



“Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30 ... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class ... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus’s procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’s crucifixion.

Pilate’s military procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology ... it was the standard practice of the Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the Jewish festivals ... to be in the city in case there was trouble ... The mission of the troops with Pilate was to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish Temple and its courts ... Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on

poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful. Pilate’s procession displayed not only imperial power, but also Roman imperial theology. According to this theology, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, but the Son of God ... For Rome’s Jewish subjects, Pilate’s procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology.

We return to the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem ... As Mark tells the story in 11:1-11, it is a prearranged ‘counterprocession’ ... The meaning of the demonstration is clear, for it uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the Jewish Bible. According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem (Zion), ‘humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ (9:9). In Mark, the reference to Zechariah is implicit. Matthew, when he treats Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, makes the connection explicit by quoting the passage: ‘Tell the daughter of Zion: look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ (Matt. 21:5, quoting Zech. 9:9). The rest of the Zechariah passage details what *kind* of king he will be: ‘He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations’ (9:10). The king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land—no more chariots, war-horses or bows. Commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of peace.

Jesus’s procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’s procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. This contrast—between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar—is central not only to the gospel of Mark, but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity. The confrontation between these two kingdoms continues through the last week of Jesus’s life ... Holy Week is the story of this confrontation.”

(Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, pp. 2-5)



## Regarding the Gospel of the “Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem:

\* “Arriving in Jerusalem a week or more before Passover, as Jesus did, was normal practice. This was because people had to be ritually clean to eat the Passover meal, and it took a week to become ritually clean if a person became unclean.” (David Wenham & Steve Walton, *Exploring the New Testament*, Vol. 1: Gospels and Acts, p. 156)

\* Bethphage and Bethany: perhaps “Place of Figs” and “Place of Affliction/Poverty<sup>1</sup>”? – two towns on the eastern crest of the Mount of Olives, a few kilometers from Jerusalem, where Jesus apparently had friends, with whom He stayed when He was in

the area of Jerusalem – some sources suggest that the Essenes (the predominantly celibate “monastic” community centred at Qumran) had two communities in this area, just outside the city limits, and there is some speculation that *these* may be those towns, especially since (1) the Qumran texts refer to their community as “The Poor/Afflicted Ones” (*ani*), which would make sense in the context of Bethany; (2) the three most famous inhabitants of Bethany in the Gospels (Mary, Martha and Lazarus) are portrayed in the Gospels as unmarried (celibates?)

“you will find a colt that has never been ridden”: perhaps part of this order lies in Jesus’ supreme authority over all of creation—in a certain sense, *all of creation* belongs to Him, and He therefore is not shy about “requisitioning” an animal for a few hours. “It was perhaps because He was unwilling to compromise His friends in any way that He had not asked at Bethany for the lowly beast on which it was His purpose to make His entry into the city ... It is probable that, in His thoughtfulness for others, He thus provided the owner with the opportunity to disclaiming all responsibility before the authorities, though He knew that He could count on the owner’s consent.” (Father M-J Lagrange, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 1938; pp. 121-22). Note both the *prophecy* by Jesus and the *immediate, exact* fulfillment: Jesus is clearly more than simply a teacher or ordinary prophet!

\* “There are Old Testament overtones to Jesus’ arrival ... The vision of a king arriving on a donkey (Zech. 9:9f.); David’s return to Jerusalem on a donkey after the rebellion and death of his son Absalom (2 Sam. 15:30; 16:1f.) ... To arrive on a donkey symbolized arriving in peace, rather than war, and therefore made a statement about the *kind* of kingship Jesus might be claiming for himself ... The crowd’s actions and cries show that they recognized the kingly overtones of Jesus’ arrival (cf. 2 Kgs. 9:13; 1 Macc. 13:49-51)” (Wenham & Walton, p. 156)

\* in the centuries before Jesus, palm branches had taken on a powerful symbolic meaning in Judaism, especially around Jerusalem, associated with the Maccabean “guerrilla war” against the Syrians (160s BC), which resulted in the re-conquest of Jerusalem and the purification and renewal of the Temple:

1 Maccabees 13:50-51 But [Simon] expelled them from there and cleansed the citadel from its pollutions. <sup>51</sup> On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.

2 Maccabees 10:7 <sup>7</sup> Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place.

Palm branches had, therefore, become associated with the successful overthrow of pagan powers and the re-establishing of Jewish self-rule, and so the use of palm branches in the procession ahead of Jesus could easily have been understood by the Jewish and Roman leadership as a declaration of civil war, of the rumblings of an uprising against the established power—an obvious threat!

\* “Hosanna!” – the basic meaning of this Hebrew exclamation is: “Save [us], please!” It is a plea for salvation, both religiously and politically, and it could certainly be interpreted as “Save us...from the Romans”!

“Jesus, who up to this always declined the title of Messiah ... was here giving His approval to what was, in effect, a Messianic entry into the Holy City. But the time had come when He was about to declare there before the Sanhedrin that He was indeed the Messiah, and He now allowed the multitude to hail Him by that title. It was also His desire that the pomp of His entry should be so unassuming as to give no cause of offence to the Roman

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<sup>1</sup> Another possible derivation comes from *Beth-Hananyah*, (“the place where God has been gracious / has shown mercy”).

authorities, and that it should have nothing of a riotous or revolutionary character. A good deal has been written about the way in which Orientals are said to regard the ass as a noble animal. But a Roman passing by on a well-trained horse, helmet on head and lance in hand, would have been more likely to smile at what would seem to him a ludicrous profession or masquerade, a caricature of the triumphant ascent to the Capitol. Jesus, however, accepted this humble homage, humble and meek King as He was; these good folk were doing the best that lay in their power. Those who were nearest laid their garments upon the ass's colt to do duty for a saddle, others spread their cloaks upon the ground along with green branches cut from the fields, while they carried branches of palm in their hands. Then surrounding Jesus, some running ahead, others following behind, and all crying: 'Hosanna! Blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the kingdom that cometh, the kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!' Hosanna, meaning, 'Save, then!' was an acclamation devoted by custom for use in processions. Thus they were hailing the Son of David, the King of Israel, the Messiah whom they so ardently desired. (Lagrange, p. 123)

\* Readers of the Gospels have often asked how a crowd that was apparently so exuberant in *welcoming* Jesus could, in the space of a few days' time, turn so dramatically *against* Him, as we seem to see in the Passion accounts. In this connection it is worth noting that, according to many historians, between 200,000 and 250,000 people were probably in Jerusalem and the immediate area for a major pilgrimage feast like Passover. Some of these were certainly Galileans like Jesus, who would have been most likely to know Him from His ministry there. Many others, however, were foreigners, visitors to the Holy City specifically for this occasion, and were unlikely to have known who Jesus was. It is difficult to know precisely how big the crowds were which welcomed Jesus; it would not be unrealistic to number them in the hundreds, or maybe a thousand. However, given the vast throngs in the city, they were, nevertheless, a proportionally *small* group. It is very possible (probable, indeed) that the "crowd" which later clamoured for Jesus' crucifixion was much smaller (the courtyard of Herod's palace, where Pilate apparently resided in Jerusalem, would probably have held *only a few dozen people*, not thousands). It is also possible that many of this later group had been specifically recruited (or paid?) by the priestly leadership, to push for Jesus' condemnation. In any case, it is very likely that the group that cried for Jesus' death was NOT predominantly the same group that had welcomed Him with such enthusiasm days earlier; they were probably *significantly different groups*, which is not unreasonable, given the size of the crowds in Jerusalem during Passover week, and the relatively small cross-section of people who were likely involved in each event.



**It is ourselves that we must spread under Christ's feet**, not coats or lifeless branches or shoots of trees, matter which wastes away and delights the eye only for a few brief hours. But we have clothed ourselves with Christ's grace, with the whole Christ—"for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"—so let us spread ourselves like coats under his feet. (Andrew of Crete)

