

A Den of Robbers

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For Christians around the world today is Palm Sunday, marking the beginning of a most sacred time that climaxes with Good Friday and Easter.

It was in the springtime in the year 30 C.E.

when, as the ancient story goes,

Jesus rode on a young colt into Jerusalem, surrounded by his followers and a crowd of mainly peasants – people on whom he primarily cared for during his ministry.

Some who loved him threw their cloaks onto the road in front of Jesus.

Others spread leafy branches of palm leaves onto the ground, to honor him.

They cried out: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of David! Hosanna in the highest!”

Quite a remarkable scene.

And, at the very time that Jesus was making such a dramatic entrance, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor was entering Jerusalem from the west.

Pilate was accompanied by a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers.

Their military presence declared the power of the Roman empire.

Judea had become a Roman province in 6 C.E.

Pilate’s procession communicated not only military and political power.

It communicated Roman imperial theology
where the Emperor was considered
not only the Ruler from Rome but the Son of God.
Worshipping Roman Gods was in stark conflict with Jewish theology.
Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday most likely
was a deliberate act of political activism, challenging, by his entrance
the very structures of power and domination of the Roman Empire.
Jesus understood that most Jews would know the meanings,
the symbolism of his riding on the young colt.
For in Jewish sacred scriptures, the prophet Zachariah prophesized
that a king would be coming,
“humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” ¹
Such a king would not be a king of war, but a king of peace.
On Palm Sunday Jesus' symbolic entrance into Jerusalem,
a metaphor for the peaceful kingdom of God,
was in stark contrast with Pilate's procession
of the power, glory, and violence of the Roman Empire
that was being so displayed on the other side of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was considered by Jews to be their “city of God.”
But domination by Roman authorities gave no voice to ordinary citizens.
Only a few privileged folks ran the city.
Much of the wealth left the pockets of the poor

¹ Zachariah 9:9.

and went into those of the rich.

This system of governance was legitimized through religious language.

The citizens of Jerusalem were told that

The Roman Emperor (king) ruled by divine law.

The Emperor (king) was the Son of God,

the social order reflected the will of God, and the powers

that be, were ordained by God².

Within the Jewish tradition prior to Jesus' ministry

there is a long history of prophets who opposed such a dominating system.

Jerusalem became for these prophets the place

where a few aristocratic rich and powerful Jews sided with the oppressors, thus, transforming Jerusalem into a city of great human injustice.

And such was the case on that first Palm Sunday.

There was a two-way domination system:

The local domination system centered in the temple was subsumed under the imperial domination system that was Roman rule.³

The Temple had become the center of both a local and an imperial tax system.⁴

The peasants across Jewish Palestine

were devastated by such a tax system.

² Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 2006. p. 4.

³ Borg and Crossan, p. 18

⁴ Borg and Crossan, p. 17

For the first time in over one thousand years,
peasant farmers lost their farmlands,
either by Roman confiscation or by an inability to pay back loans.
By 30 C.E. many peasants had lost their lands and livelihoods,
and were aware of the injustices of both Rome and the temple authorities.
Jesus' confrontations during his last week alive
made the Temple authorities realistically afraid of a peasant revolt,
fearing possible Roman punishment
upon both the Temple and their nation.

Jesus' voice against the Temple authorities
with their alignment with the Romans
was also found at that time in other Jewish voices,
including the Essenes and the Zealots,
who opposed the Temple authorities.
And, there was among the populace,
common knowledge of John the Baptist,
who had baptized people "for the forgiveness of sins."
This was against the Temple authorities, who asserted
that forgiveness of sins could only be given
through animal sacrifices at the Temple.
John the Baptist no longer required the Temple authorities
as mediator to his God.
Jesus, baptized by John, was proclaiming also that God's forgiveness

could be obtained through baptism, not animal sacrifice.

This was heresy to the Temple authorities.

There are no contemporary records of Jesus.

There is only one known possible source of the Passion week,
known as the *Cross Gospel*,⁵ which is now lost to us.

Most likely The Gospel writer Mark used this *Cross Gospel*
to write about Jesus' last week.

The gospel writers Matthew and Luke wrote their own versions from Mark.

The Gospel of *Mark* was written probably from Rome around 70 C.E.
for a local Christian congregation.

The Gospels of Luke and Matthew written about 20 years later,
copied about 40% of *The Gospel of Mark*.

The Gospel of John was focused more on what the writer perceived
as Jesus' theological ideas rather than what happened to him personally.

All of these early Christian evangelists lived outside of Judea,
fifty years or more after Jesus lived.

Their stories are slanted towards trying to persuade people of the truth of
Christianity.

So, as fascinating as they are,
they are not reliable sources for what happened
to Jesus during his last week on earth.

We know of only three pagan sources about Jesus

⁵ Jean Pierre Isbouts, *The History and Archaeology of the Bible* USA: The Teaching Company, 2021, p. 108.

written at least 80 years after his death.⁶

Pliny the Younger (61-113 C.E.) mentions Christians in a letter he wrote in 112 C.E.

The Roman Historian Tacitus (55-117) a few years later wrote about Emperor Nero shifting the blame for the great fire in Rome onto the Christian minorities, while actually Nero, himself was responsible for setting this terrible fire.

And the third pagan writer was the Roman Historian Suetonius who mentions Christians in his writings a couple of years after Tacitus.

These are the only three pagan sources writing about Jesus or Christianity, that biblical scholars know of, written 80 years after Jesus' death.

Trying to remember what happened 80 years earlier is like .

our trying today to remember accurately the events

surrounding the events of the Allies invading Sicily in 1943 during World War II.

Aside from these pagan authors and the Christian evangelists, we have one record from the great Jewish historian, Josephus, writing from Rome, after he escaped the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E in Jerusalem and eventually became part of the court in Rome.

Josephus's writings let us know that Jesus's influence continued throughout the first century for some people, even though very little evidence exists from his actual life.

So, what we have today are the stories of Jesus' life, mainly from the evangelists.

⁶ Bart Ehrman. *Lost Christianities. Lecture 16, Forgeries in the Name of Paul.* The Great Courses, 2006.

We have to remember they are stories, not historical documents.

But, as Elaine Pagels, Biblical scholar recently wrote

in her new book *Miracle and Wonders*⁷

these are stories written most likely to serve *to patch a fractured narrative -to smooth over inconsistencies that believers struggled with from the beginning.*

And in a recent New Yorker article by journalist Adam Gopnik, we find this same idea, of repairing historical gaps with fiction.

Adam writes: *We repair the rips in memory's fabric with the filler of fable.*⁸

Pagels gives us an example of such fictional writing of history

from the story of George Washington, cutting down the cherry tree, which arose about 10 years after his death.

I agree with Elaine Pagels' conclusion that while we don't really know accurately what happened to Jesus, we do know *that something happened.*

With this in mind, let us now return to the Gospel stories of the first two days of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem.

In 30 C.E., where after he briefly visited the Temple, he retired to the hills.

The next day he returns to the Temple,

and this is when he greatly angers the powers that be.

Jesus is, according to the Gospels,

⁷ Elaine Pagels, *Miracles and Wonders*, New York: Doubleday, 2025.

⁸ Adam Gopnik, "We're Still Not Done with Jesus," *The New Yorker*, March 24, 2025, p. 6.

shocked by the selling of animals for sacrifice
within the Temple forecourt.

The Gospel writer Mark tells us that

“he began to drive out those who were selling,
and those who were buying in the Temple,
and he overturned the tables of the money changers
and the seats of those who sold doves”

“Is it not written,” Mark’s Jesus cried, quoting from the book of Isaiah,
“my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?”

And in the same breath Mark’s Jesus cited Jeremiah’s Temple sermon:

*“But you have made it a den of robbers.”*⁹

Jesus’ words of “a den of robbers” may have brought about his arrest,
as just two years prior, Pilate and the Temple authorities
had been accused of illegally appropriating funds from the Temple
treasury to build a Roman aqueduct.¹⁰

Jesus, in his courageous acts during these last days of his life,
followed in the footsteps of the prophets, such as Jeremiah.

Was Jesus thinking of Jeremiah

when he turned over the tables in the Temple,

Jeremiah, who almost lost his life for his religious convictions?

Did Jesus believe that he could protest against the Temple authorities

⁹ Jeremiah 7:11; Mark 11: 15-17.

¹⁰ Jean Pierre Isbouts, *In the Footsteps of Jesus*, 2nd ed. Washington, D.C. National Geographic Association, 2017, p. 226.

and have the same outcome as Jeremiah,
which was to be saved at the last moment by the people from death?
Did he believe he could change the temple authorities to bring relief
to the poor, bring justice, not injustice?
Perhaps. But he must have known too, that he faced possible arrest and
execution.

What do these stories of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem possibly mean for
us today?

For many of us today as Unitarian Universalists
Jesus is not the Son of God, but an incredibly courageous human being,
spirit filled, who challenged injustice.

He was a preacher of dedication and purpose.

Born poor, he was sympathetic to the plight of the poor,
the needy, the peasant.

He was a powerful speaker, a prophet in his own right, following such
biblical greats as Moses, Jeremiah, Amos, and John the Baptist.

He offered both righteous indignation and visions of a better way of life,
based on an ethical foundation of how he believed
we humans can better behave towards one another.

He not only taught what he believed, but as we can clearly see.

from these two stories, that of his entrance on Palm Sunday
and his anger expressed in the Temple the next day,
that Jesus lived what he believed.

Today, in our nation, we are facing unprecedented challenges to our traditional American way of life.

We, too, are challenged to live what we believe, our values as Unitarian Universalists, and as citizens of a democracy. Because of the deep concern for what is happening in our nation today, three members of our congregation have given me copies of Timothy Snyder's book "On Tyranny, twenty lessons from the Twentieth Century."

I read this book and it deepened my understanding of authoritarianism. I recommend to anyone concerned about preserving our democracy today that you read this book, and especially the graphic edition with illustrations by Nora Krug.

Like Jesus' time, we are living in a time when greed and power are sought at higher and higher levels by fewer and fewer people. Wealth inequity has substantially increased in the United States in recent decades.

The top 10% of earners own almost two-thirds of the total wealth. The lowest fifty percent of earners own only 2.5 % of the total wealth.¹¹

And, it seems, given the current federal administration's policies, that the economic stability of our nation is moving in a fast direction where the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. This is truly an outrage, a great injustice, a cause for calling

¹¹ [what is the wealth distribution in usa - Search](#)

those who do such harm *a den of robbers*.

We are watching with great alarm the increasing use of authoritarian methods to overturn our democracy here in America.

As Unitarian Universalists we believe in our fifth principle
*of the right of conscience and the democratic process within our
congregations and in society at large.*

Like Jesus in the Temple overturning the tables,
we each need to do what we can.

Some of us are joining protests. Some of us are writing letters to the editor.

Some of us are contacting our political representatives,
letting them know of our distress, upset, anger over what is happening.

Some of us are afraid and many tell me they don't know what to do.

Some of us have legitimate and important reasons why we cannot actively participate in challenging what is happening because of, for example, health concerns or care of others in need.

I believe we need, in the words of Timothy Synder,
to be as courageous as we each can be.

We each need to do what we can, while at the same time taking care of ourselves, and our loved ones.

If all of us did something, no matter how small, every day,
there would be an inevitable impact on what is happening.

Each of us will have to decide how much we can do.

May we, like Jesus, have the courage to live our values and religious convictions.

having the courage to do what we can.

Peace and Love to you.