

OLD TESTAMENT FORTIFICATIONS

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Biblical texts and archaeological discoveries tell us about the fortifications that protected cities during the time of the Old Testament. Large fortified cities were typically built on *te/s*—hills that provided natural defense and gradually rose higher as the city was destroyed and rebuilt multiple times. These cities usually had outer protective walls with one or more gates for people to enter or exit the city. Abraham sat at such a gate at Hebron when he purchased the cave to bury Sarah (Genesis 23). This probably occurred during the Middle Bronze period (2000–1550 BC) when many cities had massive fortifications that included a city wall, gate(s), glacis (a steep artificial earthen slope built below the city wall to protect it from attackers), and bastions or projections from the wall to help with its defense.

The subsequent Late Bronze period (1550–1200 BC) witnessed a general cultural decline that affected fortifications, so by the time the Israelites left Egypt and returned to Canaan, many cities were apparently rather vulnerable. Some still used the strong earlier defenses (see Deut. 1:28). Most had little to help ward off attackers other than building homes in a ring so that their connected, exterior walls formed a simple type of city wall. This general weakness probably helped Joshua's conquest (see Josh. 10:29–39) and continued through the time of the judges during Iron Age I (1200–1000 BC).

The cultural and population resurgence experienced in about 1000 BC was likewise reflected in city fortifications. Archaeologists have uncovered the corner of a fortified building, perhaps a palace/fortress for Saul at his home in Gibeah (1 Sam. 10:26), north of Jerusalem. No fortifications have definitively been connected to David, but Solomon's fortifications at the key sites of Gezer, Megiddo, and Hazor (1 Kings 9:15) are apparently reflected in the similar gates and walls found there. The gates all have six chambers, perhaps for storage or guards, and are connected to casemate walls, made of parallel walls a few yards apart with adjoining perpendicular walls that form rooms. These rooms were used as living space during peacetime (note Rahab in Jericho's wall—Josh. 2:15) and filled with rubble to form a solid wall during wartime.

Iron Age II (1000–586 BC) saw Israelite fortifications flourish. Major cities had strong, solid city walls up to twenty-three feet thick, with towers and bastions. A few cities like Jerusalem (2 Kings 20:20) and Megiddo also had impressive water systems hewed through bedrock that enabled residents to access water even during times of siege. But all these cities had fallen to conquerors by 586 BC, and those like Nehemiah who helped rebuild these fortifications in the postexilic period would have struggled with far fewer resources than in earlier days. Likewise, they would have been rebuilding smaller cities for smaller populations.

