

The
FINAL DAYS
of
JESUS

The Archaeological Evidence

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 HarperCollins e-books

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INTRODUCTION

Who was Jesus, and what can archaeology tell us about him? I am sure many people want to know this. The theologians and historians have had their go—many thousands of books attest to this—but what can archaeology contribute in the quest to find out more about the historical Jesus? Does archaeology just provide illustrative material for the context/background of the Gospel accounts, a kind of “garnish” for the focused historical perspective? Or can it provide us with unique, valuable information that can change substantially the way we perceive Jesus and his final days in Jerusalem as set forth in the Gospel accounts?

I believe archaeology is an undervalued and untapped source of rich data on the historical Jesus, and I hope to show this in the pages of this book. Archaeology should be allowed its own voice alongside the information and ideas that emerge from the historical exegesis of the Gospels. They both have their problems: Archaeological remains may be too fragmentary or interpreted incorrectly; textual sources may be too garbled from transmission or replete with errors by copyists. Archaeology, therefore, should be used appropriately—neither to support and prop up the account of Jesus in Jerusalem nor to deny and

tear down the historicity of that account. It should be an independent means of “testing” the validity of the Gospel accounts, to compare and contrast them with historical studies. Archaeology can provide structured explanations and interpretations of specific events, such as the trial of Jesus, and these subsequently need to be tested and woven into the historical perspective.

Archaeological sites are multi-layered, as are the textual accounts—both require dissection and critical examination to elucidate the many “truths” of the past. This is admittedly a difficult and complex task. Understanding the topography of Jerusalem and the layout of the city is essential. Also, having a good grasp of Jewish material remains of the first century is vital. Artifacts with inscriptions can be very helpful: A fragment of a block of stone from Caesarea bearing the name and exact title of Pontius Pilate is a major find and a boon for scholarship. A tomb with the name of Caiaphas on one of its ossuaries is yet another major archaeological discovery highlighting the Gospel story. Other inscriptions, such as the “James” ossuary, are of dubious value because they come from the collections of antiquities dealers and not directly from scientific excavations, but this should not dampen the usefulness of archaeology in elucidating the Gospel narrative.

The need to know more about the places in which Jesus spent his last critical days began a long time ago. This is clearly reflected in the constant flow of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land and particularly to Jerusalem, which began in the fourth century and continues to the present day. Most worshippers desire to see with their own eyes the main sites associated with the Gospel stories: the traditional site of the room of the Last Supper on Mount Zion; the gnarled olive trees of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives; the pavement of Gabbatha at the place where Jesus was tried by Pontius Pilate; the Via Dolorosa along which Jesus carried his cross; the Rock of Calvary where Jesus was brought for crucifixion; and the Edicule in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre covering the vestiges of the Tomb of Jesus.

Inevitably, the same questions are asked by visiting pilgrims and travelers: How reliable are these traditional spots? How certain can we be that the authentic tomb of Jesus is indeed located at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre? In the nineteenth century, alternative locations for some of the secondary holy sites in Jerusalem were given by local guides and by resident clergy, resulting in a lot of confusion and some suspicion amongst those visiting the city. The discomfort pilgrims and travelers felt in having to make educated guesses is apparent in some of their travel accounts.

In the early twentieth century, travelers were confronted with an alternative tomb of Jesus at the “Garden Tomb” on the north side of the city, which caused further confusion. Today, Christian pilgrims are much more demanding and discerning and require “scientific” verification for explanations given by tourist guides in respect to the “traditional” Gospel sites. However, this does not mean they always get what they want.

From where have people derived information about the final days of Jesus? Visual reconstructions occasionally appear on the stage and the big screen. I am thinking particularly of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s excellent musical “Jesus Christ Superstar.” For cinematic renderings, there is the wonderful black-and-white movie by Pier Paolo Pasolini and the other newer movie, “The Last Temptation of Christ,” which managed to create quite a furor when it was released. More recently, I came out of Mel Gibson’s movie about Jesus’s final days, “The Passion of Christ,” feeling like I’d been drenched in gratuitous Hollywood blood. The movie was not being shown in Jerusalem because local distributors deemed the subject “uninteresting” for the general Israeli public; instead I watched a bootleg version, subtitled both in Arabic and English, in the rather quaint sitting room of the British School of Archaeology in East Jerusalem.

Thousands of scholarly studies have been written about Jesus the prophet and healer; his early mission around the Sea of Galilee; his

ideas, sayings, and eschatological messages; and his experiences with John the Baptist at the Jordan River. Scholars agree that none of the Gospels is an eyewitness account of the events it describes, since each was written almost forty to sixty years after the death of Jesus. And so, at best, the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) may be regarded as conveying oral tradition that was to some extent embroidered and embellished as part of the literary process. The Fourth Gospel (John) undoubtedly made use of a lot of historical data that were not available to the other three Gospel writers. The best way to get to some degree of truth about what actually happened, it has been argued, is through the careful historical and literary analysis of the Gospels and their possible sources. However, archaeology has quite a lot to offer, more so than has previously been realized.

In this book I concentrate on Jesus's final days during the Passover week in Jerusalem in 30 CE. Beginning with the road Jesus took to Jerusalem and his sojourn in Bethany, I examine Jesus's activities within the city, particularly at the Jewish Temple and in the adjacent Pools of Bethesda and Siloam. The scene of the trial is investigated and fresh archaeological discoveries are revealed for the first time. Knowing what the place of the trial looked like allows one to visualize the proceedings in a way not previously possible. Questions relating to the exact place of Jesus's crucifixion and burial are also dealt with and new archaeological discoveries are presented. A burial shroud from the first century, uncovered in Jerusalem, is compared to the famous Turin Shroud. Many new ideas and explanations have resulted from my personal quest to follow in the footsteps of the historical Jesus in Jerusalem. The reader may be astonished by some of these results.

"So you're a bit of an Indiana Jones?" the inquisitive shopkeeper asked me upon discovering I'm a professional archaeologist. He looked me up and down to see if I fit the bill, and didn't seem impressed. True, I'm nothing like that fictional movie character, at least not when it comes to fleeing from a mammoth stone ball hurtling down a

narrow underground tunnel somewhere deep in a jungle, but I've had my fair share of excitement and danger while working in the Middle East. Archaeology is a lot of fun, but it is also meticulous detective work with a lot of dull recording, and there are many hours spent in dusty libraries. But you also get the exciting moment of discovery when suddenly out of the ground you lay your hands on a rare and unique artifact: an inscription, the head of a statue, or a hoard of coins. There is also the feeling of high expectation when you open the door to an underground chamber and become the first to pass through its portals for thousands of years. Such moments bring a sublime feeling of exhilaration, with blood pounding in your head as you think about what you might find ahead. There is also danger. I have crawled through partly collapsed tunnels deep underground, some very narrow with very little room for maneuvering around, knowing that the oxygen might run out and the ceiling might suddenly cave in. Wild animals and insects also present a problem—I remember being chased by an angry wild boar and on another occasion by a swarm of stinging hornets, but usually it is just snakes and scorpions. There is further danger when working in areas where the military have left behind unexploded shells and other deadly devices, literally keeping you on your toes. But archaeology mostly consists of long seasons of backbreaking digging, meticulous recording procedures, sessions of post-excavation analysis, and days spent in research libraries fitting the pieces of evidence together.

In my mind, Jerusalem is one of the most exciting archaeological sites in the world, with an amazing array of ancient remains underground. Some have already been uncovered; some await discovery. It is one of the most excavated places in Israel, even though large portions of the ancient city, hidden under modern houses and buildings, are inaccessible for digging purposes. I am fortunate to have spent some of my professional years digging into the depths of this amazing city, seeking out the vestiges of its past and fitting together history with

archaeology. I have dug next to the palace of Herod the Great, where the trial of Jesus took place, and in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, not far from the Tomb of Jesus. I have also made detailed archaeological studies of the underground cavities beneath the Temple Mount and a new survey of the Pool of Bethesda. I am now digging in the area of the Upper City, close to where Byzantine tradition places the House of Caiaphas. They say that each spade sunk into the ground is bound to reveal rich information about Jerusalem's past, and in my experience this is true. There are still major lacunae and uncertainties in our knowledge regarding the development of ancient Jerusalem, but, as we shall see, recent scientific archaeological excavations have been able to provide solutions to quite a few thorny historical difficulties. The problem is, the more we know, the more clearly we see the need to know more, and the questions we derive from the new archaeological data begin to multiply. And so the quest for exacting more knowledge from the ground goes on. In the past decades, many archaeological discoveries have fundamentally changed the way we perceive the appearance of the city where Jesus spent his final days.

The general *raison d'être* for this book was my wish to unravel once and for all the mystery surrounding the final days of Jesus in Jerusalem: why he went there; how he came to be arrested, tried, and crucified; and where his place of burial was located. This book is the first to examine the final days of Jesus using the *full* array of archaeological finds dug up in Jerusalem. Some of my conclusions regarding Jesus and Jerusalem may be controversial, but readers should remember the dictum established by the master of detection, Sherlock Holmes: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." If the reader reaches the final page of this book and goes away feeling that it has indeed made a small contribution in illuminating the story of Jesus's final days in Jerusalem, then I will have succeeded in what I initially set out to do.

THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

(Luke 13:34)

No visitor to modern Jerusalem can ignore that it is the place where Jesus spent his final days and was ultimately crucified. Jesus’s impact on the city of Jerusalem was major, perhaps more so than that of any other individual in history. Ever since the fourth century, when Christianity was recognized as the official religion in the Holy Land, millions of Christian pilgrims have poured into Jerusalem seeking out the places associated by tradition with Jesus’s Passion week.

Almost 2,000 years later the formidable presence of Jesus still lingers over the Old City, whether at the Garden of Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives, at the Stations of the Cross along the Via Dolorosa, or at the various shrines within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Walking the city streets are Christian priests and monks of different denominations: Dominican, Franciscan, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Ethiopian, and others. Souvenir shops have wall-to-wall icons and olive-wood carvings depicting the Nativity and Calvary and are stocked with crucifixes, large baskets heaped with incense and candles, and various mementoes such as guidebooks and postcards of the Holy

Sites. Groups of Christian worshippers pass along the Via Dolorosa during Easter week carrying full-scale replica wooden crosses, singing and praying and with tears rolling down their cheeks. Jesus is on everyone's lips.

Jerusalem was and still is a city imbued with holiness and a sense of extreme tension, with ongoing battles between the liberal and free, the strict and authoritative. It is a place you thrive in or drown in; you can spout philosophy there or wander in lunacy. There is magic in its stones. Jerusalem is one of those special cities that many put on the list of places they most want to visit during their lifetime.

In Gospel accounts, Jesus first visited the city as a child with his parents during one of the major Jewish festivities held there. Jesus climbed the steps leading into the Temple precinct, establishing his footsteps firmly in the history of the city; some would say that from that moment his fate was sealed. At the time of Jesus it was a place dominated by the Temple of God, and this looming and majestic building was visible anywhere in the city. It was truly a City of the Temple. As a sensitive child fascinated with learning, Jesus would undoubtedly have been fully aware of the significance of Jerusalem as a place connected with some of the major events in Israelite history. It was here King David and King Solomon reigned; it was to this place that the Ark of the Covenant was brought; eventually the Temple of God was built on Mount Moriah; and it was in these city streets that the Israelite Prophets berated their people. As an adult, Jesus continued returning to Jerusalem to participate in the main Jewish festivities and to teach and heal, perhaps starting to gain a reputation as a man of "signs and wonders." Jerusalem became almost a forbidden magnet for Jesus: It was a place, we may surmise, he very much wanted to be in because of his Jewish upbringing and his need to be close to the Temple of God, but the city also drew out his anger and compassion, and eventually brought him into conflict with the Jewish and Roman authorities.

Finally, during Passover week in the year 30, Jesus's fate was sealed and he died on a wooden cross opposite one of the gates of the city. The crucifixion of Jesus was a traumatic event that eventually opened the door to the birth of Christianity. Archaeology, as we shall see, has been able to fill in the gaps regarding the appearance of Jesus's Jerusalem, the places where Jesus preached and healed, the whereabouts of his trial, the manner in which he was crucified, and the spot where he was ultimately buried.

But first, we need to pull back to an earlier time in Jesus's life, to establish something about his Galilean background and clarify the dates of his birth and death in order to place him within the correct historical context. We will then consider the archaeological facts regarding the road Jesus took on his final trip to Jerusalem and the places he probably visited or passed en route.

Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, was known in Hebrew as Yeshua Ben Yoseph (John 1:45: "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth'"). What many know from the Gospels is that Jesus spent his childhood and much of his formative life in Nazareth, a somewhat modest, small village nestling in the hills of Lower Galilee, and it was from there he set forth on his mission to Jerusalem.¹ But there is much yet unknown about Nazareth from the time of Jesus, except that it appears to have been an agricultural village, surrounded with terraced orchards and vineyards. Animal husbandry would have been practiced as well. A few burial caves of the period, wine presses, and a stone-vessel industry are known from the vicinity of the village. Nazareth was by no means isolated and remote; it existed near the large and thriving town of Sepphoris, the restored capital of the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas, though its name is not mentioned in the Gospels.² Judging by the relative sizes of rural villages in Palestine at that time, Nazareth must have been quite small, perhaps with only a couple of hundred people

living there. The bottom line is that everyone living in the village would have known each other.

In addition, Jesus's family was not poor as some have thought it to have been. As an artisan (carpenter/stone mason) Joseph had professional skills that would have put him and his family within the top echelon of village society, on a par with small landowners.³ Joseph's profession is clearly stated in Matthew in regard to Jesus: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" (13:55). Whether or not Jesus learned the trade is unclear, but the imagery of the artisan pops up in Jesus's sayings, such as "Why do you see the splinter in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3-5). Jesus also liked to quote Psalm 118: "The stone that the builder rejected has become the cornerstone" (Luke 20:17). Joseph clearly possessed the financial means to cover the costs of traveling to Jerusalem to ensure that Jesus was presented in the Temple ("When the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord") and even to celebrating Passover there on an annual basis (Luke 2:41: "Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover"). The cost of traveling in those days was exorbitant and could not have been undertaken by everyone. Not only was there a loss of earnings for the period the family was away from home, but food had to be bought along the way, and inns and road tolls had to be paid for. Jerusalem was an expensive city to stay in and accommodations were dear, especially at the time of festivities. Hence, the family of Jesus cannot have been poor.

What about the origins of the family of Jesus? Were they Judean or Galilean?⁴ According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus is said to have come from Nazareth. But John is doubtful that anything good can come out of Nazareth. John refers to those raising questions about Jesus's origins: "But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come

from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?’” (7:41–42). Bethlehem was situated not in the Galilee but in Judea and was regarded as the ancestral town of King David. Matthew makes a point of emphasizing the link between Jesus and David in his genealogy at the beginning of his Gospel. Matthew goes on to say that the family of Jesus at one point “withdrew” into Galilee at the time of Herod Archelaus, whereas Luke (2:4) says they were resident in Nazareth and only traveled to Bethlehem in order to enroll in a census.

Hence, there are two possibilities: First, that Jesus was born in Nazareth and came from a Galilean family of long standing. The idea is that the connection to Bethlehem was forced by certain Gospel writers to establish a firm genealogical link between Jesus and King David. The second possibility is that the family, or at least those from Joseph’s side, originally came from the Judean Hills south of Jerusalem, but eventually relocated to the Galilee at some stage after Jesus was born.⁵

Since the people of Nazareth were subsequently unfriendly toward the adult Jesus, treating him like an outsider, not as a member of a well-established local family, this points to Jesus’s family being originally of Judean stock. Indeed, at one point Jesus was cast out of Nazareth in an undignified and positively murderous fashion: “and they [the inhabitants] rose up, and cast him forth out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong . . .” (Luke 4:28–29). This sounds like they intended to harm Jesus, perhaps even to kill him by stoning, had they managed to push him over the cliff. It is not surprising that in later rabbinical writings we read that a cliff, which had to be at least twice the height of a man, was a designated execution place where criminals were thrown over and stoned to death.⁶

In Jesus’s time, archaeology shows Nazareth to have been a very small place; a violent disagreement of this kind would have had a

disruptive effect on the entire village. Since Jesus managed to escape from Nazareth to Capernaum, we must assume his family were also banished or left of their own accord. Perhaps this explains why in Mark we hear of the fishing village Capernaum subsequently being referred to as “home”: “When he [Jesus] returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.” Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, was undoubtedly Jesus’s main base of operations as a rabbi, teacher, and healer. Jesus spent most of his life in the Galilee, initially at Nazareth and then for a few years more in Capernaum, until he was more than 30 years of age (Luke 3:23).⁷

What do we know about the chronology of Jesus’s life? This is a subject that has been and continues to be a major bone of contention among scholars. My own view is that the crucifixion probably took place in the year 30 CE, when Jesus was 36 years of age, and two years after the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas.⁸ But how does this date square with the chronological data in the Gospel narratives?

There is common agreement that Jesus was born toward the end of the reign of Herod the Great (37–4 BCE) and that this Herod is the same one referred to in Matthew and Luke: “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’” (Matthew 2:1–2). The story Matthew provides of the Slaughter of the Innocents (babies up to the age of 2 years old) cannot be confirmed from any historical source, but it would be in keeping with Herod’s known cruelty and dementia, as reported by the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius. Herod’s health began deteriorating rapidly after 7 BCE.⁹ The bottom line is that Jesus would have been born during the two years preceding Herod’s death, i.e. between 6 and 4 BCE.

Luke’s story (2:1–5) of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem to register in the census undertaken by the Roman governor in Syria,

P. Sulpicius Quirinius, is muddled and incorrect, and so must be disqualified as an historical event.¹⁰ First, Quirinius only arrived in Syria in 6 CE, ten years after the death of Herod the Great, and so the census could only have been undertaken in 6 CE or a year later. Second, there is no historical attestation for a census having been ordered by decree of Caesar Augustus.

Matthew, however, suggests that Mary, Joseph, and the “young child” Jesus returned to Palestine from Egypt while Herod Archelaus was still ruling his kingdom, which included the regions of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. If we take into consideration the fact that Archelaus was deposed in 6 CE and Jesus was still only a “young child” at that time (i.e., he was twelve or younger), then 6 BCE would therefore be a reasonable date for the birth of Jesus.

What seems certain is that the crucifixion took place during Pontius Pilate’s governorship of Judea, between 26–36 CE, and while Caiaphas was serving as the Jewish High Priest in Jerusalem, between 18–36 CE.¹¹ Assuming that Jesus’s birth was in 6 BCE, the crucifixion would have taken place in 30 CE (two years after the beheading of John the Baptist) and Jesus would have been thirty-six years of age at the time of his death.¹² One has to admit, however, that there can be no absolute certainty about the 6 BCE to 30 CE date for the life of Jesus. Indeed, the scholar E. P. Sanders has stated that until new chronological data becomes available, it is perhaps best “if we accept the accuracy of the sources in a more general way. This allows not only one of them, but even all of them to be fuzzy or wrong on some details.”¹³

As a thirty-six-year-old, Jesus would have been regarded by his contemporaries as a man in his prime when he set out on his final journey to Jerusalem, because life expectancy was much lower; few lived past forty. According to Mark: “He left that place [Capernaum] and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him” (1:10). The Gospel accounts are confused and somewhat contradictory.¹⁴ Indeed, Jesus’s last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem is

not even referred to in the Gospel of John, at least only obliquely concerning Jesus's appearance in the lower Jordan Valley.¹⁵

Jesus set out south from Capernaum with his disciples, family members, and followers. Luke says they made their way *between* the borders of Galilee and Samaria, which must mean they entered into the independent territory of Scythopolis (Beth Shean). The rich agricultural lands of Scythopolis were not passed to Herod's sons upon his death, but were in the possession of the province of Syria.¹⁶ From there, Jesus might have considered taking one of three possible routes to reach Jerusalem: a road ascending the northern hills of Samaria to Jenin, where it runs south along the backbone of the hill country as far as Nablus, and then on to Jerusalem. A more direct route would have run south from Scythopolis along the western edges of the Jordan Valley toward Jericho, passing Phasaelis and Archelais. Another road running along the eastern edges of the Jordan Valley, reached via a ford over the Jordan River not far from Scythopolis (the ed-Damieh bridge), extended through the Ghor and ran south all the way to Bethabara, which was situated more or less opposite Jericho. The significance of the path taken by Jesus is important for understanding the background to Jesus's appearance in Jerusalem. Had he taken the first route, Jesus might have exposed his followers to danger. By taking the second route, Jesus would have encountered needless conflict with Judean authorities even before reaching Jerusalem.

However, the third route "beyond the Jordan" led him into familiar territory, since he joined a band of baptizers here under the leadership of John the Baptist a couple of years earlier. Also, as a resident of Lower Galilee in the territory of Perea (the territory of Herod Antipas), it probably would have been easier for Jesus to travel through these additional territories of Perea "beyond the Jordan" (which included a substantial part of central Transjordan) without too much hindrance from the authorities. The same would not have been true had he decided to travel through Judea.

The second route through the highlands of Samaria was deemed dangerous; Samaritans were known to accost caravans of Jewish travelers. The Jewish historian Josephus relates how while traversing the plain of Samaria “a large company of Jews on their way up [to Jerusalem] for the festival” was attacked and a few of its members were murdered. Although Sebaste—the Samaria of the Old Testament—was a pagan city, the Samaritan presence in the countryside was strong. That Jesus himself made visits to the Samaria region is clear from Luke and John, but according to Matthew Jesus forbade his disciples from going there. Indeed, at a watering hole close to Sebaste (Jacob’s Well), a local woman pointedly questioned Jesus about his activities there, “for the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9).¹⁷

Finally, Jesus was reportedly being followed around by a multitude of people, which would have made his appearance along the western edges of the Jordan Valley, deemed Judean territory and under the control of the Roman Procurator, dangerous and foolhardy. After all, Jesus was not just a pilgrim in a caravan on its way to the Passover festivities in Jerusalem, but the leader of disciples and additional followers—a fact the authorities might have regarded as threatening. The town of Archelais, which was built astride the road, 12 Roman miles north of Jericho, would have been difficult for Jesus to pass through unnoticed. Archelais was founded by one of Herod the Great’s sons, Herod Archelaus, who named it after himself to serve as a center for his vast date groves. It has been identified at Khirbet Beiyudat and I visited the site recently to make an appraisal. Only a small part of the site has been excavated, but the remains uncovered from the first century CE are impressive, including residential quarters, ritual bathing pools, and a lot of pottery and stone vessels.¹⁸ Today the surrounding area looks quite bleak and arid, but in ancient times this would have been a thriving town situated within a flourishing green oasis.

For these reasons, the route indicated by Mark and Matthew “beyond the Jordan,” i.e., along the eastern edges of the Jordan Valley

and within the territory of Perea, makes much more sense as the road Jesus took to Jerusalem.

The journey from Capernaum to Jerusalem would have taken most of a week, depending on the time Jesus and his entourage spent at each stopping point.¹⁹ The main roads of that period were simple, between 2 to 6 meters wide, with tamped-down hard surfaces and stones cleared to their edges.²⁰ There were no paved roads at that time. Caravans consisted of people on foot with walking sticks, carrying food and provisions on their backs. The elderly and young probably rode donkeys or mules. The Jordan Valley is a hellish place to walk through in summer, when the heat becomes oppressive. However, the region is mild during the winter and spring months, permitting sleeping in the open at prescribed halting spots. They may have stopped at small villages and water springs along the way. The American scholar Chester Charlton McCown wrote that “the balmy air and the relative infrequency of storms, which at that season may be very severe in the mountains, would seem to qualify the Jordan route as by all odds the one best suited to the movements of considerable bodies of peasant pilgrims to and from the Passover feast.”²¹

Jesus’s route would have taken him next to places of baptism previously frequented by his mentor John the Baptist, namely Aenon and Bethabara. I think Jesus’s appearance in the Jordan Valley was strategic: There, he could practice his healing and consolidate his position as the perceived successor of John the Baptist. Jesus was probably unsuccessful in his endeavor to get major support from the Baptist movement. He most certainly would have visited Salem, near the Spring of Aenon, not far south of Scythopolis, perhaps even staying there for a short while before moving on. Aenon is where John the Baptist spent time baptizing before his death in 28 CE: “And John too was baptizing at Aenon, near Salem, because there was much water there, and [people] came and were baptised” (John 3:23). According to Eusebius, writing in the early third century, “the place is still shown today,

eight miles south of Scythopolis [Beth Shean], near Salem and the Jordan.” The traveler Egeria (384 CE) wrote that on descending to the Jordan River from the main road on the west, she passed through a wide plain and approached a big village called Sedima, with a church on a hillock, and close by “a good clean spring of water which flowed in a single stream. There was a kind of pool in front of the spring at which it appears holy John Baptist administered baptism.”²² Salem also appears in a similar location on the sixth-century Madaba mosaic map of the Holy Land.

Salem is identified with Tell er-Ridrha (known today as Tell Shalem) and Aenon with the nearby spring (‘Ain Ibrahim) situated at the foot of the hill to the northeast, but previous archaeological surveys were unable to show the existence of pottery or other remnants from the site dating from the time of John the Baptist and Jesus.²³ A trip I made to the site last year, however, was quite enlightening: A large fragment of a cooking pot and fragments of red gloss *terra sigillata* bowls from the first century CE were picked up from the site’s surface, showing that the spring indeed existed at the time Jesus passed by. So it is likely that the adjacent village was one of the stopping places for him and his followers.²⁴ Unfortunately, the area of the spring and its pool cannot be excavated since it has been converted into a modern fishpond belonging to nearby Kibbutz Tirat Zvi. There are also one or two unexploded landmines in the area of the spring and village, judging by military signposts.

Another place Jesus probably reached during his final journey is Bethabara, situated in the lower Jordan Valley to the north of the Dead Sea, although this place is not mentioned by Mark, Matthew, or Luke. John, however, does say that Jesus went “beyond the Jordan into the place where John was at the first baptizing; and there he abode” (10:40), and we have to assume this is a reference to Bethabara. Jesus’s presence there was undoubtedly important in his attempt to consolidate his position as John the Baptist’s successor: “And many

came unto him [Jesus], and they said, John indeed did no sign: but all things whatsoever John spoke of this man were true. And many believed in him there” (John 10:41–42).

Bethabara (“house of crossing”) was a village situated next to a ford across the Jordan River, to the north of the Dead Sea, with a road leading west from Transjordan to Jericho. The importance of this location as a place of transition cannot have escaped Jesus. It was from here Joshua crossed into the Promised Land with the Israelites, where Elijah divided the waters of the Jordan River and went up to heaven in a blazing chariot, and where John the Baptist began his ministry and baptized Jesus.²⁵ New archaeological excavations and surveys on the east bank of the Jordan River have brought to light fragmentary remains dating from the first century CE, but unequivocal signs of the village of Bethabara from the time of Jesus have yet to be found.²⁶

Having passed over the Bethabara ford at the Jordan River, Jesus traveled across the Jericho Plain to reach the road ascending west through the hills toward the villages of Bethany and Bethphage and the city of Jerusalem.²⁷ Jericho was a major halting spot for caravans of pilgrims arriving from the north and east. Traveling along the road, Jesus reached the oasis of Jericho but probably didn’t stay there for very long: “They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside” (Mark 10:46). Mark describes the arrival of Jesus at Jericho so awkwardly that we wonder whether incidents occurred there that Mark or his source might have thought irrelevant and so were excised. Alternatively, this might have been a stylistic matter due to the translation of the original source material in Mark from Aramaic into Greek.²⁸

According to Matthew there were *two* blind men near the town:

“As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard

that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, 'Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!' The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, 'Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!' Jesus stood still and called them, saying, 'What do you want me to do for you?' They said to him, 'Lord, let our eyes be opened.' Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him" (20:29–34).

An entirely different story is related by Luke:

"He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today'" (19:1–10).

If Luke is right and Jesus stayed for a while in Jericho, it would be nice to know what the houses of Jericho looked like at that time. Unfortunately, nothing much archaeologically is known about the residential parts of the town of Jericho, except that it was quite large, with an important spring (the spring of Elisha, or in Arabic 'Ain es-Sultan), and a cemetery.²⁹ A large community of priests who served in the Jerusalem Temple lived in the town. The oasis of Jericho was renowned for its date-palm plantations and for producing balsam, which had numerous medicinal uses. Herod the Great built a large complex of sumptuous winter palaces south of the town, at a site now known in Arabic as Tulul Abu el-'Alayiq.³⁰ I know the ruins well, having clambered around them on numerous occasions. The palaces

were excavated from the 1970s, revealing pavilions, residential and service areas, bathhouses, swimming pools, and gardens. In one of the swimming pools Herod had the innocent teenager Aristobulus from the Hasmonean family drowned.

Having made the steep climb up the winding road through the hills, Jesus finally approached Jerusalem from the east, a day's journey from Jericho. Looming in front of him was the large mountainous massif known as the Mount of Olives, with the villages of Bethphage and Bethany (see more about these places in the next chapter); hidden behind it was the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of God.

Why would Jesus have wanted to go to Jerusalem in the first place? Having established himself successfully as an itinerant teacher and healer at the Sea of Galilee, with a dedicated band of disciples and a devoted following, Jesus managed to avoid conflict with the local authorities by distancing himself from the large cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias. On face value, there was no apparent need for Jesus to go to Jerusalem. It is possible that Jesus simply desired to make a religious pilgrimage to the city for the purpose of the Passover festivity, following the custom set by his father. Alternatively, he may have felt the need to go there to intentionally stir things up through his teaching. It is not surprising that sign and prophetic movements, referred to by the first century historian Josephus, originated in Judea or were active there, but not in the Galilee, although malcontents undoubtedly existed everywhere.³¹

A critical analysis of the Gospels (especially Mark) has shown that the account of Jesus's movements and his final journey were apparently edited so that they might be consistent with Jesus's apparent premonition, while still in Galilee, about a journey to Jerusalem, and a likely struggle and death that would ensue when encountering the city authorities. Whether Jesus had a clear working strategy for the time he was to spend in Jerusalem is unknown, but it seems to me that Jesus went there to consolidate his position as a "baptizer" and

to expand upon his healing activities. What is clear is that having arrived in Jerusalem, at least six days before the Passover holiday began (if one accepts the testimony of John 12:1), Jesus had sufficient time to mingle intentionally with the crowds of Jewish pilgrims for the festivities, to persuade them of his beliefs and ideas, and to try to get them to join his following.³² Indeed, Jesus's well-known previous association with John the Baptist, who had been beheaded owing to Antipas' fear of an insurrection, would have made the religious and military authorities of Jerusalem suspicious of Jesus's overall motives in visiting the city at the height of the Passover holiday. We do not know when the authorities first became aware of Jesus's presence, but it was probably when crowds began gathering around him to observe his cleansing and healing work.

Without doubt, Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem was planned, and he clearly wanted to use the Passover period to visit the Temple and other locations in the city, to spread his message among the numerous visiting pilgrims. However, Jesus's final intentions in Jerusalem remain mysterious and unclear. Did he plan to clash with the local Jewish and Roman authorities, or did things simply get out of hand?