Lions' Gate

Names (also known as)

The Sheep Gate – the gate through which sheep were brought in for sacrifice in the Temple.

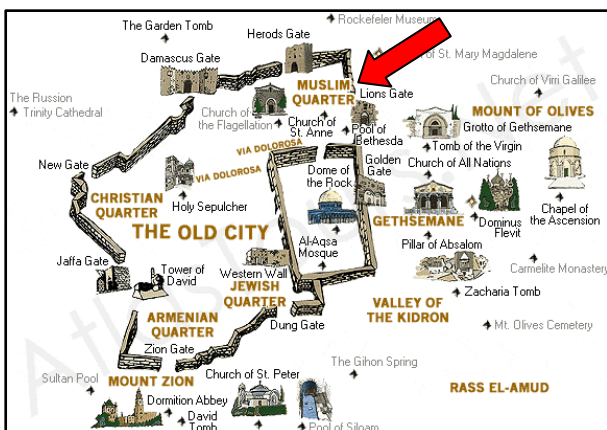Jehoshaphat Gate – named after the valley below the area of the gate.

St. Stephen's Gate – where supposed the first Christian martyr was taken out to be stoned

In Arabic – Bab Sitna Mariam – Named after the mother of Jesus, Mary's Gate (Bab = gate, Sitna = Saint; Mariam = Mary).
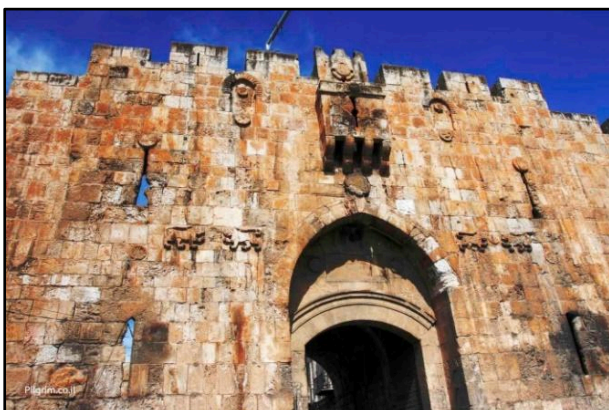
Etymology

The Lions' Gate (Hebrew: שער האריות Sha'ar ha-Arayot - Sha'ar = Gate; ha-Arayot = Lion).
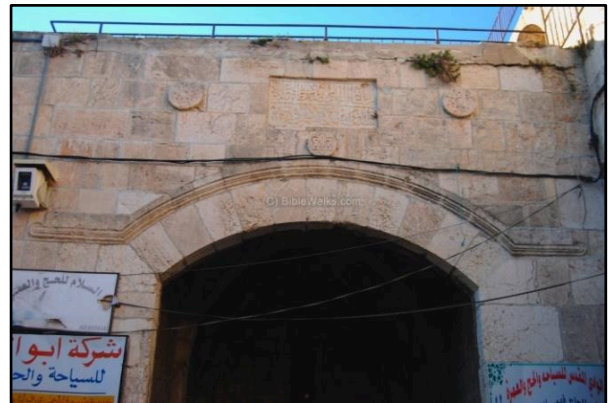
Location/Description

Located in the east wall of the Old City of Jerusalem, the entrance marks the beginning of the traditional Christian observance of the last walk of Jesus from prison to crucifixion, the Via Dolorosa. On either side of the top of the arch are four figures of lions (or possibly leopards), two on the left and two on the right.

Above the gate is the turret which is called a "machicolation". It was used in war to pour tar or boiling oil on attackers.

There is also an inscription to Sultan Suleiman above the gate on the inside. It is surrounded by three Magen–David (Star of David design) Jewish symbols.

Close-up of two of the 'lions'

Scriptural references

Old Testament

The only direct reference relates to the rebuilding of the gate after the return of Judah from captivity in Babylon. The section was repaired by Eliashib the high priest – Neh. 3:1 – **Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests, and they builded the sheep gate; they sanctified it, and set up the doors of it; even unto the tower of Meah they sanctified it, unto the tower of Hananeel.** Eliashib took the lead, despite his close alliance with Tobiah, the adversary of Nehemiah (Neh. 13:4).

New Testament

John 5:2 gives the location of the Sheep Gate precisely – **"Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in**
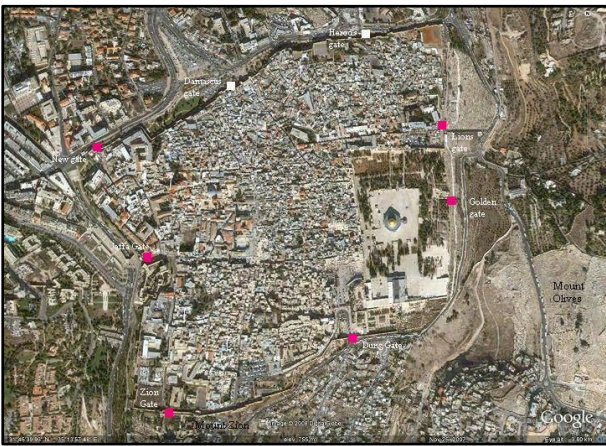
the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches."

The pool was used to wash the sheep before they were brought into the temple for sacrifice, and became over time a place for invalids to wait in desperate hope of being healed according to the mythical "moving of the waters" (John 5:3-4).

Brief history

The gates in Jerusalem today were rebuilt or renovated by the Ottomans in the 1500's AD on the foundations of earlier gates dating back to the days of Nehemiah and Solomon.

The Lions Gate is the eastern entrance into the Old City of Jerusalem. It is on the same section of wall as the Golden Gate (which is sealed shut). The Lions Gate faces towards the Kidron Valley (Valley of Jehoshaphat) and the Mount of Olives.

Aerial view showing gate in top, right corner

According to legend the lions (or leopards?) were placed there by Turkish Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent to celebrate the Ottoman defeat of the Mamelukes in 1517. His predecessor, Selim I, had planned to raze the city. He dreamt that lions were going to eat him because of the plan. So he promised to protect the city by rebuilding and repairing the walls around it.

This incorrectly led to the lion becoming the heraldic symbol of Jerusalem. Of course, Jerusalem already had a connection with the lion, this being the symbol of the tribe of Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem (Gen. 49:9; Rev. 5:5). Additionally, in Old Testament times Jerusalem was called Ariel – "the lion of God" by the prophets (Isa. 29:1-2,7).

The gate was originally built with an L-shaped structure, similar to the other Ottoman gates of Jerusalem. The structure was later altered in order to allow vehicle access through the gate.

Israel captured the Old City on 7 June 1967, three days into the Six Day War. The city had to be taken in hand-to-hand fighting in order not to damage significant sites and the IDF lost many soldiers entering through the Lion Gate. Jordanian defenders and snipers took many lives as Israeli soldiers entered by the narrow gate into the alleyways beyond.

Israeli soldiers entering the city through the Lions Gate in the Six-day War (June 1967)

Sources:

Wikipedia
AllAboutJerusalem.com

(Compilers – John and Cyndy Tierney)