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# Jesus' Jerusalem

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The following is an excerpt from the upcoming book *Melbourne to Jerusalem: A Pilgrim's Progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by K. Majdali, to be released by Teach All Nations Inc. early in 2008.

# Jesus' Jerusalem

From B.C. to A.D.

*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed' (Luke 2:1 KJV).*

During the mighty sweep of New Testament history, the Roman Empire served as the backdrop to the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. A Roman census forced the Nazareth-based Holy Family to visit Bethlehem at the time of Christ's birth. Rome demanded that people pay to Caesar what belonged to Caesar. A Roman procurator condemned Jesus while a Roman-style cross executed Him. Paul the Apostle was a Roman citizen and he preached the Gospel throughout the empire to the very gates of the Imperial City itself. Its greatest legacy is a New Testament book that bears the name of its citizens. Despite all this, Rome would only remain a footnote to the main event — the death and resurrection of Christ and founding of the Christian Church.

During the time of the Romans, specifically Augustus Caesar and Quirinius, Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary and her husband Joseph. The year was around 6 or 7 B.C.,<sup>1</sup> and the location was Bethlehem in Judaea. Micah prophesied the location of Christ's birth centuries before<sup>2</sup> and the Gospels confirmed it.<sup>3</sup> Joseph and Mary, both direct descendents of King David, were compelled to register in the city of David, Bethlehem. This was no small hardship. They had no immediate family ties and she was in the final days of her pregnancy. Compounding the problem was that there was no room at the inn. Despite all this, God used this Roman census as the catalyst to bring Micah's prophecy to fulfilment.

Herod was the appointed king of the Jews by the despised Romans. As an Idumean (part Jew, part Edomite), he would never earn the love of Jewish subjects, even when he built them the magnificent Temple that bore his name. Herod was denied by Rome the chance to possess a personal army. So he decided to, instead, 'conquer by construction'. Evidence of his handicraft can still be seen in different parts of Israel/Palestine to this day: Jericho, Masada, Herodian, Sebaste, Caesarea, and, most importantly, Mount Moriah — the site of a rectangular outer-retaining wall, filled up, levelled at the top, and host to one of the most exquisite buildings the world had ever seen. Even his harshest Jewish critics conceded that a person who had not seen Herod's Temple had never seen a beautiful building before.

Herod was admirable as a builder. He was an able, though ruthless, administrator. Paranoia was, however, his middle name. He, and the people of Israel, loved his beautiful Hasmonean wife Miriamne so much that he decided to kill her lest she fall

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<sup>1</sup> Where do we get this date? King Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C., was still alive when Christ was born. Christ was approximately two years-old when Herod, in his waning days, ordered the slaughter of the young boys of Bethlehem, two years or younger.

<sup>2</sup> Micah 5:2.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4 & 11.

into the arms of another man. One of his sons seemed a bit too eager to succeed him on the throne, and thus met an untimely end as well. With such a track record, it was hardly surprising, then, his brutality towards the toddlers of Bethlehem.

Imagine the rage that was stoked when wise men from the 'East' approached this Roman-appointed king of the Jews and had the audacity to ask, '*Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him*' (Matthew 2:2 NKJV). Herod's insecurity, mixed with rage, would boil over into infanticide. Every male child two years-old or under in Bethlehem — the birthplace of Christ — would be killed, to prevent a rival to Herod, or his heirs, from emerging. The ghastly act of brutal murder would, alas, fail to catch its intended victim. Jesus' family was supernaturally warned to flee, and wait in Egypt until Herod's death. Christ's time to die for the sins of the world had not then come. The birth of Israel's promised king, ironically and tragically, resulted in the death of 'Rachel's children' or the 'falling and rising of many'.<sup>4</sup>

## Bound for Jerusalem

Jesus did not reside in Jerusalem nor did He minister extensively there. His base of operation was Galilee, as was prophesied in Isaiah 9:1. This international hub of the north would eventually set the stage for the spreading of the Gospel to the nations. But as a pious Jew, Jesus did visit Jerusalem during the annual pilgrimage feasts, as recorded in the Gospels. He did prophesy, more than once, that He would give His life as a ransom for sin, and that the place of His death would be Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

How ironic that the city that had welcomed Him so triumphantly on Palm Sunday would only a few days later cry out to Pontius Pilate, 'Crucify Him; Crucify Him!' He knew this would happen.

That is why when Jesus gazed at the skyline of Jerusalem. He actually broke down and wept. In Matthew's gospel, He laments:

*'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! 38 Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. 39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord'* (Matthew 23:37-39 KJV).

Jesus tried to gather the dispirited city together, but it stubbornly resisted. No longer did He refer to the Temple as His Father's House; He dismissed it as '*Your house is left unto you desolate*'. With the Son about to depart from the scene, so would the Father. Like the days of Jeremiah, the beautiful Temple would again lay in ruins. And for many, this was the end of the story. For them, when Jesus says, '...you will not see Me again ...,' it is as if Jesus and Jerusalem would part, never to be re-united again.

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:16-18; and Luke 2:34.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:31 and 13:33.

Jesus is the Son of David and Jerusalem is the City of the Great King! Because God is well able to keep His promises, and He will complete that which He appoints, there will be a reunion one day. This is why, despite the strong words of condemnation, Jesus ends His comments with the same comfort and consolation that Israel's ancient prophets uttered so consistently. Verse 39 does not give the end of the matter, but the beginning: Jerusalem will see Jesus again when its inhabitants say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'. Though that day has not yet come, it is clearly on its way.

Jerusalem became the stage for our redemption. Jesus was condemned to death by Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate. His crime was written on a sign atop the cross where His sinless body would hang:

*'Now Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. And the writing was:*

*JESUS OF NAZARETH*

*THE KING OF THE JEWS'* (John 19:19 NKJV).

Yes, His crime was that He was born and anointed to be King. In Roman-occupied Palestine, there was no room for any other king but Caesar and those, like the Herods, whom Caesar appointed. His unspeakable suffering and excruciating death were the type reserved only for the most heinous of criminals. Like two bookends, Christ's life was noted for humility, meekness and, for the first thirty years of His life, obscurity. Even His enemies began to see that the seemingly ordinary Jesus was truly destined to be the King; Jesus of Nazareth, Son of David, Son of Abraham. But humility comes before honor,<sup>6</sup> and to cap this entire episode, Jesus' lifeless body was given the dignity of being placed in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, not far from where He died.

Fortunately the story does not end there. Three days after His burial, Jesus' friends and foes discovered that the tomb of Joseph was completely empty, except for Jesus' grave clothes. The King had risen from the dead! After He sojourned for 40 days, he gave instructions to His disciples and ascended to Heaven.

## The Church is Born

Jerusalem soon became the birthplace of the Christian Church. The inception date was the Day of Pentecost, so wonderfully described in the Book of Acts, Chapter 2. For the first time, the Christian community was seen as a visible, vibrant, and Spirit-filled manifestation of those who wholeheartedly followed the King.

From being the stage of redemption and birthplace of the Church, Jerusalem became the dissemination centre for spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth. It was not that the Jerusalem church was in any hurry to fulfill Christ's Commission, so clearly given in Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. Peter and the surviving apostles were willing to abide in Jerusalem, chose Matthias as the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle to replace the disgraced traitor Judas Iscariot — who had committed suicide — and build up a large local church in the Holy City.

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<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 15:33.

God forced the apostles, however, to scatter. It was eventually left to the man the apostles did not choose to send the Gospel catapulting throughout the known world. That messenger was Saul of Tarsus, known to the world as Paul, an apostle chosen not by men, nor by the will of men, but by God.<sup>7</sup> Paul, who was no stranger to the Diaspora, also had his Jerusalem experiences. His last visit was one in which neither he, nor the rest of the world, would ever forget. His very presence sparked a riot.<sup>8</sup>

More than 40 years after the time of Jesus, His very words would come to pass: 'Your house will be left to you desolate!'. A Jewish revolt against Roman rule was sparked in 66 A.D. and quickly spread throughout the country. Though vastly outnumbered, the Jews fought fiercely and, at times, ferociously. Eventually, though, the might of Rome proved too strong and Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed on the 9<sup>th</sup> Day of Av, in the year 70 A.D.. The magnificent Temple of Herod, which was only finally completed six years earlier, was set ablaze. Thousands were killed or crucified. Thanks to the chronicles of historian Josephus Flavius (37-100 A.D.), we have a detailed account of those significant, tumultuous, and tragic events. Once the fires died down and the ashes settled, the ruins of Jerusalem and its region were placed under the surveillance of the Roman 10<sup>th</sup> Legion, whose soldiers had been instrumental in its demise.

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<sup>7</sup> Galatians 1:1.

<sup>8</sup> See Acts 21:26-36.