

ΤΕΚΤΩΝ¹
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In the first century B.C.E, after Pompey marched into the Second Temple letting loose a political and religious maelstrom, Jews throughout Palestine were pushed further into crisis. Messianic hopes from the margins of their society were matched only by the complicity and greed from within the Temple itself. Messengers of liberation emerged from the far fringes of society but were quickly dispatched: any sign of insurrection was met with the harshest punishment by both the Temple elite and the colonial Roman authority. Crafting a movement that would consolidate the oppressed and overthrow the Temple hegemony could only be done with masterful skill and calculation. From all accounts Jesus of Nazareth came close, but in the end inspired a movement quite different perhaps than his intention and unlike anything the ancient world had ever seen. Jesus was an upstart from the hinterlands who understood the Jewish eschatological hope for sovereignty. He and his disciples skillfully crafted a movement from which those hopes would transform into something far greater than he probably imagined.

“...the exposure by aliens of the Holy Place.” Josephus, *Jewish Wars*

In 63 B.C.E. Pompey marched into Jerusalem killing as many as twelve thousand Jews.² He defied their religious laws by storming into the Temple Sanctuary, the Holy of Holies which housed the Ark of the Covenant. With that act of defilement, the regions of Palestine had come fully under Roman command. To add to the insult, in 40 B.C.E. a complicit Herod the Great was made King of the Jews by formal decree of the Roman Senate. The Jewish client-king then

¹ Craftsman, or one who works with stone or wood. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz. *The Historical Jesus*. John Bowden, trans. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press), p.172.

² Josephus. *Jewish War*, G.A.Williamson, trans. (Baltimore: Penguin), p.41.

proceeded to campaign throughout his own country in order to consolidate his power. He then launched an ambitious architectural campaign to rival Roman tastes. On the Judean coast he transformed Strato's Tower into the overwrought Hellenistic city of Caesarea Maritima replete with a man-made port called Sebastos. With its resplendent façades, Caesarea Maritima architecturally rivaled any of the opulence seen in Rome. In 20 B.C.E. Herod then began the ambitious project of redesigning the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, whose beauty would be compared to the Acropolis in Athens. It was not completed until long after Herod's death.

Upon Herod's death in 4 B.C.E., the client-kingdom was divided amongst his sons. The ethnarch Archelaus received Judea, until it was taken back in 6 C.E. The northern regions of Trachonitis, Itruaea, Aurantitus and Batanaea went to Philip. Galilee and Perea fell under the dominion of Herod Antipas, who immediately began large scale building projects throughout Galilee. With high political ambitions, Antipas wasted no time launching into the task of winning Rome's favor, hoping to secure for himself the appointment of King of the Jews.³ Both Sepphoris and Tiberias benefited from his grandiose architectural and political vision.

Along the western shores of the Sea of Galilee, Antipas founded a capital city. He named it after Tiberius, who had supplanted Augustus after the emperor's death in 14 C.E. Herod laid out the city in the Roman style, with an orthogonal grid bisected by two thoroughfares—the *cardo* and the *decumanus*.⁴ He had its buildings adorned with Greco-Roman façades. The Romans and the entrenched Jewish upper-class might have been impressed, but the marginalized Jews who valued their own law must have been mortified. After all, Tiberias had been built on a cemetery.

Antipas began another architectural campaign to rebuild Sepphoris after that city had been destroyed by the Roman Varus in 4 C.E.⁵ “[Antipas] covered Sepphoris and Tiberias with a Greco-Roman architectural veneer, which made them not only the first large cities in Galilee,

³ Herod Antipas died in exile in Spain. John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. *Excavating Jesus*. (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), p.63.

⁴ Crossan and Reed, p.63.

⁵ Jewish War, p.41.

but complete novelties in their style.”⁶ But Galilee was not entirely Hellenized. For the folk who lived on the outside of these blossoming Hellenistic centers—many employed to fulfill these grand programs—there was little confidence that their ever-increasing taxes were being used for their benefit. It can be said that “architectural grandeur increased at one end of Galilean society by making poverty increase at the other.”⁷ Another person came along with a grand architectural program of his own.

“He went away from there...” Mark 6:1

Jesus’ grew up in the southern region of Galilee in the small overlooked Jewish town of Nazareth. Resettled during the Hasmonean period, the town of no more than four thousand inhabitants had mostly an agrarian-based economy⁸ in addition to a variety of craftsman whose services were well utilized during the rapid period of growth in the early days of Herod Antipas’s program. For the rest of the Jews in Galilee, the economic climate was dismal. Their lifestyles were generally adequate and provided enough to fulfill their basic needs, but mostly they were fulfilling the needs of the Temple. Herod had much to gain by remaining complicit with Rome. With his ambitions and sympathies pointed toward the heart of the Roman Empire, many Jews felt left behind. Monies funneled through the Tetrarch ended up in Roman pockets. More grain was shipped to the overpopulated capital than remained within the coffers of the Jewish farmers who grew it. The Jews of first-century occupied Galilee suffered an impoverishment resulting from the wantonness of their leadership constellated at the top of the priestly hierarchy. There was a disparity between those empowered by secular privilege and the disaffected outsiders who longed to maintain their religious liberty and their cultural independence.

⁶ Crossan and Reed, p.62

⁷ Ibid., p.70

⁸ Ibid., p.32

Hope sprang from the Jewish tradition of messianic prophecy. Many would-be liberators rose up and were quickly crushed beneath the iron fist of Rome, aided by a Jewish establishment fearful of any sign of insurrection. John the Baptist was among the many. Imprisoned for speaking out and famously beheaded, after his execution the foundation of his movement was toppled.⁹ The situation must have seemed dour to the powerless masses who watched their religious body destroying itself from the inside. The encroachment of Rome had come with blood and desecration. It advanced in stone and stucco, and was sustained by a Jewish leadership who turned a blind eye to the cries of its people while opening their fists for their money. The tolerance of the devout was tensile.

“...that is why these powers are at work in him.” Mark 6:14

Jesus’ mission began in Galilee and fanned out from his home in Capernaum, a small Jewish fishing village that lay along the western littoral of the Sea of Galilee. He amazed many with his teachings when he entered the synagogue there and taught “as one who has authority.”¹⁰ He began making excursions to the more Hellenized regions of Decapolis in the southeast and into the northern regions, which were under the tetrarchy of Philip. There are scant and unreliable references placing Jesus in the area of Jerusalem until the days leading up to his crucifixion. It is safe to assume the center of his mission throughout Palestine was in the realm of Galilee, which was more disposed to unrest. But why is there no mention of Jesus at Sepphoris and Tiberias? We know that Tiberias had been founded on hallowed ground. Any devout Jew would have avoided that place. Sepphoris was the seat of Antipas’s rule; there would be no sympathy for Jesus’ words there.¹¹ Overtly reformist or fundamentalist language would be quickly extinguished in either city. Jesus intentionally avoided them.¹²

⁹ Many questions can be raised about how strong John’s mission was and its legacy after his execution.

¹⁰ Mk 1:22 (*NAGENT*).

¹¹ John the Baptist was most likely killed in either Sepphoris or Tiberias.

¹² Floyd Filson and George Wright. *The Westminster Historical Atlas of the Bible*. (Philadelphia: The

From Galilee Jesus eventually crossed over into Bethsaida within the region of Philip, who was known for being a more venerable leader than his brother.¹³ Jesus went to the villages of Caesarea Philippi to round up the Jews who were living in the countryside surrounding that Hellenized city. He and his growing group of disciples traveled as far as the regions of Tyre and Sidon on the Syro-Phoenecian coast—a Gentile landscape—seeking out Jews far and wide. It has been said that he performed miracles, taught in synagogues, healed the sick, drove out demons, and fed masses of people. He spoke in parables, constructed an eschatological message calling for “an ancient and corporate justice.”¹⁴ His fame became such that mobs found him wherever he went. “Repent and believe!”¹⁵ was the rallying cry. Soul by soul the tradesman turned would-be messiah was crafting an earthly kingdom.

How strange it must have been for people who knew Jesus before this mission began. This τεχτων who was now performing miracles, extricating demons, healing the sick, feeding thousands from a few loaves of bread. Whether fact or lore, the conclusion is that Jesus’ influence had become enormous. Many who were not benefitting from the economic boon under Rome were living in poverty and subjugation. Beneath the immoral leadership the disaffected witnessed the erosion of their religious landscape. Jesus became a gravitational center. He drew many Jews back from despair by assuaging their concerns about paying tribute to Rome.¹⁶ He was less concerned with the arbitrary laws of “men” than he was with re-establishing some form of the Jewish covenant—a Kingdom of God.

Apocalypse seemed imminent but many messiahs had come before and failed. Artfully and patiently, like any master craftsman, Jesus was building a refuge. But what was he assembling? A church—or an army?

Westminster Press, 1946), p. 86.

¹³ There was great animosity between Philip and Herod. Antipas had spurned his Nabatean wife and married his brother Philip’s wife, Herodius.

¹⁴ Crossan and Reed, p.128.

¹⁵ Mk 1:15 (NAGENT).

¹⁶ Mk 12:17 (NAGENT)

“And what I say to you I say to all...” Mark 13:37

Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do men say that I am?”

He had been targeting Jewish communities while avoiding the cities sympathetic to Rome. Aside from heralding the Kingdom of God Jesus never stated his immediate *political* aim. What was the Kingdom of God? Maybe it was Jewish solidarity in an earthly kingdom devoid of Roman authority. Perhaps it was a Jewish state embedded within Roman Palestine struggling for autonomy. He was wise not to call for the complete expulsion of Roman colonial power as far as we know. Undoubtedly, it would have cut his mission even shorter.

Jesus’ question to his disciples was nothing less than existential. Peter responded, “You are the Christ,” (Mark 8:29). This must have been a stark revelation for Jesus, through hardly surprising. He had been hammering out his place as the messiah for years and he could hardly have been unconscious of his reputation. But this naming by Peter shifted his mission of “repent and believe” into one of greater eschatological consequence. To be labeled *messiah*, titular head of the Jews (their king!) rendered a more complex situation. Not to mention—given the political climate—suicide. People believed in him, they made him their leader, and their will was clear. Suddenly, Jesus’ role became obligatory and the consequences obvious. Knowing that obligation would lead to his probable death he adapted his design and modified his language, then charged others to continue his mission. He began to predict his own destruction. He laid the foundation for his Kingdom of God then charged towards Jerusalem.

“O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem...” Luke 13:34-35

In 26-27 C.E. Pontius Pilate marched his troops into Jerusalem carrying standards bearing the icon of Caesar. For the aniconic Jews, this was yet another affront rivaling that of Pompey’s. There was such outrage that for days townsfolk and countryfolk flocked to Pilate’s base in Caesarea Maritima to protest. They laid in the streets and prepared themselves for death

rather than bear the blasphemous insult. “Kill us, not our law!” Finally, Pilate relented, removed the icons, and spared the Jews. That drama might have been the vital instigation for Jesus to bring his mission to Jerusalem.¹⁷ Passive resistance to authority used in conjunction with an eschatological message was a recipe for change.¹⁸ His people were ripe. Perhaps such an army could march into Jerusalem and take it by “non-force.” A poor man from Galilee was unlikely to overthrow such a power as Rome. However, he could possibly supplant the embedded priestly hegemony, or at the very least challenge it. More likely, Jesus was preparing for his own martyrdom. Maybe he believed his sacrifice would change minds. Had Jesus’ language remotely implicated him as an advocate of violence earlier in his mission, it is unlikely he would have remained alive long enough to make it through the gates of Jerusalem. There is simply no evidence supporting any type of active resistance or insurrectionist behavior by Jesus or his followers toward Rome. “Jesus must be seen as a protester who challenged imperial force to lay bare its own covert violence by the overt slaughter of unarmed and non-violent resisters.”¹⁹

How many of his followers arrived in Jerusalem with Jesus and the twelve disciples is unknown. Ostensibly their families followed them, believers and hopefuls who threw down “leafy branches and garments” as Jesus road in.²⁰ Pilgrims were filtering into the Temple from all over the Holy Land. The Passover would be auspicious for Jesus and his disciples for a different kind of sacrifice was going to be offered. Perhaps Jesus had confidence that such a large band of Jewish pilgrims, as exemplified by the incident in Caesarea Maritima, would help to avoid a bloodbath. But as they entered Temple grounds and he began disrupting the established order provoking the ire of the high priests, Jesus’ fate was sealed. Within days, the architecture of Jesus’ earthly mission would be raised to the ground, then reassembled by his disciples in the shape of a cross.

¹⁷ Due to the lack of clarity in the chronology of Jesus’ mission this point cannot be proved. It is, however, difficult to believe that news would *not* have reached the farthest reaches of Galilee. Maritima, after all, was closer to Galilee than it was to Jerusalem.

¹⁸ Crossan and Reed, P.173.

¹⁹ Crossan and Reed, p.143.

²⁰ Mk 11:8 (*NAGENT*).

Τεκτων

Jesus was a master craftsman and it is unlikely his skill with wood and stone will ever be uncovered. His true genius, however, was with people. During his ministry he constructed an armature over which his disciples would lay a kingdom unlike any other that had been built before. Maybe in life he did build houses, but his greatest work came after his death.

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