

ABR'S SEARCH FOR THE LOST CITIES OF THE BIBLE



Aerial view of Kh. Nisya in the hills of Benjamin, 8 mi north of Jerusalem.

Is Kh. Nisya the Ai of the Bible?

By David P. Livingston

While we were doing our research to locate Bethel at El Bireh (Livingston 1970; 1971; 1998) we went to the other side of nearby Mount et-Tawil and found an ancient site named Kh. ("ruins of") Nisya. Local Arabs told us the name "Nisya" means "forgotten." No one remembered what the ruins were. Although it sits on a natural rise, Nisya is not a "tell" with ancient remains in much depth. Bedrock can be seen at the surface all over the site. However, in spite of its having been quite denuded, the site was occupied almost continuously from very early times. The reasons we think it is Biblical Ai follow.

Criteria for Biblical Ai

For any site to be Biblical Ai, it must meet at least five criteria:

1) The topography (hills and valleys) must fit the Biblical description, which is quite detailed.

2) It must be smaller than Gibeon, but not so small as to be insignificant.

3) It must be properly located in relationship to other towns mentioned in Scripture.

4) It must be occupied or deserted at the times which match the Biblical chronology (i.e., occupied in these periods: Patriarchal, Conquest, Late Israelite Kingdom, and Persian).

5) It must have been fortified with walls and a gate just prior to the Israelite invasion.

The Meaning of "Ai"

Before examining the topography, it will be of interest to examine the meaning of the name "Ai." The traditional meaning of "Ai" is "ruins," or "heap of ruins." However, that is the only name the settlement ever had. It is doubtful that later Israelite settlers would rebuild the village and call it "the ruins" (*ha' Ai*). The name must have an alternative meaning



Ruins of et-Tell, the site accepted by most scholars as ancient Ai. Et-Tell was occupied in the Early Bronze Age (3150–2400 BC) and Iron Age I (1200–1050 BC); it was not occupied in the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC), the time of Joshua's Conquest.

(Zevit 1983:26, 27, 32). Here are the results of research on this problem by four leading scholars:

J. Simons (1959: 270): "The word means no more than a 'heap of stones'."

Y. Kaufmann (1953: 77): "Ai does not mean 'Ruin,' but heap, a pile or piles of stones. $\text{עַי} \text{ } \text{יְהוּ}$ are always and *only names of inhabited places and never of ruins*. Num 21:11, 33:44–45; Jos 15:29; Isa 10:28; Jer 49:3" (our emphasis).

J. Grintz (1961: 209–11): "As for 'Ai, Biblical evidence is clear on this point that *it was not a ruin but an inhabited place*... Actually, not only is there no connection between 'Ai and Et-Tell but the word 'Ai (and the more so 'Aiyah) does not have the meaning of 'ruin' (either in Arabic or Hebrew)... Et-Tell is not such an unusual name. It is interesting that the same also applies to the name 'Ai. Similar names exist in many places and they *always, as far as they are known to us, indicate a settled town and never designated an actual ruin*" (our emphasis).

Ziony Zevit (1983: 26): "Ostensibly the names *Et-Tell*, 'the tell,' and *ha'ay*, 'the Ai,' always with the definite article

in Hebrew, should support the identification of the site. [But] a common explanation, that both names refer to 'the ruin,' and hence the Arabic is a translation of the Hebrew, *does not bear up under scrutiny*" (our emphasis).

Ziony Zevit (1985: 62) "...the etymology of the word Ai negates any connection with a word meaning 'ruin.' Etymologically, Ai does not refer to a ruin."

If "Ai" Does Not Mean "Ruins," What Is the Point?

The point is, that if it does not mean "ruins," then et-Tell was not the Ai of Abraham's time because it was in ruins when he passed by. The Ai of Abraham's time must have been an inhabited community (sometime between EB IV-MB II). But, et-Tell was not inhabited then. Therefore, et-Tell must be ruled out as the Ai of Abraham's time.

The only other time et-Tell was occupied was Iron Age I. This means that if et-Tell was at that time called "Ai," then it is logical that no other site nearby would also be named "Ai" at the same time.

1. Topography

The topographical and geographical details were presented in our 1970–1971 articles in *The Westminster Theological Journal*.

First, there must be a mountain (Heb. *har*) between Bethel and Ai. And there is: Jebel (Mount) et-Tawil (“Tall One”). Secondly, there must be a valley north of Ai. There is a deep valley just north of Kh. Nisya with a tall hill just beyond where Joshua could have stood and easily been seen by the ambush west of the city. Thirdly, there needs to be a hiding place for the ambush. In this case, the ridge west and south of the site is admirably suited to hiding an ambush.

Fourth, there must be a *morad* (Heb. “descent”) which leads to Jericho. And there is. Wadi Sheban turns into the Wadi Qelt and goes all the way from just south of Nisya to Jericho. Remarkably, there is even a very narrow place in the wadi about 2.5 km southeast of the site which can be considered the *shevarim* (“breakers” or “broken”). Here huge boulders, from rock outcroppings above the wadi, are even now breaking off and falling down into the wadi. This very narrow defile, 3400 years ago, became a trap where the men of Ai (in the first battle) cut down the Israelites—36 of them!

The topographical details are perfectly suited for Kh. Nisya to be Biblical Ai. The battle could be reenacted there today with every detail matching. This meets the requirements of the first criterion.

2. Size of Kh. Nisya Compared with Gibeon (el-Jib)

The size of Gibeon is usually considered to be about 10–11 acres. But the Benjamin Survey (Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 46*, 235) says it is 60 dunams, or about 15 acres. Joshua 10:2 says that Gibeon was “greater than Ai.” This is interpreted as a reference to the comparative sizes of Gibeon and Ai. Ai should be smaller than Gibeon. Kh. Nisya is about 5–6 acres in size, depending on the period. In some periods it may have been smaller, in others larger than 5–6 acres.

The Benjamin Survey gives the size of Nisya as 15–dunams, or almost 4 acres (Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 32*, 166), but we believe this is a subjective figure since few, if any, of the sites were actually measured by the Benjamin survey team.

Kh. Nisya, then, meets the condition of being smaller than Gibeon.

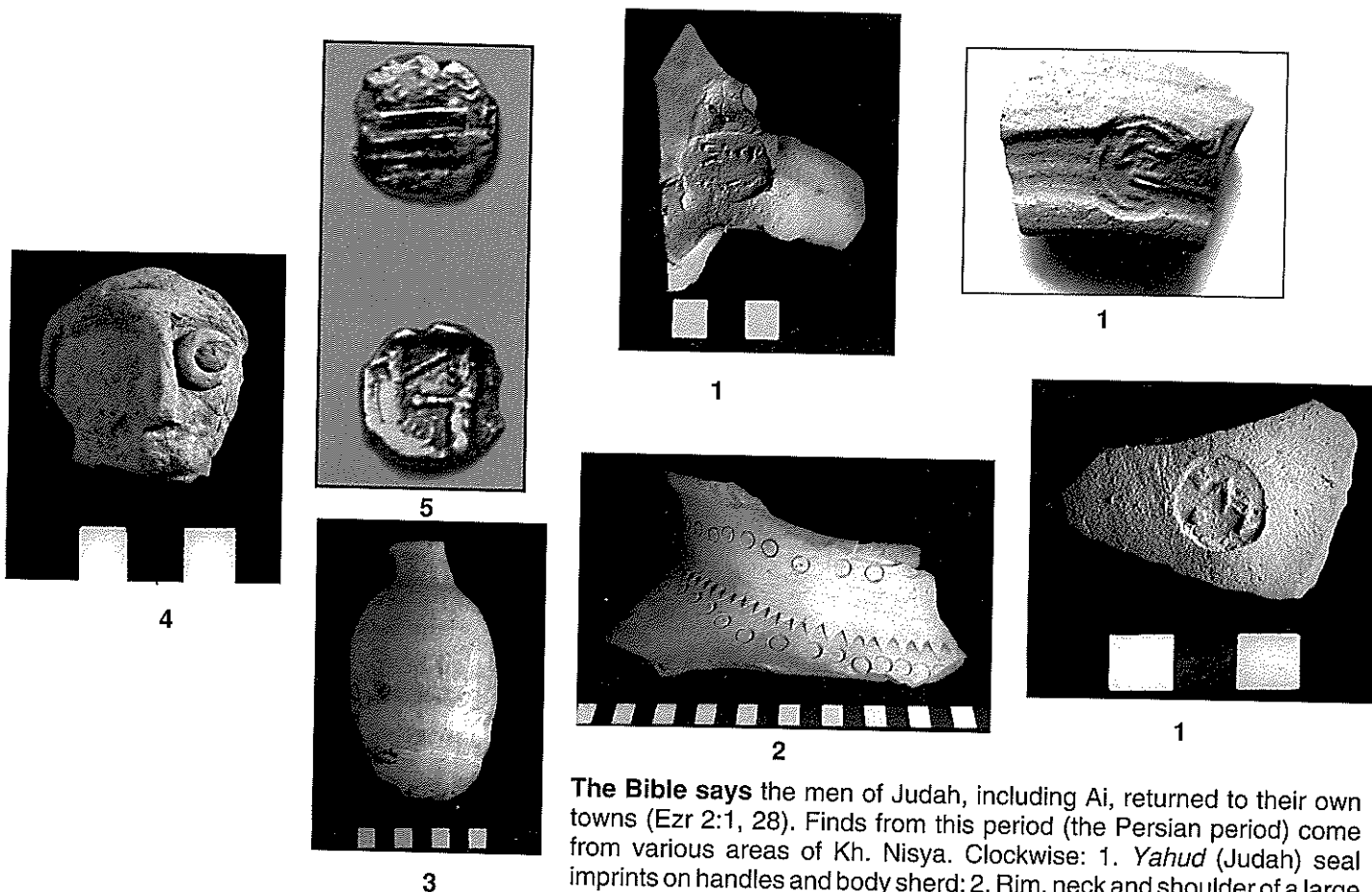
3. Geography: The Location of Ai in Relation to Bethel and Beth-Aven

A. Ai cannot be near Beth-Aven and far from Bethel

The Masoretic text of Joshua 7:2 is translated, “Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near (*im*) Beth-Aven,



Kh. Nisya from the east, with trees marking the top of the site. Houses to the right are of the Orthodox Jewish settlement Psagot, where dig staff stays while excavating. The site’s spring is on the lower left side on the hill.



The Bible says the men of Judah, including Ai, returned to their own towns (Ezr 2:1, 28). Finds from this period (the Persian period) come from various areas of Kh. Nisya. Clockwise: 1. *Yahud* (Judah) seal imprints on handles and body sherd; 2. Rim, neck and shoulder of a large jar with triangular and circular decorations; 3. Small alabaster juglet from Persian context; 4. Head of a clay figurine from possible Persian level; 5. Silver Sidonian coin from the reign of Straton I (Abdashtart, 370–358 BC), twice size, with a likeness of the king of Persia slaying a lion on the obverse (bottom).

east (*miqqedem*) of Bethel.” In this description it sounds as though Ai is near Beth-Aven.

However, the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint, or LXX) leaves out the phrase, “which is near Beth-Aven.” Thus it reads, “Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near (*im*) Bethel.” The LXX translators most likely understood the true situation. In fact, the location of Ai, Bethel, and Beth-Aven were, no doubt, well-known while they were doing the translation. Certainly they were better known to them than in the time of the Masoretes or to us today. Not only this reference, but all other references clearly indicate Ai is near to and associated with Bethel, and Beth-Aven is not.

B. Beth-Aven is listed as an independent place only once in Joshua

While Bethel and Ai are mentioned as twin cities twice (i.e., close together—Gn 12:8; 13:3), there is no reference to Beth-Aven in the Pentateuch at all.

The very first mention of “Beth-Aven” is in Joshua 7:2 (see above). Then there is an oblique reference to it in Joshua 18:12, 13 where the “wilderness of Beth-Aven” is used as a reference point. The “wilderness of Beth-Aven”

can only be located after Beth-Aven, itself, is identified.

In Joshua 16:1 and 18:21–28 Beth-Aven is not found in the list of cities belonging to Benjamin (nor in Ephraim, north of Benjamin).

The only other reference to Beth-Aven is in 1 Samuel 13:5. It must be ruled out as being at Beitin, since Beitin is mostly north of Michmash instead of west of it.

C. All other references place Ai close to Bethel (Zevit 1985: 61)

“(Abram)...removed unto a mountain on the east (*miqqedem*) of Bethel...Bethel on the west (*miyyam*), and Hai on the east (*miqqedem*)” (Gen 12:8, no mention of Beth-Aven).

“Ai which is beside (*mitsad*) Bethel” (Jos 12:9, with no mention of Beth-Aven). Note also that *mitsad* means “side;” the side of the ark of Noah (Gn 6:16); the jewels of gold are to be put on the same cart, right beside (*mitsad*) the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sm 6:8); each warrior thrusting his sword into the side (*mitsad*) of his opponent (2 Sm 2:16). Illustrations can be multiplied, but these make it perfectly clear that Ai and Bethel were beside each other.

Comparison Chart: Et-Tell vs. Kh. Nisya

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERIODS AT KH. NISYA		BIBLICAL REFERENCES OF AI'S OCCUPATION		ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERIODS AT ET-TELL	
<i>Ceramic and Artifacts Present</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Ceramics and Artifacts Present</i>	<i>Dates</i>
Early Bronze	unclear			Early Bronze	3100-2400 BC
Middle Bronze I	?-2000 BC	Genesis 12:8 Abraham	2000? BC		
Middle Bronze II	2000-1550? BC				
Late Bronze I	1550?-1400 BC	Joshua 8 Ai destroyed	1420-1400 BC		
Late Bronze II	—UNOCCUPIED—				
Iron I	1250-1000 BC	Judges 1 Bethel taken (Ai rebuilt?)	1300? BC	Iron I Village	1220-1050 BC
Iron II	1000-586 BC	Isaiah 10:28 Assyrians pass through?	730 BC		
Persian	516-332 BC	Ezra 2:28 Exiles return	516 BC		
		Nehemiah 11:31 Ai resettled	445 BC		
Hellenistic I	332-152 BC	No reference, but no reason to be deserted			
Hellenistic II (Hasmonean)	152-65 BC				
Early Roman (Herodian)	152-65 BC	1 Maccabees 9:50, Josephus <i>Antiquities</i> XIII.1.3			
	—UNOCCUPIED—	"Bethel repaired" (Ai also?)			
		Josephus <i>Wars</i> IV.ix.9	AD 68?		
		Vespasian took Bethel (and Ai?)			
Byzantine I and II	AD 350-640	Eusebius "Ai is deserted"	AD 330?		
Arabic	AD 640-800				
	—ABANDONED—				

Later in Scripture, Bethel and Ai are listed **together** in: Ezra 2:28 "The men of Bethel and Ai, 223" (no mention of Beth-Aven in the list).

Nehemiah 7:32 "The men of Bethel and Ai, 123" (no mention of Beth-Aven).

Nehemiah 11:31 "The children also of Benjamin...(dwelt) at...Aiya, and Bethel and in their villages" (no mention of Beth-Aven).

Beth-Aven is not listed at all, and likely was not reinhabited after the Return.

4. Results of Excavations at Nisya Since 1979 (Dates used are from *The Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*)

The Biblical/archaeological periods when occupation should have occurred at Ai are:

- a. Patriarchal (Middle Bronze)
- b. Conquest (Late Bronze)
- c. Late Israelite (Iron Age II)
- d. Return from Babylon (Persian).

At Kh. Nisya, we have finds for all these required periods. There are pottery and objects for MB II, LB I, IA I and II, and Persian. The latter two periods are especially important. We have an abundance of pottery and small finds for both these periods, as well as the two earliest coins, which are Persian (from 380 BC).

Why are these last two periods important? Both Ezra and

Nehemiah document the return of families to both Bethel and Ai after the Babylonian Exile (Ezr 2:1, 28, 70; Neh 7:6, 32; 11:1, 31). Both writers make it very clear that they "lived in their own towns" and not just anywhere. Furthermore, they would do this to preserve family tombs and to claim and cultivate ancestral lands.

But to return they must have lived there before the Exile. Thus Ai must have both periods present. Any site which does not have these two periods cannot be Ai.

Kh. Nisya has both. But the site is quite denuded now. Its continual occupation for long periods means early architecture was destroyed and the building materials repeatedly reused in new construction. This is seen in the abundance of Hellenistic pottery and coins, followed by Early Roman finds. We have Early and Late Byzantine represented by ceramics, many coins and most of the remaining architecture on the site. Even Early Arabic material is present, after which the site was abandoned.

The Search Continues

We wonder if any archaeologist was perfectly satisfied that his excavation was finished. At Kh. Nisya, there are still a few items needing more investigation.

First, until now, we have found no architecture earlier than Hellenistic (except for, possibly one wall of a Persian building and a few wall stubs from the Iron Age). Each succeeding occupation has gone down to bedrock for their building



Is this carved bedrock actually the foundation platform for a small temple from the Canaanite or Israelite period? Note the drain channel in the foreground, it could have been used to drain away water or blood. The area was later covered with fill and no finds were directly related to the period of use of this feature. Consequently, it cannot be identified specifically or dated with certainty.

activity, sometimes carving installations into it. Added to this is the lack of soil accumulation. It has become obvious through excavation that occupational debris which should have accumulated has instead been removed and used to fill agricultural terraces.

A **second** subject is the relationship of Abraham with the site. **Finally**, the walls and gate, which unquestionably were there when the Israelites arrived, have not yet come to light.

Answers to Remaining Questions

1. Considering the first, we note that there is no early architecture (EB, MB, LB) at several nearby sites, including: Tell en-Nasbeh (Mispeh? McCown 1947: 68); Tell el-Jib (Gibeon; Pritchard 1962: 103, 157–58), Tell el-Ful (Gibeah? Lapp 1981: 6); and, farther away, Tel Migne (Ekron; Gitin and Dever 1989: 2). There is no early architecture at those sites even though pottery and other objects were found for early periods.

2. As for the time of Abraham's first arrival at Bethel, the date held by many evangelicals is generally late EB or MB I. However, there is a wide difference of dates for Abraham even among evangelicals. John Whitcomb holds, as do many, to a date of ca. 2165 BC for Abraham's birth. On the other hand, *Young's Concordance* (p. 8) puts his birth at 1996 BC. By Ussher's chronology, Abraham entered Canaan in 1921. Anstey (1913: 130) has his entry into Canaan in 1875 BC. The Septuagint puts the same as late as 1700 BC (Finegan 1964: 193). And Finegan, a premiere chronologist, suggests Middle Bronze II as the most probable time of Abraham's entry into

Canaan (Finegan 1964: 193).

It is altogether probable, therefore, that Abraham entered the land and camped at Bethel and Ai (Gn 12:8) during MB IIA (2000–1750 BC). Recalling the point we made above, Ai must have been inhabited when Abraham came to Bethel. At that time, there is considerable evidence of occupation at Kh. Nisya with pottery and objects for that period. In any case, Abraham's entry into Canaan is so close to the beginning of MB II that this may be the time we should use instead of MB I (2200–2000 BC).

3. So far, walls and gate have not been uncovered at Kh. Nisya. To understand why not, it is important to note how city walls were built in late MB II and probably into LB I (where MB walls often continue in use). Almost without exception,

Canaanite city walls were built on a field stone base about one meter high (for drainage?) topped with mud bricks to the desired height. If this kind of wall was covered with debris, it has been preserved. If not, it has "melted." The recently discovered mudbrick walls and gate towers at Tel Dan are deteriorating so rapidly that there is real consternation as to how to preserve them at all (Biran 1984).

When there was a wall around Kh. Nisya, it was only during the earliest periods. Should we really expect to find mudbrick walls and gate remaining at a site as denuded as this one is? Any fieldstone base could have been completely dismantled or incorporated into a terrace wall and not yet discovered.

Ubiquitous Walls Around Canaanite (MB III/LB I) Cities and Towns

The Biblical narrative is quite clear about walled cities in the land. Looking at the archaeological evidence for walled cities at an early Conquest date (ca. 1400 BC), Benjamin Mazar (1968: 92) noted the "great upsurge in the construction of large fortresses in the hill country and the Shephelah" during the Middle Bronze Age. And since there was no cultural break between Middle Bronze II (and III) and Late Bronze I, there is every reason to think the situation Mazar mentions above and Dever refers to below, continued throughout LB I. So, Middle and Late Bronze ceramics and artifacts found at Kh. Nisya make Dever's (1987: 154) remarks (from his definitive article on Middle Bronze II) very fitting:

Beginning with Middle Bronze II, and continuing until the end of Middle Bronze III, the archaeological record at nearly every site shows a continual process of defensive construction...Not only are all the larger sites fortified, as might be predicted, *but even towns and villages as small as 2 to 4 acres are surrounded by city-walls*...Indeed, scarcely a single excavated Middle Bronze Age site in Palestine has failed to yield formidable fortifications (our emphasis).

Although Dever leaves a little room for exceptions to his rule, my examination (in 1984) of excavation reports on 32 MB II/LB I sites showed no exceptions to walled cities. Certainly dozens of others could be added to this list by now.

Some researchers maintain there were many villages which had no protective walls during MB II and LB I (Gophna and Beck 1981). However, population studies were the main interest of Gophna and Beck. Thus, their information regarding unexcavated sites was only from surface pottery surveys. We agree that such surveys are helpful in identifying MB/LB sites. However, it is a serious mistake to conclude that there were no fortifications based on surface surveys. In a later article Broshi and Gophna (1986: 88, n. 2) acknowledge this point; "Complete accuracy is impossible here because we do not know whether any number of sites were surrounded by ramparts, and *this fact often cannot be established without an excavation*" (our emphasis).

Finally, support for the fact that even small MB/LB I sites had walls is found closer to "home." Our new ABR excavation at Kh el-Maqtar has a very substantial MB and/or LB wall (and probably a gate) even though its size is only 1.7 acres, about one-third the size of Kh. Nisya.

Kh. Nisya was Occupied in MB II/LB I

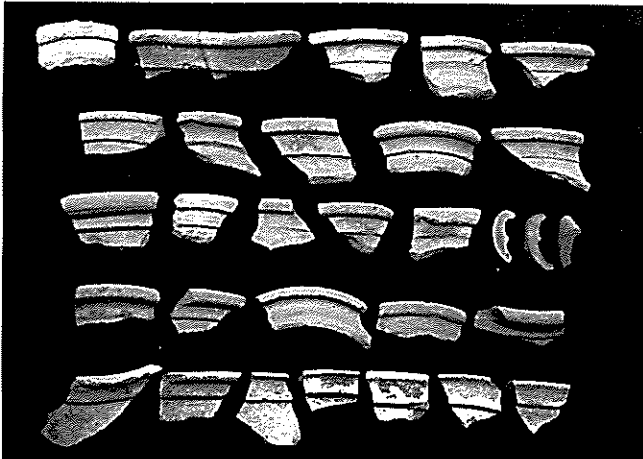
Indicative sherds and artifacts have appeared in great quantity and variety of styles. Water and storage jars, juglets, cooking pots, bowls, chalices and kraters indicate that Kh. Nisya was inhabited during the Canaanite periods.

These are not simply chance finds dropped by wandering Canaanite shepherds. The quantity is too great. For example, of 60-plus rim sherds of hand-made, "pie-crust" rimmed, Dutch oven type cookpots, no two are from the same vessel. This is a significant percentage of the total number of this vessel found at Jericho by Kathleen Kenyon's much larger excavations. Kh. Nisya was a fully occupied site during this period.

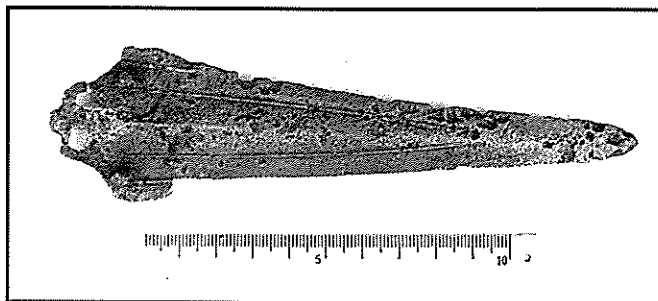
Therefore, Kh. Nisya had Walls during the Canaanite Period

There most certainly was a wall around Kh. Nisya during the Canaanite period. However, there is little hope that

Middle Bronze Age finds at Kh. Nisya. Clockwise: 1. Sherds of typical Middle Bronze storage and water jar rims with characteristic profile found in fill levels from all over the site; 2. Well-worn five-ribbed MB dagger (6.5 in long) found in fill; 3. Egyptian scarab of Middle Bronze Age with cross and curl motif found in fill; 4. Cross and curl seal impression on jar handle. Note also the potter's mark in foreground. It was found in fill.



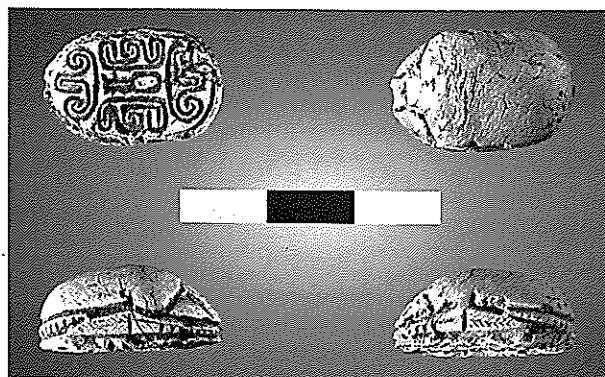
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mudbricks of the wall will ever be found (just as they have not been found at the four sites mentioned above). As for the original fieldstone base, it has likely been dismantled or incorporated into a terrace wall. The reason for our inability so far to find walls and a gate at Kh. Nisya is not as difficult to understand as it may seem at first.

Conclusion

Considering the five points necessary to prove a site is Ai, we close with a brief review: 1. Topographically, there is no other place near ancient Bethel that fits the detailed descrip-

tion given in the Bible. 2. Kh. Nisya is one-half to one-third the size of Gibeon, thus meeting that criterion very well. 3. Geographical relationships meet all the Biblical specifications at Kh. Nisya. 4. The chronology of the archaeological periods discovered match the Biblical chronology beautifully. 5. Fortifications will eventually be discovered, as seen above, since they were once there.

Is Kh. Nisya the site of Biblical Ai? In light of its match with the Biblical account for topography, size, geography, and archaeological periods, it should be considered the best possible candidate.

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