THE NOTION OF JERUSALEM AS A HOLY CITY

Margreet L. Steiner

In 1990 Graeme Auld and I met at the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem—now the Kenyon Institute—when we both attended the Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology. On this occasion Graeme invited me to join him in writing a book on Jerusalem for the series 'Cities in the Biblical World'.[1] As biblical scholar and archaeologist we worked together on what turned out to be a very enjoyable project. During our stay in Jerusalem we explored the city and recorded its ancient ruins and monuments.

There was more to see. As always I noticed tourists walking around in shorts and undershirts. It was then (and still is) a familiar sight: visitors of the holy places, touring the city showing a lot of naked flesh. And as usual I was a little shocked, not because I found it inherently bad or indecent, but because it was disrespectful. Jerusalem was a holy city, and in my perception you simply do not walk around in shorts in a holy city.

In my naiveté I had hit upon some fundamental concepts governing the notion of the holy city: it is home to one or more holy places, but not every city with churches or mosques is a holy city. According to a widely used definition: 'a holy city exists only when in the (literary) traditions of the community some beliefs or rituals can be shown in which there is an obligation to respect the sanctity not only of the shrine itself, but of the whole of the urban space or part of it'.[2] This means a (literary) tradition exists that states that the concepts of holiness extend to the whole city. The holiness of

[1] A. G. Auld and M. L. Steiner, *Jerusalem I: From the Bronze Age to the Maccabees* (Cities of the Biblical World; Cambridge: Lutterworth Press; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

[2] K. D. Jenner and G. A. Wiegers, 'De Heilige Stad als onderzoeksobject in de klassieke en moderne godsdienstwetenschap', in K. D. Jenner and G. A. Wiegers (eds.), *Jeruzalem als heilige stad: religieuze voorstelling en geloofspraktijk* (Leidse studiën van de godsdienst; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), pp. 14–28.

the main sanctuary flows over to the settlement where it resides, and ceremonial directions apply not only to the shrine or temple, but to the area around it as well.

Jerusalem is a holy city, it is said over and over again. A bibliography on Jerusalem containing more than 6,000 titles is not called: 'Bibliography of Jerusalem', but 'The Holy City, a Bibliography'.[3] Jerusalem is holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims. But when did the city become holy? When was the first time the inhabitants of the town called their residence 'holy'? Texts from the Hellenistic period onwards confirm that not only the rebuilt temple was considered 'holy' then but the settlement around it as well.[4] Was this notion a new inspiration, or was it a continuation of ideas formed in an earlier period? And if the latter is the case, from which period did the notion stem that Jerusalem as a whole was holy? What was the situation in Old Testament times, or more specifically, in the period of the monarchy, the Iron Age? The temple was considered holy, but was the settlement considered holy as well? Basically, my paper focuses on the question whether you could walk around in shorts in Iron Age Jerusalem.

Several years ago a book was published in Holland which took up the question of the holiness of Jerusalem (again). The volume was called (in Dutch): Jerusalem as a Holy City.[5] In it different views were expressed. Karel van der Toorn compared the position of Jerusalem with that of the Mesopotamian cities.[6] He stated that in Sumer every city with a temple dedicated to the city god was 'holy' in the sense that it belonged to this god. This holiness distinguished the city (which had a temple) from the surrounding countryside. The same applied to the later Mesopotamian cities, although there was more variety, and besides holy cities there were profane cities. Babylon was holy because Marduk had chosen this city to reside in. According to Van der Toorn the central issue was thus whether an important

---

[3] J. D. Purvis, *Jerusalem, The Holy City: A Bibliography* (ATLA Bibliography Series, 20; Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988).

[4] D. R. Schwartz, 'Temple or City: What did Hellenistic Jews see in Jerusalem?', in M. Poorthuis and Ch. Safrai (eds.), *The Centrality of Jerusalem: Historical Perspectives* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), pp. 114–27.

[5] Cf. Jenner and Wiegers, *Jeruzalem*.

[6] K. van der Toorn, 'Een pleisterplaats voor de goden. Het verschijnsel "heilige stad" in het Oude Nabije Oosten', in Jenner and Wiegers, *Jeruzalem*, pp. 38–52.

deity inhabited the city. According to him Jerusalem can be considered to be a holy city during the Iron Age because the important deity JHWH had his temple there. Van der Toorn found confirmation for this idea in the book of Psalms. So Jerusalem became holy when the temple was built there in the Iron Age.

Jan Tromp, however, stated that the idea that the whole city was holy is expressed in the Bible in postexilic sources only—particularly in the book of Isaiah, more specifically in Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55), dating from the second half of the sixth century BCE.[7] Several verses in Isaiah indicate that the holiness of the temple extended over the surrounding area. In Isa 48.1–2 and 52.1 Jerusalem is explicitly called 'holy city'. According to Tromp this means that the regulations for the temple, which is not to be entered by unauthorized or unclean people, applied to the whole settlement. Thus the idea of the city as holy started to take root in the exilic period and became common in the Persian period.

I think that more issues have to be explored before we can answer the question of when Jerusalem became a holy city. F. E. Peters gives a wider definition of a holy city. He states:

> What constitutes a holy city . . . is the presence in the city of a sacrum, or perhaps several, of such an order of importance or allure that the cultus connected with it exercises an attraction not merely on the city's immediate hinterland, but over an extended network. Or: the cult centres attract to the city people who would not normally resort there. . . . One may approach the holy city then, as a distinct urban type from either of two directions: from the presence, shape and extent of the 'pilgrimage network' from which it draws its extraordinary number of visitors, or more directly from an inspection of what appears to constitute its particular urban morphology.[8]

In other words: a holy city has a particular *urban morphology* with an important *central sanctuary*, and is the centre of an extended *pilgrimage network*. So, to identify whether Jerusalem was a holy city in the Iron Age we have to analyse not only the literary tradition, but also the centrality of the sanctuary—Jerusalem's first temple—the existence

[7] Joh. Tromp, 'Jeruzalem als heilige stad in het jodendom van de Perzische, Hellenistische en Romeinse periode', in Jenner and Wiegers, *Jeruzalem*, pp. 74–93.

[8] F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem and Mecca: The Typology of the Holy City in the Near East* (New York University Studies in Near Eastern Civilization, 11; New York: New York University Press, 1986), pp. 3–4.

of a pilgrimage network, and the morphology, function and centrality of the town during that period.

1. *The Temple of Jerusalem*

The centrality of Jerusalem's temple is of crucial importance for the question of when Jerusalem became a holy city. When was it built, and when did it become the central sanctuary of ancient Israel? The problem is that archaeologically no trace of this temple has been found. Not one stone or object can be traced back to this edifice, which in literature and tradition has become the most glorious building of ancient times. When the queen of Sheba saw the wonders of Jerusalem, it left her breathless.[9] Only one extra-biblical reference to the temple is known from the Iron Age. In ostracon 18 from Arad, dating from ca. 600 BCE, the 'House of JHWH' is mentioned.

Most interpretations and reconstructions of the temple are based on descriptions in the Bible. The dating of its construction ranges from the tenth century BCE ('the time of king David and Solomon') to the late eighth century BCE, when Jerusalem was growing and changing into a large metropolis.[10] Notwithstanding the fact that not only the temple but also the figures of David and Solomon are rather elusive outside biblical texts, some arguments can be given for the building of the temple in the beginning of Iron Age II, be it the tenth or ninth century BCE. A new town was then built in Jerusalem as the seat of a local ruler (see below). It is very probable that a temple was constructed in this new town. Temples have indeed been found in other regional administrative centres dating to that period, such as Megiddo and Hazor (see below). On the other hand, it is very well possible that the expansion of the town and the growing importance of Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE were the incentive for the construction of an important shrine in the town. We simply have no way of establishing a firm date for the construction of the temple. The only certainty is that by the end of the Iron Age Jerusalem *had* a temple, as evidenced by the Arad ostracon and the persistent biblical tradition.

---

[9] 1 Kgs 10.4–7.

[10] D. W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archaeological Approach* (SWBA, 9; JSOTSup, 109; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991).

How central was Jerusalem's temple in the Iron Age? In the beginning of Iron Age II it was certainly not the only temple for JHWH in the region. Traces of several other temples or cultic complexes have been found which were large enough to function as city temples.[11] In the northern kingdom of Israel the large cult centre of Tel Dan was in use from the tenth until the eighth century BCE. A possible temple complex has also been discovered in Hazor, attributed to Stratum XI of the early tenth century BCE. Indirect evidence for temples comes from Megiddo, where altar horns made of stone have been found belonging to two large altars and a cult room (room 340), which may have been part of a temple. These finds belong to Strata IV and V dating from the tenth to eighth centuries BCE. In Tel Kedesh, a corner of what may have been a temple was excavated, dating to the eighth century BCE. One or more temples can also be expected to have existed in Samaria, where according to the prophet Hosea a golden calf was erected,[12] and possibly in Bethel.[13] In Judah the fortress of Arad housed a temple, in use during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, but this was not a city temple. In Beersheba an altar was found which may be seen as indirect evidence for a temple of the tenth to early eighth centuries BCE.[14] Of course many more temples may have existed which simply have never been excavated.

In conclusion, one can say that in the tenth to eighth centuries BCE, before the disastrous Assyrian campaigns against the country, several temple complexes were in use in the main towns of Israel and Judah. Of possibly eight urban temple complexes (in Tel Dan, Hazor, Megiddo, Samaria, Tel Kedesh, Bethel, Beersheba and Jerusalem) only the temple in Jerusalem remained in use during the seventh and early sixth centuries BCE. The other temples were either destroyed by the Assyrians or dismantled by the local governments. So it was only in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE that the temple

[11] In this I follow the terminology of Zevit, who distinguishes between temples and temple complexes on the one hand and cult complexes on the other. The latter are generally smaller and include cult corners at gates and cult rooms inside larger buildings. See Z. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 123.

[12] Hos 8.5.

[13] Amos 7.13–14.

[14] For descriptions of the architecture see Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, pp. 153–247.

in Jerusalem was the central shrine, serving the followers of JHWH in what was left of the state of Judah as well as those living elsewhere in the region.

2. *Pilgrimage Network*

When a sanctuary serves as the central shrine for a large community, regular pilgrimages become an important aspects of the cult of the shrine. A pilgrimage network establishes itself, with public institutions and facilities for the pilgrims: hostels, restaurants, shops, priests and scribes. Archaeological traces of an extended pilgrimage network have not been found in Jerusalem in the later Iron Age. However, some biblical texts do seem to point to the existence of pilgrimages. According to the book of Chronicles it was during the reigns of kings Hezekiah and Josiah that celebrations of Passover, including a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem for 'all of Israel', were established.[15] Both kings initiated religious reforms, the exact content of which is still being debated, but which included a more intensive concentration of the cult on the temple of Jerusalem. These reforms would thus have taken place at the end of the eight and in the seventh centuries BCE.

It is good to dwell shortly on the kind of society in which Jerusalem's temple was functioning. At the end of the Late Bronze Age the great empires of Assyria, Mittani, Egypt and Hatti came to an end, and with them the system of Canaanite city states. Some centuries later extra-biblical texts give evidence of the rise of new polities in what was formerly the Land of Canaan. Along the coast the harbours of Phoenicia and Philistia functioned as ports of trade, while inland several regional states were established. The kingdoms of Israel, Judah, Moab, Ammon and Aram-Damascus were states in their formative stages. These early states did not (yet) show the characteristics of large empires or full-blown states, which functioned as class-based hierarchical societies, with a centralized bureaucracy, standing armies, taxes and laws. Early states are more simply organized.[16] There is

[15] 2 Chronicles 30; 34.29–32; chapter 35.

[16] See, for instance, H. J. M. Claessen and P. Skalnik (eds.), *The Early State* (New Babylon, Studies in the Social Sciences, 32; The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

no need to elaborate on this question here, except to address two issues. In early states taxes are generally not levied on a regular basis, but only when the sovereign needs an extra 'cash flow' to pay tribute or buy off an enemy. And both in early states and in full-blown states, temples were built by the sovereign of the state. In early states, however, these temples did not have a large professional class of priests serving the temple, although some (semi-)professional functionaries may have been attached to the temple. It is the growth of the temple and its importance which gives rise to a class of professional priests, serving in the temple and dependant on the temple for their living. When this happens (and only then), a kind of tax has to be levied to sustain this group.

One may expect that in an important central shrine serving a large community, such as the temple of Jerusalem in the seventh century BCE, a professional class of priests was functioning. For this group a kind of tax will have been levied. The biblical text may testify to this occurrence: in the book of Chronicles (again) Hezekiah ordered the people of Jerusalem to give part of their agricultural produce, a tithe, to the priests of the temple.[17] The term 'tithe' is also mentioned elsewhere in the Bible as a tax meant for the priests of the temple.[18]

Interestingly enough, there may also be archaeological evidence for the levying of this tax. During Kenyon's excavations a complete ostracon was discovered in the foundation of a house. Its three lines were translated by André Lemaire as:[19]

> two hundred
> one has counted 18
> to give a tithe

As far as I know this is the first occurrence of the term 'tithe' in an extra-biblical text, and it dates from the end of the eighth or the beginning of the seventh century BCE. (Please note that this tithe is not ten percent, but only nine percent—18 from 200). With some reservation this find may be considered as indirect evidence for the

[17] 2 Chron 31.4–12.
[18] See, for instance, Lev 27.30–33 and Deut 12.6.
[19] A. Lemaire, 'Les Ostraca Paleo-Hebreux des Fouilles de l'Ophel', *Levant* 10 (1978), pp. 156–60.

levying of taxes for the temple and thus for the existence of a professional class of priests.

So at the end of the eighth and in the seventh centuries there is some (with the emphasis on 'some') evidence for the characteristics of a holy city like that which Peters mentioned: a central sanctuary serving a large community, the existence of a pilgrimage network and of a primary service industry of professional priests.

3. *Centrality of the Town*

On the morphology, function and status of the town we have much more information. For a recent survey of ideas and opinions on Jerusalem in Iron Age I refer to the recent volume edited by Vaughn and Killebrew.[20] I have extensively published my own analysis of the available archaeological material and so I will only summarize it here.[21]

In the beginning of Iron Age II, be it the tenth or ninth century BCE, a settlement was built on the south-eastern hill of Jerusalem, now called the City of David. There is an ongoing debate concerning whether this settlement was a large fortified town, an unfortified village or a small fortified administrative centre.[22] I interpret the archaeological remains as belonging to a small fortified centre.

Excavated from that period are the stepped stone structure and a fragment of a casemate wall running north from the stepped stone

---

[20] A. G. Vaughn and A. E. Killebrew (eds.), *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: The First Temple Period* (SBLSymS, 18; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003). See also T. L. Thompson (ed.), *Jerusalem in Ancient History and Tradition* (JSOTSup, 381; Copenhagen International Seminar, 13; London: T. & T. Clark International, 2003); and also Z. Kafafi (ed.), *Jerusalem before Islam* (forthcoming).

[21] M. L. Steiner, 'Jerusalem in the Tenth and Seventh Centuries BCE: From Administrative Centre to Commercial City', in A. Mazar and G. Mathias (eds.), *Studies in the Archaeology of the Iron Age in Israel and Jordan* (JSOTSup, 331; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 280–88; *idem*, *Excavations by Kathleen M. Kenyon in Jerusalem, 1961–1967. Vol. 3, The Settlement in the Bronze and Iron Ages* (Copenhagen International Series, 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); *idem*, 'Expanding Borders: The Development of Jerusalem in the Iron Age', in Thompson, *Jerusalem*, pp. 68–79; *idem*, 'The Evidence from Kenyon's Excavations in Jerusalem: A Response Essay', in Vaughn and Killebrew, *Jerusalem*, pp. 347–64; *idem*, 'Jerusalem in the 10th/9th centuries BC', on the website 'The Bible and Interpretation' (www.bibleinterp.com; August, 2004).

[22] A. E. Killebrew, 'Biblical Jerusalem: An Archaeological Assessment', in Vaughn and Killebrew, *Jerusalem*, pp. 329–46.

structure. Ashlar masonry was found in its vicinity as well as the largest proto-aeolic capital of ancient Israel. Just south of the temple mount, part of an imposing citadel was found with a four-chambered entrance gate whose dimensions were almost identical to those of the palace gate 1567 in Megiddo of Stratum VA–IVB. Adjacent to this gate, part of a building 'of royal character' was excavated. The first phase of these buildings was dated to the ninth centuries BCE, although admittedly the evidence for dating it is very scant.[23] The stepped stone structure and the casemate wall protected a modest town with some public buildings and a small residential area. Its size will not have exceeded 12 hectares, and it may have housed 1,000 to 2,000 inhabitants. This settlement can be described as an administrative centre rather than as a residential city.

This settlement was very similar to contemporary towns such as Hazor, Megiddo, Beth Shemesh and Lachish in that it featured monumental architecture with ashlar masonry and proto-aeolic capitals, and had little room for residential areas. However one interprets the political situation of that time ('United Kingdom' or not), Jerusalem was one of the many fortified centres, and thus not very different or special. It may or may not have housed a temple for the God of Israel (see above).

During the following centuries this town slowly expanded. At the end of that period Jerusalem began to change enormously. As a result of the Assyrian campaigns against the kingdom of Israel in the years 734 to 720 BCE, many refugees must have found their way to the southern kingdom of Judah, and to Jerusalem. All around the old town new extra-mural quarters with houses had sprung up. The Assyrian threat induced the kings of Judah to build new fortification walls around their town as well as sophisticated water works. The new city walls were built to incorporate these new quarters. The result was that by the end of the eighth century BCE the town had grown to 40 or 50 hectares within its fortifications, and may have housed up to 10,000 inhabitants. Whenever it was built, one may assume that in that period the temple was securely situated on what is now called the Haram esh-Sheriff.

---

[23] E. Mazar, B. Mazar, and Y. Nadelman, *Excavations in the South of the Temple Mount: The Ophel of Biblical Jerusalem* (Qedem, 29; Jerusalem: The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University, 1989).

Jerusalem was the capital of Judah, and the most important town of a hierarchically structured settlement system. This system consisted of administrative and residential towns as well as fortresses, villages and isolated farms and it reflected the economic and political system in Judah. The many settlements were connected by their economic and political relationships: the agricultural and craft products of the farms and small villages were apparently processed and stored in the larger towns, while some 'cash crops' such as olive oil and grain will have been exported through interregional trade contacts concentrated in Jerusalem. The larger towns functioned as administrative centres for the various regions. The wording of the Taylor Prism mirrors back this settlement pattern. Sennacherib noted: 'As for Hezekiah the Judean, who did not submit to my yoke, 46 of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small cities in their neighbourhood, which were without number, [. . .] I besieged and took'.

In the beginning of the seventh century BCE, the Assyrian campaigns put an end to this system. The Assyrians destroyed not only most of Judah's towns, but its complete urban infrastructure. Only Jerusalem escaped the destructions wrought by the Assyrians, as if by miracle. And not only was the town saved, it actually continued to thrive. In the seventh century BCE Jerusalem's political and economic position seemed to be completely different from the situation in the ninth and eighth centuries BCE.

Jerusalem was left as the only city in Judah. Many destroyed towns never recovered from the damages wrought by the Assyrians. In most towns the destroyed town walls were not repaired, while new habitation on those sites was either on a much smaller scale or completely absent. At Lachish new fortifications were built, but occupation within those walls was limited, and the administrative buildings were never used again. Important towns such as Gezer were given over to the Philistines by the Assyrians. Jerusalem was no longer positioned at the top of a settlement system which also included many other fortified and unfortified towns engaging in all kinds of activities. On the contrary, Jerusalem was now the only real town, and all those functions must have been centred in it. Much more than before Jerusalem was *the* central city of Judah.

Economically Jerusalem bloomed. New town quarters were laid out for the rich traders and artisans with spacious dwellings, underground drainage channels and stone toilet seats. Luxury goods were imported: wood for furniture, ivory, decorative shells, fine pottery

bowls, scarabs and bronze. Food was brought in from afar: wine from Greece or Cyprus and fish from the Nile. Foreign traders may have lived in the town; three names in South Arabian script were found incised on local Judean pottery. Exported were grain and olive oil. Jerusalem was a rich and thriving 'metropolis'.

It seems that notably in the second half of the seventh century BCE, when the Assyrian domination waned, Judah experienced a period of economic prosperity. Everywhere new settlements were built, and new regions were exploited for the first time. In the Judean desert new agricultural estates were developed and the coastal regions of the Dead Sea and the Jericho oasis were used for the large-scale cultivation of balsam trees and date palms and the winning of salt and bitumen. New fortresses were erected, and a luxurious palace was built at Ramat Rachel near Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was exceptionally large—at least for the region in that period. Some 50 hectares were encompassed by its fortifications, and there may have been additional occupancy outside the city walls. Comparing Jerusalem's size with that of other fortified towns in the region puts this in perspective. Most of the town in the region did not exceed 6 hectares, while only Ekron with 20 hectares was larger than that. Towns larger than 50 hectares are only known in ancient Palestine from the Middle Bronze Age, when Hazor reached a size of 84 hectares and Ashkelon of 55 hectares. Even these sites were small, however, compared to Mesopotamian sites. Nineveh in its heyday measured 700 hectares and Babylon 1,000 hectares. But in ancient Israel Jerusalem can be seen as an immense metropolis.

As Jerusalem was much larger than all other towns and the only real city in Judah, it was the place where all economic, political and social power was concentrated. Geographers call this a 'primate city'. The annals of King Nebuchadnezzar illustrate this special position beautifully. Here there are no references to the 'many strong-walled cities'. The Babylonian Chronicle states simply: 'In the seventh year, the month of Kislev, the king of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti-land and encamped against *the city of Judah*, and on the second day of the month of Adar, he seized the city and captured the king'.

4. *Conclusion*

It is difficult to underestimate the changes Jerusalem experienced at the end of the eighth century BCE under pressure of the Assyrian threat—and especially after 701 BCE, when the town had withstood the Assyrian attacks, as one of the few towns in the whole region. With the influx of refugees from the northern kingdom and from Judah itself and the elimination of rivalling towns in the region, Jerusalem had grown to a size almost unprecedented in the Levant, especially in the Iron Age. All economic and political power of the small but 'independent' state of Judah seems to have been centred in Jerusalem. The temple of Jerusalem had survived the ordeal and was now the only temple in the whole region dedicated to JHWH, and thus the central shrine of that religion. If we follow the biblical texts, religious reforms had focused the cult even more on the temple of Jerusalem. There are also indications that the practice of pilgrimage for Passover was established then and that a professional class of priests was forming. My thesis, then, is that the notion that Jerusalem was a holy city may thus have taken root in the seventh century BCE. And yes, in that city decent garb was expected.