

Discovering Jesus Course

54

Jesus at Play

Just like today's children, the children of Nazareth would have played out the full gamut of everyday life in endless childhood games. But instead of playing "doctor and nurse" or "cops and robbers," the children of Jesus' day would have probably played "fathers and mothers" or "being a rabbi" or "fighting a Roman soldier." Jesus would have been no different from other children in this regard.

On several occasions, the Bible alludes to the games that children played. In **Zechariah 8:5**, for example, we read: "The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there." And **Isaiah 22:18** refers to the game of tossing a ball.

"If the balls used in Palestine were like those used by the Egyptians, they were sometimes made of leather or skin stuffed with bran or husks of corn, or of string and rushes covered with leather."¹

Such ball games could well have been played by Jesus and his friends as they were growing up. Other games included role-playing games, games with toys, and competition games of different kinds.

"Children played ball games and what appear to have been hopscotch and jacks. Evidence of whistles, rattles, wheeled animals, hoops, and spinning tops have been found by archaeologists. Older children and adults played various kinds of board games, including a form of checkers."²

Jesus probably had access to many different kinds of toys, some of which may have been carved out of wood by Joseph himself. Archaeology has supplied us with a wealth of information concerning the toys available in the first century.

"Toys abound from ancient Bible times. Miniature houses, animals, and everyday scenes are depicted. Children of the well-to-do were well supplied with diversion. There are dolls with movable joints and lifelike hair. Toys from Tel Beit Mirsim include whistles, rattles, and dolls."³

One thing should be stressed, however. While it has been argued that some children in Jerusalem may have played with dolls and carved animals, it is unlikely that any of the children of Nazareth had such toys, because of the strict prohibition of **Deuteronomy 4:15-18** against the carving of graven images:

“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.”

For most games in Nazareth, however, toys were not required. Like today, simple mimicry would have been the source of hours of delight. In fact, Jesus himself describes such childplay in **Matthew 11:16-17**:

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’”

Thus in Jesus’ own teaching, we gain unexpected insight into the very games he himself may have played, or seen played, as a child.

“Instrumental music, or piping and dancing, were used in marriages and festivals as a sign of joy...Children imitate their parents and others, and act over in play what they see done by others. Among their childish sports, therefore, was probably an imitation of a wedding or festal occasion...[F]unerals were attended with mournful music, and lamentation, and howling. It is not improbable that children also, in play, imitated a mournful funeral procession.”⁴

In Jerusalem, Herod the Great had erected an amphitheater and hippodrome, with regular sporting events that included gymnastics, chariot races and contests with wild animals. Although this was popular among many of the Hellenistic (Greek-cultured) Jews, the orthodox Jews vehemently opposed such pagan influences. This does not mean, however, that the rural Jews did not enjoy sports. The Bible often alludes to running as a sport (see **Psalm 19:5; Ecclesiastes 9:11**), and battle sports, such as archery, slinging and swordplay, were probably a common source of fun for both boys and men.

“Archery practice is implied in the story of Jonathan’s touching interview with David (**1 Samuel 20:20,35-38**)...Only by long practice could the 700 left-handed Benjamite slingers, every one of whom could sling stones at a hair-breadth and not miss (**Judges 20:16**), and the young David (**1 Samuel 17:49**), have attained to the precision of aim for which they are famous.”⁵

Jesus and his friends probably would have also explored the hill country around Nazareth, checking out every cave and cranny. Jesus probably played with his friends along one of the sharp bluffs near the village – a bluff that his fellow villagers would later try to throw him off (see **Luke 4:28-30**).

¹ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

² *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.98.

³ *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, “Games” (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

⁴ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁵ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

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