

Discovering Jesus Course

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Jesus in Jerusalem

First-century Jerusalem was truly one of the most awe-inspiring cities of its age, described by Pliny as “by far the most famous city, not only of Judaea, but of the whole East.” On any ordinary day, the population probably didn’t exceed 70,000, but in this single week – during the festival called Passover – the crowds may have swelled as high as 1,200,000.¹

“Jerusalem was a buzzing hive of activity on a normal day; on this day its steep, hilly streets were choked with pilgrims, as well as with the usual complement of workmen, tradesmen, slaves, and high-ranking citizens with their attendants. Its marketplaces were hardly less hectic and probably even more crowded than those outside the gates.”²

Compared with many cities of its day, Jerusalem was comparatively clean. Road sweepers swept the streets daily, maintaining the levitical purity of the city. “Jerusalem had drainage canals which were constructed with an almost modern care and precision...There appear to have been sluice holes to take the water from the streets, and even manholes for cleaning.”³

The Tyropoeon Valley (also called “the Valley of the Cheesemakers”) carved the city into two halves: the Lower City (the poorer area of the city) and the Upper City (the richer area, which would later play a prominent role in the Gospel story). According to an ancient map, “two parallel arcades ran through the city from north to south, the Great and Small market streets...These two main commercial streets were linked by numerous side streets running from east to west...”⁴

During the many days of the Passover festival, Jesus and his friends probably roamed these streets, village boys overawed by the wonder of Jerusalem.

“Nothing in Jesus’ experience would have prepared him for the busyness of business here – the haggling over prices, the shouting and teasing, the furious single-mindedness of buyers and sellers alike. Laid out on tables or held up to view was a kaleidoscopic display of souvenir trinkets and fine goods (scores of different types of luxury items were available in the city marketplaces). Slaves and servants were buying food and provisions for their masters; farmers were offering fresh fruits and vegetables, probably at appalling prices. The streets

were thronged with domestic animals, including those being brought to the Temple for sacrifice and those being offered for sale to pilgrims.”⁵

And amid the cosmopolitan hurly-burly, the young Jesus would have seen Roman soldiers, watching over the pilgrim crowds. For the political character of Jerusalem had changed drastically since the days of Herod the Great. When Herod’s son Archelaus inherited Judaea, the province was thrown into political turmoil, which had climaxed in the slaughter of 3000 pilgrims on a Passover just a few years earlier.* Caesar Augustus had responded by deposing Archelaus and annexing Judaea as a Roman province. Thus the Jerusalem that the boy Jesus saw was already under Roman rule, governed by a Rome-appointed procurator. And each year auxiliary troops were marched in from Caesarea in order to prevent a repeat of the Passover unrest.

The potential for unrest during Passover was obvious to all, Jew and Roman alike. Not only did the population of Jerusalem swell to many times its usual number (in itself a cause for concern), the very message of Passover was one of liberation. It commemorated the deliverance of the Jews’ forefathers from slavery under Egypt’s iron rule. And now that Jerusalem was again under the rule of a pagan power, the significance of Passover had gained a new and potentially explosive dimension.

“...in this time of Roman military occupation [Passover] took on an added, electric significance. During the seven days of the Passover observance, the air of Jerusalem was fraught with the hope and promise of liberation. The Passover crowd was potentially dangerous; but had Rome tried to deprive the Jews of this religious observance, the troops would surely have met with massive resistance.”⁶

Jesus would have sensed, like every Jew, the building messianic expectation. While visiting the Temple, he would stop and listen to the rabbis discussing fine points of the Law and arguing about the nuances of messianic prophecy.

The time came, however, for the pilgrims to return to their villages. Joseph and Mary told Jesus of the departure time, and since Jesus had consistently been an obedient child, they never considered the possibility that he would not be among the Nazarene caravan when they set out. And so it was not until a full day into the journey, at the time when they would expect Jesus to join his family’s bivouac, that they discovered he was not with them.

* This happened around AD 6. If Jesus was born in 2 BC, this event would have been around 6 years before his Passover visit to the Jerusalem at the age of 12 (remember that there is no 0 AD, which means there is just one year between 1 BC and AD 1). If Jesus was born earlier (around 5 or 6 BC), as many scholars believe, then Jesus’ visit to the Temple may have coincided with the slaughter of the 3000 pilgrims, although this is unlikely since Luke’s account provides no hint of such immediate political tension.

¹ *Fausset’s Bible Dictionary* (Electronic Edition: BibleSoft, 1998)

² *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.123.

³ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p.17.

⁴ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p.19.

⁵ *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), pp.123-124.

⁶ *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.121.

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