

ISTOCK PHOTOS

BY BRYAN E. BEYER

THE YEAR WAS 445 BC. Nehemiah, a descendant of Jewish exiles, was serving as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia (ruled 464-424 BC).¹ Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, brought sad news from Jerusalem regarding the city's condition: "Jerusalem's wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned" (Neh. 1:3, CSB). Nehemiah began to pray earnestly that God would remember His covenant with Israel and that God might use him to intercede before the king for Jerusalem (vv. 4-11).

About four months later, the Lord granted Nehemiah favor in Artaxerxes's eyes, and the king

granted Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem and rebuild (2:1-8). When Nehemiah arrived, he told Jerusalem's inhabitants of the king's favor and challenged them to work with him to rebuild Jerusalem (vv. 17-18).

Nehemiah 1:3 and 2:3 specifically mention the burning of Jerusalem's gates. Indeed, gates played an important role in ancient cities. This article focuses on city gates—in particular, their construction, role, and function in Bible times.

Construction and Design

Citizens put much effort into the proper construction of their city's gates. They needed to do so because, for cities with stone walls, the weakest point

in the wall—and therefore, the most logical place for attack—was the gate.² Consequently, city gate doors were constructed of heavy wood or metal, and were strongly reinforced to withstand an enemy's siege. A wide door of wood might be relatively heavy and solid, but it still was weaker than the same amount of solid stone.

Sometimes gates were merely openings in the wall, with stone on either side and above. Some of Jerusalem's Old City gates today, which date to the sixteenth century AD, feature this pattern. A narrow gate opening was easier to control and defend. Other city gates featured more ornamentation and were at least partly intended to show a city's majesty and its ruler. Jerusalem's

Damascus Gate is the most splendid of the Old City's gates today and is the location of significant traffic and business. Despite its rich ornamentation, though, the gate opening itself is a relatively small portion of the gate structure.

King David's son Solomon (ruled 970-931 BC) was a great builder; he constructed massive gate structures on major cities such as Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer (1 Kings 9:15). Inside these gates were six chambers—three on the right and three on the left.³ Here people conducted important business matters. The six chambers provide further testimony both to Solomon's power and to the importance of these three cities. The gate area's additional chambers also provided additional security measures, as guards could be stationed in each chamber of the gate. An enemy who broke through the first line of defense would find more lines behind that one.⁴

Many city gates had towers on either side. These towers provided additional protection for the city's entry point.⁵ They also gave watchmen the most strategic vantage point from which to observe all that was happening near the gate both inside and outside the city.

Function and Usage

Gates provided access to a city. Citizens and visitors could enter the city through one of its gates. At the same time, gates limited access to a city. Cities often posted guards at gates to monitor who came in and who went out.⁶ Again, if the gate opening was relatively narrow, monitoring gate traffic was much easier. Open gates allowed the free flow of people in and out; closed gates restricted access, but also protected those inside the walls from hostile forces outside. In tense times, security at the gate was especially important; one did not want to let the enemy in through the gate! The additional gate chambers further ensured a city's protection.

As stated above, gate doors needed to be strong enough to withstand enemy attack. An invading army would commonly besiege a city. That meant the army would surround a city to cut off both access and escape. It then would build platforms that

extended to a height above the wall so archers could shoot down into the city. Such a strategy was designed to stop the defending army from looking over the wall. If they raised their heads, they faced death from an arrow! Meanwhile, another team of attackers would try to rush the city gate with a battering ram, pounding away at the door in an effort to dislodge it. Some also might try to



Below: Damascus Gate, also known as the Fish Gate, at Jerusalem. This is the most massive and ornate of all the Jerusalem gates.

Right: Dated to about 845 BC, the Balawat Gates are from the palace of Assyria's King Shalmaneser III and stand 23 feet tall. Balawat was a city near the Assyrian capital of Nineveh.

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set fire to the gate to weaken it, while others tried to dig tunnels under the walls to weaken them. Assyria's King Sennacherib described his own attack of Jerusalem during Hezekiah's day in similar fashion.⁷

In times of peace, the city gate area was a place of much activity. A good deal of the city's business matters transpired there, where citizens could publicly witness transactions.

Scripture provides numerous examples of this practice. Abraham met at the city gate of Ephron the Hittite's hometown in order to arrange burial for his wife Sarah (Gen. 23:10,18). City elders sat at the gate to issue judgment on various matters its citizens brought (Deut. 21:19; 22:24). Boaz met with the elders of Bethlehem at the city gate to arrange for the redemption of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 4:1-11).

Absalom, King David's son, stood outside of Jerusalem's gate so he could greet people and talk to them as they entered the city. Over time, he stole away their hearts with his smooth speech (2 Sam. 15:1-6). After Absalom's coup attempt against David ended with his death, a victorious but saddened King David received his loyal citizens' respects at the city gate (19:8).

Jerusalem's Old City today features much activity at its gates. Jaffa Gate has many businesses that open early in the morning and stay open late into the evening. Damascus Gate, located on the north, is a place of much interaction and commerce. People often gather both outside and inside to buy and sell, or just to converse.

History and Hope

The Bible records how Nehemiah, armed with God's promise and King Artaxerxes's blessing, rallied the people to restore Jerusalem. By God's grace, they finished the wall and gates in fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15). The people celebrated God's blessing



Left: The south Hellenistic city gate at ancient Perga in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). It is flanked by two large, round (actually convex) defense towers. Perga was the major city of the ancient region of Pamphilia.

Below: The Solomonic gate at Gezer; in the distance is the Aijalon Valley.

Right: Artist's rendering of a siege tower.

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Below: Model of ancient Megiddo; when entering the city gate, a person had to make an almost 90-degree

turn to the left, which exposed his unshielded and thus vulnerable right side to those guarding the city gate.

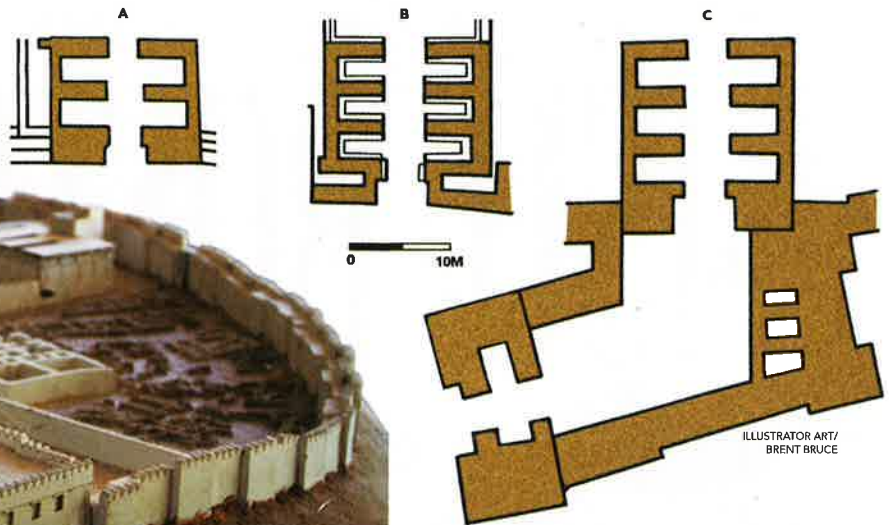
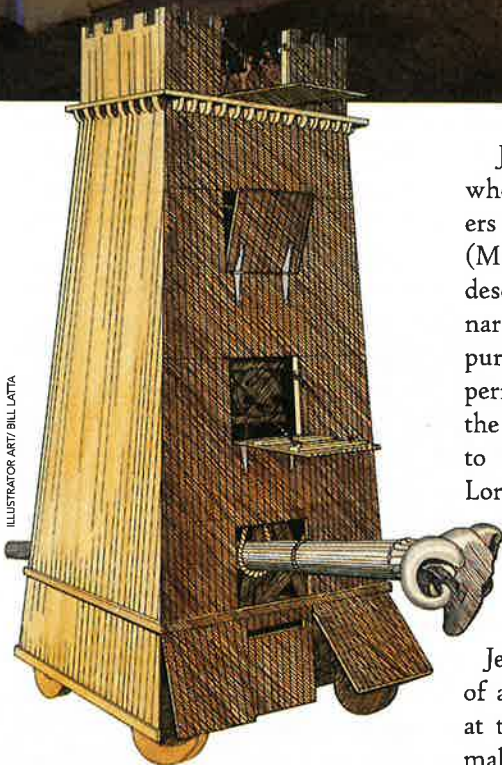


Diagram A: Archaeologists have uncovered remains of a 4-chambered gate from stratum C at Beersheba.

where the judges heard cases.

Diagram B: The 6-chambered gate at Gezer had stone benches

Diagram C: Megiddo had a large outer courtyard where merchants displayed their wares to those entering or leaving the city.



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Jesus referenced the city gate when He encouraged His followers to enter through the narrow gate (Matt. 7:13-14). Jesus was probably describing those who focused more narrowly on God's will rather than pursuing the wider interests of a perishing world. They had chosen the correct path; it would lead them to their heavenly destination. The Lord also used the imagery of a gate and door when He described Himself as the door (CSB, "gate") through whom His sheep would enter the sheepfold (John 10:7-9).

Jesus was alluding to the practice of ancient shepherds who would lay at the entrance to a sheepfold, thus making themselves the gate. As the door, Jesus provides access and security, while excluding those who might harm His sheep. Ironically, Jesus, the One who provides access to the gate of heaven to all who place their faith in Him, was crucified outside Jerusalem's city gate (Heb. 13:12).

by reading the Law, celebrating the Feast of Booths, confessing their sin, renewing their vow to God, and holding a thanksgiving procession (chs. 8-12). Their celebration reflected the fact they recognized the Lord as their ultimate protector.

The Bible closes with a glorious description of the New Jerusalem, including its gates (Rev. 21:9-22:5). The twelve gates bear the names of the tribes of Israel (21:12-13). These gates never close (v. 25), however, because the city is secure, and only those written in the Lamb's book of life may enter (v. 27).

1. Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [EBC], ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 570-72.
2. Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., "City Gate" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [HIBD], gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 306.
3. R. D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, "1, 2 Kings" in EBC, 96.
4. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 233-34.
5. Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., "Gate" in HIBD, 624.
6. Ibid.
7. Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds., *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 146-47.

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