

Q&A: What is the significance of Jerusalem being the capital of Israel?

Anonymous asks:

My question is the significance of Jerusalem being made capital again. My reaction is yay, hallelujah!!

In Nehemiah 2 an Arab was amongst those ridiculing Nehemiah m helpers n in b 20 saying they have no right to any property in Jerusalem n no share in traditions.

My feelings run along side as God gave His people the Jews, Jerusalem.

It's all in end time prophecy but I'm seriously out of date wth the latest happenings.

Your enlightenment would b so appreciated. Tks so much.

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]



Thanks for the question. The topic is loaded with some political energy, so I'm hoping to tread carefully.

I need to begin with the significant caveat that I have no expertise in international politics, and certainly not in

Middle Eastern affairs! My limited understanding of the current situation leads me to the following initial thoughts.

1) There has not actually been any significant change in the actual status of Jerusalem. As far as I am aware, the nation state of Israel has pretty much always claimed Jerusalem to be its capital, even if the administrative centre is in Tel Aviv. The complexity is that the displaced Palestinians also claim Jerusalem as their capital. What *has* changed is that President Trump has announced that the US will *recognise* that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and implement this through the relocation of the US embassy. While this is controversial, it is not a surprise, and it is an action that has been mooted by other US presidents in recent years.

2) Personally, I don't think my reaction can be "yay, hallelujah!" Irrespective of its justifications or otherwise, this is a *provocative* action on President Trump's part. It seems pretty clear that the socio-political situation in and around Jerusalem is highly anxious. The cliché of "powderkeg waiting for a spark" seems to fit. Bloodshed *is* possible. Diplomacy and care *is* needed. While I'm not in full disagreement about the US recognition of Jerusalem, (the "recognition of reality" line has some merit), I'm not sure President Trump has pursued the way of peace in this situation. Certainly, many other leaders, including the UN, have decried the escalation.

3) Before I get to the theological aspects (see below), it is clear that Jerusalem is a conundrum of competing claims, all of which have at least some degree of validity. I understand that the Palestinians, through no fault of their own, *have* been displaced from a city and a land in which they have lived for generations. I understand that the Jewish community has also experienced displacement (and worse!) in the last century, and that they have genuine ethnic links to Jerusalem and the land also. I also suspect

that there is some significant “proxy activity” going on as the tensions in Jerusalem connect with the power plays of broader political forces. Injustice is the order of the day, and it’s a difficult thing to wade through.

Theologically, I can only begin to approach this issue by noting the *differences* between the people and nation of Israel that we see in the Bible, and the contemporary nation and state of Israel in modern politics. The biblical notion of Israel is that of a covenant people (a people of *promise*), descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (who was later, personally, called *Israel*). They are a people defined by these roots of divine promise, and the subsequent foundation of divine rescue as they are brought out from Egypt under Moses, and called by the Law towards the goals of the original covenant. This identity reached something of a zenith under King David, who established Jerusalem as a political capital in about 1000 BC. His son, King Solomon, responding to the Mosaic law, established Jerusalem as a *holy* city, building the temple that encapsulated all that the Mosaic tabernacle had beforehand. It became the tangible and symbolic manifestation of God’s promise and presence.

The modern state of Israel, while having clear ethnic and historical roots in this theological understanding, can be considered in contrast: It is a “Jewish and democratic state”, and, as I understand it, the “Jewish” part is understood *ethnically* not *religiously*. As a political entity there is very little that sets it apart as being particularly shaped by an Abrahamic, Mosaic, or Davidic identity. Its establishment as a nation state lies in post-war turmoil and involves the actions of Zionist activists, and the political machinations of Western powers, leading to a formal recognition in 1948. Even among orthodox Jews, there has been controversy about the form and formation of modern Israel. I understand that Haredi Jews, for instance, consider the re-establishment of Israel without the Messiah to be an act of

presumption and rebellion against God.

The presence of Jesus in salvation history also impacts our understanding. The person of Jesus interacts with the basic shapes of theological identity – Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic – in a way that cannot be ignored. In particular, we understand that Jesus *fulfills* these covenants. Jesus fulfills the Abrahamic covenant – the family who was “blessed to be a blessing” has brought forth its ultimate blessing. Jesus fulfills the Mosaic covenant – he obeys the law and receives the covenant blessings, sharing them with his people as he covers them sacrificially. Jesus fulfills the Davidic covenant – he is the “big-M” Messiah, the anointed King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus is the Temple, where the presence of God is manifest. Jesus is the Promised Land, in which we have “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” In his risen life, Jesus extends this promise to all those (Jews and Gentiles alike) who would follow him, put their faith and trust in him, and so receive his Spirit and be counted amongst his people.

What this means, is that when I read stories in the Old Testament, such as the one you mention where Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem and faces his opponents, I understand the story in the light of Jesus. Nehemiah, in verse 20 of chapter two, says to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.” For me, I see a man, grasping the promises of God and moving forward in faith and favour in order to see the covenant promises manifest once more. I see the powers of this world, that would frustrate God’s purposes, put rightly in their place. This is, with bricks and mortar, the same prayer as “Thy Kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Nehemiah wants to re-establish Jerusalem, and I draw from that a desire for Christ’s rule to be made more manifest.

This is something that the New Testament imagines as the “New

Jerusalem.” And President Trump’s declaration does not particularly enter into it!

Nevertheless, I am not intending to completely spiritualise the reality of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Physical locations are important. Ethnic identity is important also. And these are particularly so when they are filled with such historical and theological meaning. For myself, I turn to Romans 11, where Paul speaks not only of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the promises of God, but mourns the apparent intransigence of his own people, the Jews. Yet he is full of hope, that even in their stumbling they are fulfilling their calling:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written:

*‘The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.’*

(Romans 11:25-27)

The calling on Israel and Jerusalem is to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). That calling is caught up into the Messiah, Jesus, who has embraced it, fulfilled it, and continued it by “grafting” the Gentiles of faith into the covenant people of God. But that doesn’t mean the calling has waned. It remains Jerusalem’s calling – to shine a light, to bless the world, to truly be the city of peace. For that to happen, for the “end” to be reached, Jerusalem doesn’t so much need the proclamation of a President, but the ministry of her Messiah.

Come, Lord Jesus.