

“ANCIENT CITY GATES”

Ancient city gates are mentioned many times in the Bible, particularly in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). But many Bible students do not understand their use or importance in terms of ancient culture and the history of Israel. The following is a short but significant review of the several usages of ancient city gates which will give us insight into the biblical text.

In the Hebrew Bible the word “gate” (*sha’ar*) is used c. 375 times (for “gates” of cities, towns, palaces, temples, private houses, etc.). [A couple of synonyms are used rarely, “gate” or “opening” for *petach* and “gate” or “door” for *deleth*.] Thus, we have no lack of biblical references to help us understand the importance and usages of ancient city gates. Also, archaeological excavations of ancient city sites almost always find a “city gate or gates” with which to work (at least the foundations).

Ancient cities protected themselves by means of strong, mammoth walls which included one or more gates. These city gates became the focus of enemies as the “weak spots” of a city’s defenses. Thus, city planners and builders created increasingly more and more complex gate systems to protect the city and its walls. But defense was only a small part of ancient city gate usages. As Ray Vander Laan summarized:

The gate was the center of city life in biblical times. Originally designed to defend a city against attack, this massive structure soon became a combination of community center, city hall, and marketplace. People paid their taxes in the city gate, and officials settled legal matters there. Prophets prophesied and kings ruled in the gate. Shops and markets around the gate provided for the people’s daily needs. Lot sat in the gate of Sodom. In the gate, Boaz established his legal right to marry Ruth. Absalom won the affection of Israel in the gate. The Bible predicts the return of the Messiah for the Last Judgment in the symbolism of the Eastern Gate of Jerusalem. When we understand these complex structures, we have a “window” on life in biblical times. (*That The World May Know*. Teacher’s Guide I, p. 14.)

It is difficult to imagine how in ancient times one area could be used in such a variety of ways, equivalent to our modern-day armory, courthouse, city hall, open-air preaching meetings, malls and market area, political conventions, daily news “paper,” and general community center. Let’s look at some biblical and archaeological sources to help us understand this phenomenon in some organized fashion.

I. DEFENSIVE PURPOSES

The primary purpose of the ancient city gates was to have controlled access to a walled city. The “gates” were usually double wooden doors (Neh 2:3, 17), often plated with metal (Ps 107:16; Isa 45:2), secured with an iron bar (1 Kgs 4:13; Ps. 107:16) or even wooden bar (Nahum 3:13). (See also Deut 3:5 and 2 Chron 8:5; 14:7.) Usually cities had one main gate (Jerusalem had ten gates and Ezekiel’s idealized city had 12 gates). In most cities there was an outer and inner gate (2 Sam 18:24). By Solomon’s time gates were more complex. Solomon had three cities fortified (1 Kgs 9:15) to protect the main trade route, the Via Maris: Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer. Excavations at these ancient cities have revealed the so-called “Solomonic” gate complex: three pairs of long narrow piers separated by two pairs of long narrow recesses and

resembling the 10th century B.C. gateways at Charchemish. The enclosed rooms at the sides of the gates were primarily for guards and military supplies (2 Sam 18:24 - "room above the gate"). Huge towers on either side of the gate complex (2 Chron 26:9; 2 Sam 18:24; 18:33) enabled soldiers to see approaching enemies from a distance and of course were the place for the gate watchmen. The watchmen closed the gates at night (Josh 2:5; Neh 7:3).

Even if an enemy could break through the outer gates (double doors), they would be confronted on three sides by soldiers who could attack from above or drop down into the battle below--in three different areas! And even then another "inner gate" would have to be negotiated before the city itself could be reached. While these gate complexes were formidable to break or burn down, they could be destroyed with persistence. However, it is interesting to note how often ancient armies resorted to sieges and simply starved the citizens out!

The biblical literature and ways of talking about war included the city gates. Note the following references. Ezekiel describes how Jerusalem's gates were attacked by the Babylonians: "I have stationed the sword for slaughter at all their gates. . . . to set battering rams against the gates, to build a ramp and to erect siege works" (Ezek 21:15, 22). Earlier Deut 28:52ff. had warned about this: "They will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down. They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the LORD your God is giving you." "To possess the gate" was to possess the city (Gen 22:17; 24:60). Deborah's sarcastic victory poem reprimands: "When they chose new gods, war came to the city gates. . . . Then the people of the LORD went down to the city gates" (Judg 5:8, 11). In several oracles Isaiah proclaims: "The gates of Zion will lament and mourn; destitute, she will sit on the ground" (3:26); "Your choicest valleys are full of chariots, and horsemen are posted at the city gates; the defenses of Judah are stripped away" (22:7-8a); "The city is left in ruins, its gate is battered to pieces" (24:12); and "He will be a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, a source of strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate" (28:6). When the people are disobedient to the laws of God, Jeremiah cries out on behalf of God--"I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses" (17:27b). Ironically, Jeremiah warns the Babylonians--"Babylon's thick wall will be leveled and her high gates set on fire" (51:58a). Jeremiah finally laments: "All her gateways [i.e., Jerusalem's] are desolate" (Lam 1:4b). Eyewitnesses reported to Nehemiah: "The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire" (Neh 1:3b). So while ancient city gates were primarily for defensive purposes, they could be destroyed by a persistent and strong enemy.

But warfare or the threat of warfare was the exception. In peacetime the ancient city gates were used for multiple purposes.

II. A PLACE FOR MEETING OTHERS AND FOR PUBLIC ASSEMBLAGES

Two angels of God met Lot while he "was sitting in the gateway of the city" (Gen 19:1). Boaz deliberately went to the town gate in order to find the next-of-kin to Naomi. Everyone apparently passes through the gate during a day: "Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, 'Come over here, my friend, and sit down.' So he went over and sat down" (Ruth 4:1). Absalom met people coming to the gate "for justice" and skillfully turned them against his father, David (2 Sam 15:2).

While gates were public places, there were dark corners by which a private conversation could go on; but note what Joab did---“Now when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the gateway, as though to speak with him privately. And there, to avenge the blood of his brother Asahel, Joab stabbed him in the stomach, and he died” (2 Sam 3:27). Just beyond many gates were squares where large groups of people could congregate (see Gen 19:2b). In this way Ezra read the Torah to “all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate” (Neh 8:1). But the ancient city gate complex was for more than just meeting people coming and going, for good or ill.

III. A PLACE FOR COURT PROCEEDINGS AND LEGAL TRANSACTIONS

The city gate area was where one went to receive justice, hopefully. Note the instructions in Deuteronomy. The father and mother of a rebellious son “shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town” to be judged and perhaps even stoned to death (Deut 21:19-21). The parents of their slandered married daughter “shall bring proof that she was a virgin to the town elders at the gate” (Deut 22:15). A widow who seeks levirate marriage by her husband’s brother “shall go to the elders at the town gate” in order to receive “justice,” either marriage itself or the ability to publicly shame the brother’s family (Deut 25:7-10). Sometimes the execution of justice is done in the gate area: “If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death” (Deut 22:23-24a).

“Oppression” in the gates was a synonym for judicial corruption. The NIV does not translate *sha’ar* as “gate,” but rather “court” in Prov 22:22: “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court.” It literally reads “in the gate.” The same kind of interpretive translation is found in Amos 5: “You hate the one who reproves in court [in the gate]” (vs. 10a); “You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts [in the gates]” (vs. 12b); “Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts [in the gates]” (vs. 15a). The same is found in Isaiah: “those who with a word make a man out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court [in the gate] and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice” (29:21). The truly guilty and foolish man cannot defend himself in the court proceedings as Prov 24:7 states: “Wisdom is too high for a fool; in the assembly at the gate he has nothing to say.”

But how are we to visualize these court proceedings? Tel Dan is a good example. Usually the judge had a special seat in the gate area as illustrated by Eli (1 Sam 4:18) and Samuel (1 Sam 9:18). Or kings often held court or public audiences for various reasons. King David, when he had finished mourning for his son Absalom, “got up and took his seat in the gateway. When the men were told, ‘The king is sitting in the gateway, they all came before him’” (2 Sam 19:8). Jehoshaphat and Ahab sat in the gate of Samaria (1 Kgs 22:10) [an incident we will mention later]. Apparently Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was holding court “while [he] was sitting in the Benjamin Gate” (Jer 38:7b). (The reference to the “King’s Gate” in 1 Chron 9:18 is referring to the temple gate and not the city gate.)

“Elders” were a necessary part of the judicial system. In fact, a seat “among the elders” in the gate was a high honor in those days (Prov 31:23). Job must have been an elder or even a

judge in the gate by his own statement: “When I went to the gate of the city and took my seat in the public square. . . I took up the case of the stranger” (Job 29:7, 16b). When Jeremiah laments: “The elders are gone from the city gate” (Lam 5:14a), he means there are no longer any court proceedings or legal transactions---the city is destroyed along with its inhabitants in exile. The Book of Ruth instructs us that “Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, ‘Sit here,’ and they did so” (Ruth 4:2). Even the archaeologists at Tel Dan use this scripture to illustrate the use of the long stone bench parallel to the “throne-seat” in the Dan gateway. Boaz and the no-name next-of-kin would have stood in front of the judge/king and the ten elders and transacted their “legal business.” Thus, did Boaz purchase Naomi’s husband’s land as well as perform levirate marriage on behalf of Naomi and Ruth in order to keep Abimelech’s “seed” alive (Ruth 4:7-10). “Then the elders and all those at the gate said, ‘We are witnesses’” (Ruth 4:11a).

These types of legal transactions and court proceedings had a long and enduring tradition as illustrated by Abraham’s experience with the Hittites: “Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. ‘No, my lord,’ he said, ‘Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead’” (Gen 23:10-11). After the essential cultural hassling over a gracious gift or a legal payment, the text reads: “So Ephron’s field in Machpelah near Mamre---both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field---was deeded to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city” (Gen 23:17-18). Incidentally, it cost Abraham 400 shekels of silver! Not a very good deal.

IV. A PLACE FOR PROPHETIC PROCLAMATION

Besides the activities of kings and judges, the prophets often shared their messages in the city gates, for that was where the people were. On one occasion prophets were summoned by the king or kings in this case. “Dressed in their royal robes, the king of Israel [Ahab] and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were sitting on their thrones at the threshing floor by the entrance of the gate of Samaria, with all the prophets prophesying before them” (1 Kgs 22:10). About 400 “false” prophets were there; but only one, the true prophet Micaiah, spoke the truth to the two kings!

Jeremiah is told by Yahweh to go stand “at the gate of the people, through which the kings of Judah go in and out; stand also at all the other gates of Jerusalem,” in order to warn them against doing business on the Sabbath; i.e., “Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem” (Jer 17:19, 21).

“Wisdom” is personified in Proverbs as calling out to the young man to hold on to the knowledge and fear of Yahweh, presumably as the prophet would cry out: “Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech” (Prov 1:20-21).

Interestingly, as a side-note, the city gate was also a place for “mad-men” and the town’s “good-for-nothings.” The future king David, himself, faked madness at the city gate of Gath (1

Sam 21:13). The Psalmist cries that he is the object of scorn by drunkards' songs at the gate: "Those who sit at the gate mock me, and I am the song of the drunkards" (Ps 69:12).

V. THE MARKETPLACE

Finally, closely connected to the city gate was the marketplace, just outside the gate. Especially during peace time the whole city gate complex made an excellent marketplace as people went in and out of the gates during the day. One biblical reference refers to this phenomenon: 2 Kgs 7:1ff. Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, besieged Samaria and there was a great famine in Samaria with food prices "sky high." Elisha, however, predicted: "About this time tomorrow, a seah of flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel *at the gate of Samaria,*" which was the *marketplace*! [See 2 Kgs 7 for this interesting story.] We have already mentioned how Jeremiah attempted to stop business men from carrying their wares on the Sabbath (Jer 17). Nehemiah attempted to do the same. Nehemiah warned: "Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said, 'Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.' From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath" (Neh 13:20-21).

A modern-day example can be found at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem. Everyday the multitudes of people, mostly tourists, crowd this area and are constantly treated to the selling of foods and other goods just outside the gate, much as it was in ancient times.

CONCLUSION: METAPHORICAL USE OF "GATE"

Because of the cultural/historical use of the ancient city gates, the term itself is used metaphorically throughout the biblical literature. The whole process of the administration of justice is termed "at/in the gate" (Prov 22:22; Amos 5:15; Jer 15:7). It is used in metonymy where "gate" stands for the whole city (Gen 22:17; 24:60). Note how this metaphorical use is at the same time personified by Isaiah in a parallel phrase: "Wait, O gate! Howl, O city!" (Isa 14:31a; cp. 3:26). "Gate" is the symbol of access or entrance to anything such as: "gate of death" (Ps 9:13); "gate of Yahweh" (Ps 118:20); "gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17); or the entrance to a particular land (Jer 15:7; Nah 3:13). Perhaps metonymy is used in Isa 60:11 where the gates "will always stand open," which is in an eschatological sense the gospel. This use can be said of the "gates of righteousness" (Ps 118:19) and the "open gates" for the righteous nation to enter (Isa 26:2). "Gates" are personified in several references: Isa 3:26; 14:31; Jer 14:2; and Ps 24:7, 9. "Gates" are used symbolically throughout Ezek 40-48 and Rev 21 to refer to the Idealized and Perfect City and Temple (the New Jerusalem and the Idealized Temple). Those who have "citizen's rights" and political authority or voice are called "those who enter the gate" (Gen 23:10; Job 29:7); the body of citizens within a city can be called "all the gate of my people" (Ruth 3:11); and men who are capable of bearing arms, i.e., soldiers, are called "those who go out the gate" (Gen 34:24).

In light of this study two New Testament concepts can be illuminated. One is Jesus' statement to Peter: "And I tell you that you are 'Rock,' and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades [Hell] will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18). This is referring to the "powers" of hell/death/Satan that cannot overcome the "onslaught" of Christ and the church. In

other words, “the powers of evil cannot contain or hold in check the new community.” [AB, Matthew, Albright, p. 196.] (For concepts of the “gates of Hades/hell/death” see such passages as Isa 38:10; Job 17:16; 38:17; Ps 9:13; 107:18; and in the Apocrypha, Wisdom of Sol 16:13.) The picture here is the offensive action of the Church and the defensive posture of the “gates of Hell.” As the church preaches the gospel concerning the resurrection and reign of Jesus, the “power” of Satan “who holds the power of death” (Heb 2:14) cannot withstand the attack. The Church will always overcome the “gates of hell!” The Church is on the offense and “Hell” is on the defense! Victory is promised: John 16:33; Rom 16:20; Eph 6:10-13; Rev 12:13-16; 17:14; 20:7-10.

For the second insight I quote from Ray Vander Laan:

The Bible predicts that the Messiah will enter the temple through this gate [the Eastern/Beautiful Gate]. Years ago, Islamic leaders blocked the entrance and built a cemetery in front of it to prevent the Messiah from entering. If the closed gate would not stop Him, the cemetery would, because as a Jew, the Messiah would become ceremonially unclean if He touched anything connected with death; thus, he would not be able to enter the Temple Mount.

By tradition, the Last Judgment is to take place at this gate. Since city gates were used as court-houses, it is easy to see why the Bible would describe that event in a location like this one. “Believers” would be blessed with entrance into the New Jerusalem. [*That The World May Know*, Teacher’s Guide I, p. 14].

I believe this is symbolically used for the Last Judgment. See such passages as Joel 3:2, 12; Zech 14:1-11; Isa 62:10; and Rev 21.

Now when you read in your Bible text and you come to a “gate,” hopefully it will have much more meaning than before. May “your gates” always stand open!

Dr. Walter D. Zorn
Lincoln Christian College
100 Campus View Drive
Lincoln, Illinois 62656
wzorn@lccs.edu