

JESUS LAST WEEK

JERUSALEM IN THE TIME OF JESUS

LENTEN STUDY

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JERUSALEM AND THE SYSTEM

Jerusalem was not just any city. By the first century, it had been the center of the sacred geography of the Jewish people for a millennium. Ever since the first century it has been central to the faith of both Jews and Christians.

Jerusalem became the capital of ancient Israel in the time of King David around 1000 BCE. Under David and his son Solomon, Jerusalem and the kingdom experienced its greatest period in history. The country was united, all twelve tribes under one king. It was during this time that Solomon built the glorious temple. Under David in particular the kingdom saw power and glory, and it was considered a time of justice and righteousness. David became associated with goodness, power, protection and justice; he was the ideal shepherd-king, the apple of God's eye, even as God's son.

The time of glory, the ideal time, was remembered. So revered did David become that the hoped-for future deliverer, the messiah, was expected to be the "son of David," a new David, greater than David. This new David would rule a restored kingdom from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was therefore associated with Israel's hope of future glory – a glory involving justice and peace as much or more than it involved power.

David's son Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem in 900s BCE. The temple became the sacred center of the Jewish world. A theology developed around the temple and it was the place where this earth connected with God. The temple was God's only dwelling place on earth. Even though the people believed that God could not be contained and was present everywhere, he was especially present in the temple. To be in the temple was to be in God's presence.

The temple mediated not only God's presence but also his forgiveness. It was the only place of sacrifice, and sacrifice was the means of forgiveness. According to temple theology, some sins could be forgiven and some impurities could only

be forgiven through temple sacrifice. The temple was therefore the center of devotion and pilgrimage.

Jerusalem, as the center of the people and their worship, also acquired negative associations. In the second half century after David's reign it became the center of a "domination system." This idea of a "domination system" is central to much of the conflict that runs through the Bible and in particular to the last week of Jesus' life. The phrase "domination system" is shorthand for the most common form of a social system in ancient times and does not only apply to ancient Israel.. It names a social system marked by three major features:

1. Political oppression. The many were ruled by the few, the powerful and the elites – the rulers, the powerful, the wealthy elites. Ordinary people had no voice in the shaping or running of society.
2. Economic exploitation. A high percentage of the society's wealth, which came primarily from agricultural production, went into the coffers of the wealthy and powerful. The system was set up, through structures and laws about land ownership, taxation, indenture of labor through debt and many other ways.
3. Religious legitimation. In ancient societies, these systems were legitimated, or justified with religious language. The people were told the king ruled by divine right, the king was the Son of God, the social order reflected the will of God, and the powers that be were ordained by God.

This form of society was extremely common in premodern times. This was the type of society in which ancient Israel, Jesus and early Christianity lived. The central dynamic of this "domination system" was the political and economic domination of the many by a few and the use of religious claims to justify it.

JERUSALEM IN THE CENTURIES BEFORE JESUS

Jerusalem had become the center of politics and religion for the Israelites. When following Solomon the kingdom divided into two, Judah in the south and Israel in the north, Jerusalem was still the religious center. The kings of Israel tried to counter this by setting up two religious centers, one in Dan on the northern border and one at Bethel on the southern border. In time this kingdom fell away from the worship of Yahweh which caused its downfall.

Much of the prophecies of the Old Testament were warnings about the religion moving away from trust in Yahweh. After a dreadful siege of over a year, Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The city and the temple were destroyed, and many of the Jewish survivors were taken into exile in Babylon. This looked like the end of the Jewish people as they had lost the center of their religion, the place where God resided. But even in exile the yearning for Jerusalem remained. This yearning can be seen in Psalms written during this time, such as Psalm 137.

After about 50 years in exile, the Israelites were permitted to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple. Because of the impoverished state of the returned community, it was a very modest temple compared to the temple of Solomon, which had been destroyed.

For several centuries Judea with its capital in Jerusalem was ruled by foreign empires. Under the Persian Empire and its Hellenistic successors, the temple was the center of local government in Judea. The high priest and the temple authorities were in effect the rulers of the Jewish people, though of course they owed allegiance and tribute to the imperial overlords. This continued into the second century BCE when the Jewish people gained their independence from the Hellenistic empire around 164 BCE. The successful revolt was led by a Jewish family known as the Maccabees. Also known as Hasmoneans they ruled the Jewish homeland from Jerusalem for about 100 years, until it fell under the control of Rome in 63 BCE.

After abolishing the Jewish monarchy, Rome initially ruled through the high priest, the temple and a local aristocracy centered in the temple. This was Rome's traditional way of ruling by appointing local collaborators from the indigenous population. The primary qualification was wealth. The local people could rule with a relative free hand as long as they were loyal to Rome, maintained order and most importantly

they were responsible for collecting and paying the annual tribute owed to Rome.

Unfortunately for the people there were many power struggles among the Jewish aristocratic families and so Rome appointed Herod as king of the Jews. Herod was an Idumean, which is an ancestor of Esau, whose family had only recently converted to Judaism.

Herod was a ruthless, cunning man who had a great ability to rule. Early in his reign he ordered the execution of many of the traditional aristocracy in order to secure himself against power struggles and also to confiscate their land and wealth. He eliminated the old elites of wealth and power and replaced them with new elites who owed their position to him. He also severely limited the power of the high priest and although the high priest was to serve for life Herod regularly replaced them. He restricted their role to a very narrow religious function in the temple.

Herod ruled from Jerusalem and the city became magnificent during his reign. During his reign he had extensive construction projects that included the following:

- Rebuilt the modest post-exilic temple to one of magnificence with large courtyards and colonnades, using much marble and gold. It was said the temple glowed in the sun light and was known as the most magnificent in the Roman Empire.
- Built himself a magnificent palace, again using marble and gold. There were numerous fountains, pools and painted ceilings. The dining hall alone could seat 300 people.
- The most extensive building project was the building of an all-weather port on the coast known as Caesarea Maritima which was recognized as a great feat in its own right. The city that grew around the port became the headquarters of the Roman governor of the region.
- Built a large palace and fortress for himself at Masada.
- He was also active inside and outside his kingdom for financing the building of temples to Caesar Augustus.

All of this cost an enormous amount of money apart from his opulent lifestyle and what he had to pay Rome as tributes. His only source of finance was to get it from income from the

lands he controlled or the people. This led to extortion and the majority of the people living in poverty.

Herod was known as "Herod the Great" but to the people he became known as "Herod the Monstrous." When he died in 4 BCE revolts erupted and Roman legions had to be brought in to regain control. The town of Sepphoris, 4 miles from Nazareth was burned and destroyed and many people taken and sold into slavery. When Jerusalem was retaken by the Romans they crucified 2,000 people en-masse and the roads leading to Jerusalem were lined with crosses to remind people what happened to people who threatened Roman rule. The kingdom was divided between Herod's three sons. Herod Antipas ruled the northern area of Galilee, the area northeast of the Jordan to Philip and Judea and Samaria to Archelaus. Archelaus ruled from Jerusalem, but in 6 BCE Rome removed him from the throne and began to rule this area by governors sent from Rome.

JERUSALEM IN THE FIRST CENTURY

The events of 6 CE significantly changed political circumstances for Jerusalem and the temple. Rome continued its practice of placing local administration under rulers chosen from local elites, and with Archelaus gone; Rome assigned this role to the temple and its authorities. Though the temple had always been religiously important, it now became the central economic and political institution in the country.

The temple replaced Herodian rule as the center of the local domination system. A domination system was not new-it had existed under Herod and before. What was new was that the temple was now at the center of local collaboration with Rome. It had the defining features of ancient domination systems: rule by a few, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation. And it was a two-layered domination system: the local domination system entered in the temple was subsumed under the imperial domination system that was Roman rule. As such, it owed "tribute" to the emperor, both loyalty and money, and so was a tributary domination system.

The few who ruled at top of the local system were the temple authorities, headed by the high priest, including members of aristocratic families. Mark's terminology for the temple authorities is "the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes." The chief priests came from high-ranking priestly families and the elders from wealthy lay families. Many would have been from the new elites recently created by Herod. The scribes

associated with "chief priests" and "elders" were a literate class who worked for them as legal experts, record keepers, and lower-level administrators. Mark also refers to a "council," governing body in Jerusalem composed largely or completely these groups.

With regard to economic conditions, the temple authorities, priestly and lay, came from wealthy families. Because wealth in the premodern world was primarily the product of land ownership and the agricultural production that comes from it, many were large landowners. Even many high-priestly families owned land, despite the Jewish law's prohibition of ownership of land by priests. (Their scribes interpreted the prohibition to mean that they could not work on the land, though they could own it; as you think about it, this is what one would expect.) Because they lived in Jerusalem away from their lands, they were also absentee landlords. In this they were typical, for wealthy landowners most often lived in cities.

In order to accumulate land, the wealthy, whether lay priestly, had to subvert laws about land in the Jewish Bible. Among those laws was one that said agricultural land could not be bought or sold. The reason for the law was to try to ensure that every family had its own plot of land in perpetuity. Thus land could be acquired only by confiscation, which occurred in at least two forms. First, land could be confiscated by a king. Herod had large "royal estates," royal lands, and presumably he didn't buy all these. He also gave land to the new elites he created. In fact, having lands is what made them elite. Secondly, land was acquired by confiscation for the non-payment of debt. Though land could not be bought or sold it could be used as collateral for a debt. If the loan was not repaid then the land could be confiscated. The foreclosure rate was very high due to high taxes. The peasant landowners were increasingly forced off their land and where they had had a meager existence for many survival became an issue.

Jerusalem was not only the home of large landowners who received wealth from their estates. Wealth flowed into the city for other reasons. The temple was the center of both a local and an imperial tax system. The local taxes, commonly called "tithes," were on agricultural production. Most tithes were paid to the temple and priesthood, and the rest were to be spent in Jerusalem. The tithes amounted to over 20 percent of production, There was also an annual "temple tax" paid by Jewish men over a certain age, including millions of

Jews living in the Diaspora, Jewish communities in other lands. And, beginning in 6 CE, the temple and temple authorities were also the center of the imperial tax system. They had the responsibility for collecting and paying the annual tribute due to Rome. Also, as the economic center of the domination system, records of debt were stored in the temple,

Wealth poured into the city for yet another reason. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish pilgrims visited the city each year. Though population estimates for cities in the ancient world are difficult, Jerusalem probably had around forty thousand inhabitants in the first century. But for a major festival like Passover, two hundred thousand pilgrims or more would come to the city. Moreover, non-Jewish travelers were also attracted to Jerusalem, commonly described as one of the most beautiful cities in the ancient Near East.

Importantly, the issue as we describe the wealthy and powerful is not whether they - in our case, the Jerusalem authorities centered in the temple - were "corrupt," if by that we mean an individual failing. As individuals, the wealthy and powerful can be good people - responsible, honest, hard-working, and faithful to family and friends, interesting, charming, and good-hearted. The issue is not their individual virtue or wickedness, but the role they played in the domination system. They shaped it, enforced it, and benefitted from it.

The high priest and the temple authorities had a difficult task. As with the client-rulers before them, their primary obligation to Rome was loyalty and collaboration. They were to make sure that the annual tribute to Rome was paid. They were also to maintain domestic peace and order. Rome did not want rebellions. Their role was to be the intermediaries between a local domination system and an imperial domination system.

It was a delicate balancing act. They needed to collaborate enough with Rome to keep Rome happy, but not so much as to anger their Jewish subjects. They were in an awkward spot. Their decisions were often difficult. It is easy to imagine a responsible official saying, as the high priest Caiaphas is reported to have said in John's gospel, "It is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Why Caiaphas says this can be seen from a previous verse that shows a fear of Roman intervention: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and

the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation".

Some high priests seem to have been more successful walking this tightrope than others. Though Jewish law mandated that the high priest was to serve for life, as mentioned earlier, Rome replaced high priests with great frequency. There were eighteen high priests from the time Rome shifted local rule from Archelaus to the temple in 6 CE to the outbreak of the great revolt in 66 CE. Caiaphas, the high priest during Jesus' public activity, must have been particularly skillful, for he held the office for eighteen years, from 18 to about 36 CE.

The temple's role as the center of a domination system was legitimated by theology: its place in the system is said to have been given by God. Temple theology continued to see the temple as the dwelling place of God, the mediator of forgiveness through sacrifice, the center of devotion, and the destination of pilgrimage.

This is the Jerusalem that Jesus entered on Palm Sunday. His message was deeply critical of the temple and its role in the domination system.

Jesus was not the only Jewish anti-temple voice in the first century. Given the temple's role in a tributary domination system collaborating with an imperial domination system, this should not be surprising. Among the other voices were the Essenes, almost certainly to be identified with the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. They rejected the legitimacy of the present temple and priesthood, understood their own community to be an interim temple, and looked forward to the day when they would be restored to power in a purified temple in Jerusalem.

Much of the passion of violent Jewish revolutionary movements was directed against Jerusalem and the temple because of its collaboration with the domination system. The great Jewish revolt that broke out in 66 CE was directed as much against the Jewish collaborators in Jerusalem as it was against Rome itself. When the Jewish rebels, by then known as "Zealots," took Jerusalem at the beginning of the revolt, their first acts were to replace the high priest with a new high priest chosen by lot from the peasant class and to burn the records of debt housed in the temple.

In the gospels, the movements of both John the Baptizer and Jesus had an anti-temple dimension. John's baptism was for the "forgiveness of sins." But forgiveness was a function that temple the theology claimed for itself, mediated by sacrifice

in the temple. For John to proclaim forgiveness apart from the temple was to deny the temple's role as the essential mediator of forgiveness and access to God.

Like John, Jesus pronounced forgiveness apart from temple sacrifice. It is implicit in much of his activity, including his eating with "tax collectors and sinners," who were seen as intrinsically impure, but it becomes explicit as well. For example, in Mark 2, Jesus forgives the sins of a paralyzed man and empowers him to walk. Some scribes object: "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy. Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (2:7). Their point is not that Jesus is claiming to be God. Rather, their point is that God has provided a way to forgive sins—namely, through temple sacrifice. And here is Jesus, like John, proclaiming forgiveness apart from the temple.

Other teachings of Jesus reflect both the positive and negative associations of the temple and Jerusalem. On the one hand, Jerusalem is "the city of the great King" (Matt. 5:35) and the object of God's love: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." And yet, as the same passage continues, Jerusalem is "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it" (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34). In another passage, reported only in Luke, Jesus weeps over the city even as, like one of the classical prophets of ancient Israel, he indicts it:

As Jesus drew near and saw Jerusalem, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God." (Luke 19:41-44)

Thus in these voices from the time of Jesus, Jerusalem with its temple was still seen as "the city of God" that called forth Jewish devotion. But it was also the center of a local domination system, the center of the ruling class, the center of great wealth, and the center of collaboration with Rome.

Jerusalem and the temple did not survive the first century. In the year 70 CE, Roman legions shattered the great revolt by reconquering the city. When they had done so, they tore down the temple, leaving only part of the western wall of the

temple platform. The destruction of the temple changed Judaism forever. Sacrifice ceased, the role of the priesthood was eclipsed, and the central institutions of Judaism became scripture and synagogue.