



How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” ISAIAH 52:7

Jerusalem, the Holy City

The sights, sounds, smells, and textures of Jerusalem are like nowhere else on earth. Arab men with heads wrapped in kefiyas, Jewish men in skullcaps, woman in head scarves, Franciscans in brown habits, children with every imaginable hue of skin and facial features—all reflect the diverse global roots of the people who inhabit the city. Jutting up from the cityscape are Christian crosses, Islamic crescents, and Jewish stars of David and menorahs. The Arabic chant from the mosques, the sound of church bells, and the Jewish chanted prayers create a dissonant harmony. Smells of coffee, produce, spices, and incense waft from the shops and houses into the cobbled streets.

When viewing Jerusalem from the hills that surround the city, the visitor knows that the atmosphere of the city is saturated with prayers and dreams. Here the memories of past centuries and the hopes of future ages force people to confront the big questions about God and human purpose. Dominating the view of Jerusalem from afar is the golden Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine built over the jutting bedrock that served millennia ago as the sacrificial altar of the Canaanite city called Urusalim. To this rock Jews believe Abraham brought his son to be sacrificed, and around this rock King Solomon built his temple. It is in the courts of the later temple of Herod that Jesus taught and was challenged by the religious leaders of his day. Below the mount on which the Dome of the Rock rests is the revered Western Wall, at

which Jewish people pray in remembrance of the temple and for the restoration of what has been lost. A few more blocks to the west is Christianity's gray-domed Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which houses the cave-like tomb in which Jesus was buried, the most notable characteristic of which is its emptiness.

The city is called by many names in the Bible. The most frequent is Jerusalem, an ancient name for the city centuries before the Israelite conquest. The etymology is "foundation of Shalem," the Canaanite patron god of the city. The popular meaning of Jerusalem, "the city of peace," comes from the Hebrew word "shalom," meaning peace, harmony, and wholeness. The city is also called "Zion" throughout the Bible. This is a poetic name for the city, sometimes referring to the mount on which the temple rested, but usually referring to the city as a whole and its people. Jerusalem is also called "the holy city," "Salem," "Mount Moriah," "the city of David," "Ariel," and "city of the great King." The Jewish rabbinical tradition bestowed seventy names on Jerusalem, praising the city for its beauty and perfection. In Islam, the city is called by seventeen names, but by far the most common is al-Quds, "the holy city."

Reflection and discussion

- What thoughts come to my mind when the name Jerusalem is mentioned?

- Why is Jerusalem so much the focus of news in our day?

City of Beauty and Sorrow

The rabbis tell this tale about Jerusalem: “Ten portions of beauty, God gave to the world; nine to Jerusalem and one to the remainder. Ten portions of sorrow, God gave to the world; nine to Jerusalem and one for the rest of mankind.”

No other city in history has been as beloved and fought over as Jerusalem. The settlement on which the modern Jerusalem rests has been occupied for five millennia. It has been built, besieged, destroyed, and rebuilt over and over again throughout its history. Among its conquerors are pharaohs, Jebusites, Israelites, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, Ayyubids, Mamluks, and Ottomans.

Billions of people today revere Jerusalem as a holy city. The fact that Jerusalem is sacred to the three major monotheistic religions is both its blessing and its curse. Their common history goes back four thousand years to Abraham, the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In an ideal world, the children of Abraham—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—would find common ground in their historical roots and in the one God they worship. They would seek to create that justice which is the highest aspiration of each religion and live together in the peace of the one God. But this world is not the kingdom to come and Jerusalem is at the vortex where bitter history, politics, and religion meet. In reality, the frailty of humanity is nowhere more apparent than here.

For religious Jews, Jerusalem is not just a city that holds ancient memories; it is the focus of future promises. As envisioned by the ancient prophets, Jerusalem will be the center of God’s rule on earth. God’s people will be redeemed through the coming of the messiah who will make his appearance in Jerusalem.

One rabbi compared the world to a human eye: “The white of the eye is the ocean which surrounds the whole world; the iris is the inhabited land; the pupil is Jerusalem.” Jerusalem is the center of the Jewish world. No matter where in the world they live, Jews pray toward Jerusalem. Their Sabbath prayers express a deep longing for the restoration of Jerusalem. Year after year, Jews the world over conclude their traditional Passover meal with the longing words, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

Christianity inherited the recognition of Jerusalem as a holy city from the Scriptures of ancient Israel. In addition, Christianity honors Jerusalem as the place where Jesus lived, died, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit. It seems natural that the faith founded on the belief that God had become flesh would honor the places where those incarnate events occurred.

In the fourth century, with the discovery of the tomb of Christ, the emperor Constantine transformed Jerusalem into a Christian city. He designed the Basilica of the Resurrection (today's Church of the Holy Sepulcher) as the new temple. The mount of Calvary was the new place of sacrifice, and the tomb of Christ the new Holy of Holies. Christians constructed shrines throughout the city to mark the places that have a special connection to Jesus. Pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem from places far and wide in a stream of pilgrimage that continues to the present.

Like Christians, Muslims consider themselves as inheritors of the faith of Abraham. A few years after the death of Mohammed in 632, Muslim armies conquered Jerusalem because they wanted to bring the land of Abraham's migration under Islamic control. They quickly transformed Christian Jerusalem into a Muslim city. In 691 the reigning Caliph commissioned Byzantine architects to build the Dome of the Rock. It was to be built on the site formerly occupied by the temple and was to be taller than the dome of the Holy Sepulcher. The shrine was seen by Muslims as expressing the triumph of Islam over Judaism and Christianity. The site eventually came to be designated as the goal of Muhammad's night journey where he joined earlier prophets, including Jesus, for prayer, and where he was briefly taken up into heaven.

Reflection and discussion

- Why is the worldwide reverence for Jerusalem both a blessing and a curse for the city?

- What might Jerusalem be like in an ideal world, freed from human frailty?

City of the Great King

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus called Jerusalem “the city of the great King” (Matt 5:35), recalling its long history as a royal city. Jerusalem came into prominence when King David captured the city and made it his capital. Yet, David knew that the real king enthroned in Jerusalem was not himself but God. Jerusalem was the city of David, but more importantly the city of God.

When the books of Samuel told of David’s bringing the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem and of David’s desire to build a temple to God there, the writings were expressing David’s yearning to honor God as king. The psalms celebrate God’s kingship and God’s choice of Jerusalem. They proclaim Zion as the place from which God exercises his sovereignty over heaven and earth.

Yet Jerusalem was also the royal capital of Israel’s human monarchs. God had installed his own king on Zion, and God’s reign was expressed through the continuing dynasty of David. The kings reigning in Jerusalem were vice-roys of God, anointed by God and charged with promoting God’s reign of justice in the kingdom. The failure of the human kings to defend their people and to uphold honesty and social justice resulted eventually in the defeat of the kingdom and the destruction of its royal city Jerusalem.

Even in ruins, the city continued to be the focus of God’s promises and the hopes of God’s people. In exile the people of Judea began the practice of turning toward Jerusalem to pray. The prophets continued to speak of Jerusalem as the place where God’s kingdom would be manifested. God’s future Anointed One would bring about that final salvation for which all people yearned. The peoples of the earth would come to Zion to experience life as it was meant to be. God would establish a new Jerusalem more glorious than ever in which God would be king not only over Israel but over the whole world.

Through the centuries following the exile, there emerged a glaring discrepancy between prophetic hope and political reality. The prophets spoke of great things for the city, yet Jerusalem continued to be subjected to conquest and oppression. God's people trusted in the promises of God, yet they grew increasingly expectant as they awaited God's liberating action in their history.

Reflection and discussion

- Who is the great king over Jerusalem? What are the implications of this royal rule over the city?
- Why do the Jewish people pray in the direction of Jerusalem? Does my bodily position and posture make a difference when I pray?

City of the Messiah

In proclaiming that the long-awaited Messiah had come to Jerusalem, the New Testament writers evoked and re-awakened all the expectations from the Old Testament that for so long had been associated with the holy city. They knew that Jesus and Jerusalem were inextricably linked, and that what God had done in Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecies about Jerusalem in unexpected ways and gave new significance to the ancient city. While affirming the underlying continuity and unity of God's purposes throughout history, they reforged the ancient tradition concerning Jerusalem because of God's revelation of himself in Christ.

The gospel accounts about Jesus are stories about Jerusalem as well. The climactic importance of Jerusalem for the life of Jesus reflects the centrality of the city within the whole history of salvation. The gospel writers interpret the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as the coming of Zion's king. Humble and mounted on a donkey, Jesus came into God's own city as the divinely appointed ruler. Yet, by some perverse twisting of its destiny, this city of God had become the place where God's messengers could expect their fiercest opposition. The king was rejected and his only "throne" was an execution hill outside the city walls.

God would faithfully fulfill his promises toward Jerusalem, but it would not be through a physical restoration of the city or through its political independence. Paradoxically, it would be through the suffering and death of Israel's Messiah, then through the message of his resurrection going out to the ends of the earth. Jerusalem was no accidental backdrop to these events; Jerusalem was the one place where the true identity of Jesus could be revealed. Jesus said that Jerusalem would experience a fate similar to his own crucifixion, and these two tragedies were intrinsically linked. The Roman soldiers would eventually destroy Jerusalem, but first they would crucify the city's true king.

Yet, the resurrection of Jesus showed the way beyond Jerusalem's destruction. Jesus suffered in advance the fate of Jerusalem; likewise, Jesus was the first to experience the victory of resurrection for all believers. When the earthly Jerusalem lay in ruins, the saving news of resurrection continued to go out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. This work of God's Spirit confirmed that God's saving plan had taken a new direction and that the exclusive focus on the historical Jerusalem was being eclipsed by the long-anticipated emphasis on the universal.

Reflection and discussion

- How did the life of Jesus fulfill the ancient prophecies about Jerusalem in unexpected ways?

- How does Jerusalem reflect the tragedy and triumph of Christ's passion and resurrection?

The Hub of Salvation-History

For both the ancient prophets of Israel and for the New Testament writers, Jerusalem was the central place of salvation-history. For the ancient prophets, the movement of saving history was toward the holy city, swirling centripetally toward the center. For the New Testament writers, however, saving history was moving centrifugally away from Jerusalem, outwardly to the entire world. The saving mystery of Christ's death and resurrection dramatically reversed the direction of salvation's whirl, and the universal Gospel began to expand its reach to all people.

Paul, the Jew educated in Jerusalem, tried to help his Gentile converts understand their spiritual debt to Jerusalem. Yet, Paul also understood the dangers of over-focusing on the earthly city. Paul urged his Jewish and Gentile converts to focus on the "Jerusalem above," for this transformed city of God is "mother" to all believers (Gal 4:26). Paul was the first Christian to preach the concept of the "heavenly Jerusalem." The writer of Hebrews also called believers to set their sights on the heavenly Jerusalem, where Christ now reigns. This is the city that will endure, the goal of life's pilgrimage, the object of Christian hope. Knowing that the earthly Jerusalem would be destroyed, he said: "Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb 13:14). Finally, expressing the culmination of saving history, the book of Revelation affirmed the ancient prophecies that had foretold Jerusalem's future glory by describing the city "coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev 21:2, 10). This New Jerusalem pictorially expresses all that God has now achieved in and through Christ, the completeness of God's dwelling with his people.

Both the ancient Scriptures and the ancient city point the way toward Christ. Like the ancient sacrifices, temple, priesthood, and law, the city of David was destined to be eclipsed by the inauguration of God's new covenant in Christ. In light of the new, the former reality is seen as a shadow of the greater reality which was revealed in him. The resurrection of Jesus transformed all ancient reality; the historical city lost its saving significance for the present, but finds its eternal fulfillment in the risen Christ.

This New Testament understanding of the city in no way denigrates Jerusalem's vital role within salvation-history. The Old Testament experiences of God's people in Jerusalem were not made invalid by the coming of God's Messiah. God truly dwelt among the people of Israel in the city of Jerusalem, yet that experience was localized in a way that is no longer relevant because of the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. In the Old Testament that ancient city expressed God's eternal desire to dwell among his people and to form a community of peace around himself. Yet Jerusalem's role was inherently preparatory for the full accomplishment of that desire in Christ.

Reflection and discussion

- In what way is Jerusalem the focal point for both the Old Testament and the New?

- What are some differences between the ancient, historical city and the new, heavenly Jerusalem?

City of Peace

All the great religions insist that the test of true spirituality is practical compassion. From the beginning of its biblical history, the test of Jerusalem's authenticity as God's city was its efforts to establish justice within its walls. The city could not be considered holy unless it was willing to treat its inhabitants with fairness and compassion, especially those who are poor and vulnerable.

It was not enough that people were able to experience God's transcendence in Jerusalem. The experience of God must always be incarnated in treating God's children with compassion. Vertically oriented worship of God must be accompanied by horizontally oriented justice and forgiveness of people. The holiness of God must give rise to a deep understanding of the sacredness of humanity. Yet sadly, some of the worst atrocities in Jerusalem have occurred through the centuries when people have tried to gain access to God there, while neglecting the quest for justice and peace.

Though God certainly expresses his presence on high mountains, in quiet deserts, and isolated caves, biblical history demonstrates that the populated city most fully expresses God's ideal for divine dwelling with humanity. By grace God has been involved in the all-too-human city of Jerusalem. For thousands of years, this city has exerted an influence on people's imagination and aspirations out of all proportion to its physical size or its political significance. It has ignited passion and excited controversies, sometimes of worldwide proportion. Its future does not seem to be any less significant for the billions of people of the three monotheistic religions.

The New Testament vision of our ultimate future, the New Jerusalem, is not a pie-in-the-sky utopia. Because it is a graced perfection of the earthly Jerusalem, it offers a blueprint of the type of society we must seek to create in this world. It is a city not divided by race, stratified by ability, or segmented by nationalism. It is a community where justice reigns, where forgiveness is plentiful, and where peace flourishes for all. This urban vision is applicable to all societies throughout the world, but it must also pertain to the earthly Jerusalem today. It would be ironic and tragic if here, of all places, this biblical vision went unheeded.

As followers of Jesus, we will forever be debtors to Jerusalem. For as long as history and earthly reality are important, Christians will be connected to

Jerusalem and rooted in its soil. So, let us pray that all the sons and daughters of Abraham might create a city that is both holy and peaceful. Let us heed the words of the ancient psalmist: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Ps 122:6).

Reflection and discussion

- What elements are necessary for a city to achieve true peace?

- Why do I want to learn about Jerusalem from a biblical perspective?

Prayer

Lord God, though all creation reveals your presence, you chose Jerusalem as your dwelling place on earth. In its history of tragedy and triumph, you reveal your judgment and your salvation to the world. In the holy city, Mount Zion, the city of the great king, the city of peace, you prepared your people for the fullness of your coming among us. Lead me as a pilgrim through the sacred texts of Israel's history, prophets, and psalms, to experience the city of your Messiah. Establish your rule over my life and lead me to the eternal Jerusalem, where you reign as King forever.