



FEATURES

In the City of David

How Jerusalem of the Bible is reshaping the city of today

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The view looking up at the Dome of the Rock and refurbished Jewish Quarter from the lookout point of the 'City of David'.

Karen Armstrong wrote that Jerusalem has a “sacred geography” from which people draw their conceptions of themselves—and therefore is so bound up in myth that objective reality becomes obscured.¹ Rashid Khalidi believed it easy to see how the city is a “touchstone of identity” for all its inhabitants, past and present.² Meron Benvenisti argued that this touchstone has in fact become a “gigantic quarry from which each side has mined stones for the construction of its myths—and for throwing at one another.”³

The three conceptions, similar in fact (and neatly collected by Daniel Bertrand Monk⁴), illustrate a number of things about Jerusalem, its people and its history. They have one fundamental observation in common: in Jerusalem, you see what you want to see. And often those visions have more precedence than the city’s real life. Indeed, the priority of truth is somehow granted to paper and text, rather than living, breathing testimonial.

Go to this hill and look at these stones. They have been piled on top of each other to form what appears to be a wall. Using a variety of

methods we can date these stones to the Middle to Late Bronze Age. Extrapolating from scripture, we can then surmise that this is the wall that tried and failed to hold off David, king of the Jews. This then must be the site of the City of David, capital of the United Jewish Monarchy, to which so much importance is attached in Jewish tradition.

Go to the same hill and look that way. See those stones? They have been piled on top of each other to form what appears to be a wall. Using a variety of methods, we can date these stones to the early twentieth century. Extrapolating from municipal documents, Jordanian registry papers and conversations with the inhabitants, we can then surmise that this dwelling belongs to a Palestinian family. This then must be the site of Silwan, a Palestinian village that was occupied in a war 40 years ago and whose population is now rapidly being shunted aside.

We see what we want to see.

In the Land of the ‘Eternal God’

A small party of five assemble on this hill one sunny but chilly morning in March to start a tour of what has been designated an Israeli archaeological park, but is administered by a settler group called El ‘Ad, which is dedicated to the Jewish settlement of occupied East Jerusalem.⁵

Guy (that, I kid you not, was the name of our guide) starts the tour by taking us to the looking point at the top of the hill. There he asks us to observe the hills and imagine them empty, just as they once would have been.

“Wishful thinking, Guy?” I can’t help but wonder as I squint up at the Aqsa Mosque above us. But Guy-the-Guide is off on a well-rehearsed routine, giving us a detailed account of the hills as they are seen in scripture, using their Hebrew names and various biblical associations. He then proceeds to take us on a three-hour walk, down the hill, through the hill and back up again—a walk through Jewish tradition.

In 2005, Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar announced that a wall dug a little under this look-out point formed the foundation wall of David’s palace, the house that, according to Samuel 2, verse 5, was built for David by Hiram, the king of Tyre. The evidence she proffered was that this was a much larger structure than a simple private dwelling and that pottery shards at the site had been dated to approximately the tenth century BCE. This period, biblical scholars posit, was that of David and his son, Solomon, a time also known to Israeli archaeologists and Biblical scholars as the First Temple period.⁶ Today, the dig is ongoing, and Guy is clearly quite excited. More biblical stories follow. Why would David bring in labour from what is now Lebanon? Guy asks us. “Because Jews are too lazy to do their own hard work,” answers one of our party, a large and rather gruff Israeli hosting an English visitor.

Guy-the-Guide ignores the barb. Beneath us, under the boards constructed above this latest dig, a Palestinian labourer removes rubble in a wheelbarrow.

“Because they had cedars there,” Guy explains with the strained patience of a put-upon teacher. “The palace was built with wood, as we learn from Samuel. Local craftsmen would not have had the necessary skill.”

Each stop is similarly illustrated with stories from scripture and exact references to verse. Thus we learn that the “burnt house”, further down the hill where the ground is charred black, “may have been a royal archive,” according to the pamphlet I receive at the visitors’ centre. Guy speculates that this place was burnt to the ground in 586 BCE, “when the Babylonians sacked the city and destroyed the First Temple.”

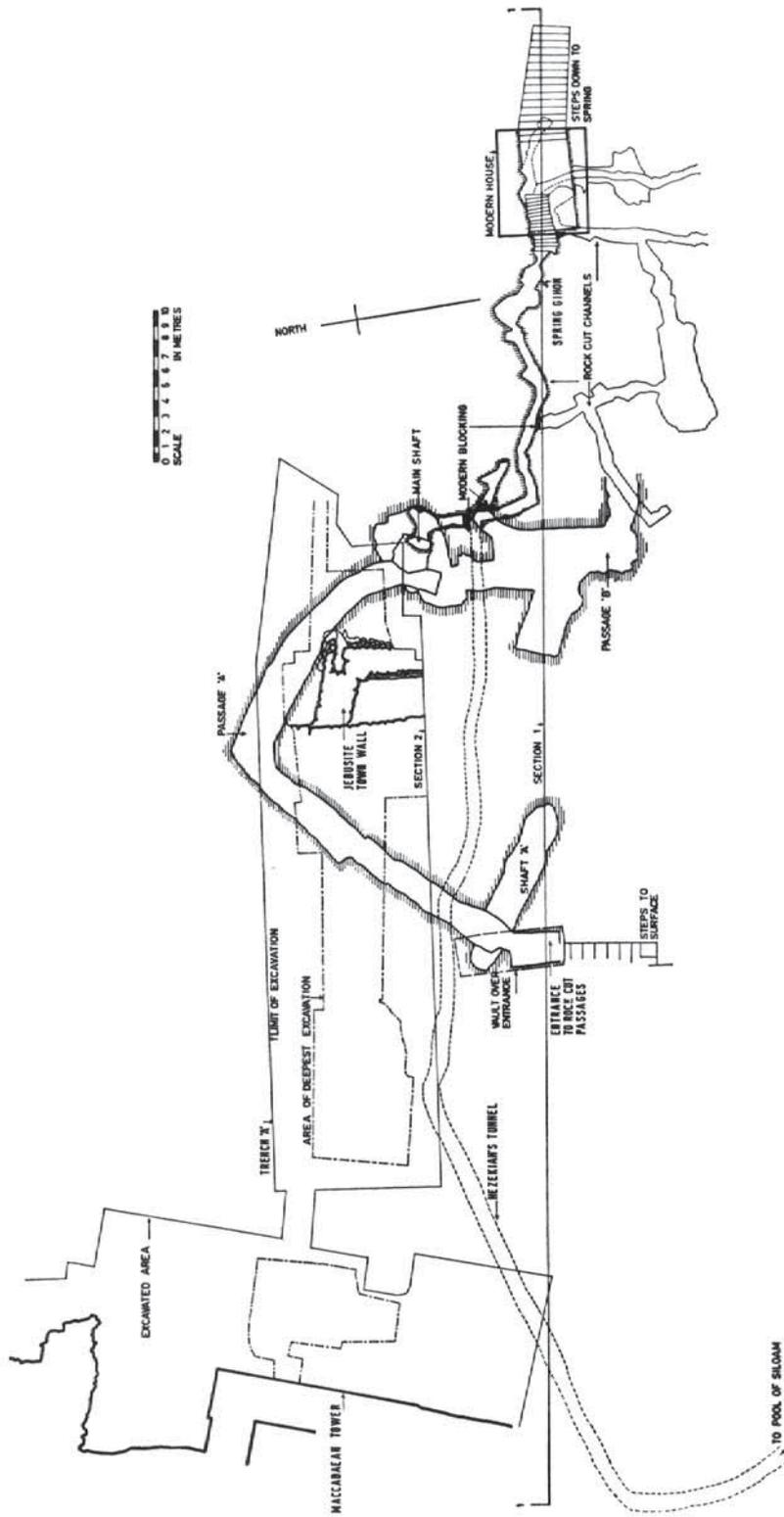
We are on the eastern slope of the hill, and Guy points out what are believed to be the remnants of the city’s earliest fortifications down the slope. This is key to understanding the city and how David captured it, Guy says.

Indeed. This is one hill in a city of hills and valleys. It lies just south of the present day Old City, under the shadow of the Haram al-Sharif east of the 1967 armistice lines. Archaeological finds on this hill have been dated as far back as the Chalcolithic era, 4,000 BCE, or 6,000 years ago, and are commonly understood to be the site of the earliest settlement of Jerusalem.

The early settlement, like so many other communities, was planted here to access water. Ein al-Hilweh, or Gihon Spring, is Jerusalem’s only perennial source of water and runs into Wadi al-Hilweh, or the Kidron Valley. That valley runs between the two hills that form the neighbourhood of Silwan, one of which is the one we are standing on.

The first known permanent settlements here have been dated to approximately 1800 BCE. The evolution from small settlement to city can be traced in Egyptian texts, the Execration Texts, which list cities in the area, as well as their rulers. There are two mentions of Jerusalem. They remain the only known references to Jerusalem in the early period.⁷

The most impressive archaeological evidence from this time lies on the eastern slope, as Guy-the-Guide points out, and are remnants of fortifications, including what is believed to be a large gate and a tower. Jerusalem, it would seem, had by this time evolved into a walled Canaanite city state. One of the few primary source materials from this period, the Amarna Letters of approximately 1388 BCE, confirms this. These letters are rather dry diplomatic correspondence between the Egyptian administration at the time and its representatives in Canaan and Amurru. In one, the Canaanite King of Jerusalem, Abdi-Hepa, reveals that his kingdom stretched over a vast hilly region to the north, in what is now known as the West Bank.



A cut-away of the dig on the Silwan hillside, as featured in Kathleen Kenyon's book, *Source: K. Kenyon, Jerusalem, p. 20.*

A large number of vessels have been found from this period, along with gravesites on the Mount of Olives, attesting to the city's relative status at this time. During the 12th century BCE, Jerusalem's power apparently began to decline, however, and, according to accounts in the Bible, a Canaanite king fought and lost to Joshua, after which the tribe of Judah burnt the city.

The ailing city attracted new residents, the Jebusites. This period is mentioned primarily in the Bible. They dominated Jerusalem, according to the biblical account, for around two centuries. Few archaeological remains have been found attesting to this account, however.

It is from the Jebusites that David is said to have conquered the city. Guy-the-Guide recounts that episode in detail as it appears in scripture.

But here the account becomes even more muddled, as the scripture itself is contradictory. Samuel II tells us that either David conquered the city (verse 5:6-9), while Chronicles states that that Joab Son of Zeruiah was the conqueror (verse 11:4-7)⁸ And was the attack one of stealth, the city penetrated by fighters through its water system? This is the story that Guy serves us. Or was it done with blaring horns, in much the same way Jericho fell, also a reading gleaned from scripture?⁹

Guy takes us to Warren's Shaft, an underground tunnel apparently built to enable inhabitants to draw water from the spring in times of siege. But there is no conclusive evidence that this was built during the Middle to Late Bronze Age, as Guy would have it.¹⁰ There are similarities in structure to remnants of other cities in the region that existed at that time, but that is as far as conjecture leads.

In the Land of Silwan

It is fascinating conjecture and Guy paints a fascinating picture. But ultimately, it is a picture that, at most, illustrates less than 1,000 years of history in a city 6,000 years old. It is based almost entirely on one source text that was written much later and focuses exclusively on the doings of one collection of tribes over the myriad of others that have come and gone and stayed.

"Viewed from the longer perspective," writes Keith Whitelam, "the history of ancient Israel is a moment in the vast expanse of Palestinian history."¹¹

But Palestinian history, ancient or modern, is far from Guy's remit. Pausing briefly, on our way back up the hill, he points to the other part of Silwan to our east—Guy refers only to that hill as "Silwan". He points out new construction there amid the chaotic housing climbing precariously up the cliff, and recalls how Yemeni Jews settled there in the early twentieth century because "they were not accepted by the Old City's Jews". They were protected in the 1929 riots by their "Arab" neighbours, he says, but felt



The sophisticated El 'Ad website of the dig at Silwan shows the modern day. *Source: www.cityofdauid.org.*



A virtual tour allows the visitor to view what is ostensibly David's Jerusalem on the same site. *Source: www.cityofdauid.org.*

compelled to leave soon after and were reluctantly welcomed into the Jewish fold. Now, he says proudly, the newly permitted building—a five-storey structure housing a banquet hall, a commercial centre and an underground car park—is being erected in honour of those early 'pioneers'.

Presumably Guy meant the story to show how relations between Jewry from around the world have improved, but he seems disheartened by the reaction from the burly Israeli fellow. "Why would Jews live there?" the large man snaps, unimpressed. "It's a Palestinian neighbourhood."

"Well," Guy stammers back, somewhat at a loss. "Jews used to live there."

Guy's mood only darkens a few moments later when, back to the subject at hand, the gruff Israeli's English friend almost sheepishly points out that there are no extant written sources about David or Solomon, and could he throw some light on that? The guide vaguely tosses off one possible inscription, and hurries through how archaeological finds do not *contradict* scripture.

He is clearly finding his small party somewhat quarrelsome and, ignoring all those early twentieth-century structures decorated with cheap track suits hung out to dry, raises his tempo up the hill.

Yet, considering the massive importance attached to David and his successor Solomon in Hebrew scripture, the complete and utter silence outside biblical texts in any written source either from Palestine or a neighbouring country remains an enormous puzzle to those that accept the Bible's core as broadly historical.

And some don't.

“The picture of Israel’s past as presented in much of the Hebrew Bible is a fiction, a fabrication like most pictures of the past constructed by ancient (and, we might add, modern) societies,” writes Whitelam.¹²

English archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon was much more diplomatic. “No one explanatory model will accommodate either the multi-layered textual traditions of the Old Testament or the variety of evidence now available through excavation and survey,” she wrote three decades ago.¹³

But Kenyon was of a careful nature. One of the first to excavate this hill, she dug with sensitivity for the environment. “To have cut our trench further south,” she explained in one passage, “would have meant cutting through an important pathway leading from the summit of the ridge to the Silwan Valley and village. The Silwanis are patient in such matters, but this seemed unfair.”¹⁴

It is unlikely then, that Kenyon would have approved of much that has happened since. One trench at the bottom of the hill is a deep scar where a road once ran. Guy has no amusing anecdote to illustrate the reaction of the residents of the house at the top of this trench, where the garden wall runs flush with the dig and its gate opens directly onto a 20-foot drop.

Instead he sighs at the intransigence of other residents. Another abutting garden belongs to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. “They won’t allow us to dig in the garden”, Guy complains. “Until we do, we cannot say for certain what we have uncovered here.”

“It’s all about local politics”, he offers, when asked by another member of our party. “The Christians have to be careful not to enflame the Muslim community.”

We see what we want to see.

“All they see is Daoud,” said Um Jihad, when I met her a week before the tour. Um Jihad, 60, a mother of six, is a resident of one of those early twentieth century structures on the hill. Her house lies on the path of the tour, as I was later to discover. “Prophet Daoud this, Prophet Daoud that,” she continues. “They have guides that show them around, and all they ever say, is David, David.”

Um Jihad and her husband have let their house for 40 years from owners who were in Jordan during the 1967 war and cannot return. If the house had been left empty, it would long ago have been seized by the Israeli government as absentee property. Um Jihad hopes one of her married children will take it over when she and her husband are gone.

She says many houses in the neighbourhood have been taken over by Jews—10, according to the April settlement bulletin from PASSIA, housing 27 families.¹⁵ Houses have ended up in Jewish hands in a variety of ways, but the most common, Um Jihad says, is when owners have sold them for vastly inflated prices.

“How can they go and meet their God?” she asks, disapprovingly.

She says there is little organized opposition by residents to stop houses from changing hands. Protests in 2005 organized by a group of residents brought about the freezing of Israeli demolition orders on 88 houses on the hill, but the orders have never been lifted entirely.

When I ask Guy about these residents and how Jews came to live here in recent years, he smiles. “I’ll tell you the secret,” he says conspiratorially. “It takes a lot of patience and a lot of money.”

Endnotes

¹ Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

² Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³ Meron Benvenisti, *City of Stone: The Hidden History of Jerusalem* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996).

⁴ Daniel Bertrand Monk, *An Aesthetic Occupation: The Immediacy of Architecture and the Palestine Conflict*, (London, Duke University Press, 2002).

⁵ *El ‘Ad* means ‘Eternal God’ in Hebrew.

⁶ Otherwise known as the Early Iron Age.

⁷ Dan Bahat, *The Illustrated Atlas of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, Carta The Israel Map and Publishing Company, 1990).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Kathleen Kenyon, *The Bible and Recent Archaeology* (London, British Museum Publications Ltd, This edition 1987. First published 1977).

¹⁴ Kathleen Kenyon, *Digging up Jerusalem* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1974).

¹⁵ *Israeli Settlement Activities and Related Policies in Jerusalem* (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs: April, 2007).