

Dr. Perry Phillips, Historical Geography

Session 3 – Jerusalem

Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Perry Phillips provides a comprehensive overview of the **historical geography of Jerusalem**, emphasizing the city's strategic evolution from the **Jebusite period** to the **New Testament**. The source highlights how **topography and water sources**, particularly the **Gihon Spring**, dictated the initial location of the **City of David** and necessitated the engineering of complex defense tunnels. Through detailed archaeological descriptions, the text connects physical sites like the **Temple Mount**, **Hezekiah's Tunnel**, and various palaces to specific **biblical narratives** and political shifts. Significant attention is given to **Herod the Great's** architectural contributions, which transformed Jerusalem into a monumental religious and political center. Finally, the author examines sites associated with **Jesus' life and passion**, such as the **Pool of Siloam** and the **Church of the Holy Sepulcher**, to illustrate the city's profound spiritual legacy.

Briefing Document:

Historical Geography and Strategic Development of Jerusalem

This briefing document synthesizes the historical, geographical, and archaeological insights regarding the city of Jerusalem, based on the lectures of Dr. Perry Phillips. It examines the city's evolution from a Jebusite stronghold to the religious and political center of Israel, focusing on its unique topography, hydraulic engineering, and monumental architecture.

Executive Summary

The historical significance of Jerusalem is inextricably linked to its geography and water supply. Originally established on the "Ophel" (City of David) due to the proximity of the Gihon Spring, the city was strategically chosen by King David as a neutral capital to unify the northern and southern tribes of Israel. Its defensive posture relied on deep valleys—the Kidron, Hinnom, and Tyropean—though its

lower elevation relative to surrounding hills necessitated sophisticated fortifications and water management. Key historical developments include Hezekiah's 8th-century BC defensive tunnel and Herod the Great's 1st-century BC expansion of the Temple Mount, which remains the largest temple platform of classical antiquity. Archaeological evidence, ranging from 570-ton stones to the five-porticoed Pool of Bethesda, consistently corroborates biblical and historical accounts of the city's complex infrastructure.

Geopolitical Significance and Strategic Location

Jerusalem's importance in biblical history is partly due to its role as a "land between" and its specific placement on the "mountainous spine" of Israel.

- **Tribal Neutrality:** Jerusalem is situated in the tribal territory of Benjamin, positioned precisely between the major powers of Judah to the south and Ephraim/Manasseh to the north.
 - **The "District of Columbia" Parallel:** King David moved the capital from Hebron (deep in Judah) to Jerusalem to avoid charges of tribal favoritism. By establishing a separate capital between the northern and southern interests, he mirrored the modern logic used to establish Washington, D.C., thereby unifying the nation.
 - **Religious and Political Integration:** David transformed Jerusalem into the center of both civil governance and religious life by bringing the Ark of the Covenant to the city.
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Topographical Framework

Jerusalem is defined by three primary valleys that provided natural defenses but also dictated the city's growth patterns.

Feature	Description	Significance
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Kidron Valley	A deep valley to the east of the Old City.	Separates the city from the Mount of Olives; contains the Gihon Spring.
Hinnom Valley	Starts west, swings south, and meets the Kidron.	Formed the southern boundary of the ancient city.
Tyroean Valley	Also known as the "Central Valley" or "Valley of the Cheesemakers."	Divided the eastern hill (Ophel/Temple Mount) from the western hill.
The Ophel	A "jut of land" also known as Zion or the City of David.	The original site of the Jebusite city and David's capital.

The "Surrounding Mountains"

The city of Jerusalem—specifically the original City of David—is lower than the hills surrounding it. This geography informs the imagery of Psalms 121 and 125, where the surrounding mountains serve as a metaphor for divine protection.

Water Management: The Lifeline of the City

Ancient Jerusalem's survival depended on its ability to access and protect its water source, the Gihon Spring.

The Gihon Spring and Early Defenses

The spring was located in the Kidron Valley, outside the city walls. To secure it, the Jebusites and early Israelites utilized:

- **The "Sinor":** A water tunnel mentioned in 2 Samuel 5, likely used by Joab to infiltrate and capture the city.
- **Massive Towers:** Archaeological finds from the last five years reveal foundation towers built to protect the spring.
- **Internal Access:** Inhabitants dug a tunnel from within the city walls to a pool fed by the spring, allowing them to draw water without exposing themselves to enemies.

Hezekiah's Tunnel (701 BC)

Facing a siege by the Assyrian King Sennacherib, King Hezekiah engineered a massive tunnel to redirect water from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam in the west.

- **Engineering Feat:** Two teams started from opposite ends, digging through 150 feet of solid bedrock for approximately half a kilometer. They followed the sound of picks to meet in the middle.
- **The Siloam Inscription:** A stone inscription found in the 1800s commemorates the moment the two teams joined.

Roman Aqueducts

As the city grew during the Roman period, the local springs were insufficient. The Romans constructed aqueducts to bring water from 20 miles away to fill cisterns for city use and ritual purposes on the Temple Mount.

Architectural and Archaeological Evolution

The "Millo" and Terracing

Jerusalem's steep slopes required unique construction methods. The "Millo" (meaning "to fill") refers to the system of terracing, retaining walls, and fill dirt used to create level foundations for buildings.

- **Achiel's House:** A two-story structure from the 11th–9th century BC featuring central pillars and even a stone toilet.
- **David's Palace:** Excavations by Eilat Mazar have uncovered a "monumental building" supported by a massive wall, believed to be the palace of King David.

Herodian Magnificence

Herod the Great transformed the city's landscape by leveling Mount Moriah to create a massive, flat Temple Mount platform.

- **Massive Masonry:** The retaining walls consist of stones chiseled with such accuracy that no mortar was required. One stone is 40 feet long and weighs approximately 570 tons.
 - **Fortress of Antonia:** Built to guard the temple and named after Mark Antony.
 - **The Royal Stoa and Solomon's Portico:** Elaborate colonnades used for teaching and public gathering.
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Historical and Biblical Synchronisms

Archaeological discoveries consistently validate the details found in historical and biblical texts.

- **The Pool of Bethesda:** Described in the Gospel of John as having five porticoes. Excavations confirmed this unique layout—four perimeter colonnades and one dividing the center.
- **The Place of Trumpeting:** A stone found in the debris below the Temple Mount features an inscription marking the spot where priests announced festivals, exactly as described by Josephus and the Talmud.
- **The Pool of Siloam:** Recent excavations have uncovered the Herodian-era steps leading into the water, providing a geographic context for the healing of the blind man in John 9.
- **Gethsemane:** The "olive press" garden across the Kidron Valley contains olive trees dated back 1,800 to 2,000 years, potentially offshoots of trees present during the time of Jesus.
- **The Church of the Holy Sepulcher:** Historically regarded as the most evidenced site for the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, though the "Garden Tomb" remains a popular alternative for visualizing the biblical account.

Study Guide:

The Historical Geography of Jerusalem: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide provides a detailed review of the historical and geographical development of Jerusalem as presented in the analysis by Dr. Perry Phillips. It covers the city's strategic importance, its water systems, architectural expansions, and its role in biblical history from the Jebusite period through the New Testament.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following ten questions in 2–3 sentences, based on the information provided in the source context.

1. Why was the location of Jerusalem strategically important for King David when he sought to unify the tribes of Israel?
2. What is the "Gihon Spring," and why was it the primary reason for the city's initial location on the Ophel?
3. According to the biblical text and historical analysis, how did David's forces capture the Jebusite city?
4. What does the term "Millo" refer to in the context of Jerusalem's ancient construction?
5. Explain the geographical significance of the three main valleys surrounding Jerusalem.
6. How did Herod the Great transform Mount Moriah into the Temple Mount platform seen today?
7. What was the purpose of "Hezekiah's Tunnel," and how was its construction unique for the year 701 BC?
8. Describe the architectural layout of the Pool of Bethesda and how it confirms the historical accuracy of the Gospel of John.
9. What is the "Antonia Fortress," and why did Herod the Great place it in its specific location?

10. How does the topography of the Ophel and the surrounding hills provide a physical metaphor for the spiritual themes found in the Psalms?

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Strategic Neutrality:** David chose Jerusalem because it sat on the border between the northern tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh) and the southern tribe of Judah. By placing the capital in Benjaminite territory, David avoided showing favoritism to his own tribe, Judah, effectively unifying the nation in a manner similar to the creation of Washington, D.C.
2. **Water Supply Dependency:** The Gihon Spring was the only reliable water source for the area, making it the essential anchor for any permanent settlement. Despite the Ophel being lower than surrounding hills and thus harder to defend, the necessity of having direct, protected access to the spring dictated the city's placement.
3. **The Sinor (Water Tunnel):** David's commander, Joab, entered the city through a feature called the *sinor*, which is best translated as a water tunnel or shaft. This allowed David's forces to bypass the Jebusite walls, which the inhabitants believed were so strong that even "the lame and the blind" could defend them.
4. **Terracing and Fill:** The "Millo" comes from the Hebrew word "to fill" and refers to the system of terracing and supporting walls used to build on the steep slopes of the Ophel. Workers would build massive foundation walls and fill the space behind them with dirt and stone to create flat surfaces for monumental buildings like David's palace.
5. **Natural Boundaries:** The Kidron Valley to the east and the Hinnom Valley to the south and west provided deep natural moats that protected the city from attack. The Central (Tyropean) Valley divided the city internally, separating the original City of David (Ophel) from the Western Hill.
6. **Engineering the Platform:** Herod took the rounded hill of Mount Moriah and flattened it by building massive retaining walls—some stones weighing over 500 tons—and filling the interior with dirt and arches. This created the largest

temple area in classical antiquity, providing a massive flat platform for his grand temple and surrounding colonnades.

7. **Siege Protection:** Constructed to protect the water supply from the Assyrian King Sennacherib, the tunnel diverted water from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam inside the city walls. It was unique because two teams dug from opposite ends through 150 feet of solid bedrock, meeting in the middle by following the sound of each other's picks.
8. **Five Porticoes:** Archaeology has revealed that the Pool of Bethesda featured four colonnades around its perimeter and one cutting through the center, totaling five porticoes. This matches the specific description in John 5, suggesting the author had direct, eyewitness knowledge of Jerusalem before its destruction in 70 AD.
9. **Temple Surveillance:** The Antonia Fortress, named after Mark Antony, was a mighty structure with four towers located at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount. Herod built it there specifically to monitor the temple area, as he feared any potential revolt against his rule would likely begin among the crowds gathered for religious rituals.
10. **Divine Protection:** The Ophel is physically lower than the Temple Mount, the Mount of Olives, and the Western Hill. This topographical reality is reflected in Psalm 125, which uses the physical image of the mountains surrounding the lower city as a symbol of how the Lord surrounds and protects His people.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the provided source material to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Evolution of Jerusalem's Water Systems:** Analyze how the Gihon Spring, Hezekiah's Tunnel, and Roman aqueducts shaped the growth and defensibility of Jerusalem across different historical eras.
2. **Herodian Architecture as Political Statement:** Discuss how Herod the Great's construction projects—including the Temple Mount, the Antonia

Fortress, and his palace—served both his ego and his need to maintain control over a restive Jewish population.

3. **Archaeology and the New Testament:** Evaluate the role of archaeological discoveries (such as the Pool of Siloam, the Pool of Bethesda, and the "Place of Trumpeting" stone) in validating the historical narratives of the Gospels and the book of Acts.
4. **The Topography of the Passion:** Trace the movements of Jesus during his final days—from Gethsemane to the Temple, the high priest's house, and Golgotha—explaining how the geography of the Kidron Valley and the city walls influenced these events.
5. **Jerusalem as a Religious and Political Center:** Explain the "stroke of genius" behind David's decision to move the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and how this dual role as a political and religious hub influenced the city's development through the time of Solomon.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Antonia Fortress	A military stronghold built by Herod the Great at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount to guard the temple and monitor for revolts.
Central (Tyropean) Valley	Known as the "Valley of the Cheesemakers," this valley ran through the center of ancient Jerusalem, separating the Ophel from the Western Hill.
Gethsemane	Meaning "olive press," this was a garden located across the Kidron Valley on the slopes of the Mount of Olives where Jesus was arrested.
Gihon Spring	The primary water source for ancient Jerusalem, located in the Kidron Valley at the base of the Ophel.

Hinnom Valley	A major valley that curves around the west and south sides of Jerusalem, meeting the Kidron Valley at the city's southern tip.
Jebusites	The original inhabitants of Jerusalem who occupied the city before it was conquered by King David.
Kidron Valley	A deep valley to the east of the Old City and the Temple Mount, separating Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.
Millo	A Hebrew term meaning "to fill," referring to the structural fill and terracing used to create level foundations on Jerusalem's hillsides.
Mount Moriah	The hill north of the Ophel where Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac and where Solomon later built the first temple.
Ophel	A Hebrew term for a "jut of land," referring to the small, lower ridge where the original City of David was established.
Pool of Siloam	A reservoir at the southern end of the city that collected water from Hezekiah's Tunnel; the site of Jesus's miracle healing of a man born blind.
Sinor	The Hebrew term for the water shaft or tunnel through which Joab and David's men supposedly entered to conquer the Jebusite city.
Western Hill	The higher elevation area west of the Central Valley that became part of the city's expansion during the Hasmonean and Herodian periods.
Zion	A term used interchangeably with the City of David, the Ophel, and Jerusalem itself to signify the religious and political heart of the nation.
