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.

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.[1] 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.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that...

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