

# The Relationship between the Jewish People and Yerushalayim: A Historical Account of the First 400 Years

Jill Katz, PhD

Professor of Archaeology and Anthropology, Yeshiva University

Yerushalayim was not an obvious candidate for a major world city. No major body of water is found in its vicinity: no ocean, no sea, not even a river. The Gichon, the only permanent body of water, is a spring that gushes forth nicely, but whose depth leading to either agricultural terraces or to a diverting pool never exceeded four or five feet. The two major international trade routes of the ancient Levant did not pass through the city or even come close. The Via Maris went along the Mediterranean coast while the King's Highway was further to the east in Transjordan. Rather, only regional roads and local trails led to this highland settlement.

Prior to David's conquest, Yerushalayim was a provincial town. Both archaeological and textual sources confirm that it was a Canaanite city-state often dominated by a non-local elite. For about 300 years (1480-1180 BCE), Jerusalem's rulers were vassals, bound by personal oath and tribute to pharaoh in Egypt. Despite their inferior status, the princes maintained a fair degree of independence and were able to raise their own militias and confront neighboring cities such as Gezer and Shechem.

According to the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE Egyptian Amarna tablets,<sup>1</sup> one of the rulers in Jerusalem was an ethnic Hurrian by the name Abdi-Hepa. He appears not to have been one of the more successful Canaanite princes as he not only failed to expand his territory but was actually attacked by locally stationed Egyptian troops. Sometime later, the Yevusi (Jebusites) became dominant in Jerusalem. Scholars are not sure precisely when they arrived, but they are linked archaeologically with agricultural terracing along the eastern slope of the City of David that

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<sup>1</sup> See William L. Moran (Editor), *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

dates to the period of the Shoftim<sup>2</sup> (Iron Age I; 1200-1000 BCE). Like the Hurrians before, the Yevusi may have represented a non-local administrative elite descending from the north.

The Israelites did not initially conquer Yerushalayim:

*The sons of Judah could not drive out the Yevusi  
who lived in Yerushalayim ...*

**Yehoshua 15:63**

וְאֵת-הַיְבוּסִי יוֹשְׁבֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם, לֹא-יָקְלוּ בְנֵי-יְהוּדָה  
לְהוֹרִישָׁם ...  
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ טו:סג

In fact, Yerushalayim played only a minor role in the formative events prior to King David's ascension. While the cities of Beit-el, Hevron, Shechem and Beer Sheva are connected with the patriarchal narratives, Yerushalayim is singularly associated with David. It is not exactly known how David conquered the Yevusi city, as the text is somewhat obscure and incomplete (Shmuel Bet 5:8). It seems, however, more like a military *coup d'état* rather than a bloody conquest. Regardless, David's victory proved to be a watershed moment in the history of the city: the beginning of the deep relationship between the Jewish people and Yerushalayim.

Since David had conquered Yerushalayim with his own troops, it became, according to ancient Near Eastern practice, his personal property. While his initial motivation may have been to eradicate a Yevusi enclave in the midst of his United Kingdom, David soon found himself with a capital city possessing quite a few attractive features: (1) it was built on territory not associated with a particular tribe; (2) it was centrally located (more so than Hevron); (3) it was far enough from Philistine towns not to be attacked suddenly, yet close enough to keep an eye on them; and (4) it was nicely fortified.

David fell in love with his city, even renaming it after himself—*Ir David*. He built a palace and established his family as leaders of the Jewish people. However, David did not just want his family to love Yerushalayim; he wanted all Israel to be connected to his city. This he did by bringing the *Aron*, which had been held at Kiryat-Yearim on the western border of his kingdom, to Yerushalayim (Shmuel Bet 6). Even though he could not build the Beit haMikdash, he purchased its future site.

The city's political and spiritual role increased dramatically under David's son and successor Shlomo. Yerushalayim doubled in size and acquired regional status due to Shlomo's ambitious building program and aggressive expansionist policies. He built a royal acropolis on the crest of Har Zion, which included the Beit haMikdash and a royal palace (Melachim Alef 6-7). With the completion of the Beit haMikdash, the Israelites believed that their days of wandering had come to an end. They had finally established a permanent place where they could serve Hashem independent of external political and cultural pressures.

Then, almost overnight, the city's political and spiritual influence was gravely diminished. All of that Solomonic building activity had extracted a price: the people were exhausted and felt they needed relief. When Shlomo's successor, Rehavam, refused to reduce the forced labor burden (Melachim Alef 12:14), the people rebelled with the end result that the kingdom divided into

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<sup>2</sup> Yigal Shiloh, "Jerusalem: Excavation Results" in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations of the Holy Land*, Vol. 2, edited by Ephraim Stern (Jerusalem, Israel Exploration Society, 1993), p. 702.

two: a more prosperous northern kingdom (Israel) with strong ties to Phoenicia, and a more isolated southern kingdom (Judah), lacking in resources. For some 50 years, the kingdoms engaged in hostilities until Israel became embattled up north and began to treat Judah more like a vassal than an enemy.

With the division of the two kingdoms, more than half of the Jewish people instantly lost their connection to Yerushalayim, both politically and spiritually. New administrative capitals were built in the north, first at Shechem, then Tirzah, and finally Shomron. The first King of Israel, Yeravam, provided alternate places of worship at the borders of his new kingdom: Dan in the north and Beit El in the south (Melachim Alef 12:26-33). This seemed to have created no existential crisis for his citizens, since the Beit haMikdash was still in its infancy and their attachment was relatively flexible. It was not until much later, even in Judah, that all public ritual activity became centralized in Yerushalayim (as explained below). The kings of Israel never tried to recreate a single political and religious center that rivaled Yerushalayim. Rather, they spatially divided the political center from the official religious ones. Ultimately, this led to the creation of a very different type of capital city in the north, one that was predominantly administrative in function, and one that ultimately garnered little spiritual attachment.

During the 150 years of the Divided Monarchy (920-721 BCE), the relatively isolated and economically modest kingdom of Judah developed an affinity for its humble capital. Yerushalayim was what urban anthropologists refer to as a regal-ritual city, inhabited by religious functionaries associated with the Beit haMikdash and a not-so-powerful Davidic dynasty. The city relied on the countryside for food, yet its relatively small urban population (less than 10,000) meant that the strain was not overly burdensome. With a strong ideological function, Yerushalayim's social life revolved around the sacred calendar, divine sacrifices and lifecycle events of the royal household. Three times a year, at Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, the city's population would swell as pilgrims arrived to celebrate the festivals.

In the last quarter of the eighth century BCE, the Jewish people became even more devoted to Yerushalayim. Two events in particular led to this escalating affection: (1) the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE by the Assyrians and (2) the successful withstanding of the Assyrian siege of Yerushalayim in 701 BCE.

The Assyrian conquest of the Kingdom of Israel meant that all of its major cities were devastated, including its political and religious centers. In addition, thousands of Israelites were deported—the so-called “Ten Lost Tribes”—while thousands of foreigners were subsequently brought to the area in their place (Melachim Bet 17). The Kingdom of Judah saw its population swell as a sizeable number of northerners sought refuge within its borders. Yerushalayim grew tremendously. For the first time, Judahite Jerusalem became a major population center. It expanded to three or four times its former size. New neighborhoods were built, including the *Mishneh* (Second City) on the Western Hill and the *Makhtesh* (the hollow) in the Central Valley.

When the Assyrian king Sargon died in 705, Yerushalayim was at the center of a new coalition of discontented vassals who hoped to throw off the Assyrian yoke. King Hezekiah flexed some of his newfound political muscle and rebelled. He fortified the new neighborhoods and diverted

the waters of the Gichon—both projects reflecting the needs of the city’s burgeoning population (Divrei Hayamim Bet 32). Hezekiah’s bold move was equally motivated by his faith that Hashem would protect His sacred city.

When Yerushalayim withstood the siege against the formidable Assyrian army, the city acquired a mythic sense of itself, and this ethos of impregnability amplified the sanctity and holiness of the city. However, increasing bureaucratic needs and the growing diversity of the city’s population had upended the simple regal-ritual city that had prevailed in earlier days. As the society was moving toward greater centralization of state power and the city was becoming more administrative in nature, a deliberate attempt was made by the leadership to refine the city’s ritual and spiritual identity.

These efforts were manifest in a series of reforms that were enacted first by Hezekiah and later by Yoshiyahu that centralized public ritual in Yerushalayim and purified it of its syncretistic elements. Specifically, Hezekiah enacted measures that no longer tolerated ritual practices involving *bamot* (high places), *matzevot* (stone pillars), *ashera* (wooden posts or tree trunks), or the bronze *nachash* (serpent) that Moshe had made (Melachim Bet 18:4). Yoshiyahu followed a few generations later with even more sweeping reforms that emphasized the primacy of Yerushalayim and the exclusivity of worshiping Hashem. Within Yerushalayim, he purified the sacred precinct by removing pagan objects and male prostitutes, whereas outside of Yerushalayim he eliminated all public ritual whether pagan or Jewish (Melachim Bet 23). A number of archaeological finds attest to these reforms, including a dismantled stone *mizbeach* (altar) at Beer Sheva, a covered up tri-partite temple and *mizbeach* at Arad, and a collection of hundreds of female and zoomorphic figurines in a pit within Yerushalayim itself.

The seventh century BCE was generally one of economic prosperity throughout the Land of Israel, including Judah,<sup>3</sup> while the religious reforms strengthened Yerushalayim in particular. The Temple Mount had been expanded and the Beit haMikdash itself served as a repository for the state’s increasing wealth. Wheat and barley yields throughout Judah exceeded local demand and were exported to other regions, while a cottage wine industry prospered in the hills around Yerushalayim. Judah began to slowly expand territorially, particularly to the south where the lands were used to raise sheep and goats for wool, milk and meat.

The notion that Yerushalayim was immune from destruction, seemingly validated during the Assyrian siege, did not go away in the face of a rising Babylonian threat a century later. On the contrary, Judahites—with a few exceptions such as Yirmiyahu—were confident that their increased devotion to Hashem and affection for the Beit haMikdash meant that their city was more protected than ever. It was this false confidence that led to the politically unwise decision by King Zidkiah to forge an alliance with Egypt and rebel against the Babylonians.

At war with Egypt, the Babylonian king Nevuchadnezzar felt compelled to invade Judah, eliminate potential threat, and wreak vengeance. The Babylonians employed a scorched-earth policy that sought to render conquered lands uninhabitable. Unlike the Assyrians who liked to

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<sup>3</sup> Avi Faust and Ehud Weiss, “Judah, Philistia, and the Mediterranean World: Reconstructing the Economic System of the Seventh Century BCE,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 338 (2005), 71-92.

shuffle conquered peoples to all parts of the empire and rebuild devastated regions, the Babylonians cared only to depopulate peripheral regions, bringing the higher status individuals to Bavel, thereby adding to the magnificence of the core region. They showed no compunction about the complete destruction of Yerushalayim and its sacred Temple. It was standard practice.

For the inhabitants of Judah, the destruction of Yerushalayim and the Beit haMikdash was anything but commonplace. While the physical devastation was not unlike what had happened to Shomron 150 years earlier, the social, psychological and spiritual trauma was unparalleled. Yerushalayim had been the capital of an independent Jewish state for over 400 years; its royal house had served continuously (with one interruption) for over 400 years; its Beit haMikdash had flourished uninterrupted for nearly 400 years. Yerushalayim represented political autonomy and spiritual devotion, inextricably linked since the time of David and reinforced particularly by Hezekiah and Yoshiyahu.

And now all that was gone. The city was no longer inhabitable. The remaining Jews were either exiled to Bavel or left behind to try to rebuild their lives amid the rubble. They mourned the loss of their loved ones, their homes, the Beit haMikdash, their city and their independence. They mourned themselves, that they were not immune from conquest. They mourned that they had once had something very precious and they had not been able to protect it.

And they resolved to never forget.