

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Is Jerusalem the Capital of Israel?

In early December, President Trump officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. He also stated that his intent is to relocate the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He did not say when he would do that. But that Jerusalem is Israel's capital is an established fact. The state of Israel has regarded Jerusalem as its capital since its War of Independence in 1948. West Jerusalem is the seat of Israel's president, prime minister, Supreme Court and most government ministries. Furthermore, as Bret Stephens observes, when President Nixon became the first American president to visit Israel in 1974, he attended his state dinner in Jerusalem. In 1977, President Anwar Sadat traveled to Jerusalem and spoke before the Israeli Knesset in his effort to make peace with Israel. When Barack Obama paid his visit to Israel, he spent most of his time in Jerusalem. In April of 2017, Russia declared, "We view West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel."

Do the Jewish people have an historic claim to Jerusalem as its capital? It was King David who made Jerusalem the capital of a united Israel. The historic context of David's rise to power is important. The division between Judah and the rest of the tribes of Israel had characterized Saul's reign. In fact, 1 Samuel presents Israel and Judah as virtually two separate identities within Israel pursuing two separate destinies. For this reason, a civil war ensued shortly after Saul's death. The leaders of Judah logically and sensibly declared David king in 1011 B.C., and he ruled from Hebron in Judah. Not only was David of the tribe of Judah, but, when he sought refuge from Saul among the Philistines, he attacked the enemies of Judah persistently, thereby further winning the favor of the Judahites (see 1 Samuel 27:8-12). Saul had a surviving son, Ish-bosheth, whom the northern tribes supported. Ish-bosheth established his capital at Mahanaim along the Jabbok River east of the Jordan River. Abner, Saul's cousin, was his military commander; Joab, David's cousin, was his commander. The civil war lasted for two years, with one major recorded battle (2 Samuel 2:12-32) near the pool of Gibeon. When Abner attempted to forge an agreement with David, Joab killed him, avenging Asahel, his brother, who died at the battle of Gibeon. Ish-bosheth's men then murdered him and the northern tribes declared their loyalty to David. He ruled a united Israel from Hebron for seven years (2 Samuel 5:1-5).

Since Hebron was in Judah's land grant, David understood that he needed to establish a new capital. He could not show favoritism toward Judah alone. He chose Jerusalem, a Jebusite city. No tribe controlled this city, so Joab, following David's orders, took the city by entering via the "water shaft" (a vertical shaft to a water source outside the city's wall; see 2 Samuel 5:8). In 1004 B.C., Jerusalem became the Israel's capital and David built his palace there, receiving the cedar wood and materials from Hiram, king of Tyre, a major trading city of the eastern

Mediterranean. Wisely then, David had the Ark of the Covenant moved from Keriath-jearim to Jerusalem, building a tent shrine to house it. In one stroke David united both the political and religious loyalties of the tribes and paved the way for a royal theology centered on Jerusalem, David and his descendants. David ruled from Jerusalem for 33 years.

The movement of the Ark to Jerusalem triggered David's desire to build a Temple to house the Ark and as a place of worship (see 2 Samuel 7). Through His prophet Nathan, the LORD rejected this plan. David was a warrior-king who had shed blood. The Temple must symbolize "peace without bloodshed," which is the essence of Solomon's name—shalom. In this chapter, the LORD calls David "my servant," an accolade bestowed on Moses and Joshua, which connotes responsible obedience, faithful dependence, personal intimacy and humility. Even though David would not build the Temple, the LORD made a covenant with him: He promised David that his kingdom, his throne and his dynasty would be eternal (7:16). This covenant is technically a royal grant "by which a sovereign graciously bestowed a blessing," which in David's case was the blessing of eternal kingship. (Jesus Christ, the "son of David" [Matthew 1:1], fulfilled completely the promise of eternal kingship, with an eternal kingdom on an eternal throne.)

With the marvelous covenant promise of eternal kingship in his mind, David began to make preparations for building the Temple. From Araunah the Jebusite, David purchased the threshing floor north of Jerusalem as the location for the Temple (1 Chronicles 21:18-22:1). He then began to make elaborate preparations for its building. He chose stonecutters from resident aliens to prepare building blocks according to the specific measurements he had received from the LORD (see 1 Chronicles 28:12-19). Most probably from the booty of war, he prepared iron, bronze and cedar wood for the Temple. He charged Solomon with the task of building the Temple (1 Chronicles 22:6-13) and commanded that Israel's leaders support all Solomon did (22:17). David pledged that the finances to pay for the Temple would come from the royal treasury, from his own resources and from the free-will offerings of Israel's leaders, which resulted in over 190 tons of gold, 375 tons of silver, 675 tons of bronze and 3,750 tons of iron (1 Chronicles 29:6-9).

Solomon, David's son, built the Temple in Jerusalem. Thomas Brisco provides a helpful summary of the topography of Jerusalem: Jerusalem is located on a series of ridges that run from north to south, with deep valleys on all sides. "The Kidron Valley separates the eastern ridge from the higher elevations of Mount Scopus and the Mount of Olives (2,684 feet). The Hinnom Valley descends alongside the western ridge, encircling the two ridges to the south before joining the Kidron Valley. A central valley . . . divides the two ridges."

The Temple of Yahweh was one of the most noteworthy and beautiful structures of the ancient world. As mentioned above, King David cleared the site on Mount Moriah, and prepared much of the material needed to begin construction of the Temple. According to 1 Kings 5:13-18, Solomon conscripted 30,000 Canaanites as lumbermen to work in Lebanon with Hiram's workers. He also conscripted 70,000 carriers of the lumber and 80,000 stone-cutters in the quarries near Megiddo and Samaria. Supervision of these conscripted workers was done by

3,300 foremen overseen by Adoniram, who presumably was responsible to Solomon. The Temple builders were a combination of Solomon's skilled workers, skilled craftsman from Hiram and the "men of Gebal" (1 Kings 5:18, i.e., men of Byblos, a Phoenician city north of Tyre). Nothing of Solomon's Temple survives, for it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's armies in 586 B.C.

Because of their sin, the people of Judah were then sent into exile to Babylonia, but began their return 70 years later. The return of the Jewish exiles to Judah occurred in three waves. The first wave in 537 B.C. was under Sheshbazzar, a "prince of Judah" (Ezra 1:8), appointed by Cyrus as governor of the province (Ezra 5:14), who led the initial group of exiles back to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:11). According to Ezra 2:64-65, 42,360 plus 7,337 slaves and 200 singers constituted the size of this initial group. Sheshbazzar was of the royal lineage of David, one of the sons of Jehoiachin (the Shenazzar of 1 Chronicles 3:18). Cyrus also entrusted to him the job of returning the sacred vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezra 5:13-16). Under Sheshbazzar, the returnees began to lay the foundations of the Temple (5:16). Although this cannot be validated, more than likely Sheshbazzar died shortly after his return (he was in his sixties) and Zerubbabel, his nephew, succeeded him. Joshua, the high priest, assumed responsibilities for the spiritual affairs of the fledgling community.

Under the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel, the workers built an altar on the ruins of the original one, celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles and offered burnt offerings to the Lord (Ezra 3:1-7). Joshua and Zerubbabel organized the priesthood, which supervised Temple construction. Building materials from Lebanon were ordered, and, with the foundation completed (536 B.C.), joyous praise and worship from the people followed, singing the same hymn King David had composed (1 Chronicles 16:34). But, due to the modesty of this foundation, those who remembered the glory of Solomon's Temple wept (Ezra 3:12-13).

For the next sixteen years, virtually nothing further was done on the work of rebuilding the Temple. The opposition from the Samaritans, descendants of the intermarriage between transplanted Assyrians and Jews from the northern kingdom, was part of the reason. At first, the Samaritans offered to aid in the project, but the Jewish leaders, fearing compromise with the syncretistic Samaritans, rejected the offer. In addition, the returnees began to focus more on rebuilding their own homes and farming the land (see Haggai 1:3-11). The poverty of the people intersected with discouragement and lethargy. Work on the Temple stopped.

The Old Testament prophets of Haggai and Zechariah were central to lifting the morale of the people to finish the Temple work (see Ezra 5:1). Haggai, whose oracles date from 520 B.C., exhorted the people to set aside work on their own homes and farms and finish the Temple (see 1:4-9). Truly, Yahweh would soon "shake the nations" and make Jerusalem and the Temple again the center of His plans for the world (2:1-9). The prophecies of Zechariah complemented those of Haggai. His visions affirmed that the Temple, the center of Yahweh's kingly rule, must be completed, for Judah would be the center, with Jerusalem, of God re-gathering His people from all over the earth. Chapters 3 and 4 gave focus to Joshua and Zerubbabel standing with Messiah in the future kingdom, with Joshua a prototype of Messiah

(6:9-15): Joshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the ruler, together manifested the Davidic line renewed, for Messiah would be both priest and king.

In about three weeks, Zerubbabel and Joshua assembled enough workers to resume the work. Finally, in 516 B.C., the Temple was completed, twenty years after the foundations had been laid. As Merrill correctly demonstrates, the year 516 marked the end of the “seventy years” Jeremiah had set for the Exile, for with a functioning Temple, Yahweh could dwell once again with His people. Thus begins what is often called the Second Temple Period.

When Rome gained control of the eastern Mediterranean, it established Herod as king of the Jews. Although Herod transformed Jerusalem with a new palace on the western side, a new theater and a hippodrome, and with additional aqueducts for fresh water, it was the Temple that was his lasting achievement. It was begun in 19 B.C. and was not completely finished until A.D. 64. Herod pulled down the existing Second Temple built by Zerubbabel. Herod’s engineers then dug down to bedrock. He expanded the esplanade of Temple Mount, filling in the space with a substructure supported by pillars and vaulted arches. The result was a massive platform, enlarged to the north, south and west. Lebanese cedar provided the lumber and massive ashlar stones from the quarries around Jerusalem were used to build the vast retaining walls that supported the platform. (The “Wailing Wall” on the western side of Temple Mount today is one of those retaining walls.) Herod’s Antonia Fortress, with its four distinctive towers, dominated the northwestern corner of Temple Mount. Montefiore describes the finished product: “Dazzling and awe-inspiring, Herod’s Temple was ‘covered all over with plates of gold and at the first rising of the sun reflected back a fiery splendor’ so bright that visitors had to look away. Arriving in Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, it reared up ‘like a mountain covered with snow.’” The entire space Herod enclosed amounted to forty acres. This was the Temple where Jesus worshiped, prayed and which He prophesied would be destroyed (Luke 21:5-6).

The Jews rose in revolt against Roman domination, which lasted from AD 66 to 73. Roman General Vespasian convened a war council in Caesarea to finalize plans for the assault on Jerusalem. It was there that he received news that Caesar Nero had committed suicide on 9 June A.D. 68. An intense and brutal power struggle ensued throughout the Empire. Because Nero had appointed him, Vespasian had to suspend his plans to capture Jerusalem, while he waited for confirmation from the new Caesar. During the famous “year of the four emperors,” Galba, then Otho, and then Vitellius claimed the throne of Rome. But, when the legions of the eastern empire gave their support to General Vespasian in December A.D. 69, he assumed the role as emperor. He then named his son, Titus, the commander of the legions in the east, with the goal of finally ending the Jewish Revolt.

With a combined army that probably totaled over 80,000, Titus began his siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. As with virtually all invaders of Jerusalem, Titus came from the north. By late May, the first and second walls to the north were breached. By mid-June the Antonia Fortress at the northwest corner of Temple Mount fell to Titus. Titus then ordered a siege wall built around the entire city. In late August, the Roman troops burned the walls surrounding the inner court

and then 28 August the entire Temple was burned. Titus and his army carried back to Rome the golden furniture, the trumpets, the Table of Shewbread and the seven-branched Menorah. (In Rome, the Arch of Titus, built to commemorate Jerusalem's destruction, bears evidence of these objects.) By 30 August, after horrific street fighting, the Upper and Lower cities were secured. Finally, by the end of September, all of Jerusalem was under Roman control.

Due to famine and Roman slaughter, Josephus estimated that 1,100,000 Jews were killed during the siege. Probably an inflated figure, a more realistic number is 600,000. Despite such slaughter, thousands of Jews survived. Titus chose 700 of the tallest and most handsome for his victorious processional. The remaining were divided into several categories for speedy removal from Jerusalem: Surviving rebels were immediately executed; healthy men over the age of seventeen were sent to work in the Egyptian mines or kept for use in the wild animal shows or gladiatorial contests; children under seventeen were sold as slaves; and the old and sickly were also instantly executed. To finalize the humiliation, Titus ordered that the remaining Temple enclosure wall and the entire circuit of Jerusalem's walls be razed. He only left Herod's three towers. The destruction of the walls was so complete that Jerusalem was completely unrecognizable. Jesus predicted this thoroughgoing devastation of Jerusalem in Luke 21:20-24 and Matthew 24:2 and declared that Gentile domination of the city would last until the "times of the Gentiles is fulfilled." Only with the victory in the 1967 war did Israel regain control of Temple Mount.

Therefore, the historic claim to Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish people is incontrovertible. Furthermore, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus Christ will return to the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem and establish it as the capital of His millennial empire (see Zechariah chapters 12, 13 and 14 and Acts 1:11). As Ezekiel 36 and 37 declare forthrightly, God will bring His people Israel back to their land and completely fulfill His covenantal promises in the Abrahamic, Davidic and New Covenants. Every year, at the very end of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, and at the end of the Passover Seder, Jews recite, "Next year in Jerusalem." They are back in their land and today more Jews live in the State of Israel than in any other nation on earth, including the United States.

President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital is an important step in validating what the Bible has declared all along—Jerusalem is the capital of the renewed nation of Israel. The historic claim of the Jews to this city is clear and irrefutable. God is moving history toward its end and the re-gathering of the Jewish people to their homeland is evidence that God's plan is on track. The next event on God's calendar is the return of His Son. "Come quickly Lord Jesus."

See Bret Stephens in the *New York Times* (9 December 2017) and James P. Eckman, *A Covenant People: Israel from Abraham to the Present*, pp. 65-69, 78-80, 147-149, 187-188 and 216-218.