

## Jesus, Jerusalem, Judas, Judaism, Jews

### Jesus in Jerusalem

Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem? To celebrate the Jewish Passover, of course, like all Jews. But Jerusalem was about much more than that. This is my explanation of what happened there and why.

Prior to his trip to Jerusalem, Jesus' ministry had taken place almost entirely in small towns and villages in Galilee. It was now time, however, for Jesus to take his message to the big city. He felt he was ready for prime time, and what better time than Passover, when he could reach a maximum audience. After all, his message was a vital and urgent one. The Kingdom of God was imminent, and there was no time to waste. Jews needed to know that and change their behavior accordingly to get themselves ready for the big event.

Jews would likely be in a receptive mood for his message, because it was a time to remember back to their ancestors' miraculous escape from Egypt. They were now looking for another deliverance – this time from their Roman overlords. Some expected it to come in the form of a political and military coup, while others thought it would be more of a cosmic supernatural event. Either way, the end result would be the Final Judgment and the long-awaited Kingdom of God on earth. That part of the prediction wasn't anything surprising to Jews. They had heard that all their lives, and they didn't doubt it would happen. The question, though, was when? The urgency in Jesus' message was that it was almost upon them. It would happen during that generation. So, it behooved Jews to get themselves ready, PDQ.

But one of the first things Jesus did when he got to town was to stir up a big stink in the Temple. By big I mean not that big, really. It wasn't big enough to get him arrested right away. The Temple was, in total, about 25 football fields big. Certainly Jesus'

mini-rebellion didn't cover more than a tiny fraction of that. But it was big enough to make his point.

So, what was his point? It was an odd thing for him to do -- overturn tables used by the money changers and chase merchants out of the Temple. They both had a perfect right to be there, and they were merely obeying Jewish law. Jews were legally obligated to sacrifice an animal each year at Passover, and it could be done only at the Temple. It was impractical, for most people at least, to bring the animal with them, so they bought their sacrificial lamb at the Temple. But they couldn't use Roman money, because the coins had an image of the emperor. That was a no-no for Jews for a couple of reasons. First, it violated their sense of monotheism. There was only one God, and it wasn't the emperor, so his image had no business in the Temple. Second, it violated their law against "graven images". So, Jews traded their Roman coins for Temple money before buying their sacrificial animal.

Why would Jesus have a problem with that? Maybe because he objected to anyone making a profit off such a holy day. That's how his disciples apparently interpreted it. It is widely accepted that Jesus thought the Temple officials had become corrupt. But there may have been a more symbolic meaning, as well. Jesus thought the Temple would be destroyed when the Son of Man arrived to usher in the Kingdom of God. Maybe Jesus' kerfuffle was meant to symbolize what was about to happen on a much larger scale. That certainly seems to fit well with the rest of the Jerusalem story, and with these verses: Mark 13:1-2; 14:58; 15:28-29:

**As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great**

**buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”**

**“We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’”**

**Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!”**

Jesus’ contempt for corrupt Jewish Temple leaders would be reason enough for them to take note of him. The incident in the Temple may not have been big enough to have him arrested immediately, but it was enough to have him followed. What that surveillance revealed over the next few days was cause for alarm among Jewish leaders. They saw Jesus attracting ever larger crowds, and they realized that things could quickly get out of hand. There were plenty of people who might be exposed to Jesus’ teaching, and most of them were likely be receptive to it, because they were getting tired of waiting for the Messiah and the Kingdom of God to arrive. They were fed up with their Roman oppressors, and they were antsy. The idea that the Kingdom was right around the corner would have sounded pretty good to them, but not to Jewish leaders. So the leaders decided to have Jesus arrested in a preemptive strike against him.

That set the stage for Judas to play his role. But why would he betray Jesus? Maybe he just wanted some quick cash. Maybe he was disappointed that Jesus had not provoked by now a full-fledged rebellion. Maybe he thought Jesus wasn’t aggressive enough, and he wanted a revolt that would get that whole Kingdom of God thing started, pronto. Maybe he thought he could force Jesus’ hand and give the Final Judgment a kick-start.

In any case, Judas didn’t simply tell the authorities when and where they could find Jesus alone. The leaders could easily have gotten that information based on their own surveillance and saved themselves some silver. What else did Judas do or say to make his services worth 30 pieces of silver?

That takes us to an aspect of Jesus’ teachings that we don’t often hear about in Sunday School or from the pulpit. It is widely accepted that Jesus privately

told his disciples things he would not say publicly. And what did Jesus publicly say about himself? One of the things Jesus had never publicly proclaimed was that he was King of the Jews. Yet that’s what he was charged with when he was arrested. Why would Roman authorities think he had said any such thing? From Judas.

Matthew 19:28:

**Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”**

Luke 22:28-30:

**“You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”**

Jesus had privately told his disciples that they would play a prominent role in the coming Kingdom of God, and Jesus would play a slightly greater role – King of the Jews. (Did that make Jesus divine? Not at all, any more than it made the disciples divine). Obviously Jesus said those words prior to Judas’ betrayal, because after that no Jew in his right mind would have ever entertained the notion of Judas sitting on a throne, judging a tribe of Israel.

When Jesus was asked if he was indeed the King of the Jews, he couldn’t very well deny it after telling his disciples that he was (or soon would be). That’s something the Roman authorities would have taken very seriously, because there was not room in the Roman Empire for another king, especially someone like Jesus. Yet, Pilate did not want to crucify Jesus. Roman authorities didn’t see this man as a threat to them. But the Jewish leaders saw Jesus as a threat to them. That’s why they insisted that Jesus be crucified.

To Jews, *King* was another word for *Messiah*. They did not expect their Messiah to die, and the fact that Jesus did die was enough to disqualify him as the Messiah in most Jewish minds at the time. His resurrection did not change that. So anyone who

thought of Jesus as their Messiah after his death and resurrection must have thought of him as the Messiah before his death. (Was his resurrection enough to prove Jesus' divinity? No. His disciples would undergo some form of resurrection in order to sit on the throne as judges over the 12 tribes of Israel. They weren't divine. And Lazarus had been resurrected by Jesus. That didn't make Lazarus divine).

Even in proclaiming himself as future King of the Jews to his disciples, that did not mean Jesus thought of himself or wanted others to think of himself as divine. Nowhere in Mark, Matthew, or Luke does Jesus ever proclaim himself to be divine. He was simply an apocalyptic prophet and a Jew, committed to Jewish law and tradition. Everything about his trip to Jerusalem is consistent with that and helps make sense of it.

## Judas

The story of Judas, as told by Matthew and Luke (author of Acts).

Matthew 26:14-16:

**Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.**

Matthew 27:3-10:

**When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. “I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.”**

**“What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.”**

**So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.**

**The chief priests picked up the coins and said, “It is against the law to put this into the**

**treasury, since it is blood money.” So they decided to use the money to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: “They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.”**

Luke 22:3-6:

**Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.**

Acts 1:15-19:

**In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, “Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”**

**(With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)**

Why did Judas do it? Because of greed? Because the devil made him do it?

How did Judas die? Did he hang himself? Or maybe he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out? Can't be both, although a few bizarre scenarios have been concocted in a pathetic attempt to reconcile them.

Who bought the potter's field? Was it the chief priests? Or Judas himself? Can't be both.

Why was it called the Field of Blood? Because it was purchased with blood money? Or because Judas bled all over it? Could be both, but not likely.

Once again, we see that the Bible does not present a consistent, coherent narrative. The Judas episode, like so many others, has discrepancies and inconsistencies.

(This post is based largely on *Jesus, Interrupted*, Bart D Ehrman.)