Ancient City Gates

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Jerusalem of the New Testament period had fifteen gates, each with a different name: Women’s; Water, or Garden; Damascus; Zion; Jaffa; Lion’s; Dung. During the Bronze Age, cities usually had only one or two gates. By the Iron Age, gates were more numerous. The city of Babylon, which was some twenty-five miles in circuit, had one hundred bronze gates.

The walled cities of Israel during the biblical period always had one or more “gates,” which served a variety of functions. Five different Hebrew and three Greek words are translated “gate.” As a city grew, gates were added for the convenience of citizens and tradesmen, until a walled city might have several larger gates and additional small entries called today postern gates. The small gates were low and narrow, permitting the entrance only of pedestrians or a single donkey.

Walls were constructed primarily to keep invading armies out. Gates obviously were necessary for access, but such an opening created a weak point in the defensive nature of the wall structure. Thus, elaborate gates were invented to prevent enemy breaching maneuvers. Infantrymen attempted to penetrate the gates by hacking at them with axes, ramming them with beams or logs, or setting them afire with torches. The defenders were at an enormous advantage during a breaching action so long as the gates could be preserved intact, for they were free to drop or throw stones from the ramparts, as well as rain arrows down on anyone who approached.

Gates usually were strengthened with towers which were located in varying positions around the gates. Early forms of these towers were excavated at Jericho, Tell el-Far‘ah, and Tell el-Hesi. The Roman city of Samaria-Sebaste had two round towers on either side of the main city gate. Each tower was fourteen meters in diameter, and today are preserved to a height of twenty-six to thirty-six feet, standing on square foundations that date from the Hellenistic period. The city gate at Tiberias was built of large well-dressed basalt stones flanked by two round towers some

Lesson reference:
L&W: Matthew 7:13

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twenty-three feet in diameter which projected outwards from the wall.
Gates usually were placed at strategic positions in the wall. At Tell Balas in the Soreq Valley, during three different historical periods the city gate was placed on the side of the city least vulnerable to attack. This arrangement kept the enemy from mounting a frontal attack on the fortress gate. He was forced to expose himself to a shower of arrows and stones as he attempted to skirt around the corners of the city wall.

The type of gate built by Solomon has been found in several locations in Israel. Drawings have been done by scholars based on these remains. The approach of the camp roadway gradually inclined uphill, which led a person or contingent of soldiers toward the city gate at an angle along the city walls that brought them under fire of defenders above them well before they came to the main gate. Once the complex gate was reached, an approaching army then was forced to pass through an outer gate where it could be scrutinized by guards. As they continued to the main gate, they faced two square towers which flanked a pair of massive wooden doors which opened outward. The whole facade was almost fifty-five feet high. The area inside was much narrower, about fourteen feet, covered, and almost sixty-five feet long with another gate at the far end. The sides of this vestibule were divided by massive piers into three chambers which were used as guardrooms. The top of this elongated gate-entrance was supported by huge beams and served as a platform for defenders.

Gates often were constructed with an indirect approach, as at Tell Beit Mirsim and Lachish. There, the two gates were so constructed that a person approached with his left side to the city wall, passed through one gate, then turned at right angles to enter the city itself by the second gate, an indirect mode of progress which is still to be seen in the Jaffa and Damascus gates of Jerusalem. This type of gate has been dated as early as the Early Bronze Age at Khir...
The preserved gateway found in Isra-
el at Tell en-Nasbeh consisted of two pairs of piers 13’ 8” apart. Middle Bronze fortifications had this interest-
ing fortress gate with two or three gateways, each flanked by a pair of massive pillars; all four or six of the piers were of the same size and were symmetrically arranged in two paral-
lel alignments.

The usual gateway was provided with double doors, swung on projections that fitted into sockets in the sill and lintel. Gate sockets have been excavated at several sites (such as Tell Batah and Tell en-Nasbeh) still fitting in the gate threshold.

City gates usually were made out of wood (Neh. 2:8), but they normally were protected from burning by a layer of bronze. The gates sometimes were strengthened with heavy metal bands (Ps. 107:16; Isa. 45:22). Josephus spoke of the solid Corinthian brass doors of the Beautiful Gate of the Temple (Acts 3:2; see “The Gate Beautiful,” Summer ’80) as excep-
tional in beauty. This gate was so heavy it took twenty men to close it. Some gates, though rare, were made of solid slabs of stone. The in-
jectory of gates made from single jew-
el probably was derived from this con-
struction (Rev. 21:21). In Upper Egypt, a gate made of granite bear-
ing the name of Alexander, the son of Alexander the Great.

When closed, the gates were secured by a bar, sometimes made of wood (Neh. 3:13) or of metal (1 Kings 4:13; Ps. 107:16), which was fitted into clamps on the doors and sockets in the post. Gates were secured by strong locks of brass, iron, or wood; and keys have been found that were close to two feet in length. The gates often were elaborately decorated. The gate of Herod Agrippa I at Jerusalem (excavated under the modern Damascus Gate) was a tri-
arched gateway of the typical Roman plan flanked by columns with pedestals and stone moldings. An arched Roman gate at Petra was highly decorated with carved stone-
work. The gateways of royal cities often were richly ornamented, and inscriptions were commonly found on and above the gates.

Although the primary purpose of a gate was to make entrance and exit through its walls possible and to make the city secure, it also was used for many public purposes in the state’s economy. Gates were the civic centers of the city. There, in an open square by the gate, the people met their friends or discussed news (Gen. 19:1; Ps. 69:12). Houses in ancient cities were so crowded together within the city walls that ordinarily the only open place or square in a city was either part of or just inside its gates. Enough space had to be provided to allow for the free swinging of the large doors.

This open space served as a forum in which all the commercial and legal business of the city was transacted. The gateways of Jerusalem were places of public hearings, legal transactions, and business (1 Kings 22:10; 2 Kings 7:1; Ruth 4:11). For assembly purposes, “broad” or open places (distinguished from the “streets” in Prov. 7:12) were pro-
vided (Neh. 8:1); these were the cen-
ters of public life. Markets were conducted there (2 Kings 7:1), and the special commodities sold in them gave their names to the gates (Neh. 3:1,3,28). At the Greek-period Mar-
sa (Old Testament Maresah), a well-
planned Greek town was excavated with a rectangular marketplace ( agora) near the gate.

Most of the city citizens passed through the gate everyday, so the gate was the place for meeting others (Ruth 4:1; 2 Sam. 15:2) and for as-
sembly meetings. The gate was used as the place of legal tribunals. A seat “in the gates . . . among the elders” (Prov. 31:23) was a high honor, while oppression in the gates (Job 31:21) was a synonym for judicial corruption. The elders, judges, or king might sit here officially (Deut. 21:19; 2 Sam. 18:24; Isa. 29:23) and so might be synonymous with the court of judgment (Amos 5:12,15). The king sometimes held public audiences in the gate. Because crowds gathered in that place, prophets and teachers delivered their messages there. In this sense the gate was the news center. David had to appear there for the army and his supporters to recover their morale when it was thought he was losing touch with reality over the death of Absalom.

Excavations at Tell en-Nasbeh (biblical Mizpah) revealed an inter-
esting feature, an open square twenty-six by thirty feet in front of the gate on the outside and another on the inside. Benches with a smooth plaster finish were built along the square outside the gate and in the guard chambers between the piers. Perhaps these benches were for those who “sat in the gates.”

The four gates from Herod the Great’s fortress at Masada were made with inner square rooms with benches built along the walls. A re-
cently excavated gate area at Tell Dan showed a large square area in the entrance to the gate that would have provided a civic center area for the city as far back as the Early Bronze period. Gates were important features of ancient cities and served a variety of functions. They shared the unique as-
pect of providing access into the city and thus a meeting place for the peo-
ple, but they were primarily built along plans that allowed entrance by enemy soldiers. Complex gate constructions and associated gate fea-
tures have been excavated through-
out Israel and give evidence to their importance in all of the biblical peri-
ods.

—James, Philemon, and Israels at TImna/Tell Deir al-
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