

What is the significance of the city of Jerusalem?

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For millennia, Jerusalem has been an important city, often commanding the attention of much of the world, and the city figures prominently in both biblical history and biblical prophecy. Jerusalem is central to many important events in the Bible.

The city of Jerusalem is situated on the edge of one of the highest tablelands in Israel, south of the center of the country, about thirty-seven miles east of the Mediterranean Sea and about twenty-four miles west of the Jordan River. Its situation, lined on two sides by deep ravines, provides a natural defense for the city. Jerusalem is called by various names in Scripture: "Salem," "Ariel," "Jebus," the "city of God," the "holy city," the "city of David," and "Zion." Jerusalem itself means "possession of peace."

Jerusalem in history. The first biblical reference to Jerusalem is found in the story of Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek, King of Salem (Genesis 14:18-24). The actual name Jerusalem first occurs in Joshua 10:3. Later, David marched on Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-10, c. 1000 BC), and he "captured the fortress of Zion—which is the City of David" from the Jebusites (verse 7). At that time, Jerusalem became the capital of Israel. It was in Jerusalem that Solomon built the temple and his palace (1 Kings 6-7). In 586 BC the Babylonians destroyed the temple and the city and deported the Jews to Babylon (2 Kings 24-25). After the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem, they rebuilt the temple, completed in 516 BC under Zerubbabel (Ezra 6). Under Nehemiah's leadership the walls were rebuilt in 444 BC (Nehemiah 6).

During the intertestamental period, the Selucid king Antiochus IV (175-164 BC)

desecrated the temple. In c. 165 Jerusalem was liberated by Judas Maccabeus, and the Jews cleansed and restored the temple. In 65 BC the Romans besieged the city and destroyed the walls. Herod the Great was made “king of the Jews” by Caesar Augustus in 40 BC. Twenty years later Herod began a massive remodeling of the Jewish temple, a project completed in AD 66. That temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, and the Jews dispersed throughout the world.

In the seventh and eighth centuries, Islam came on the scene, and Muslims began building shrines and mosques in Jerusalem to commemorate certain events important in their religion. The Dome of the Rock is the most noteworthy shrine, built directly on the temple mount. Under Arab rule, Jerusalem prospered, and tolerance was at first extended to Christians. However, this tolerance began to wane over time. In the early eleventh century, a ruler of the Fatimid Dynasty ordered the destruction of all churches in Jerusalem. This outraged Christians throughout Europe and led to the First Crusade (1095-1099).

After World War II, on May 14, 1948, Israel once again became an independent state, and President Truman duly recognized Israel’s restored status as a national homeland for the Jewish people. On December 5, 1949, Israel declared Jerusalem to be its “eternal and sacred” capital. Unfortunately, other nations have been slow in facing the reality of Israel’s independence and its right to choose its own capital. In December 2017 the United States officially recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

Jerusalem in prophecy. The Bible predicted that the Jewish people would return to Israel, and Jerusalem figures prominently in prophecies concerning the end times (Joel 3:1; Jeremiah 23:3; 30:7; Ezekiel 11:17; 37:1-14). Someday, the Jewish temple will be

rebuilt in the Holy City (Daniel 9:27; 12:11; Matthew 24:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).

In the early part of the tribulation, a combined military force, including Russia, will march against Jerusalem: this battle is outlined in Ezekiel 38-39 in the prophecy of Gog and Magog, and it will end in the destruction of those armies arrayed against Israel. During the tribulation, the two witnesses will be martyred in Jerusalem (Revelation 11). At the end of the tribulation, the nations of the world will mount a final assault on the city in the Battle of Armageddon (Joel 3:9-12; Zechariah 14:1-3; Revelation 16). That battle will be ended by the arrival of Jesus Christ Himself (Revelation 19). “The Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle. . . . The Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (Zechariah 14:3, 5).

Zechariah 12:2-4 refers to the futility of people attacking Jerusalem: “I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling. Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem. On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves. On that day I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness.”

During the Millennial Kingdom, the Lord Jesus Christ will reign over the earth from Zion, and the nations will come to Jerusalem for instruction and blessing (Isaiah 2:2-4; 35:10; Psalm 102:20-22; Revelation 20).

Jerusalem in the present. Israel is a sovereign nation, and it has chosen its capital to be Jerusalem. In 1995, the United States Congress passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act, requiring the U.S. embassy to be moved to Jerusalem. However, for over two decades,

implementation of that law was delayed by U.S. Presidents. Now the United States has officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, a move that accords with thousands of years of history and the wishes of Israel itself.

Jerusalem is held in high regard by all three major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jews consider the Temple Mount to be the holiest place on earth; it is the third holiest Islamic site. Christians value Jerusalem as the site of much of Jesus' ministry, the place where He was crucified and rose again, and the church's birthplace (Acts 2). Today the Temple Mount is under the control of the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, a trust established to manage the Islamic structures in Jerusalem. Under their current rules, access to the holy sites is prohibited to all non-Muslims. The closest the Jews can get to their former temple site is the Western Wall.

Currently, Jerusalem is still experiencing what Jesus called "the times of the Gentiles" in Luke 21:24: "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." This period began with the Babylonian Exile (or possibly with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70) and will continue through the tribulation period (Matthew 24; Revelation 11:2). Scripture tells us to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:6).

The rebirth of Israel in 1948 was a vital step in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The dry bones of the prophecy in Ezekiel 37 began coming back together. The recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital is another important step. The stage is being set for other prophecies to be fulfilled. We may not know all the implications that current events have on the prophetic timeline, but we do know that Jerusalem is a special city.

It is the only city in the world where God has put His Name (2 Kings 21:7). As for the temple, the Lord said, “I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there” (2 Chronicles 7:16). God has promised an everlasting covenant with Jerusalem (Ezekiel 16:60), and Zion has this promise:

“‘Though the mountains be shaken  
and the hills be removed,  
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken  
nor my covenant of peace be removed,’  
says the Lord, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:10).

At His second coming, Jesus will descend to the Mount of Olives, just outside of Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:4). Jerusalem will be the seat of authority in Jesus’ kingdom, and judgment will be meted out from Zion (Micah 4:7; Isaiah 33:5; Psalm 110). With every passing day, we are closer to the Lord’s fulfillment of His promises concerning Jerusalem and His reign of true justice and peace (Isaiah 9:7). “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20, KJV).