from rear.
8 Defenders surrounded and annihilated.

In this Israelite stratagem we encounter a factor of as yet unrecognized significance, the fact that in both these cases final success was preceded by abortive attempts upon the fortifications, each culminating in the actual repulse of the attackers. The initial assault upon Ai failed, and in the campaign against Gibeah there were two initial setbacks. The true ingenuity and boldness of the Israelite battle-plan lay in the seeming repetition of the very tactics which had just led to failure. This, then, is another instance of the "conditioning" factor noted at Jericho, in which repetitive moves lulled the enemy into a false sense of security. How well the Israelites foresaw the gullibility of their enemies emerges from Joshua's Order of the Day, in which he told his men that the Canaanites would think that the Israelites "are fleeing from us, as before" (Joshua 8:6). Thus, the negative lessons of frontal attack at Ai and Gibeah were immediately digested and turned to advantage, by recasting them in a sophisticated, "indirect" mould.

Stratagems of ambush and feigned retreat as a means of taking fortifications were esteemed practices in antiquity. Frontinus devoted an entire chapter (III, 11) to the subject, denoted *de simulatione regressus*. Some of his examples are essentially identical with our biblical episodes:

> Himilco, the Carthaginian, when campaigning near Agrigentum, placed part of his forces in ambush near the town, and directed them to set fire to some damp wood as soon as the soldiers from the town should come forth. Then, advancing at daybreak with the rest of his army for the purpose of luring forth the

> enemy he feigned flight and drew the inhabitants after him for a considerable distance by his retirement. The men in ambush near the walls applied the torch to the wood-piles as directed. The Agrigentines, beholding the smoke ascend, thought their city on fire and ran back in alarm to protect it. Being encountered by those lying in wait for them near the walls, and beset in the rear by those whom they had just been pursuing, they were caught between two forces and so cut to pieces (III, 10, 5; Loeb edition, pp. 238ff.; and cf. Polyaenus V, 10,4).

The underlying principle of "conditioning" appears in the following example:

> Fulvius, commander in the Cimbrian war, having pitched his camp near the enemy, ordered his cavalry to approach the fortifications of the barbarians and to withdraw in pretended flight, after making an attack. When he had done this for several days, with the Cimbrians in hot pursuit, he noticed that their camp was regularly left exposed. Accordingly, maintaining his usual practice with part of his force, he himself with light-armed troops, secretly took a position behind the camp of the enemy, and as they poured forth according to their custom, he suddenly attacked and demolished the unguarded rampart and captured their camp (II,5,8; Loeb edition, pp. 136f.).

Many of the Canaanite strongholds were not taken by deceptive means, but fell to the Israelites following victories in the field. Two such battles — fought against

Canaanite leagues at Gibeon in the south and at the Waters of Merom in northern Galilee — led to the capture of entire blocs of towns. But how were the Israelites able to attain such victories in open clashes — especially at the Waters of Merom where their infantry faced chariotry? The clue to this may be found in the wording of the descriptions of these battles, in the key-word "suddenly", which implies the element of surprise: "So Joshua came upon them *suddenly*" (at Gibeon)(Joshua 10:9–10); and "So Joshua came *suddenly* upon them . . . by the Waters of Merom, and fell upon them . . ." (Joshua 11:7).

Surprise is a universal principle of war, essential in engaging an adversary superior either technologically or numerically. We have already seen two of its typical manifestations — the subtle device of "conditioning" and outright deception. In the open battles at Gibeon and the Waters of Merom, however, the surprise took a more direct, forthright form, in lieu of stratagem. In both cases the two vital components of surprise, secrecy and speed on the part of the attacking force — deprived the enemy of the opportunity of assessing his situation in order to counteract effectively.

At the battle of Gibeon, the bold Israelite plan of action is unfolded in a single biblical verse: "So Joshua came upon them suddenly, having marched up all night from Gilgal" (in the Jordan valley) (Joshua 10:9). Exploiting the night, the Israelites made a lightning march of some 25-30 kilometres and involving a climb of over a thousand metres, all under the cover of darkness. The actual attack apparently took place at dawn, when the astonished Canaanites were facing the walls of Gibeon (which they

have been besieging), with their rear and flanks exposed most dangerously to the assailing Israelites. The credibility of this reconstruction is supported by the renowned verse cited in Joshua: "Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon, and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon . . ." (Joshua 10:12). This wondrous picture can only reflect an early morning situation, prior to the setting of the moon in the west, over the Ajalon valley, but after the sun had risen in the east, over Gibeon.

The Israelite tactics may have taken into account another factor — the very position of the sun on the horizon, which would have blinded the enemy, who was forced to wheel about in order to face the Israelite troops attacking them from the east. That this is not solely a modern military consideration is demonstrated by examples in Frontinus (II, 2, 8) and Polyaenus (VIII, 10, 3). Both of these sources relate that the Roman general Marius, fighting barbarian tribes, deployed in such a manner as to cause the sun to blind the enemy facing him. Polyaenus adds:

> When the barbarians turned (toward the Romans), the sun was in their faces and they were blinded by its brilliance . . . and when they could no longer bear the rays of the sun, they raised their shields to their faces. Thus they exposed their bodies and were wounded, and were destroyed by the Romans.

Finally, a word on night operations: the cloak of darkness was a basic garment of early Israelite tactical planning. Though much more demanding than daytime operations — in training, leadership and courage — night

operations benefit from an inherent security of movement, besides allowing for possible psychological bonuses. A small force, entirely out of proportion to the strength of its adversary, can achieve night victories provided that it is the party taking the initiative. Israelite night operations took the form of either outright assaults or unobserved convergence upon an enemy preparatory to dawn and daylight attacks. The latter case is found in the final attack on Ai, at Gibeon, in Abimelech's ambush against Shechem, in Saul's deployment against the Ammonites at Jabesh-Gilead and, possibly, in David's raid on the Amalekites.

The classical example — not only in the Bible but throughout Military History — of the ability of a diminutive force to rout a far superior enemy in a night attack is provided by Gideon's raid upon the Midianite camp, described in great detail in Judges 7. Analysis of this episode reveals characteristics of night warfare still quite valid today, despite the story's theological tendentiousness. This was a precisely planned operation, relatively simple in execution and thus well suited to nocturnal conditions. To attain manageability in the dark, Gideon limited his force to 300 picked troops — a "notional army" — leaving the bulk of his camp behind. Thorough reconnaissance, including a last-minute patrol by the commander himself, further assured success. Timed to catch the enemy at his most vulnerable moment, Gideon struck his blow just after the changing of the middle watch. Final victory was secured by a rapid and relentless pursuit of the scattered Midianites, even as far afield as their own domains, in classical application of the "principle of pursuit".

When encountered by an adversary much their superior in military strength, the Israelites initiated what can be regarded today as a specific military doctrine — the earliest attested instance of a broad and systematic application of the "indirect approach". It is hardly surprising, then, that the bold imagination and stark courage so manifest in these early biblical episodes has fired the interest and fascination not only of the present-day Israeli soldier, but also of such veteran field commanders as Edmund Allenby — who during his Palestine Campaign kept a copy of the Bible in his saddle-bags and frequently consulted it in the presence of his staff, or Archibald Wavell — who wrote an illuminating essay on Gideon's tactics; or finally, of course, Charles Orde Wingate, ever controversial amongst British military circles — who taught the first modern Jewish fighters in Palestine to hold a sword in one hand and the Bible in the other.