

Two chapters of my book Jesus Before the Gospels involve discussions of “distorted memories” - that is, recollections of events from Jesus life that appear not to represent what actually happened. One of the chapters deals with events leading up to Jesus’ death (the most remembered part of his life), the other with his public ministry. Just to give a taste of how I proceed in these chapters, I will excerpt here my discussion of the Triumphal Entry. The discussion is a little long for a single post, so I will divide it into two. Today’s post explains what the memory is (one many people still have today!); the next one will try to show why it is best seen as not being a “true” memory.

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## The Triumphal Entry

There seems to be no reason to doubt that Jesus spent the last week of his life in Jerusalem looking ahead to the celebration of the Passover feast. Passover was by far the busiest time of the year in Jerusalem, when the city would swell many times its normal size as Jewish pilgrims from around the year would come to enjoy the feast in the capital city. They would normally arrive a week early to prepare for the big day.

The festival was, and is, celebrated to commemorate the exodus of the children of Israel from their slavery in Egypt during the days of Moses, over a millennium before the birth of Jesus. The historical basis for the feast is given in the book of Exodus. There we are told that the people of Israel had been in Egypt for centuries and had been enslaved there. God, though, heard their cries of despair and sent a great leader Moses, who through his miracle-working power brought the Israelites - well over a million of them - out from their slavery and eventually brought them to the Promised Land.<sup>[1]</sup> Jewish people throughout the world have celebrated this great exodus event, in some respects the founding event for the people of Israel, once a year at Passover. Since the festive meal in the days of Jesus was to involve eating a sacrificed lamb, the only place on earth to celebrate it properly was in Jerusalem, as it was only there, in the temple, that animal sacrifices could be made to God. And so those who had the time and money to do so would come to Jerusalem for the feast.

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It would be a mistake, though, to think that most Jews in Palestine were celebrating this feast out of purely antiquarian interests, to recall what God had once done many centuries before in freeing his people from the bondage of a foreign oppressor. In the first century, Israel was once again subject to another power, this time not Egypt but Rome. Many Jews surely anticipated that as God had acted on behalf of his people in the past, so he would do once more in the future, liberating his oppressed people from the tyranny of a foreign power.

The Roman rulers of Palestine understood full well that this time of year was especially incendiary. Not only were there large crowds of Jews in Jerusalem, but some of these crowds were eager to drive the Romans out of the Promised Land, or to have God do so. The Roman governor, in this case Pontius Pilate, normally stayed at his palatial residence on the Mediterranean coast in Caesarea. But Passover was one time of the year when he would come to stay in Jerusalem, along with his troops, which he would station around the city in order to quell any problems that arose, to squelch any riots before they got out of

hand.

That is the historical reality of Passover around the year 30 CE, when Jesus and a group of his followers came to the city along with thousands of other pilgrims for the festival. That reality itself should call into question the memory of how Jesus arrived in town, in the episode known throughout Christian history as the Triumphal Entry.

In our earliest version, found now in Mark 11, as Jesus and his disciples draw near to the walls of Jerusalem, he sends two of them into a village to procure for him a colt on which he can ride into town. They do so, and Jesus comes into Jerusalem to the acclamation of the gathered crowds. Some throw garments on the road for him to ride over; others cut leafy branches from the fields. The throng of people both before and behind him acclaim Jesus to be the new king who has come to restore the kingdom of David to his people: “And they were crying out, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the Kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest” (Mark 11:9-10).

Matthew has an intriguing variation of this memory of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. According to Matthew, Jesus’ ride into town was a fulfilment of Scripture: “This took place in order to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, who said, “Speak to the daughter of Zion, behold the king is coming to you, humble and seated on a donkey, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass” (Matthew 21:5) This is a quotation of the Jewish Scripture (see Isa. 62:11; Zech. 9:9). According to Matthew, Jesus fulfilled the Scripture in an oddly literal way. As is commonly known, in ancient Hebrew poetry, poetic lines were coupled not by rhyming schemes, as with some English poetry, but by various kinds of conceptual parallelism. In a two-line sequence (a couplet) the first line might say something, and the next line might say the same thing in other words; or it might repeat part of the first line with an additional thought; or it might express the opposite side of the same coin. There were several ways such poetry could work. But it was poetry, not straightforward descriptive prose.

The line from Zechariah about one “seated on a donkey, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass” was the first kind of parallelism I just mentioned, where the second part (a colt, the foal of an ass) is saying the same thing as the first part (a donkey), only in other words. Matthew apparently didn’t understand how the parallelism worked. He took it literally. For him, Scripture predicted that there was to be both a donkey and a colt. As a result, in his version, Jesus tells his disciples to secure two animals. They do so. And Jesus rides into town straddling them. It is, needless to say, a very peculiar memory of the event.

But is the event itself an accurate memory? Was there really a Triumphal Entry?

[1] Exodus 1:37 indicates that there were 600,000 men, which does not include the women and children.



[The Triumphal Entry as a Distorted Memory](#)  
[Weekly Readers’ Mailbag: March 4, 2016](#)