

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

## 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, Antiquities 17.213

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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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 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).<sup>4</sup> Wright explains:

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<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (), p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> This may also point to David putting Solomon on a mule to announce his enthronement (1 Kings 1:38-40).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

“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.”<sup>5</sup>

### **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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Jesus knows what he is doing; he knows the cost; and does it anyhow.

### **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.

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> R. T. France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 429.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

Inanimate objections have better perception of what God is doing than do the people that Jesus came to save.”<sup>8</sup>

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."

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.”<sup>9</sup>

### **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.

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<sup>8</sup> Darrell Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 1547.

<sup>9</sup> Bock, p. 1547.

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 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."<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Lee Feinberg, ed. Frank Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel* vol. 6, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 428.

<sup>11</sup> R. T. France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 437-9.

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 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.

## Historical Jesus 12: Intensified Conflict

After he enters Jerusalem, Jesus spent his days in the Temple courts teaching the people and his nights on Mount Olivet staying with friends at Bethany (Lk 21:37-38).

### Stumper Questions

During Jesus' last week of ministry, three times religious leaders pose him questions designed to entrap him. Right from the start, the chief priests and elders asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matthew 21:23). This question seeks to undermine Jesus' credibility. He doesn't have authority from any of the official leaders to interrupt the goings on in the Temple. His authority comes from God, but they could easily call that into question.

Matthew 21:24-27

24 Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Next, the Pharisees and Herodians partnered up to entangle him in his words (Mark 12:13-17). They asked, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" Jesus perceived their hypocrisy and replied, "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." After they brought one to him Jesus asked, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"

"Caesar's," they replied. Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." This answer perfectly avoids both pitfalls this question forces the answerer to fall into. On the one hand, if Jesus said to pay taxes, he would lose credibility with the people. On the other, if he said not to, they would immediately report him to the authorities. Jesus gives the kind of answer that they could understand in different ways, and all they could do was marvel.

The third stumper question came from the Sadducees about resurrection (Luke 20:27-40). They reminded Jesus that Moses had taught them to marry a brother's widow if she didn't have any children. Then they told a preposterous story about seven brothers who all lawfully married the same woman, one after the other. Then they asked, "In the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be?" Once again, his interlocutors think they have Jesus boxed in. No matter which way he answers, they have come-back ready to throw at him.

Luke 20:34-40

34 And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35 but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, 36 for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. 37 But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. 38 Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him." 39 Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." 40 For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

Since death ends a marriage, people would have to get remarried in the resurrection. Jesus rejects this notion, averring that God's people will be like the angels who do not marry. Next, Jesus uses an interesting though obscure argument to support his belief in resurrection. Here is how Anthony Buzzard explains Jesus' response:

"The logic of Jesus' argument was simply that since Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had long been dead, there must be a future resurrection to restore them to life, so that their relationship with the living God could be resumed and they could receive what the covenant had guaranteed them. On no account is Jesus' answer to be used as a justification for believing that the patriarchs were *already* alive. The issue between Jesus and his opponents was whether there would be a future resurrection. Jesus argued that the covenant would fail if the patriarchs were left in their graves. For God to be God of the living, the patriarchs must rise to life again in the future resurrection (Dan 12:2)."<sup>12</sup>

### **An Honest Question**

Of course, while Jesus was dueling with the Sadducees, others were listening in. One such man, a scribe, quite enjoyed Jesus' defense of the resurrection (Mark 12:28-34). So, he asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" This was not a stumper question. The scribe is checking Jesus out, but not in an attempt to embarrass or accuse him. He really wants to see where Jesus is coming from. Jesus replies by quoting the Shema—the classic statement of Judaism from Deuteronomy. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe agreed with Jesus and said, "You have truly said that he is one and there is no other besides him." To this Jesus replied, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." They agree on the definition of God as a singular individual.<sup>13</sup> They agree that humanity's duty is to love the one God with everything and our neighbors as ourselves. This is the one positive interaction Jesus has in

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<sup>12</sup> Anthony Buzzard, (Fayetteville, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 1999), p. 65. See also Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse), p 60 and Warren Prestidge, *Life, Death and Destiny* (Auckland, New Zealand: Resurrection Publishing, 1998), pp. 41-2.

<sup>13</sup> That God is one person is clear from the scribe's usage of the *singular* personal pronoun "he" when he said, "He is one and there is no other besides him." Thus, Jesus and the Jewish scribe both agree on God's oneness leaving no room for later Trinitarian conceptions (*pace* Athanasius).



this public scene.

### **Jesus' Stumper Question**

Now that they've gone a few rounds on the offensive, Jesus puts them on the defensive by asking his own stumper question (Matthew 22:41-45). To the Pharisees he asked, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They replied, "The son of David." Jesus continues:

Matthew 22:43-46

43 He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 44 "'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? 45 If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" 46 And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

This is a really tough saying to understand because Jesus doesn't explain what he means. He poses the question and just lets it hang there in the air. My thought is that Jesus was trying to show them that descending from David is not enough. It is necessary for the Messiah to be a "son of David" but that is not sufficient. Mary was of David's descendants, but Jesus' father—well, that's another story. He is, in fact, the son of God. His mother knew it, the demons knew it, but these critics were clueless. Jesus is both son of David and Son of God.

### **Parables against His Enemies**

Interspersed with them asking Jesus questions, he told several parables. That Jesus could exhibit such creative genius under such hostile conditions boggles my mind. Typically our wit diminishes the more stress we experience.

Jesus told them a story about two sons whom their father told to work in the vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32). The first said he wouldn't go but then changed his mind and went, but the second said he would go but then didn't. Jesus asked them which had done his father's will. They replied, "The first." Jesus continued, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him." This kind of direct confrontation was Jesus' style.

Next, he told another parable about wicked tenants who abused and even murdered the representatives the owner sent to collect the fruit (Matthew 21:33-44). Then the master sent his own son, thinking they would have to respect him, but instead they seized him and killed him. Jesus asked, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They answered, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." Unwittingly, they have condemned themselves. They are the tenants, and Jesus is the son. In just a few days, they will kill him, bringing God's judgment down on themselves.

Lastly, Jesus narrated the story of a wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14). A king gave a wedding feast for his son, but those whom he invited would not come, so he punished them and opened up the invitation to anyone who was willing to attend. The Pharisees were invited to believe in God's Messiah but did not, though the tax-collectors, prostitutes, and sinners received him warmly. Sadly, even such razor sharp and convicting parables could not penetrate the hard hearts of these people. In the end, they would do just as the parable said.

Jesus did not only use parables, he also pronounced judgment on the Pharisees and scribes directly (Matthew 23). We have already looked at how he accused them of hypocrisy and called them to repentance, so we will not look at that now, though it is good to keep in mind that the eight thunderous woes of Matthew 23 occurred in the context of his last week.

From his triumphal entry to his Temple disturbance to his public confrontations, Jesus' enemies prepared to act. They weren't sure how they could capture him, but they knew they wanted to kill him (as well as Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead, cf. John 12:9-11).

Matthew 26:3-5

3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, 4 and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. 5 But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

For his part, Jesus continued preaching openly in the Temple courts to all who would listen.

John 12:42-50

42 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

In the end, they would have to wait for someone to hatch a plan to whisk Jesus away secretly. But, where did Jesus stay? When could they get to him when he wasn't surrounded by the multitude? If only they had an insider—one of Jesus' inner circle—to tell them where and when they could arrest him....