



Type: Magazine Article

Hezekiah's Tunnel

Author(s): Doyle L. Green

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 70, No. 8 (August 1967)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 4–11

Abstract: This article gives a first-person description of Hezekiah's Tunnel in Jerusalem.

*The Era takes you
under the holy city
of Jerusalem, through
a subterranean
passage 2,700 years
old, on a
trip through*

Photo by Doyle L. Green

HEZEKIAH

By Doyle L. Green, Managing Editor

● Underneath the holy city of Jerusalem are a number of subterranean passages and other excavations that have played important roles in the long and kaleidoscopic history of that ancient city. One of these is known as Hezekiah's Tunnel, or the tunnel of Siloam. It conveys water from the famed spring of Gihon, also called the Fountain of the Virgin, to the pool of Siloam. The story of the digging of this ancient tunnel and of the circumstances surrounding it is fascinating to anyone interested in the people and times of the Old Testament.

When one first stands on the Mount of Olives and looks across the Kidron Valley at Jerusalem, built as it is on the tops of the desert hills of Judea, he is likely to wonder why the ancient peoples chose this location for their city, which was called Jebus by the Amorites and Salem in the time of Abraham and Melchizedek. He may also be puzzled as to why the shepherd king, David, captured the city a thousand years before Christ and moved his capital to it from

the plains city of Hebron, 20 miles to the south. (See 2 Sam. 5:6-9.)

One answer to these questions obviously lies in the advantage of fortification afforded by a hilltop site. The east wall of Jerusalem is built along the top of the slope leading up from the Kidron Valley, or the Valley Jehoshaphat ("the valley of the judgment of Jehovah"). Historians tell us that in ancient times a rather deep impression called the Tyropoeon Valley joined the Kidron Valley from the northwest. On the hill Ophel between the two valleys was situated the early city. These steep hills made somewhat of a natural stronghold. Then, when the great walls were built, the early peoples had a fortification that could and did on many occasions withstand the onslaught of large armies.

There was another important consideration in building the city here. This reason had to do with one of the essential elements of life—water. Except for the unfailing waters of the spring of Gihon, located



Map drawing by Maurice Scanlon

H'S TUNNEL

partway up the slope on the west side of the Kidron Valley, the city founders perhaps never would have selected this location. Historians say that the spring provided water for Jerusalem as far back as 3000 B.C. Its waters flow out of a crack in the rocks at a rate reported to be some 250,000 gallons a day. It is first mentioned in the Bible in the first chapter of 1 Kings in connection with the anointing of Solomon after Adonijah had attempted to seize the throne:

"So Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites, and the Pelethites, went down, and caused Solomon to ride upon king David's mule, and brought him to Gihon.

"And Zadok the priest took an horn of oil out of the tabernacle, and anointed Solomon. And they blew the trumpet; and all the people said, God save king Solomon." (1 Kings 1:38-39.)

It is supposed that the spring was selected as the site for this ceremony because of its importance to

1 Present-day view of the southeast section of Jerusalem, taken from the south (compare with accompanying sketch **2**). The ridge along the top of the picture is the Mount of Olives. The Kidron Valley runs northward (from the bottom right-hand corner of the photograph), between the Mount of Olives and the east wall of the city. The City of David occupied what was the hill Ophel just over the tops of the trees, from about the center to the left of the picture. This area was within the city wall in the time of Jesus. The City of David, as well as the city Jesus knew, lies buried beneath the rubble of centuries. Hezekiah's tunnel runs under this section of the city from the Kidron Valley to the Tyropoeon Valley.

the people of the city. The spring must have had additional meaning to David, as it was through a gutter, or a shaft leading from the spring, that his men entered the city and captured it. (See 2 Sam. 5:8.)

The Holy City has had other sources of supply for this life-giving liquid. Rain water is carefully collected. King Solomon built great stone reservoirs south of Bethlehem, and an aqueduct brought water



Photo by Clyde Olsen

from them into Jerusalem to help fill vast underground cisterns hewed out of the rock. One of these cisterns, situated under the temple site, is 40 feet deep and 200 feet in diameter. All together they are said to have a capacity of 10 million gallons.

But for our present purposes let us return to the spring of Gihon and go back in history to the time of the prophet Isaiah, 700 years before the birth of Christ.

Hezekiah, a descendant of David, was king of Judah. Unlike King Ahaz, his father, who had made "molten images for Baalim" and burnt incense and sacrificed his own children in the valley of Hinnom (2 Chron. 28:1-4), King Hezekiah followed the ways of the Lord and often sought and received divine guidance through Isaiah. During his reign the temple was repaired and reopened, the passover was kept again, and pagan altars were torn down. Speaking to the Levites, King Hezekiah had said, ". . . sanctify now yourselves, and sanctify the house of

the Lord God of your fathers, and carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place.

"Now it is in mine heart to make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel, that his fierce wrath may turn away from us." (2 Chron. 29:5, 10.)

Certainly the wrath of the Lord seemed to be upon the people of Judah during the reign of wicked King Ahaz, for they were smitten in turn by armies of Syria, Israel, and Edom. (See 2 Chron. 28:5, 17.) But Hezekiah freed Judah of the yoke of their captors:

"He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him.

"For he clave to the Lord, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses.

"And the Lord was with him; and he prospered whithersoever he went forth: and he rebelled against the king of Assyria, and served him not." (2 Kings 18:5-7.)

³Thirty-four rough, wide stone steps lead down from the present ground level to the famed spring of Gihon, also called the Fountain of the Virgin, in honor of the mother of Jesus. The life of Jerusalem centered around the cool waters of Gihon for hundreds of years. In earlier times the pool may have been near ground level.

These were troubled times for all the peoples of Palestine. In the fourth year of Hezekiah's reign, Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, led his armies against the northern kingdom of Israel and took many of the people into captivity.

During the years that followed, the armies of Assyria attacked the walled cities of Judah and captured them one by one until 46 had fallen. The great city of Jerusalem seemed to be doomed. Hezekiah tried to make peace, and the new Assyrian king, Sennacherib, demanded tribute. To try to meet his demands and keep peace, Hezekiah gave not only the treasures from his own house, but also all of the silver and gold from the temple, even removing the precious metal from the doors and pillars of the holy house. Still the Assyrian king threatened Jerusalem with annihilation if the city did not surrender. In this time of great trial Hezekiah turned to the Prophet Isaiah for guidance and sent his servants to the prophet to tell him of their plight.

"And Isaiah said unto them, Thus shall ye say to your master, Thus saith the Lord, Be not afraid of the words which thou hast heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.

"Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and shall return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land." (2 Kings 19:6-7.)

With this assurance Hezekiah refused to give up the city. To his people he said:

"Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him:

"With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles. . . ." (2 Chron. 32: 7-8.)

Sennacherib, however, was a master of intrigue; he sent men inside the city to try to influence the people to turn against their king and surrender. The message they bore was:

"Doth not Hezekiah persuade you to give over yourselves to die by famine and by thirst, saying, The Lord our God shall deliver us out of the hand of the king of Assyria?"

"Now therefore let not Hezekiah deceive you, nor persuade you on this manner, neither yet believe him: for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to

Because the spring Gihon was outside the city, the Assyrians could cut off Jerusalem's water supply.

deliver his people out of mine hand, and out of the hand of my fathers: how much less shall your God deliver you out of mine hand?" (2 Chron. 32:11, 15.) He also tempted the people with promises of a better life if they would cast their lot with him. (See Isaiah 36.)

When these tactics proved ineffective, Sennacherib sent a letter to Hezekiah, demanding that he surrender. Taking the letter first to Isaiah, then to the temple, Hezekiah placed it before the Lord and asked what should be done. Again the Lord spoke to Isaiah and told him to let the king know that He had heard his prayer and would not permit the Assyrians to capture the city.

In the meantime Hezekiah had set about strengthening the fortifications of Jerusalem. One of his greatest concerns must have been for the water supply. He realized that because the spring Gihon was outside the city wall, if the Assyrians attacked they could not only cut off the water supply from the city but could also use it for their own purposes.

So Hezekiah called his "princes and his mighty men" together, and it was proposed that a tunnel be dug through the mountain from the spring in the Kidron Valley to the Tyropoeon Valley so that the precious water from Gihon could be diverted into the city.

It was a bold and daring proposal, and one can imagine the heated discussions that must have taken place, especially when it was suggested that because of the limited time two crews should start from opposite sides of the mountain and dig toward each other. Were the calculations of the engineers correct? Could they dig that far through solid rock with their crude tools? Would the two crews ever meet? Would they finish the tunnel in time? Could they engineer it so the water would flow through?

Hezekiah must have made the final decision, perhaps in consultation with Isaiah, and the word was given to proceed with the project with all haste. In time the two crews did meet, the tunnel was finished, the water was diverted through it into Jerusalem, and the spring Gihon was covered over so that the Assyrian armies could not find it.

We had read about Hezekiah's tunnel, but it had never stirred our imagination until we had the opportunity of exploring it with other members of a Brigham Young University Bible Lands tour group in the summer of 1966. We had been told that the distance



Photo by Oda Rasmussen

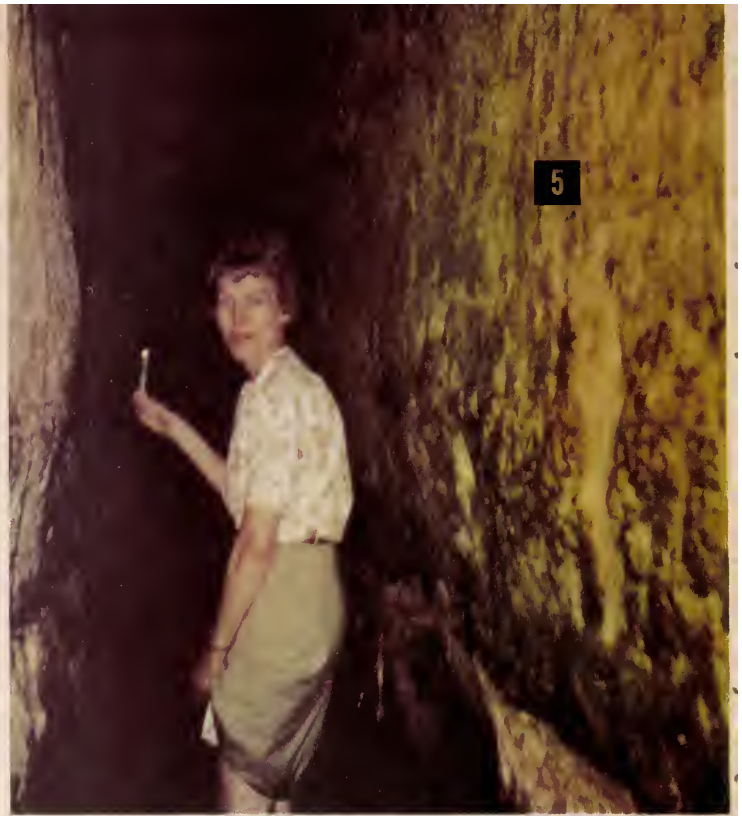


Photo by Ellis T. Rasmussen

4 5 These two photographs were taken in opposite directions about halfway through the tunnel at the place where the two crews of workmen digging from both sides of the mountain may have met. Note the difference in the height and width of the tunnel in the two pictures. It is supposed that the workmen coming from the right were at a higher level than those coming from the left, so the floor of the tunnel had to be lowered many feet. Also note the abrupt turn made by the tunnel in the picture on the left. These photographs guided the artists in their rendering of the painting on the front cover. Shown in the pictures are members of a Brigham Young University Bible Lands tour: Photo at right, Mrs. Ellis T. (Oda) Rasmussen. Left photo, from right to left: Dr. Ellis T. Rasmussen, Mrs. Doyle L. (Elvera C.) Green, and the author.

6 7 The workmen of King Hezekiah dug 600 yards through solid rock to divert the waters of Gihon inside the city. Much of the tunnel is rough hewn. The configuration of the tunnel varies greatly.

through the tunnel was about 300 yards, or the length of three football fields. Our local guide had been through it some years earlier and said we would have to be prepared to wade, as the water would be about a foot deep.

After obtaining candles, we descended the 34 wide stone steps leading down to the spring of Gihon, tested the cool waters with our toes, and stepped into the pool to make our way over to the tunnel. It was somewhat of a surprise and shock when the water proved to be not a foot deep, but instead was deep enough to reach halfway between our knees and our hips. However, the water in the tunnel itself, for the most part, was well below our knees. Four of us were barefooted; only one of our party had foresight to bring along a pair of canvas shoes.

The adventure turned out to be a fabulous experi-



Photo by Hanna Safieh

ence. The tunnel is not 300 yards long as we had been told, but almost 600 yards long, and our thin candles were almost burned out by the time we reached the other end. As we inspected the tunnel we were amazed at the work that had gone into the undertaking by those ancient people. Every foot of the tunnel is through solid rock. No braces of any kind were used. The workmen's tools must have been crude picks and chisels and hammers. Surely they had no dynamite or drills as we have today. Could more than one person at a time have worked in

the end of the narrow tunnels? All of the rock chippings must have been carried out in baskets on the shoulders of the workmen. Anyone who has ever worked in a mine will wonder how fresh air was provided.

We were awed by their engineering ability. As the accompanying sketch shows, the tunnel has many twists and turns and is in the shape of a modified S. We speculated that it would have been difficult enough for these people to have started at one end and to have dug their way through the mountain to a predetermined spot without the instruments and knowledge that we have today, but the very thought of their starting from both sides and meeting in the middle was so remarkable that we could hardly comprehend it.

The tunnel varies greatly in shape and size, but generally it is perhaps some 12 to 18 inches wide on the bottom, and slopes out to three or sometimes four feet. The walls, up to a height of about three feet,

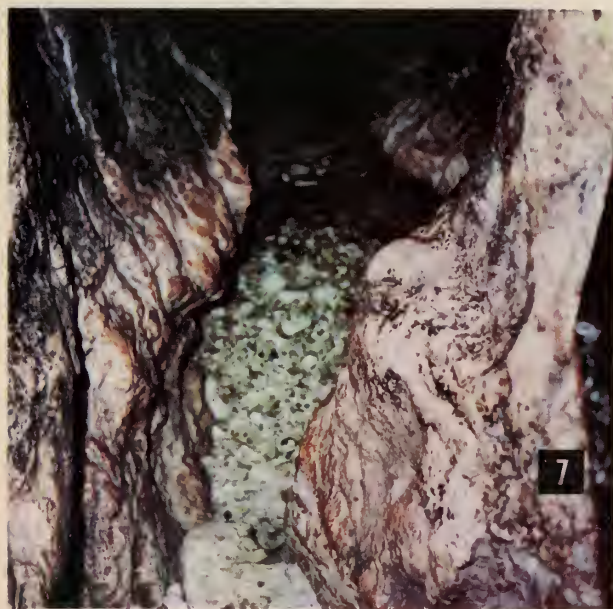


Photo by Hanna Safieh

are coated a half inch or more with deposits from the water. The tunnel ranges in height from perhaps six feet to as much as 15 or 20 feet in some places. The bottom is relatively smooth all the way, but in some places rocks of varying sizes cover it, and it was not surprising that some of our party emerged with bruised feet and bleeding toes. We were in the tunnel for over an hour; and as the candles burnt lower and we could not see the end because of the curves, we bolstered our spirits by singing, "Come, Come Ye Saints."

But at last we emerged from the passage into the pool of Siloam. This is a spot in Jerusalem we hadn't visited before but had eagerly looked forward to seeing, as it is a pool that is associated with an important event in the ministry of the Savior. To this pool Jesus sent the man who had been blind from birth to wash his eyes, after the Master had anointed them with clay; and having done so, the man was healed. (See John 9:1-7.)

The pool itself is about 18 feet wide and 52 feet long. It was a beehive of activity. A number of women were squatting on the rock bank washing clothes, a dozen or more children were swimming and bathing, and there were many spectators. Perhaps in earlier times the pool was closer to the level of the surrounding land; today it is some 30 feet below the surface and is approached only by a stone stairway.

Considering the magnitude of the undertaking of digging this tunnel and its importance in the history of Jerusalem, it seems a little surprising that the writers of the Bible treat it in such a seemingly casual manner. The book of 2nd Chronicles reveals:

"This same Hezekiah also stopped the upper water-course of Gihon, and brought it straight down to the west side of the city of David. . . ." (2 Chron. 32:30.)

"And when Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib was come, and that he was purposed to fight against Jerusalem,

"He took counsel with his princes and his mighty men to stop the waters of the fountains which were without the city: and they did help him.

"So there was gathered much people together, who stopped all the fountains, and the brook that ran through the midst of the land, saying, Why should the kings of Assyria come, and find much water?" (2 Chron. 32:2-4.)

Second Kings makes only a brief reference to this great feat:

"And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made a pool, and a conduit, and brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?" (2 Kings 20:20.)

The account of how the engineers and workmen of King Hezekiah started on the tunnel from both ends and met deep in the mountain was not discovered until the year 1880. One day two young boys were playing in the pool of Siloam and dared each other to go into the dark tunnel. Farther and farther they went, without any light, cautiously feeling their way with their hands along the sides. Some 300 yards inside the tunnel one of the boys felt a smoother surface on the wall, with what seemed to be some



Photo by Clyde Olsen

characters engraved into it. Emerging from the tunnel, he hurried to his teacher in the Boys' School of the London Mission to the Jews and told of the experience. They returned to the tunnel, supplied with torches, went into it, and confirmed the fortunate discovery. The now famous writing is known as the Siloam inscription. Experts tell us that it is an example of the oldest known Hebrew writing. It is translated thus:

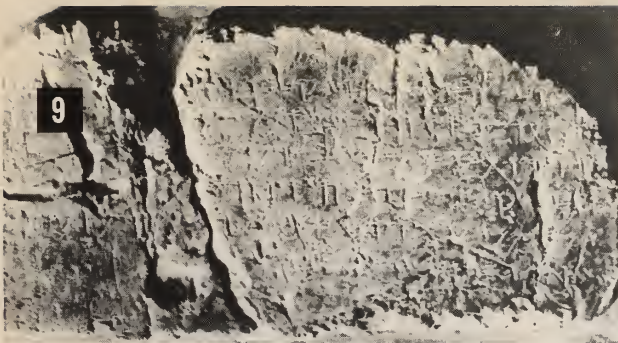
"Behold the excavation. Now this is the history of the excavation. While the excavators were still lifting up the pick, each toward his neighbor, and while there were yet three cubits to excavate, there was heard the voice of one man calling to his neighbor . . . and after that the excavators had struck pick against pick, over against one another, the water flowed from the spring to the pool for a distance of 1200 cubits."

One will search in vain for the inscription in the tunnel today, since it has long since been chiseled

out of the wall by robbers and taken out of the country. It is now in the Museum of the Ancient Orient in Istanbul.

It would have been most enlightening had the inscription told why the tunnel was made in an S shape. Much speculation has been indulged in concerning this. It has been thought in the past that perhaps tombs were in the way and the tunnel was curved to go around them. Nothing has been found, however, to substantiate this theory.

There is a postscript that should be added to the story of Hezekiah. So great was his faith and so good were his works that he received a blessing that probably few men have ever experienced. He became very ill; in fact, the scriptures say that "he was sick unto death," insomuch that the Prophet Isaiah came to him and suggested that he set his house in order, for he was going to die. But Hezekiah felt that his work was not finished. Perhaps the tunnel had not yet been completed. Perhaps he knew that the peo-



8 The pool of Siloam is a public laundry, swimming pool, and bath house. Most of the water used for culinary purposes is pumped from the spring of Gihon into the city. However, some women still dip water from the pool and carry it on their heads in earthen jars or in five gallon gasoline cans through narrow streets to their homes.

9 The Siloam inscription, which tells the story of the digging of the tunnel. Written in ancient Hebrew, it was chiseled into the wall.

10 The waters of Gihon, after flowing 600 yards through the tunnel, flow into the pool of Siloam, which was inside the city wall in the times of Isaiah and Jesus. Jesus sent the man who was born blind to this pool to bathe his eyes, which He had anointed with clay.



"Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. . . ."

Through Isaiah, Hezekiah received the message, "Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years.

"And I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria: and I will defend this city." (See Isa. 38:1-6; 2 Kings 20:1-6.) As a sign, the Lord caused the sun to be moved ten degrees backwards. (See 2 Kings 20:8-11; Isa. 38:7-8.)

True to his promise, the Lord prolonged Hezekiah's life and protected the city of Jerusalem. The scriptures record:

"Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred and fourscore and five thousand. . . ." (Isa. 37:36.)

King Sennacherib never attacked the city, but soon left Palestine and returned to Ninneveh. Later two of his own sons killed him with swords as he was worshipping his pagan god.

Perhaps one should not look for physical evidences to help substantiate the truthfulness of the scriptures. Nevertheless, such "proof" is interesting. Of all the archaeological evidences of the Old Testament we have seen in our ventures through the Holy Land, none seems to bring the scriptures closer or give them more meaning and reality than does Hezekiah's tunnel. The city of David itself has been changed, destroyed, and rebuilt numerous times over the years. Perhaps none of the buildings that Isaiah or Hezekiah knew remain. The Tyropoeon Valley has been filled in with 30 to 60 feet of debris, the Kidron Valley is not as deep as it was, the level of most of the city itself is some 25 to 30 feet higher than it was in former times. But this subterranean passage, built by the workmen of King Hezekiah, and through which water has been flowing for 2,700 years, remains unchanged and helps to make the story of the Prophet Isaiah and Hezekiah and their times come alive, and gives added meaning, significance, and realism to this part of the Old Testament. ○

ple needed his strength and leadership.

In his writings *Antiquities of the Jews*, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus says: "Yet while he [Hezekiah] was very zealous and diligent about the worship of God, did he soon afterwards fall into a severe distemper, insomuch that the physicians despaired of him, and expected no good issue of his sickness, as neither did his friends; and besides the distemper itself, there was a very melancholy circumstance that disordered the king, which was the consideration that he was childless, and was going to die, and leave his house and his government without a successor of his own body; so he was troubled at the thoughts of this his condition, and lamented himself, and entreated of God that he would prolong his life for a little while till he had some children, and not suffer him to depart this life before he was become a father." (P. 301.)

The scriptures do not confirm this account, but in any event, Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, saying,