When Jerusalem first appears in biblical history, it is a location unaffiliated with any individual Israelite tribe. In the Bible, Jerusalem is described as a Jebusite settlement, conquered and chosen by David to be the capital of his newly united kingdom (II Samuel 5:4–11). Today it is again the capital of a Jewish state. In the three thousand years that separate the modern city from David’s settlement on the southeastern spur of Mount Moriah, Jerusalem is a contested city, considered sacred by the world’s three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Its spiritual significance encompasses past, present and future. Jerusalem represents the glories of the past and encounters between humankind and God as in the Akedah, where tradition places Abraham at Mount Moriah in connection with the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–3). The city’s fate was determined with the building of the first Temple by King Solomon, when God descended to earth to reside among humankind (I Kings 9:10). Jerusalem also represents the future, the ultimate union between humanity and God, when the ingathering of the exiles will bring the people to the divine fold, to be united forever. And lastly, Jerusalem expresses the present desire for spiritual uplifting—for a personal, religious and mystical experience.

In more recent history, Jerusalem has become the center of fierce political conflict which has cast a shadow over its idealized image as a heavenly city.¹ No less disillusioning are the at times ambiguous physical remains from archaeological excavations and modern critical

analysis of the biblical texts that have tarnished Jerusalem’s reputation as King Solomon’s glorious capital city. In this paper, I reassess the evidence and present the major highlights of recent archaeological discoveries near the Temple Mount during the First and Second Temple periods (see Fig. 1 for suggested settlement sizes of ancient Jerusalem during the Bronze through Byzantine periods).

Canaanite, Jebusite, and First Temple Period Jerusalem

The accumulative evidence derives from major archaeological expeditions during the last half century in the vicinity of the Temple Mount, which include excavations in the City of David directed by Kathleen Kenyon, Yigal Shiloh, and more recently by Eli Shukron, Ronny Reich and Eilat Mazar. To the south of the Temple Mount, Benjamin Mazar and Eilat Mazar excavated extensive areas, in some cases reaching bedrock. Most recently, excavations adjacent to the Western Wall Plaza directed by Shlomit Weksler-Bdolah and Alexander Onn.

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2 For a recent summary of the various interpretations of First Temple period Jerusalem, see e.g. chapters in Andrew G. Vaughn and Ann E. Killebrew (eds.) Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: The First Temple Period, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series Number 18 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).


9 Eilat Mazar and Benjamin Mazar, Excavations in the South of the Temple Mount, The Ophel of Biblical Jerusalem, Qedem 29 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989).