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JERUSALEM

Jerusalem is one of the world's oldest and most famous cities. It is also of great importance for three of the world's most important faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. No other city has been as beloved or as fought over as Jerusalem.

It remains a focal point for international politics because President Bush's failed "road map for peace" in the Middle East had the final status of the city between Israel and Palestine as the major sticking point. A failure to sort out of the future status of Jerusalem undermined the entire peace process. Barack Obama is making no further progress.

Some religious groups see the city as the location of the world's final conflict. Some Jewish groups want to rebuild the temple – but this requires demolishing the Islamic buildings that have been on the site for 1300 years.

The creation of Jerusalem was unusual in that the city (unlike other major cities) was not near a seaport or trade route. Many of the world's main cities were created near major rivers or the coast, and trade was a major factor in their development.

Additionally, it lacked an adequate supply of water and the surrounding land was not good for agriculture. It was hemmed in by deep valleys and difficult roads.

It was created because it was centrally located between the northern and southern Jewish tribes as King David's way of uniting the people into one kingdom about 3000 years ago. It was also easy to defend because it is on a high hill and dominated the local territory.

King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. He wanted to build a temple to house it but he was warned by a prophet that as a warrior with blood on his hands it would not be suitable for him to do so. Instead, his son Solomon, a man of peace, took on that task.

Solomon created a golden era for the city. Tribes around Solomon's empire were busy fighting among themselves and so for once he was able to concentrate on improving his country without a constant fear of invasion. Jerusalem became one of the Middle East's most beautiful cities.

But Solomon died in about 922 BC and his empire fell apart. The country was divided into two parts. Surrounding countries had by this time become more organized and so started to grab territory. Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (near modern Baghdad) invaded the city in about

587 BC and took most of the inhabitants into captivity. Solomon's temple was destroyed in the siege. The city became a place of ruins.

Jews in exile remembered with fondness their wonderful city and yearned to return to it. They remained in exile for about a century and half, until King Cyrus of Persia (modern day Iran) beat the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return home, starting in about 537 BC. Jerusalem did well in the tolerant Persian empire. It did not reach the heights of the Solomon era but it was again a great city.

Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) swept through the region, beating the Persian. He tried to impose Greek thinking and religion. The Jews fought back and this provided an opportunity for a war of independence led by Judas Maccabeus.

Jerusalem became the capital of newly independent Judea – a position it had not enjoyed for three centuries, when the Babylonians took over the land. This, the last Jewish kingdom, survived for only 76 years.

The freedom was not to last because yet another empire was being created: based in Rome. The Romans took over in Judea and Jerusalem was one of the administrative centres. The half-Jewish Herod family was installed by the Romans. Herod the Great (37-4 BC) was a ruthless fighter, cunning negotiator and a subtle diplomat. The Romans liked the way that he maintained order among the unruly Jews.

Unfortunately, he was also paranoid, fearing that others would try to take his power. He killed his sons and one of his wives (he had a total of 10). He also feared that the baby Jesus (with better Jewish roots than his own) would eventually rival his power and so he tried to have him killed as well.

Herod the Great was a high-taxing, big spending ruler. He wanted to make Jerusalem one of the wonders of the Middle Eastern world. He transformed the city as had no other ruler since Solomon.

He decided to rebuild the temple to win over Jewish support. His temple was going to be even bigger and grander than Solomon's. Some of the stones used for that massive project are still visible. 10,000 manual workers and a 1,000 priests were engaged in the nine-year project.

He hoped that all the religious, sporting and entertainment buildings would make him more popular among his Jewish subjects. In a dry region, he even found ways of getting water piped into the city for gardens. All this building activity created a booming economy, which provided employment for agricultural workers who were looking for work.



Jews were expected to visit the city on a regular basis for religious observances. They had to pay a temple tax, which helped Herod's finance other major projects.

For example, Jesus first went to Jerusalem as a baby when his parents took him to the temple. They were so poor that they could only afford to buy small birds as a sacrifice. He returned 12 years as a pilgrim. The city in Jesus' day had about 480 synagogues.

The city would have been teeming with life for the first Easter. Passover was an important time for Jews to travel to the city. Jesus and His disciples were congregating on the city just as other Jews were also.

It was the centre of Jewish learning. The temple dominated the skyline, with its gold-plated doors and walls. It shone in the sunlight.

Pilgrims attracted traders from all over the Middle East. Jerusalem was a great place for shopping. Caravans brought in goods from the Arab world, Persia and India. There were also some Greeks still in the area, as a residue from the Greek invasion. There were also a few Romans.

In short, the Jerusalem of Jesus' day was a rich, active and multicultural city. It was again one of the Middle East's most exciting cities.

But boiling away under the surface there was Jewish anger at the Roman occupation. The overcrowding and religious-based excitement frequently led to anti-Roman violence.

Finally, the Jews rebelled in AD 66. The initial campaign went well but they could not expect to beat the Roman empire. The city was destroyed in AD70. The temple was smashed. The last remaining wall of the temple, the Western Wall, is the holiest site in Judaism. Many Jews were killed, while others were enslaved and scattered.

The next major empire to arise was the Islamic one. The Islamic conquest of the land began in 633. The prophet Mohammed was miraculously transported by Mecca to Jerusalem and it was from there that he made his ascent into heaven – from what is now the Dome of the Rock, built on the temple site.

Jerusalem was never the capital of any Arab territory. It was largely a backwater throughout the centuries of Islamic domination. But it was important as a shrine because of Mohammed's ascent into heaven.

Therefore, attention is focussed on Jerusalem. The Israeli Government would like international recognition of Jerusalem as the capital (Australia and most other countries retain their embassies in Tel Aviv).



Some Jews would like to rebuild the temple but they will need to get control of the Dome of the Rock and destroy it. This would be a flashpoint for Jewish-Islamic tension. Meanwhile, the Pope has annoyed both faiths by calling for Jerusalem to become an international city, not governed by Israel or Palestine. Jerusalem at the time of the first Easter was a centre of tension and political intrigue. 2,000 years later it still is.

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