

GLIMPSES

OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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JUDEA (ca. 0–33)



The
ins and outs
of travel in
Jesus'
time.



ON THE ROAD

Travel was a major part of first-century Palestinian life, as the Gospels record: Mary left Nazareth to visit Elizabeth in the hills of Judea; foreign dignitaries came to pay homage to the new king of the Jews; Jesus attended the wedding feast at Cana and visited with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. In fact, the travel narratives form a large proportion of the Gospels.

GETTING AROUND

The least expensive mode of transportation was, of course, walking. Walking speed depended on the climate, season, and terrain, but one could generally walk about 20 miles in a day. The Book of Acts recorded Peter walking 40 miles from Joppa to Caesarea in two days.

Jesus, like many of his contemporaries, crisscrossed the country

CONTINUED . . .

numerous times. Assuming he went from Nazareth to Jerusalem every year for each of the three required annual feasts using the shortest route through Samaria, a distance of 75 miles each way, he would have walked a minimum of 13,500 miles before beginning his ministry. On at least one of his later pilgrimages, he went from Capernaum to Jerusalem by way of Jericho, 106 miles

DID YOU KNOW?

The population of Palestine in Jesus' day was approximately 500,000 to 600,000.

each way. Estimating conservatively, Jesus probably walked at least 15,000 miles in his lifetime.

Donkeys were frequently used to transport goods. They are fairly strong for their size, sure-footed, and even-tempered, especially when compared with camels. The animals were not used for riding except by women, children, or those too weak or old

to walk. The fictional Good Samaritan, for example, put the injured man on a donkey to transport him to the inn. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, it was an act of great humility.

Horses were faster and more prestigious than donkeys but also more expensive. A horse can travel 25 to 30 miles per day; changing horses throughout the day can yield extra miles. Chariots, from Egypt, were typically used only by the very wealthy or powerful, and the only mention of such transportation in the New Testament is the story of an Ethiopian eunuch riding on the long road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

DANGERS

Along their way, travelers risked dangers and hardships.

Attacks by wild beasts remained a threat until the end of the nineteenth century, particularly along the Jordan Valley. Worse than the lions, which were eradicated from Palestine during the 1800s, were the unpredictable Syrian

bears in the hills.

Even more likely were attacks by bandits along lonely stretches, as described in the parable of the Good Samaritan. These attacks were often politically motivated, and the Roman penalty for such acts was crucifixion. (Barabbas was likely such a bandit.)

WHERE TO STAY

For Jews, hospitality to travelers was a necessity. The land and climate make necessary the giving of water, food, and protection. In addition, God commanded hospitality. Jews described Abraham as the model host and considered him the founder of inns for travelers. In one story, God himself dropped in on Abraham just after the three heavenly visitors had arrived; God was told to wait while Abraham attended to the guests who had arrived first.

Even when Jerusalem was flooded with pilgrims during the feasts, Jews were expected to take in as

many guests as possible. Rabbi Nathan described Jerusalem as a city where “no man ever said to his fellow, ‘I haven’t found a bed to sleep on in Jerusalem. ...’ No payment for a bed is accepted there.”

So at Passover, Jesus and his disciples used a furnished upper room for the meal (for which no payment was mentioned as part of the arrangement). There were also hostels next to synagogues where travelers could spend the night. Those who came to Jerusalem after the rooms were full would spend their nights in tent camps located on the Mount of Olives.

WHERE TO GO

Jesus’ journeys between Galilee and Jerusalem have been the most misunderstood travel accounts in the Bible. Josephus’s reference to a Samaritan attack on a group of Galilean pilgrims going to Jerusalem has often been taken to explain that Jesus’ route through Samaria was unusual and risky. Many have asserted that Jews refused to travel through

At the Synagogue

Though first-century Palestine was mostly illiterate, theological education remained a high priority for Jews. So the illiterate gathered with the literate and learned the Scriptures together in a place named for the Greek word for assembly—the synagogue. Synagogues provided a spectrum of services from hotel to courtroom, but these activities were secondary to the synagogue’s main function as a place of Scripture reading and worship.

On the Sabbath, the meetings began with a series of prayers. After the prayers came the essence of the synagogue service, the reading of the Torah. The attendant of the synagogue would take the scroll from the ark and offered it to the first of seven selected readers.

The reading was done while standing. The Torah was read first, then the Prophets, accompanied by a continuous translation into Aramaic (the language commonly spoken in Palestine). Only one verse at a time could be read from the Law before translation, and three verses for the Prophets.

Following the reading of the Law and Prophets, a sermon was given by someone invited by the hazzan. Preaching was not the prerogative of any one group or class of people. Jesus, for example, preached in the Nazareth synagogue. Paul often “proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews” (Acts 13:5). The preacher would then close the sermon with a brief prayer.



Samaria at all, crossing the Jordan to the east in order to avoid the

area they regarded as “unclean.”

This notion is a myth.

The Samaritan attack Josephus referred to happened in AD 52, and no such attack had occurred before or during Jesus' lifetime. Even Josephus says, "It was the custom of the Galileans, when they came to the Holy City at the festivals, to take their journeys through the country of the Samaritans." The route from Galilee to Jerusalem via Samaria remained the shortest and easiest route, a journey that took only three days.

The direct route through Samaria was not, however, the only way from Galilee to

Jerusalem. It was also possible to follow the Jordan River to Jericho, then ascend the Jericho Road to Jerusalem. This route was not only 23 miles longer but also considerably hotter, with a steeper ascent to Jerusalem. The steep road winds through a desolate wasteland of barren rock with twisted canyons and cliffs.

Pilgrims went up to Jerusalem for the three required feasts: Unleavened Bread, Weeks (Pentecost), and Tabernacles. Jesus also went to Jerusalem during Hanukkah (the Feast of Dedication).

Pilgrims from the entire civilized world came to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem. Josephus records 256,000 sacrificial lambs offered at Passover in AD 66, a figure implying more than two million participants. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus made their pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem

at Passover with a company of relatives and acquaintances large enough for Jesus' absence not to be noticed for a full day's journey.

By the time Paul began preaching, Roman roads extended into Palestine, and established routes were constantly improving. In AD 56, Nero began placing milestones in Palestine at every Roman mile (4,862 feet), indicating the dis-

DID YOU KNOW?

Eating two meals per day was common in ancient Palestine, and bread was the main food.

tance to the next town. Understanding the demands of travel in those days helps us know a little more about the life of Jesus, who traversed such demanding, dangerous paths so frequently.

PRAYER JOURNAL

"May it be Your will, Lord, our God and the God of our ancestors, that You lead us toward peace, guide our footsteps toward peace, and make us reach our desired destination for life, gladness, and peace."
— Ancient Jewish prayer for travelers.