

Joshua 10:38

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to Debir; and fought against it:

Analysis

And Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to Debir; and fought against it—the verb "returned" (shuv, שׁוּב) seems unusual since this is the campaign's forward progression, not retreat. Most likely it indicates turning back from Hebron's southernmost position toward the northeast to Debir, or possibly returning from a pursuit of fleeing enemies. The Hebrew shuv has broad semantic range including "turn," "return," and "turn back," not always implying retracing previous steps.

Debir (דְּבִיר) means "sanctuary" or "inner room," possibly indicating the city's religious significance as a Canaanite cultic center, though this remains speculative. The city's earlier name was Kirjath-sepher (קִרְיַת־סֵפֶר, "city of the book" or "city of writing"), suggesting it may have been a scribal or literary center (Joshua 15:15; Judges 1:11). If so, its destruction represented judgment not merely on Canaanite military power but on their intellectual and religious systems.

The persistent refrain "and all Israel with him" appears again, maintaining emphasis on covenant unity. The southern campaign's success depended on national solidarity under Joshua's leadership. Individual tribes acting independently could not have accomplished what united Israel achieved through coordinated action. This principle carries forward into New Testament ecclesiology—the church accomplishes God's purposes through unified action under Christ's headship (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Historical Context

Debir is generally identified with Khirbet Rabud, about 8 miles southwest of Hebron, though Tel Beit Mirsim was previously favored. Archaeological surveys show Late Bronze Age occupation at Khirbet Rabud with evidence of destruction and subsequent Iron Age Israelite settlement, consistent with conquest followed by Israelite occupation. The site's elevation (approximately 2,900 feet) placed it in the southern Judean highlands, controlling routes toward the Negev.

The name Kirjath-sepher ("city of books" or "city of writing") has generated scholarly speculation about the city functioning as a scribal center or repository for ancient texts. Whether this etymology reflects actual function or merely ancient folk etymology remains uncertain. However, the ancient Near East did have specialized scribal cities where archives and educational institutions concentrated, making the designation plausible.

Judges 1:11-15 provides additional details about Debir's conquest, crediting Othniel (Caleb's nephew) with capturing the city and receiving Caleb's daughter Achsah as reward. This parallel account suggests that like Hebron, Debir required reconquest after initial seizure—Joshua's campaign broke the city's military power, but full pacification and permanent occupation came later under Caleb and Othniel. This pattern of initial conquest followed by mopping-up operations characterized the entire conquest period.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does Joshua's comprehensive campaign, returning to address every remaining stronghold, model the thoroughness required in addressing sin and spiritual strongholds?

2. What does Debir's possible identity as a literary or religious center teach about the necessity of confronting intellectual and ideological strongholds, not just behavioral sins?
3. How does the pattern of initial victory requiring later consolidation (Joshua conquering, Othniel securing) illustrate the ongoing nature of sanctification after initial conversion?

Interlinear Text

וַיָּשָׁב	וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ	וְכָל	יִשְׂרָאֵל	עִמּוֹ	דָּבִרָה	וַלְחָם
returned	And Joshua	H3605	and all Israel	H5973	with him to Debir	and fought
H7725	H3091		H3478		H1688	H3898

עָלֶיהָ:
H5921

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 15:15 (Parallel theme): And he went up thence to the inhabitants of Debir: and the name of Debir before was Kirjath-sepher.