

## “The Lord Drove Out Before Us All the Peoples”

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 • Psalm 78:1-7 • 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 • Matthew 25:14-30

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This is the third time in the past six weeks that I have attempted a sermon touching on the current crisis in Israel and Gaza. Five weeks ago I offered a broad historical sketch, stretching back more than three thousand years. Three weeks ago I raised some uncomfortable questions about God’s instructions to the ancient Israelites, according to the Bible, to exterminate all the people who were living in the Promised Land when they arrived there in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC. To commit genocide. I mentioned that I had learned of a relatively new book by Walter Brueggemann, a distinguished Old Testament scholar and Christian theologian, formerly at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, now retired. The book is called *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. I have now read the book. It’s short – just 88 pages. It was helpful; it pointed me to some other biblical passages and theological issues that I hadn’t fully considered, and led me toward today’s sermon. But it didn’t really address the hard questions about God. I’ll need to keep searching for answers to those.

The Old Testament passages in recent weeks have been dealing with Israel’s conquest of Canaan thirty-three centuries ago. The juxtaposition between what happened *back then* and what has been happening in the past century has been both eye-opening and disturbing. Who has the right to live in the Holy Land – the people who were there first, or the people who arrived later? How should the newcomers and the old-timers treat each other, when *both* of them claim rights to the land? Those are two of the key questions, both then and now. Today’s passage takes place after the Israelites have conquered much of the Promised Land and divided it up among their twelve tribes. Joshua, the successor of Moses, asks the tribal heads to pledge their unwavering fidelity to God. He orders them to set aside the gods of the various other nations around them, reminding them that “the Lord drove out before us all the peoples” who worship those gods. Except, according to the Bible, the Israelites weren’t successful in wiping out all those nations, as God had told them to do. They tried ... and failed.

I want to tell you what happened to *one* of those seven nations that were living in the land when the Israelites arrived. This is illustrative of what happened to all seven, but it’s also unique, because this particular group – the Jebusites – lived where Jerusalem is now. Unfortunately, they didn’t leave behind any written records, so we don’t have *their* side of the story. All we know is what later Jewish scribes chose to record about them. I want to tell you what we know about them, and talk about the origins of Jerusalem, and the words “Zion” and “Zionism.” That will be enough for one day!

Let’s start with a little geography. This will be relevant, I promise! This map shows the area around the ancient city of Jebus, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Don’t worry about the words and lines in black. Just look at the topography. Notice the hills, ridges, and valleys. There are three main ridges, all starting in the north and ending in the south. Jebus was built on the middle ridge. That wasn’t the

*highest* ridge. The highest point is what is now called Mount Scopus, in the upper right corner of this map. That's where the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is today. The second highest point is south of Mount Scopus, atop another hill, the Mount of Olives. Yes, *that* Mount of Olives, the one that figures prominently in final week of Jesus' ministry. Here's what the Mount of Olives looks like today. Both mounts offer fantastic views of historic Jerusalem – here's the view from the Mount of Olives today.

To get to the third highest peak, you have to go west, across a valley, and a ridge, and another valley. There's a fairly large plateau over there. Today that hilltop is called Mount Zion, although that wasn't its original name. I'll say more about that in a minute. Here's what this hill looks like today; that beautiful church is built on the spot where Mary, the mother of Jesus, is said to have died. The fourth highest peak is back over on the eastern ridge, just south of the Mount of Olives. The fifth highest is Mount Moriah, on the middle ridge. This is the peak where, according to Genesis, Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac, and where, centuries later, King Solomon built the Jewish Temple. This is where the Temple Mount still stands today, with the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque.

That middle ridge extends a bit further to the south, and it descends as it goes south. *This was where the ancient city of Jebus once stood.* It wasn't that big – just a fraction of the size of Jerusalem today. It was built on that little hill because there was a natural spring there. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, when the Israelites entered the land, the king of the Jebusites was a man named Adoni-zedek, which means “My Lord is Righteous.” He took his army out to fight against the invading Israelites, together with the kings and armies of four other nearby cities. The battle went extremely poorly for them. The five kings took refuge in a cave, but Joshua's men found them, and then, after Joshua won the battle, Joshua executed them. That story is told in Joshua 10. Not long after, the Israelites tried to take the city of Jebus by force, but they failed. They couldn't breach the walls. (Joshua 15:63; Judges 1:21)

A couple hundred years later, King David finally defeated the Jebusites. 2 Samuel 5 says that David and his men marched “against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land.” The Jebusites thought their hilltop citadel would provide sufficient defense against David and his men. They were wrong. “David took the stronghold of Zion, which is now the city of David.” So the Israelites captured Jebus. It became the capital of David's kingdom, and its name changed to “Jerusalem.” And the Jebusites basically disappear from the biblical record after that. There is one final reference to them: “All the people who were left of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, who were not of the people of Israel—their descendants who were still left in the land, whom the Israelites were unable to destroy completely—these Solomon conscripted for slave labor.” (1 Kings 9:20-21; 2 Chronicles 8:7-8). So they didn't all end up dead. Captured and enslaved, but not eradicated.

Did you notice the reference to the “stronghold of Zion”? That is the first time the word “Zion” appears in the Bible. It seems, at first, to have been the name of the Jebusite citadel, and the name of the hill on which that citadel stood. A few minutes ago I told you that Mount Zion is now over *here* – on the western ridge. But it seems that *originally*, when people spoke of “Mount Zion,” they were talking about *this* area, the *middle* ridge. The earliest references to “Mount Zion” clearly point to *this* spot, where David's capital was, on the middle ridge, *not* the peak on the western ridge. How did the name shift from one ridge to another? That's a great question; I'll explain that in a minute!

So David established the capital of his kingdom on this *middle* ridge. Mount Zion. Later, his son Solomon flattened the top of Mount Moriah – the higher peak to the north – and built the Temple there. Here's a model of what that might have looked like, with the city a little lower, and to the south of, the Temple, on the same ridge. Over the next several hundred years, the city expanded westward, onto that western ridge. The historic “Old City” of Jerusalem stretches over *both* ridges. In the 6<sup>th</sup>

century BC, the city was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Jews were carried off into exile hundreds of miles away from home. There, in Babylon, a curious shift happened: the Jews began using the word “Zion” to refer to the place where the *Temple* had stood. Mount *Moriah* became Mount *Zion*. It seems that, as generations of Jews grew up far away from the Promised Land, they grew up without a good understanding of the geography of Jerusalem. They didn’t know which hills were which, or they blended one hill with another. The government was on the lower hill; the religious establishment was on the higher; living far away from home, the Jews remembered those two hills as one. “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” (Ps. 137:1) In time, the word “Zion” came to stand for *all* of it. The nation. The religion. The land. The identity. *All* of it.

Yet another shift happened later on. After some Jews were allowed to return to the ruined city of Jerusalem in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, they looked around, and concluded that the old city of King David must have been on that higher, western ridge. They probably thought that because it’s taller and more prominent. They didn’t have archaeologists who could say, “Hey, wait, the evidence points to the older city being here, on the *middle* ridge.” They just tried to make sense of what they saw. So they started calling the peak on the western ridge “Mount Zion.” That name stuck, and endures to this day.

Today, that *original* Mount Zion, south of the Temple Mount, is – and has been for a very long – inhabited mostly by *Palestinians*, not Jews. It is part of what is now called “East Jerusalem” and is technically part of the West Bank. The historic City of David is not internationally recognized as a part of Israel. Many Israelis *want* that land. Israel has been seizing parcels of land whenever it can.

So the word “Zion” refers to a number of things: (1) the citadel of the Jebusites, (2) the hill on which that citadel stood, (3) the higher hill on which the Temple stood, (4) the even higher hill on the ridge to the west, (5) metaphorically, to the whole city of Jerusalem, (6) metaphorically again, to the whole land of Israel, and (7) symbolically, to the *idea* of a great Jewish kingdom, faithful to God. I used to get confused whenever I encountered the word “Zion” in Bible; I never could figure out exactly what the word meant. Well, *now* I understand: the word has multiple different (but related) meanings!

As for the word “Zionism”, or “Zionist” – you’ve probably these words; they get bandied about in news and politics today. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the word “Zionism” referred to the movement to create a national home for the Jewish people in the land of Palestine (which is the geographical term we use to refer to that region that was once called the land of Canaan). Once the nation of Israel was established in 1948, Zionism became an ideology supporting the continued development and protection of that nation. But there are a variety of different types of Zionism today. Some Zionists want to expel all non-Jews from the Holy Land. Some Zionists are blatantly racist, believing that Jews are inherently better, or more worthy, or more deserving, than Palestinians. Other Zionists want to promote and strengthen Judaism, Jewish identity, and a Jewish state, while at the same time believing that the Palestinians need equal rights and their own state too. So be careful in using the word “Zionist”; as with many other labels, it doesn’t mean just one thing. It’s like the word “Christian” or “American”: it’s a broad umbrella term, and when you look more closely, the people who identify as “Zionist” don’t all share the same views. Anybody in politics or in the media who uses the word “Zionist” to describe other people or their beliefs should explain what they *mean* by it.

So, here we are. Jebusites, Jerusalem, Zion, Zionism, the current conflict – *it’s all related*. Thirty-three centuries ago people were fighting over the land. Bloody battles and sieges. Men, women, and children died, on *both* sides. It would be nice if we could find a way to move *past* all that.

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