

The Holy City

by Albert Bigelow Paine

Thirty-nine hundred years ago it was called merely Salem, and was ruled over by Melchisedek, who feasted Abraham when he returned from punishing the four kings who carried off his nephew, Lot. Five hundred years later, when Joshua ravaged Canaan, the place was known as Jebusi, the stronghold of the Jebusites, a citadel "enthroned on a mountain fastness" which Joshua failed to conquer, in spite of the traditional promise to Israel. Its old name had been not altogether dropped, and the transition from Jebusi-salem to Jebu-salem and Jerusalem naturally followed.

It was four hundred years after Joshua's time that David brought the head of Goliath to Jerusalem, and fifteen years later, when he had become king, he took the "stronghold of Zion," smote the difficult Jebusite even to the blind and the lame, and named the place the City of David.

"And David said on that day, whosoever getteth up to the gutter and smiteth the Jebusites, and the lame and the blind, *that are* hated of David's soul, he shall be chief and captain."

That is not as cruel as it sounds. Those incapables had no doubt been after David for baksheesh, and he felt just that way. I would like to appoint a few chiefs and captains of Jerusalem on the same terms.

But I digress. The Bible calls it a "fort," and it was probably not much more than that until David "built round about" and turned it into a city, the fame of which extended to Hiram, King of Tyre, who sent carpenters and masons and materials to David and built him a house. After which "David took him some more concubines and wives out of Jerusalem," brought up the Ark of the Covenant from Kirjath-jearim, and prepared to live happy ever after. The Ark was, of course, very sacred, and one Uzzah was struck dead on the way up from Kirjath for putting out his hand to save it when it was about to roll into a ditch.

It was with David that the glory of Jerusalem as a city began. Then came Solomon—David's second son by Uriah's wife—wise, masterful, and merciless, and Jerusalem became one of the magnificent cities of the world. Under Solomon the Hebrew race became more nearly a nation than ever before or since. Solomon completed the Temple begun by David on Mount Moriah; the Ark of the Covenant was duly installed. Judaism had acquired headquarters—Israel, organization, and a capital.

The fame of the great philosopher-poet-king spread to the ends of the earth. The mighty from many lands came to hear his wisdom and to gaze upon the magnificence of his court. The Queen of Sheba drifted in from her far sunlit kingdom with offerings of gold, spices, and precious stones. And "she communed with him of all that was in her heart." That was more than a thousand years before Christ. Greece had no history then. Rome had not been even considered. Culture and splendor were at high-tide in the Far East. It was the golden age of Jerusalem.

The full tide must ebb, and the waning in Jerusalem began early. Solomon's reign was a failure at the end. Degenerating into a sensualist and an idolater, his enemies prevailed against him. The Lord "stirred up an adversary" in Hadad the Edomite, who had an old grudge. Also others, and trouble followed. The nation was divided. Revolt, civil wars, and abounding iniquities dragged the people

down. That which would come to Rome a thousand years later came now on a smaller scale to Israel. Egyptian and Arabian ravaged it by turns, and the Assyrian came down numerous. It became the habit of adjoining nations to go over and plunder and destroy Jerusalem.

Four hundred years after Solomon, Josiah undertook to rehabilitate the nation and restore its ancient faith. He pulled down the heathen altars which Solomon had constructed, "that no man might make his son or daughter pass through the fire to Moloch"; he drove out and destroyed the iniquitous priests; he burned the high places of pollution and stamped the powder in the dust.

It was too late. Josiah was presently slain in a battle with the Egyptians, and his son dropped back into the evil practices of his fathers. Nebuchadnezzar came then, and in one raid after another utterly destroyed Jerusalem, including the Temple and the Ark, and carried the inhabitants, to the last man, into a captivity which lasted seventy years. Then Nehemiah was allowed to return with a large following and rebuild the city. But its prosperity was never permanent. The Jews were never a governing nation. Discontented and factional, they invited conquest. Alexander came, and, later, Rome. Herod the Great renewed and beautified the city, and to court favor with the Jews rebuilt the Temple on a splendid scale. This was Jerusalem in its final glory. Seventy years later the Jews rebelled, and Titus destroyed the city so completely that it is said to have remained a barren waste without a single inhabitant for fifty years.

To-day the city is divided into "quarters"—Christian, Jewish, Mohammedan, and Armenian. All worships are permitted, and the sacred relics—most of them—of whatever faith, are accessible to all. Such in scanty outline is the story of the Holy City. It has been besieged and burned and pulled down no less than sixteen times—totally destroyed and rebuilt at least eight times, and the very topography of its site has been changed by the accumulation of rubbish. Hillsides have disappeared. Where once were hollows are now mere depressions or flats. Most of the streets that Jesus and the prophets trod lie from thirty to a hundred feet below the present surface, and bear little relation even in direction to those of the present day. Yet certain sites and landmarks have been identified, while others are interesting for later reasons.

Hence, both to sceptic and believer, Jerusalem is still a shrine.

Source:

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