

PROLOGUE

On 8th of the Jewish month of Ab, in late July AD 70, Titus, the Roman Emperor Vespasian's son who was in command of the four-month siege of Jerusalem, ordered his entire army to prepare to storm the Temple at dawn. The next day happened to be the very day on which Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem over 500 years before. Now, Titus commanded an army of four legions – a total of 60,000 Roman legionaries and local auxiliaries who were eager to deliver the final blow to the defiant but broken city. Within the walls, perhaps half a million starving Jews survived in diabolical conditions: some were fanatical religious zealots, some were freebooting bandits, but most were innocent families with no escape from this magnificent death-trap. There were many Jews living outside Judaea – they were to be found throughout the Mediterranean and Near East – and this final desperate struggle would decide not only the fate of the city and her inhabitants, but also the future of Judaism and the small Jewish cult of Christianity – and even, looking forward across six centuries, the shape of Islam.

The Romans had built ramps up against the walls of the Temple. But their assaults had failed. Earlier that day, Titus told his generals that his efforts to preserve this 'foreign temple' were costing him too many soldiers and he ordered the Temple gates set alight. The silver of the gates melted and spread the fire to the wooden doorways and windows, thence to the wooden fittings in the passageways of the Temple itself. Titus ordered the fire to be quenched. The Romans, he declared, should 'not avenge themselves on inanimate objects instead of men'. Then he retired for the night into his headquarters in the half-ruined Tower of Antonia overlooking the resplendent Temple complex.

Around the walls, there were gruesome scenes that must have resembled hell on earth. Thousands of bodies putrefied in the sun. The stench was unbearable. Packs of dogs and jackals feasted on human flesh. In the preceding months, Titus had ordered all prisoners or defectors to be crucified. Five hundred Jews were crucified each day. The Mount of Olives and the craggy hills around the city were so crowded

with crucifixes that there was scarcely room for any more, nor trees to make them.¹ Titus' soldiers amused themselves by nailing their victims splayed and spread-eagled in absurd positions. So desperate were many Jerusalemites to escape the city that, as they left, they swallowed their coins, to conceal their treasure, which they hoped to retrieve when they were safely clear of the Romans. They emerged 'puffed up with famine and swelled like men with dropsy', but if they ate they 'burst asunder'. As their bellies exploded, the soldiers discovered their reeking intestinal treasure troves, so they started to gut all prisoners, eviscerating them and searching their intestines while they were still alive. But Titus was appalled and tried to ban these anatomical plunderings. To no avail: Titus' Syrian auxiliaries, who hated and were hated by the Jews with all the malice of neighbours, relished these macabre games.² The cruelties inflicted by the Romans and the rebels within the walls compare with some of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century.

The war had begun when the ineptitude and greed of the Roman governors had driven even the Judaeian aristocracy, Rome's own Jewish allies, to make common cause with a popular religious revolt. The rebels were a mixture of religious Jews and opportunistic brigands who had exploited the downfall of the emperor, Nero, and the chaos that followed his suicide, to expel the Romans and re-establish an independent Jewish state, based around the Temple. But the Jewish revolution immediately started to consume itself in bloody purges and gang-warfare.

Three Roman emperors followed Nero in rapid and chaotic succession. By the time Vespasian emerged as emperor and despatched Titus to take Jerusalem, the city was divided between three warlords at war with each other. The Jewish warlords had first fought pitched battles in the Temple courts, which ran with blood, and then plundered the city. Their fighters worked their way through the richer neighbourhoods, ransacking the houses, killing the men and abusing the women – 'it was sport to them'. Crazed by their power and the thrill of the hunt, probably intoxicated with looted wine, they 'indulged themselves in feminine wantonness, decked their hair and put on women's garments and be-smearred themselves with ointments and had paints under their eyes'. These provincial cut-throats, swaggering in 'finely dyed cloaks', killed anyone in their path. In their ingenious depravity, they 'invented unlawful pleasures'. Jerusalem, given over to 'intolerable uncleanness', became 'a brothel' and torture-chamber – and yet remained a shrine.³

Somehow the Temple continued to function. Back in April, pilgrims had arrived for Passover just before the Romans closed in on the city. The population was usually in the high tens of thousands, but the

Romans had now trapped the pilgrims and many refugees from the war, so there were hundreds of thousands of people in the city. Only as Titus encircled the walls did the rebel chieftains halt their in-fighting to unite their 21,000 warriors and face the Romans together.

The city that Titus saw for the first time from Mount Scopus, named after the Greek *skopeo* meaning 'look at', was, in Pliny's words, 'by far the most celebrated city of the East', an opulent, thriving metropolis built around one of the greatest temples of the ancient world, itself an exquisite work of art on an immense scale. Jerusalem had already existed for thousands of years but this many-walled and towered city, astride two mountains amid the barren crags of Judaea, had never been as populous or as awesome as it was in the first century AD: indeed Jerusalem would not be so great again until the twentieth century. This was the achievement of Herod the Great, the brilliant, psychotic Judaeen king whose palaces and fortresses were built on so monumental a scale and were so luxurious in their decoration that the Jewish historian Josephus says that they 'exceed all my ability to describe them'.

The Temple itself overshadowed all else in its numinous glory. 'At the first rising of the sun', its gleaming courts and gilded gates 'reflected back a very fiery splendour and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away'. When strangers – such as Titus and his legionaries – saw this Temple for the first time, it appeared 'like a mountain covered with snow'. Pious Jews knew that at the centre of the courts of this city-within-a-city atop Mount Moriah was a tiny room of superlative holiness that contained virtually nothing at all. This space was the focus of Jewish sanctity: the Holy of Holies, the dwelling-place of God Himself.

Herod's Temple was a shrine but it was also a near-impregnable fortress within the walled city. The Jews, encouraged by Roman weakness in the Year of the Four Emperors and aided by Jerusalem's precipitous heights, her fortifications and the labyrinthine Temple itself, had confronted Titus with overweening confidence. After all, they had defied Rome for almost five years. However, Titus possessed the authority, the ambition, the resources and the talent necessary for the task. He set about reducing Jerusalem with systematic efficiency and overwhelming force. Ballistae stones, probably fired by Titus, have been found in the tunnels beside the Temple's western wall, testament to the intensity of Roman bombardment. The Jews fought for every inch with almost suicidal abandon. Yet Titus, commanding the full arsenal of siege engines, catapults and the ingenuity of Roman engineering, overcame the first wall within fifteen days. He led a thousand legionaries into the

maze of Jerusalem's markets and stormed the second wall. But the Jews sortied out and retook it. The wall had to be stormed all over again. Titus next tried to overawe the city with a parade of his army – cuirasses, helmets, blades flashing, flags fluttering, eagles glinting, 'horses richly caparisoned'. Thousands of Jerusalemites gathered on the battlements to gawp at this show, admiring 'the beauty of their armour and admirable order of the men'. The Jews remained defiant, or too afraid of their warlords to disobey their orders: no surrender.

Finally, Titus decided to encircle and seal the entire city by building a wall of circumvallation. In late June, the Romans stormed the hulking Antonia Fortress that commanded the Temple itself and then razed it, except for one tower where Titus set up his command-post.

By mid-summer, as the blistered and jagged hills sprouted forests of fly-blown crucified cadavers, the city within was tormented by a sense of impending doom, intransigent fanaticism, whimsical sadism, and searing hunger. Armed gangs prowled for food. Children grabbed the morsels from their fathers' hands; mothers stole the tidbits of their own babies. Locked doors suggested hidden provisions and the warriors broke in, driving stakes up their victims' rectums to force them to reveal their caches of grain. If they found nothing, they were even more 'barbarously cruel' as if they had been 'defrauded.' Even though the fighters themselves still had food, they killed and tortured out of habit 'to keep their madness in exercise'. Jerusalem was riven by witch-hunts as people denounced each other as hoarders and traitors. No other city, reflected the eyewitness Josephus, 'did ever allow such miseries, nor did any age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was, since the beginning of the world'.⁴

The young wandered the streets 'like shadows, all swollen with famine, and fell down dead, wherever their misery seized them'. People died trying to bury their families while others were buried carelessly, still breathing. Famine devoured whole families in their homes. Jerusalemites saw their loved ones die 'with dry eyes and open mouths. A deep silence and a kind of deadly night seized the city' – yet those who perished did so 'with their eyes fixed on the Temple'. The streets were heaped with dead bodies. Soon, despite Jewish law, no one buried the dead any more in this grandiose charnelhouse. Perhaps Jesus Christ had foreseen this when he predicted the coming Apocalypse, saying 'Let the dead bury their dead.' Sometimes the rebels just heaved bodies over the walls. The Romans left them to rot in putrescent piles. Yet the rebels were still fighting.

Titus himself, an unsqueamish Roman soldier, who had killed twelve

Jews with his own crossbow in his first skirmish, was horrified and amazed: he could only groan to the gods that this was not his doing. 'The darling and delight of the human race', he was known for his generosity. 'Friends, I've lost a day,' he would say when he had not found time to give presents to his comrades. Sturdy and bluff with a cleft chin, generous mouth and round face, Titus was proving to be a gifted commander and a popular son of the new emperor Vespasian: their unproven dynasty depended on Titus' victory over the Jewish rebels.

Titus' entourage was filled with Jewish renegades including three Jerusalemites – a historian, a king and (it seems) a double-queen who was sharing the Caesar's bed. The historian was Titus' adviser Josephus, a rebel Jewish commander who had defected to the Romans and who is the sole source for this account. The king was Herod Agrippa II, a very Roman Jew, brought up at the court of the Emperor Claudius; he had been the supervisor of the Jewish Temple, built by his great-grandfather Herod the Great, and often resided in his Jerusalem palace, even though he ruled disparate territories across the north of modern Israel, Syria and Lebanon.

The king was almost certainly accompanied by his sister, Berenice, daughter of a Jewish monarch, and twice a queen by marriage, who had recently become Titus' mistress. Her Roman enemies later denounced her as 'the Jewish Cleopatra'. She was around forty but 'she was in her best years and at the height of her beauty', noted Josephus. At the start of the rebellion, she and her brother, who lived together (incestuously, claimed their enemies), had attempted to face down the rebels in a last appeal to reason. Now these three Jews helplessly watched the 'death-agony of a famous city' – Berenice did so from the bed of its destroyer.

Prisoners and defectors brought news from within the city that especially upset Josephus, whose own parents were trapped inside. Even the fighters started to run out of food, so they too probed and dissected the quick and the dead, for gold, for crumbs, for mere seeds, 'stumbling and staggering like mad dogs'. They ate cow dung, leather, girdles, shoes and old hay. A rich woman named Mary, having lost all her money and food, became so demented that she killed her own son and roasted him, eating half and keeping the rest for later. The delicious aroma crept across the city. The rebels savoured it, sought it and smashed into the house, but even those practised hatchetmen, on seeing the child's half-eaten body, 'went out trembling'.⁵

Spymania and paranoia ruled Jerusalem the Holy – as the Jewish coins called her. Raving charlatans and preaching hierophants haunted the streets, promising deliverance and salvation. Jerusalem was,

Josephus observed, 'like a wild beast gone mad which, for want of food, fell now upon eating its own flesh'.

That night of the 8th of Ab, when Titus had retired to rest, his legionaries tried to douse the fire spread by the molten silver, as he had ordered. But the rebels attacked the fire-fighting legionaries. The Romans fought back and pushed the Jews into the Temple itself. One legionary, seized 'with a divine fury', grabbed some burning materials and, lifted up by another soldier, lit the curtains and frame of 'a golden window', which was linked to the rooms around the actual Temple. By morning, the fire had spread to the very heart of holiness. The Jews, seeing the flames licking the Holy of Holies and threatening to destroy it, 'made a great clamour and ran to prevent it'. But it was too late. They barricaded themselves in the Inner Court then watched with aghast silence.

Just a few yards away, among the ruins of the Antonia Fortress, Titus was awakened; he jumped up and 'ran towards the Holy House to put a stop to the fire'. His entourage including Josephus, and probably King Agrippa and Berenice, followed, and after them ran thousands of Roman soldiers – all 'in great astonishment'. The fighting was frenzied. Josephus claims that Titus again ordered the fire extinguished, but this Roman collaborator had good reasons to excuse his patron. Nonetheless, everyone was shouting, the fire was racing and the Roman soldiers knew that, by the laws of warfare, a city that had resisted so obstinately expected to be sacked.

They pretended not to hear Titus and even shouted ahead to their comrades to toss in more firebrands. The legionaries were so impetuous that many were crushed or burned to death in the stampede of their bloodlust and hunger for gold, plundering so much that the price would soon drop across the East. Titus, unable to stop the fire and surely relieved at the prospect of final victory, proceeded through the burning Temple until he came to the Holy of Holies. Even the high priest was allowed to enter there only once a year. No foreigner had tainted its purity since the Roman soldier-statesman Pompey in 63 BC. But Titus looked inside 'and saw it and its contents which he found to be far superior', wrote Josephus, indeed 'not inferior to what we ourselves boasted of it'. Now he ordered the centurions to beat the soldiers spreading the fire, but 'their passions were too strong.' As the inferno rose around the Holy of Holies, Titus was pulled to safety by his aides – 'and no one forbade them to set fire to it' any more.

The fighting raged among the flames: dazed, starving Jerusalemites wandered lost and distressed through the burning portals. Thousands

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of civilians and rebels mustered on the steps of the altar, waiting to fight to the last or just die hopelessly. All had their throats cut by the exhilarated Romans as though it were a mass human sacrifice, until 'around the altar lay dead bodies heaped one upon another' with the blood running down the steps. Ten thousand Jews died in the burning Temple.

The cracking of vast stones and wooden beams made a sound like thunder. Josephus watched the death of the Temple:

The roar of the flames streaming far and wide mingled with the groans of the falling victims and owing to the height of the hill and the mass of the burning pile, one would have thought the whole city was ablaze. And then the din – nothing more deafening or appalling could be conceived than that. There were the war cries of the Roman legions sweeping onward, the howls of the rebels encircled by fire and swords, the rush of the people who, cut off above, fled panic-stricken only to fall into the arms of the foe, and their shrieks as they met their fate, blended with lamentations and wailing [of those in the city]. Transjordan and the surrounding mountains contributed their echoes, deepening the din. You would have thought the Temple hill was boiling over from its base, being everywhere one mass of flame.

Mount Moriah, one of the two mountains of Jerusalem, where King David had placed the Ark of the Covenant and where his son Solomon had built the first Temple, was 'seething hot full of fire on every part of it', while inside, dead bodies covered the floors. But the soldiers trampled on the corpses in their triumph. The priests fought back and some threw themselves into the blaze. Now the rampaging Romans, seeing that the inner Temple was destroyed, grabbed the gold and furniture, carrying out their swag, before they set fire to the rest of the complex.⁶

As the Inner Courtyard burned, and the next day dawned, the surviving rebels broke out through the Roman lines into the labyrinthine Outer Courtyards, some escaping into the city. The Romans counter-attacked with cavalry, clearing the insurgents and then burning the Temple's treasury chambers, which were filled with riches drawn from the Temple tax paid by all Jews, from Alexandria to Babylon. They found there 6,000 women and children huddled together in apocalyptic expectation. A 'false prophet' had earlier proclaimed that they could anticipate the 'miraculous signs of their deliverance' in the Temple. The legionaries simply set the passageways alight, burning all these people alive.

The Romans carried their eagles on to the Holy Mountain, sacrificed to their gods, and hailed Titus as their *imperator* – commander-in-chief.

Priests were still hiding out around the Holy of Holies. Two plunged into the flames, and one succeeded in bringing out the treasures of the Temple – the robes of the high priest, the two golden candelabra and heaps of cinnamon and cassia, spices that were burned every day in the Sanctuary. When the rest surrendered, Titus executed them as ‘it was fitting for priests to perish with their Temple’.

Jerusalem was – and still is – a city of tunnels. Now the rebels disappeared underground while retaining control of the Citadel and the Upper City to the west. It took Titus another month to conquer the rest of Jerusalem. When it fell, the Romans and their Syrian and Greek auxiliaries ‘poured into the alleys. Sword in hand; they massacred indiscriminately all whom they met and burned the houses with all who had taken refuge within.’ At night when the killing stopped, ‘the fire gained mastery of the streets’.

Titus parleyed with the two Jewish warlords across the bridge that spanned the valley between the Temple and the city, offering them their lives in return for surrender. But still they refused. He ordered the plundering and burning of the Lower City, in which virtually every house was filled with dead bodies. When the Jerusalemite warlords retreated to Herod’s Palace and Citadel, Titus built ramparts to undermine them and on 7th of Elul, in mid-August, the Romans stormed the fortifications. The insurgents fought on in the tunnels until one of their leaders John of Gishala surrendered (he was spared, though he faced lifelong imprisonment). The other chieftain Simon ben Giora emerged in a white robe out of a tunnel under the Temple, and was assigned a starring role in Titus’ Triumph, the celebration of the victory in Rome.

In the mayhem and the methodical destruction afterwards, a world vanished, leaving a few moments frozen in time. The Romans butchered the old and the infirm: the skeletal hand of a woman found on the doorstep of her burnt house reveals the panic and terror; the ashes of the mansions in the Jewish Quarter tell of the inferno. Two hundred bronze coins have been found in a shop on the street that ran under the monumental staircase into the Temple, a secret stash probably hidden in the last hours of the fall of the city. Soon even the Romans wearied of slaughter. The Jerusalemites were herded into concentration camps set up in the Women’s Court of the Temple itself where they were filtered: fighters were killed; the strong were sent to work in the Egyptian mines; the young and handsome were sold as slaves, chosen to be killed fighting lions in the circus or to be displayed in the Triumph.

Josephus searched through the pitiful prisoners in the Temple courtyards, finding his brother and fifty friends whom Titus allowed him to

liberate. His parents had presumably died. But he noticed three of his friends among the crucified. 'I was cut to the heart and told Titus,' who ordered them to be taken down and cared for by doctors. Only one survived.

Titus decided, like Nebuchadnezzar, to eradicate Jerusalem, a decision which Josephus blamed on the rebels: 'The rebellion destroyed the city and the Romans destroyed the rebellion.' The toppling of Herod the Great's most awesome monument, the Temple, must have been an engineering challenge. The giant ashlar of the Royal Portico crashed down on to the new pavements below and there they were found nearly 2000 years later in a colossal heap, just as they had fallen, concealed beneath centuries of debris. The wreckage was dumped into the valley next to the Temple where it started to fill up the ravine, now almost invisible, between the Temple Mount and the Upper City. But the holding walls of the Temple Mount, including today's Western Wall, survived. The spolia, the fallen stones, of Herod's Temple and city are everywhere in Jerusalem, used and reused by all Jerusalem's conquerors and builders, from the Romans to the Arabs, from the Crusaders to the Ottomans, for over a thousand years afterwards.⁷

No one knows how many people died in Jerusalem, and ancient historians are always reckless with numbers. Tacitus says there were 600,000 in the besieged city, while Josephus claims over a million. Whatever the true figure, it was vast, and all of these people died of starvation, were killed or were sold into slavery.

Titus embarked on a macabre victory tour. His mistress Berenice and her brother the king hosted him in their capital Caesarea Philippi, in today's Golan Heights. There he watched thousands of Jewish prisoners fight each other – and wild animals – to the death. A few days later, he saw another 2,500 killed in the circus at Caesarea Maritima and yet more were playfully slaughtered in Beirut before Titus returned to Rome to celebrate his Triumph.

The legions 'entirely demolished the rest of the city, and overthrew its walls'. Titus left only the towers of Herod's Citadel 'as a monument of his good fortune'. There the Tenth Legion made its headquarters. 'This was the end which Jerusalem came to', wrote Josephus, 'a city otherwise of great magnificence and of mighty fame among all mankind'.

Jerusalem had been totally destroyed five centuries earlier by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. Within fifty years of that first destruction, the Temple was rebuilt and the Jews returned. But this time, after AD 70,

the Temple was never rebuilt – and, except for a few brief interludes, the Jews would not rule Jerusalem again for nearly 2,000 years. Yet within the ashes of this calamity lay the seeds not only of modern Judaism but also of Jerusalem's sanctity for Christianity and Islam.

Early during the siege, according to much later rabbinical legend, Yohanan ben Zakkai, a respected rabbi, had ordered his pupils to carry him out of the doomed city in a coffin, a metaphor for the foundation of a new Judaism no longer based on the sacrificial cult in the Temple.⁸

The Jews, who continued to live in the countryside of Judaea and Galilee, as well as in large communities across the Roman and Persian empires, mourned the loss of Jerusalem and revered the city ever after. The Bible and the oral traditions replaced the Temple, but it was said that Providence waited for three and a half years on the Mount of Olives to see if the Temple would be restored – before rising to heaven. The destruction was also decisive for the Christians.

The small Christian community of Jerusalem, led by Simon, Jesus' cousin, had escaped from the city before the Romans closed in. Even though there were many non-Jewish Christians living around the Roman world, these Jerusalemites remained a Jewish sect praying at the Temple. But now the Temple had been destroyed, the Christians believed that the Jews had lost the favour of God: the followers of Jesus separated for ever from the mother faith, claiming to be the rightful heirs to the Jewish heritage. The Christians envisaged a new, celestial Jerusalem, not a shattered Jewish city. The earliest Gospels, probably written just after the destruction, recounted how Jesus had foreseen the siege of the city: 'ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies'; and the demolition of the Temple: 'Not one stone shall remain.' The ruined Sanctuary and the downfall of the Jews were proof of the new revelation. In the 620s, when Muhammad founded his new religion, he first adopted Jewish traditions, praying towards Jerusalem and revering the Jewish prophets, because for him too the destruction of the Temple proved that God had withdrawn his blessing from Jews and bestowed it on Islam.

It is ironic that the decision of Titus to destroy Jerusalem helped make the city the very template of holiness for the other two Peoples of the Book. From the very beginning, Jerusalem's sanctity did not just evolve but was promoted by the decisions of a handful of men. Around 1000 BC, a thousand years before Titus, the first of these men captured Jerusalem: King David.

PART ONE

JUDAISM

The city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel ...
Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful
garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city.

Isaiah 60.14, 52.1

My native city is Jerusalem, in which is situated the sacred shrine
of the most high God. The holy city is the mother city not of one
country, Judaea, but of most of the other neighbouring lands, as
well as lands far away, most of Asia, [and] similarly Europe, to
say nothing of the countries beyond the Euphrates.

Herod Agrippa I, King of Judaea, quoted in Philo,
De Specialibus Legibus

He who has not seen Jerusalem in her splendour has never seen
a desirable city in his life. He who has not seen the Temple in
its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his
life.

Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate of the Tabernacle*

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her
cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the
roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Psalms 137.5-6

Jerusalem is the most famous city of the East.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 5.15

I

THE WORLD OF DAVID

THE FIRST KING: CANAANITES

When David captured the citadel of Zion, Jerusalem was already ancient. But it was scarcely a city, just a small mountain stronghold in a land that would have many names – Canaan, Judah, Judaea, Israel, Palestine, the Holy Land to Christians, the Promised Land to Jews. This territory, just 100 by 150 miles, lies between the south-eastern corner of the Mediterranean and the River Jordan. Its lush coastal plain offered the best path for invaders and traders between Egypt and the empires of the east. Yet the isolated and remote town of Jerusalem, 30 miles from the nearest coast, far from any trade routes, stood high amid the golden-rocked desolation of the cliffs, gorges and scree of the Judaeen hills, exposed to freezing, sometimes even snowy, winters and to witheringly hot summers. Nonetheless, there was security atop these forbidding hills; and there was a spring in the valley beneath, just enough to support a town.

The romantic image of David's city is far more vivid than any facts of verifiable history. In the fog of Jerusalem's pre-history, fragments of pottery, ghostly rock-cut tombs, sections of wall, inscriptions in the palaces of faraway kings and the holy literature of the Bible can provide only fleeting glints of human life in an invincible gloom, separated by hundreds of years. The sporadic clues that emerge cast a flickering light on some random moment of a vanished civilization, followed by centuries of life of which we know nothing – until the next spark illuminates another image. Only the springs, mountains and valleys remain the same, and even they have been redirected, resculpted, refilled by millennia of weather, debris and human endeavour. This much or little is certain: by the time of King David, holiness, security and nature had combined to make Jerusalem an ancient fastness that was regarded as impregnable.

People had lived there as early as 5000 BC. In the early Bronze Age, around 3200 BC, when the mother of cities, Uruk, in what became Iraq, was already home to 40,000 citizens, and nearby Jericho was a fortified

town, people buried their dead in tombs in Jerusalem's hills, and started to build small square houses in what was probably a walled village on a hill above a spring. This village was then abandoned for many years. Jerusalem scarcely existed while the Egyptian pharaohs of the Old Kingdom reached the zenith of their pyramid building and completed the Great Sphinx. Then in the 1900s BC, at a time when Minoan civilization flourished in Crete, King Hammurabi was about to compile his legal code in Babylon and Britons worshipped at Stonehenge, some pottery, sherds of which were discovered near Luxor in Egypt, mentions a town named Ursalim, a version of Salem or Shalem, god of the evening star. The name may mean 'Salem has founded'.*

Back in Jerusalem, a settlement had developed around the Gihon Spring: the Canaanite inhabitants cut a channel through the rock leading to a pool within the walls of their citadel. A fortified underground passageway protected their access to the water. The latest archaeological digs on the site reveal that they guarded the spring with a tower and a massive wall, 23 feet thick, using stones weighing 3 tons. The tower could also have served as a temple celebrating the cosmic sanctity of the spring. In other parts of Canaan, priestly kings built fortified tower-temples. Further up the hill, remnants of a city wall have been found, the earliest in Jerusalem. The Canaanites turn out to have been builders on a scale more impressive than anyone in Jerusalem until Herod the Great almost 2,000 years later.¹

The Jerusalemites became subjects of Egypt which had conquered Palestine in 1458 BC. Egyptian garrisons guarded nearby Jaffa and Gaza. In 1350 BC, the frightened King of Jerusalem begged his overlord, Akhenaten, the pharaoh of the New Kingdom of Egypt, to send him help – even 'fifty archers' – to defend his small kingdom from the aggression of neighbouring kings and bands of marauding outlaws. King Abdi-Hepa called his citadel 'the capital of the Land of Jerusalem of which the name is Beit Shulmani', the House of Well-being. Perhaps the word Shulman is the origin of the 'Shalem' in the name of the city.

Abdi-Hepa was a paltry potentate in a world dominated by the Egyptians to the south, by the Hittites to the north (in today's Turkey) and to the north-west by the Mycenaean Greeks who would fight the Trojan War.

* The Egyptian Pharaohs aspired to rule Canaan at this time but it is not clear whether they actually did. They may have used these pottery symbols to curse the defiant rulers of their enemies or to express their aspirations. The theories about these fragments have changed several times, showing how archaeology is as much interpretative as scientific. It was long believed that the Egyptians smashed these vases or figures to curse or execrate the places named on them – hence they are known as the Execration texts.

The king's first name is west Semitic – the Semites being the many Middle East peoples and languages, supposedly descended from Shem, son of Noah. Therefore Abdi-Hepa could have hailed from anywhere in the north-eastern Mediterranean. His appeals, found in the pharaoh's archive, are panic-stricken and sycophantic, the first known words of a Jerusalemite:*

At the feet of the King I have fallen 7 and 7 times. Here is the deed that Milkily and Shuwardatu have done against the land – they have led the troops of Gezer . . . against the law of the King . . . The land of the King has gone over to the Habiru [marauding outlaws]. And now a town belonging to Jerusalem has gone over to the men of Qiltu. May the King listen to Abdi-Hepa your servant and send archers.

We hear no more, but whatever happened to this beleaguered king, just over a century later the Jerusalemites built steep terraced structures above the Gihon Spring on the Ophel hill that survive today, the foundation of a citadel or temple of Salem.² These powerful walls, towers and terraces were part of the Canaanite citadel known as Zion that David would capture. Some time during the thirteenth century BC, a people called the Jebusites occupied Jerusalem. But now the old Mediterranean world was being torn apart by waves of so-called Sea Peoples who came from the Aegean.

In this storm of raids and migrations, the empires receded. The Hittites fell, Mycenae was mysteriously destroyed, Egypt was shaken – and a people called the Hebrews made their first appearance.

ABRAHAM IN JERUSALEM: ISRAELITES

This new 'Dark Age', which lasted three centuries, allowed the Hebrews, also known as Israelites, an obscure people who worshipped one God, to settle and build a kingdom in the narrow land of Canaan. Their progress is illuminated by the stories about the creation of the world,

* These are some of the 380 letters, written in Babylonian on baked clay tablets, by local chieftains to the heretic pharaoh Amenhotep IV (1352–1336), who instituted the worship of the sun, instead of the traditional pantheon of numerous Egyptian gods: he changed his name to Akhenaten. The royal archive of his foreign ministry, the House of Correspondence of Pharaoh, was discovered in 1887 at his new capital Akhetaten, now El-Amarna, south of Cairo. One theory suggests that the Habiru were the early Hebrews/Israelites, yet the word actually appears all over the Middle East at this time to describe these marauders – the word simply means 'vagrant' in Babylonian. It is possible that the Hebrews descended from a small group of Habiru.

their origins and their relationship with their God. They passed down these traditions which were then recorded in sacred Hebrew texts, later collated into the Five Books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the first section of the Jewish scriptures, the Tanakh. The Bible became the book of books, but it is not one document. It is a mystical library of interwoven texts by unknown authors who wrote and edited at different times with widely divergent aims.

This sacred work of so many epochs and so many hands contains some facts of provable history, some stories of unprovable myth, some poetry of soaring beauty, and many passages of unintelligible, perhaps coded, perhaps simply mistranslated, mystery. Most of it is written not to recount events but to promote a higher truth – the relationship of one people and their God. To the believer, the Bible is simply the fruit of divine revelation. To the historian, this is a contradictory, unreliable, repetitive,* yet invaluable source, often the only one available to us – and it is also, effectively, the first and paramount biography of Jerusalem.

The founding patriarch of the Hebrews was, according to Genesis the first book of the Bible, Abram – who is portrayed as travelling from Ur (in today's Iraq) to settle in Hebron. This was in Canaan, the land promised to him by God, who renamed him the name 'Father of Peoples' – Abraham. On his travels, Abraham was welcomed by Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem in the name of El-Elyon, the Most High God. This, the city's first mention in the Bible, suggests that Jerusalem was already a Canaanite shrine ruled by priest-kings. Later God tested Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice his son Isaac on a mountain in 'the land of Moriah' – identified as Mount Moriah, the Temple Mount of Jerusalem.

Abraham's roguish grandson Jacob used trickery to clinch his inheritance, but redeemed himself in a wrestling match with a stranger who turned out to be God, hence his new name, Israel – He who Strives with God. This was the appropriate birth of the Jewish people, whose relationship with God was to be so passionate and tormented. Israel was the father of the founders of the twelve tribes who emigrated to Egypt. There are so many contradictions in the stories of these so-called Patriarchs that they are impossible to date historically.

* The Creation appears twice in Genesis 1.1–2.3 and 2.4–25. There are two genealogies of Adam, two flood stories, two captures of Jerusalem, two stories in which God changes Jacob's name to Israel. There are many anachronisms – for example, the presence of Philistines and Arameans in Genesis when they had not yet arrived in Canaan. Camels as beasts of burden appear too early. Scholars believe the early Biblical books were written by separate groups of writers, one who emphasized El, the Canaanite god, and another who stressed Yahweh, the Israelite one God.

After 430 years, the Book of Exodus portrays the Israelites, repressed as slaves building the pharaoh's cities, miraculously escaping Egypt with God's help (still celebrated by Jews in the festival of Passover), led by a Hebrew prince named Moses. As they wandered through Sinai, God granted Moses the Ten Commandments. If the Israelites lived and worshipped according to these rules, God promised them the land of Canaan. When Moses sought the nature of this God, asking 'What is thy name?', he received the majestically forbidding reply, 'I AM THAT I AM,' a God without a name, rendered in Hebrew as YHWH: Yahweh or, as Christians later misspelt it, Jehovah.*

Many Semites did settle in Egypt; Ramses II the Great was probably the pharaoh who forced the Hebrews to work on his store-cities; Moses' name was Egyptian, which suggests at least that he originated there; and there is no reason to doubt that the first charismatic leader of the monotheistic religions – Moses or someone like him – did receive this divine revelation for that is how religions begin. The tradition of a Semitic people who escaped repression is plausible but it defies dating.

Moses glimpsed the Promised Land from Mount Nebo but died before he could enter it. It was his successor Joshua who led the Israelites into Canaan. The Bible portrays their journey as both a bloody rampage and a gradual settlement. There is no archaeological evidence of a conquest but pastoral settlers did find many unwalled villages in the Judaeen highlands.† A small group of Israelites, who escaped Egypt, were probably among them. They were united by their worship of their God – Yahweh – whom they revered in a moveable temple, a tabernacle that held the sacred wooden chest known as the Ark of the Covenant. They perhaps crafted their identity by telling the stories of their founding Patriarchs. Many of these traditions, from Adam and the Garden of Eden to Abraham, would later be revered not just by Jews but by Christians and Muslims too – and would be located in Jerusalem.

The Israelites were now very close to the city for the first time.

* When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, only the high priest, once a year, could utter the tetragram YHWH, and Jews, even today, are forbidden to say it, preferring to use Adonai (Lord), or just HaShem (the unspeakable Name).

† The Israelite invasion of Canaan is a battlefield of complex, usually unprovable theories. But it seems that the storming of Jericho, whose walls were crumbled by Joshua's trumpets, is mythical: Jericho was more ancient than Jerusalem. (In 2010, the Palestinian Authority celebrated its 10,000th anniversary – though the date is random.) However, Jericho was temporarily uninhabited and there is no evidence of collapsed walls. The Conquest Hypothesis is hard to take literally since the fighting (as recounted in the Book of Joshua) usually takes place in such a small area. Indeed Bethel near Jerusalem is one of the few conquered towns in the Book of Judges that *was* actually destroyed in the thirteenth century. The Israelites may have been far more peaceful and tolerant than they claimed.