

JERUSALEM: THE HOLY CITY THROUGH THE AGES

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[Good]

It is often claimed that Jerusalem possesses a distinctive spiritual and material atmosphere, one that lends a special character to its cultural and even daily life. This no chance observation. Jerusalem is, in fact, a holy city, sacred to three religions. And during the course of its long history, Jerusalem has undergone innumerable changes of regimes and cultures, each lending of itself to the richness of the city.

The Bible hints that even in the most ancient past, Jerusalem occupied a prestigious position among the neighboring city states. Melchizedek king of Salem, "priest to the most high God" (Genesis 14:19), welcomed Abraham to the area in the name of all its kings, and another king, Adoni-Zedek, led a regional coalition against Joshua and the Gibeonites (Joshua 10). Later, King David, seeking a capital with which all the Israelite tribes could identify, chose Jerusalem, an extraterritorial border city located between the tribes of Benjamin and Judah. After conquering the city from

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the Jebusites, he assumed residence there and transferred the Ark of Covenant to the city, ensuring Jerusalem's role as his kingdom's political and spiritual center.

The city flourished under David's son, Solomon. He built palaces and administrative institutions and of course, the Temple, which he constructed on a hill overlooking David's city. Although shortly after Solomon's death the kingdom of Israel split into the northern Kingdom of Israel and the smaller, southern Kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem remained the capital of the latter and continued to develop materially and spiritually. With the fall of the Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrian Empire in c. 722 B.C.E., Hezekiah king of Judah fortified the city to protect it from an anticipated Assyrian onslaught. The walls were expanded to include suburbs that had developed to the west of Jerusalem, and a sophisticated water system was built to carry water from the Gihon spring outside the city to the Siloam pool inside the walls. When the Assyrian armies eventually reached Jerusalem (701 B.C.E.) their commander, Sennacherib, who, according to the biblical account, was unable to conquer it. King Josiah initiated extensive religious reforms, concentrating all worship in the Temple. Other important religious figures of the time were the many prophets, who called for the pursuit of justice, the fulfillment of moral principles, and the establishment of universal peace. But Jerusalem's religious revival was short-lived. In 586 B.C.E., the city was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia, the population

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was exiled, and the Temple was destroyed. Jerusalem would remain in ruins for almost fifty years.

The Babylonian Empire was succeeded by the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great. Jerusalem's new rulers adopted more liberal policies with regard to conquered minorities, and in 519 B.C.E. King Cyrus sanctioned the return of the Jewish exiles to

their land and the rebuilding of the Temple. Two figures dominated Jerusalem's religious and political life at this time: Ezra the Scribe, who led the people in renewing their ancient covenant with God, and Nehemiah, the Jewish governor, who won Jerusalem recognition as the capital of an autonomous province within the Persian Empire.

In 333 B.C.E. the Persian Empire was defeated by Alexander the Great. In the ensuing years, many Jerusalemites adopted Greek customs and beliefs, much to the chagrin of Jewish "Traditionalists," who clung to the ancient ways of their forefathers. Religious edicts issued by Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168 B.C.E. led to a violent Jewish rebellion against their Greek overlords and their Hellenist sympathizers. After a long campaign, the rebels liberated Jerusalem, restored the Temple, and established the Hasmonean Kingdom of Judea. In 63 B.C.E. the kingdom was overrun by Pompeii, commander of Rome's Eastern army.

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Some years later, Herod, an Idumean of Jewish faith, was installed as king of Judea (37-4 B.C.E.) under Roman aegis. Herod was a monumental builder, who expanded and enhanced the Temple Compound and built fortresses, palaces, and numerous public buildings throughout Jerusalem. But Jerusalem was suffering from growing religious and social unrest between emerging Jewish factions. Intense displeasure with Roman hegemony and a growing sense that the End of Days was near was the backdrop against which Jesus of Nazareth lived and preached. Arrested in Jerusalem for apparently claiming to be the king-messiah, the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, ordered him crucified as a rebel. Thus, the apogee of the Second Temple Era in Jerusalem was the birth of a new religion, Christianity, with Jesus hailed as its founder.

In 66 C.E. religious zealots initiated the Great Rebellion against Roman rule. They successfully held Jerusalem until the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Ab (summer) 70 C.E., when Roman legions, led by Titus, destroyed the city and exiled its inhabitants. In 132 C.E. the Roman emperor Hadrian prepared municipal plans for a new, pagan city, Aelia Capitolina, to be built on Jerusalem's ruins. For many years, Jews were officially forbidden to live in Aelia Capitolina, although the extent to which this law was enforced depended upon the whim of the particular Emperor.

Christianity, too, suffered under Roman rule. Only after the ascension of Constantine the Great as sole ruler of the Roman Empire (324 C.E.) did the Church

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win legal recognition and eventually become the official religion of the Empire. Imperial attention focused on Jerusalem and every effort was made to locate the city's holy sites and establish them as centers of pilgrimage. Under the auspices of Constantine's mother Helena, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was built in the center of the city, at the site of Jesus' death and resurrection. Other events in the life of Jesus and his disciples were celebrated at the sites where they took place, shaping Jerusalem into the spiritual and material center of Christianity.

In 614 C.E. the Persians conquered Jerusalem, massacred its inhabitants, destroyed its churches, and confiscated sacred relics, including what was believed to be the holy cross. Fifteen years later, Byzantine emperor Heraclius reconquered Jerusalem and restored the cross to its rightful place. But only ten years later, in 638, Jerusalem surrendered to a rising new power-the Muslim Arabs.

The Muslim conquest was bloodless. According to tradition, the Christian patriarch Sophronius peacefully handed the city to the Arab leader, Omar. In return, Christians were granted the right to occupy their sacred sites and to practice their religion unmolested. Nevertheless, by the end of the century, Jerusalem was impressed upon the Muslim consciousness as Islam's third holy city, the place where the prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven on his Night Journey. To mark the site, the Umayyad caliph, .. Abd al-Malik ibn al-Marwan of Damascus, built the Dome of the Rock next to the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount. These two mosques came to symbolize

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Jerusalem in the Muslim collective consciousness, and the city became a place of pilgrimage. Under the succeeding Abbasid dynasty, however, Jerusalem's importance as a political and economic center declined and its population diminished.

Jerusalem did, however, retain its importance as a holy city to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, who continued to visit the sacred sites within its walls. Under Arab rule, Jews were again permitted to settle in Jerusalem-there had been no permanent Jewish settlement there since the time of Constantine- and the Jewish community grew rapidly. On festivals and important occasions, Jewish pilgrims accompanied the local community to the Mount of Olives, where they could pray facing the Temple Mount. The Crusaders besieged Jerusalem for five weeks before finally conquering it on 15 July 1099. Most of the Jewish and Muslim population was slaughtered; the survivors were forbidden to remain in the city, which was designated the capital of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Crusaders set about restoring the city's many churches and building new ones. Chief among their objectives, however, was the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, to which a Romanesque facade was added to remnants from earlier periods, so that the church, as a whole, formed a single architectural unit. For ninety years monks, pilgrims, knights, merchants, and noblemen from all over Christendom pressed against each other in Jerusalem's crowded streets.

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In 1187 Salah-ed-din (Saladin), founder of the Ayyubid dynasty and ruler of Egypt and Syria, conquered Jerusalem from the Crusaders. The great gold cross atop the Dome of the Rock was knocked down and a Muslim crescent was hoisted up in its place. The city was rebuilt and expanded to encompass Mount Zion. Repairs to the city's fortifications were begun in 1212 by al-Muazzem Isa, ruler of Damascus and Salah-ed-din's nephew, but only seven years later, he destroyed his own walls, fearing that the city might again fall to the Crusaders, who would use them in their own defense.

In 1260 Jerusalem fell to the Mamluks. The Mamluks were devout Muslims who built numerous religious academies throughout the city and hostels for Muslim

scholars and pilgrims. These buildings are still famous for their elaborately ornamented facades of finely chiseled white, red, and black stones. However, Nahmanides, a Jewish scholar and physician who visited Jerusalem in 1267, complained in a letter to his son of the devastation he found in Jerusalem. He noted that only two Jews-dyers-lived in the city and that a Torah scroll had to be borrowed from faraway Nablus. The revival of Jerusalem's Jewish community is generally attributed to Nahmanides's time, but it was only in the late fifteenth-early sixteenth centuries, with the arrival of Jewish refugees from Spain, that the local Jewish community began to grow. By the late Mamluk period, Jerusalem's Jews were divided into three subgroups:

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native-born, Arabic-speaking Jews; Ashkenazi, or Western, Jews, and Sephardic Jews, refugees from Spain.

The Ottoman conquest of Jerusalem in 1517 ushered in a glorious period in the city's history. Under Suleiman the Magnificent, the city's walls were rebuilt, the ancient aqueduct was restored, and fountains were constructed for public use. This period was short-lived, however, and after Suleiman's death, the city suffered from almost three hundred years of cultural and economic stagnation.

The slow collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century and the parallel infiltration of the Levant by European interests finally led to numerous political, social, and technological changes in Jerusalem. The city's skyline was altered radically as new churches, monasteries, and bell towers appeared. European architectural styles could be found in the Russian Compound, Notre Dame, and Dormition Abbey, all dating from this period. With modernization and growing European influence came the expansion of Jerusalem's Jewish community. Jews from Europe, Yemen, and North Africa began settling in the city, and by the end of the century, Jews constituted Jerusalem's largest community. As the population rose, so did the demand for better living conditions. In 1860 a new Jewish neighborhood, Mishkenot Sha'ananim, was built outside the Old City's walls, launching a building spree that eventually spread to Jerusalem's Christian and Muslim communities as well.

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On 9 December 1917 Jerusalem surrendered to the British army, ending four hundred years of Ottoman rule. For the first time since the Crusades, Jerusalem was again the country's capital. The neighborhoods beyond the walls were developed extensively and new neighborhoods were added, laying the foundations for a modern city. Various national Jewish national institutions, including the Hebrew University, were also built, emphasizing the centrality of Jerusalem in the Jewish national consciousness.

At the same time, tensions between Jews, Arabs, and British escalated, and occasionally led to bloodshed. In 1948, six months before the end of the British Mandate, these tensions intensified as the battle for Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel began. The main difficulty faced by the city's Jewish defenders was the siege imposed on the city by the Arabs: there was a severe shortage of food, water, arms, ammunition, and other essentials. Once the mandate ended, the struggle for control

over Jerusalem erupted into open war, with the Jews now having to face the armies of Arab Legion and an Egyptian expeditionary force. At the cessation of hostilities, a border ran through the center of Jerusalem, dissecting neighborhoods, streets, and even houses. Even at the height of the war, Israeli prime minister David Ben Gurion declared that: "Jerusalem is an integral part of the State of Israel and its eternal capital." Immediately after the war Israeli government offices, the parliament, and other public institutions were transferred to Jerusalem, despite the fences, army posts,

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and mine fields dividing the city. New national and cultural centers were built, including the Israel Museum, the Yael Vashem Holocaust Museum, and a new campus for the Hebrew University.

Jerusalem was reunited during the Six Day War of 1967. The mine fields were defused, the army posts were removed, "and Jerusalem, with all its municipal and political complexities, became a united city where Jews and Muslims, some secular and others religious, could live side by side. Archeological digs carried out around the city each revealed something about Jerusalem's unique history, providing rich insights into Jerusalem's role as a sacred city to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.