

Historical Jesus 11: Entering Jerusalem

Passover Background

The festival of Passover was an intense time of year when riots were likely to occur. The city's population swelled with pilgrims from near and far. Josephus estimates a total of 2.7 million celebrants in his own time (Josephus, War 6.423-426). To give some perspective, the population of Rome—probably the world's most populated city—was only 1.5 million. Passover began by offering more sacrifices than any other festival.⁵³ Furthermore, the day memorialized God's judgment upon Egypt for enslaving His people. People couldn't help but see the irony of remembering this liberation while the Roman soldiers looked down from above, eager to quash any who dared to defy Caesar and his representatives. Everyone knew if there was going to be trouble, it would happen during Passover. As a result, the Romans were on high alert, and the Jewish Sanhedrin had their eyes out for any potential troublemakers.

Messianic Secret

Up until when he entered Jerusalem, Jesus had carefully guarded his messianic identity. Here are two examples:

Luke 4:40-41

40 Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. 41 And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

Matthew 16:15-20

15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven...20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

However, when he was nearing Jerusalem, he stopped in Jericho and was hailed "Son of David" by a blind man, named Bartimaeus. Jesus does not correct him; instead, he heals him, and the man joins Jesus' entourage as they climb the hill to the fateful city of Jerusalem.

⁵³ Josephus, Antiquities 17.213

Triumphal Entry

Jesus begins walking up from Jericho to the Mt. of Olives and then to Jerusalem. N. T. Wright helpfully describes the journey:

“If you’ve ever been to the Holy Land, you will know that to go from Jericho to Jerusalem involves a long, hard climb. Jericho is the lowest city on earth, over 800 feet below sea level. Jerusalem, which is only a dozen or so miles away, is nearly 3,000 feet *above* sea level. The road goes through hot, dry deserts all the way to the top of the Mount of Olives, at which point, quite suddenly, you have at the same time the first real vegetation and the first, glorious sight of Jerusalem itself. Even if you were climbing that road every week on business, there would still be a sense of exhilaration, of delight and relief, when you got to the top.”⁵⁴

Before Jesus got to the top, he sent two disciples to fetch a young donkey.

Mark 11:7-11

7 And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it.
8 And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. 9 And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" 11 And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

In this incident, we encounter three coded actions: (1) riding the donkey, (2) waving palm branches, and the cry, “Son of David.”

Riding the Donkey

By riding the donkey, Jesus provocatively fulfilled Zechariah’s prophecy.⁵⁵

Zechariah 9:9-10

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall

⁵⁴ N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (), p. 146.

⁵⁵ This may also point to David putting Solomon on a mule to announce his enthronement (1 Kings 1:38-40).

be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Palm Branches and Coats in the Road

They spread their coats in the road. A long time before, people had acted in a similar way when they declared Jehu king (2 Kings 9:13). They also waved palm branches, which had happened when Judah the Maccabee captured the Temple and cleansed it and again when his brother Simon achieved independence for Israel and eliminated the last soldiers holed up in the fortress next to the Temple. Furthermore, leaders featured palm branches on their coins, including John Hyrcanus (134-104 bc), Alexander Jannaeus (104-76 bc), and Simon ben Kosiba (ad 132/3).⁵⁶ Wright explains:

“You don’t spread cloaks on the road—especially in the dusty, stony Middle East! – for a friend or even a respected senior member of your family. You do it for royalty. And you don’t cut branches off trees, or foliage from the fields, to wave in the streets just because you feel somewhat elated; you do it because you are welcoming a king.”⁵⁷

Son of David

The people declaring Jesus’ “son of David” are likely from his entourage who had accompanied him for the journey. Bartimaeus had cried out “son of David,” and Jesus may have picked up more followers from this incident. (This crowd, probably mostly Galileans, is likely not the same as the Jerusalem mob who later cries out, “Crucify him!”) They shouted, “The Son of David,” “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!” and “The King of Israel.”

The triumphal entry is Jesus’ “blatant messianic self-advertisement.”⁵⁸ He is publicly announcing his claim to be God’s Messiah. Still, he could turn back. He doesn’t have to enter Jerusalem. This becomes his moment of truth. Other leaders of messianic and quasi-messianic movements both before Jesus and after him inevitably found themselves quickly crushed under the intolerant and paranoid boot of Roman might.⁵⁹ Jesus knows what he is doing; he knows the cost; and does it anyhow.

⁵⁶ In Revelation we encounter a scene of people “wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands,” proclaiming salvation (Revelation 7:9-10), which may be another example of celebrating victory of God’s king.

⁵⁷ Wright, p. 147.

⁵⁸ R. T. France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 429.

⁵⁹ Examples include Athronges (4 bc), Judah the Galilean (ad 6), the Samaritan prophet (ad 36), Theudas (ad 45), the Egyptian Prophet (ad 58), Simon bar Giora (ad 69), and Simon ben Kosiba (ad 132).

Rejection

As he nears the gates of Jerusalem, he encounters resistance and criticism from the Pharisees. He finds himself overcome with emotion and weeps over the city's coming judgment.

Luke 19:37-40

37 As he was drawing near-- already on the way down the Mount of Olives-- the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, 38 saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" 39 And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." 40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

Darrell Bock writes:

"The Pharisees' rejection near the end of the entry shows that nothing has changed. The leadership still refuses to accept that Jesus is God's messenger—much less Messiah. Their protest at the disciples' actions is but the first of many acts of resistance at the end of Luke's Gospel. The irony is that Jesus declares that if the disciples did not speak out, creation would. Inanimate objections have better perception of what God is doing than do the people that Jesus came to save."⁶⁰

Jesus' ministry is God's effort to bring His people back to Himself, but they rejected Jesus and thus God Himself whose deeds Jesus always did and words he always spoke.

John 12:44-50

44 And Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. 45 And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. 46 I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. 47 If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. 48 The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. 49 For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment-- what to say and what to speak. 50 And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me."

⁶⁰ Darrell Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 1547.

Overwhelmed with sadness, Jesus prophesies of the city's coming judgment.

Luke 19:41-44

41 And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Bock:

"The lament over Jerusalem shows Jesus' pain at Israel's failure to respond with faith. In 19:41-44, Jesus sounds like Jeremiah lamenting the coming exile (Jeremiah 6:6-21) or Isaiah declaring the impending fall of Jerusalem (Isaiah 29:1-4). Jesus' lament over Jerusalem shows that the consequence of rejecting God's messenger is national judgment. When God sues for peace and his terms are rejected, only judgment remains. Jesus predicts the nation's collapse as tragic fact."⁶¹

Temple Cleansing

The triumphal entry got many of inhabitants' attention, but what he did next turned him from a curious charismatic leader to a serious threat whom the city's power brokers had to eliminate, one way or another.

Mark 11:15-18

15 And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. 16 And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 17 And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

The most popular understanding of what happened here is that Jesus rebuked and intervened to prevent inappropriate merchandising in the Temple area. He calls them robbers because they were jacking up the prices to take advantage of the throngs of sacrificers coming from long distances. This may have been the case, but the Scripture does not explicitly say so. Jesus here quotes Jeremiah who had pronounced God's

⁶¹ Bock, p. 1547.

judgment on the Temple to superstitious Jews who thought they could get away with anything and find safety in the Temple (Jeremiah 7:11). Thus, the Temple was not a hideaway for criminals, but God's house where they should worship Him. Charles Feinberg explains:

"Ultimately the people were treating the temple, the house of God, as robbers do their dens. It was a temporary refuge till they sallied forth on another foray. Limestone caves in Palestine were used as robbers' dens; so Jeremiah's metaphor was clear to his hearers."⁶²

Another commentator, R. T. France writes:

"His attack on the traders and money changers, who were there in the Court of the Gentiles with the permission of the temple authorities and who provided a convenient and probably essential service to worshippers visiting the temple from outside Jerusalem, was not simply (if it was at all) a protest against exploitation by unscrupulous traders...It was a repudiation of the way the temple's affairs were being conducted (and therefore of those under whose authority this took place), not simply an attempt to correct abuse of the system...As apparently a one-man demonstration it is unlikely to have had any long-term practical effect, and we may well assume that the tables were back in place the next day. But it marked Jesus out as more than an idealistic teacher. He is a radical reformer, and he has thrown down the gauntlet to the temple authorities in a way they cannot ignore, and to which they will respond...Following on the royal procession to the city, this action looks like a further deliberate claim to messianic authority. Seen in that light, this was not an attempt at short-term reform of the system but a symbolic declaration of eschatological judgment."⁶³

Regardless, if the Temple demonstration was targeting the greed of merchants or more in the vein of a prophetic demonstration of coming judgment, it certainly got the attention of the leaders. Here is how they responded:

Luke 19:47-48

47 And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and

⁶² Charles Lee Feinberg, ed. Frank Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel* vol. 6, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 428.

⁶³ R. T. France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 437-9.

the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, 48 but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.

Next, we'll look at how the situation heated up for Jesus throughout the last week leading to his arrest.