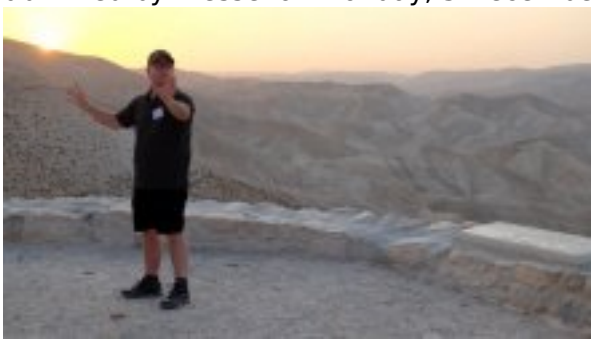
The Origins of Christianity Tour: Part 2 [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Monday, 3 December 2018 - 22:13



Read time: 22 minutes
In this post, I begin my summary of the Origins of Christianity tour. It will cover my first three days in Israel and two days of the tour, which was focussed on Jerusalem and the area of ancient Judah.

Prelude: Arriving in Israel

Being the only non-Australian joining the tour, I was responsible for my own travel arrangements and for meeting the rest of the tour group at the Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. I arrived a day before the rest of the tour group and, following the advice of a friend, spent the night in Tel Aviv instead of going through to Jerusalem. Tel Aviv is in a sense very much the opposite of Jerusalem: it is a modern city, founded in modern times. The area where I stayed was very much an "artsy" area and there was an abundance of graffiti. Pride flags hung boldly from some of the windows. Speaking of flags, it was striking how many Israeli flags were flown outside windows. One got an impression of clear nationalist pride from the locals. I wandered over to the sea shore, where I stepped into the Mediterranean sea for the first time. It was a national holiday, so many people were out and about enjoying the lovely weather. After walking on the beach for a while, I returned to to my AirBnB, stopping for a pub dinner on the bustling streets on my way. They next day I returned to the airport to meet up with the Australians.

Day 1: Jerusalem

> I was glad when they said to me, "Let's go to the LORD's house!" Our feet are standing within your gates, Jerusalem; Jerusalem, that is built as a city that is compact together; where the tribes go up, even the LORD's tribes, according to an ordinance for Israel, to give thanks to the LORD's name.
>
> Psalm 122:1–4

The first day was relatively easy; at least for me. The Australians had just come off of a long flight and some were fighting jet lag. After some introductions and booking in at the hotel, we first went for lunch to a kibbutz1.

Thereafter we went to the Tower of David Museum. The Tower of David has nothing to do with king David. And this set the tone for the day: orientation of the landscape and the city, and being able to distinguish between what part of Jerusalem belongs to which period of its long, complicated and multicultural history.

To say that Jerusalem had (and continues to have) a turbulent history would be an understatement. The ancient city of the Jebusites—which seemed impregnable to the Israelites until David captured

the city (Judges 1:21)—was small compared to how it would grow over the following three millennia. It was limited to one hill which is flanked by the Kidron and Hinnom valleys. David, Solomon, and later kings would greatly expand this city. David designated the Temple Mount for the building of the future Temple, which Solomon completed. This site is only a couple of hundred metres away from Mount Moriah, where—according to tradition—Abraham nearly offered up Isaac as a sacrifice[2]. I was not aware that these sites were so close to each other. We don't know whether the beginning of the Jebusite city was already there in the time of Abraham; but the almost-sacrifice of Isaac in this area makes gives context to God's command to Abraham. We know that the Cannanites (among whom were the Jebusites) practised child sacrifice, and this particularly took place in the valley of Hinnom. (Because of this, and the valley later being converted into a place where the city's rubbish would be burned, it became the metaphor for Hell.) And so Abraham's intentions would not have seemed strange in that context; what was strange was God's dramatic intervention, and Him setting Himself apart from the idols worshipped in that close proximity as the benevolent God who does not require sacrifice, but love, obedience and righteousness.

To the west lies Mount Zion, and this mount would not be incorporated into the city of Jerusalem for a long time.

The Jebusite city fell to Israel (2 Samuel 5:4–9), who build it into a truly magnificent city. This city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians four hundred years later, and through much toil and hardship the city was rebuilt over a long time (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah). This rebuilt city fell again to the Romans in AD 70, when it was completely obliterated. The city was rebuilt, conquered by Muslims, conquered by crusaders, reconquered by the Muslims, and went through various dynasties and flavours (e.g. Mamluks and Ottomans)[3]. All of these left their distinct impressions on the city. In 1857, due to overpopulation and squalor, the limits of city eventually expanded beyond the walled city[4]. Consequently, nearly nothing remains of the Jerusalem of Jesus's time. When looking at Jerusalem, one needs to mentally pull it apart and identify the various parts of it for it to make sense. But the Tower of David Museum does a good job of explaining the history of the city, and many models and reconstructions helps the visitor to imagine what the city looked like; although, I am sure, we cannot imagine the grandeur—and desperation—that the city has experienced.

Day 2: Masada, Qumran and Wadi Qelt

The following day we entered the West Bank to go see the sites of Masada, Qumran and Wadi Qelt. None of these locations are mentioned in the gospels, so one can be forgiven for wondering why these sites made the itenrary of the Origins of Christianity tour. The purpose, simply, was to further explore the context of the (Jewish) world into which Jesus was born.

Masada is a high, impressing, and nearly impenetrable plateau with a fortress built atop of it. It was the site of a famous last stand between the Jewish sect named the Zealots, and the Romans[5], where the former chose the mass suicide of nearly 1000 people, including women and children, instead of falling to the hands of the Romans[6]. Herod the Great had originally built up Masada as a military fortress, as well as two palaces, a Roman bath and a synagogue, after the mountain served as a safe refuge for his family during a time of upheaval and civil war. Eventually Masada became a Roman armoury. When the Jewish revolt against the Romans began, some Zealots scaled the cliff face during the night, killed the guards, and liberated the armoury, thereby arming the Jewish for their fight against the Romans. The fortress served the rebels well, and for years after the rebellion was considered crushed, Jews remained safe in the fortress. It was only after a long siege by the Romans, during which they partially needed to fill up a valley so that their siege tower could reach up to the wall of the fortress, that Masada was taken. Today the story of Masada is source of pride and inspiration for the modern state of Israel and many of its citizens, as it demonstrates an unrelenting spirit of independence.

Qumran, also famously, is the site where the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered[7]. These scrolls were produced by the Essenes, another Jewish sect. While they were not mentioned in the Bible, they definitely were active during Jesus's time, and His teachings allude to their beliefs and teachings. Some people may think of Qumran as only being a bunch of caves in the desert, but the site of the caves is only a few hundred metres from where a thriving community of Essenes lived, as archeology

has now confirmed. (The site is also within sight of that large body of water which is the Dead Sea which, tragically to the inhabitants of Qumran, was useless to them).

At Wadi Qelt we could see the Judean wilderness—between Jerusalem and Jericho—where Jesus spent forty days and forty nights, deliberately re-enacting Israel's wandering the desert of 40 years. This was a breathtaking and surreal landscape, and where John Dickson gave the last part of his lecture on the Judaisms of Jesus's day (summarised below), and where we could reflect on all that we had experienced and learned that day.

This part of the country is really dry and very desert-like. Some of it is sand dunes, while other parts are rocky desert. Jerusalem sits on the border of where the desert begins to the south, and the more fertile land in the north. Flash floods during the rainy season do carry water to the desert region, enabling humans to capture that water and survive there, but otherwise the terrain is inhospitable, with little or no vegetation[8]. The desert, and the famously salty Dead Sea, are the hallmarks of this region.

To understand the Jewish context into which Jesus was born, it is necessary to understand the sects which were active at that time. These sects aren't fully explained in the Bible, and they largely developed during the inter-testamental period. To understand them, we need to dig into history, and the Jewish writer Josephus is the most significant (but not only) source for this.

The **Sadducees** were, perhaps, the most significant sect during the time of Jesus. They had control of the Temple and, as such, were the top dogs. They did not believe in the Resurrection, like the other Jewish sects. They adhered to the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), but it is not known which, if any, other Jewish writings they considered sacred. That is why, when Jesus refutes the Sadducees in Matthew 22:23–33 about the Resurrection, He quotes from the Torah, and not later Jewish writings which more explicitly speak about the Resurrection. Being in a position of power, the Sadducees collaborated with the Romans and, as such, wanted to maintain the status quo. This made them extremely unpopular with many of their contemporary Jews. Particularly, when considering that they did not believe in the Resurrection but that this life is all that there is and any blessings which God gives is in this life, they were somewhat after wealth and power. When Jesus was captured, tried and executed, the main instigators where the Sadducees, not Pharisees.

Pharisees, whom many Christians may think of as the main adversaries to Jesus, actually were not, despite them locking horns with Jesus from time to time. The Pharisees developed a theology where Jews could draw close to God without having to physically go to the Temple[9]. This could be accomplished through study of the Law, prayer, and good deeds; if these things were done, then a person was right with God. The Law was not merely the Torah, but a vast set of laws and teachings which were transmitted orally (and eventually written down and is now known as the Mishnah). These oral laws eventually came to be regarded as having the same status as the Torah (written Law), and is therefore considered—as Christians would say—divinely inspired, infallible and canon. These oral laws interpreted and expanded upon the Torah. The were meant to add restrictions so that transgressing the written Law would be much more difficult. We see a glimpse of this in Mark 7:1–23. The Pharisees are questioning Jesus about why His disciples didn't wash their hands. There are no requirements in the Torah (Old Testament) about the washing of hands, but there is a significant amount of regulation in the oral law. So when the Pharisees try to impose their oral traditions on Him and His disciples, He rebukes them for that.

Pharisees were not a class of people or a caste; anyone could become a Pharisee if they studied enough and were strict enough in keeping to the laws and traditions. They were viewed with admiration by many Jews, because of their knowledge and piety.

Despite frequent conflicts in the New Testament between the Pharisees and the Jesus, many Pharisees ended up becoming Christians. Nicodemus was a noteworthy example, as well as the most famous Pharisee to have become a follower of Jesus: Saul of Tarsus.

In a certain sense, the **Essenes** were "next level" in terms of piety and devotion, even when compared to the strict Pharisees. The Essenes believed that all the other Jews had become corrupted, and they isolated themselves from them They also believed that Jerusalem had become a

place of corruption and debauchery. Therefore they set up their own "Temple community" away from Jerusalem in the desert, and waited for time when God would bring judgement on the nation and restore them—as Essenes—to Jerusalem and the Temple. They were extremely strict and it was difficult to be admitted to their community. Even small infractions of their strict rules carried harsh penalties. They considered themselves as "sons of the light", and those who were corrupt and evil as "sons of darkness". They were taught to "hate the sons of darkness", and so Jesus may well have had them in mind when He taught, provocatively, to "love your enemy".

We do not know what happened to the Essenes. It may well be that when the Jewish rebellion against the Romans happened, they either joined the fighting, thinking that that would be the conflict through which God would restore the sons of light to their proper place, or they may have fled to Masada, which is not too far from Qumran.

The **Zealots** have already been mentioned in connection with Masada. They can be regarded as similar to the Pharisees, but with a military theology. They believed much the same as the Pharisees, and one of the two founders of the sect was a Pharisee. The Pharisees believed in a great upheaval and war through which Israel would be restored and God would bring His judgement to world (and resurrect those who have passed away). This is not dissimilar to what many Christians believe about the end of the world based on prophecies in the books of Daniel and Revelation. Important for us is that the Pharisees believed that these end times be a supernatural process brought about in God's own good time. The Zealots, on the other hand, believed that for the end times to come about, they need to act and not wait passively. Fuelled by Jewish resentment towards the Romans, they started sowing sedition. The movement eventually became popular, as well as more radical[10]. But one must not think that these were a bunch of unruly rebels. They were sincerely religious, and their religious zeal and piety would be astonishing to many modern observers. This zeal led them to a defiant uprising against the largest empire that the world had known to that point, believing that they—in their small numbers—would be carried to victory by God and through their faithfulness and obedience.

The last sect which we need to know about was the **Baptisers**. Christians are familiar with John the Baptist; but there were many other baptisers at that time. Contrary to movements such as the Pharisees and Essenes—where you had to "do more" to become pure and righteous—the baptiser movement was a simple call to come back to the essential Jewish Laws from the Old Testament (with a sincere and repentant heart, and a love for God). People were baptised in the Jordan river once, to symbolise them coming out the wilderness into God's promises, as the Israelites did when they passed through the Jordan river (Joshua 3)[11]. Once baptised, a person was ready to begin a new life devoted to and following God. The baptists (not to be confused or conflated with Christian Baptists) called people to come back to following the Laws of God in the Torah, but scorned the unnecessary traditions and oral laws of the Pharisees.

When John the Baptist was beheaded, Jesus became the de facto leader of that movement, and many of the followers and disciples of the baptists would have become His.

A word also needs to be said of the Jewish expectations of the Messiah at that time. The Messiah was nearly universally expected and anticipated (not so much by the Sadducees), and was imaged to be a powerful and charismatic military leader who would overthrow the Romans. This was a expectations which Jesus constantly needed to battle against. He did this by telling people that the Messiah needed to be humiliated, and to suffer and die, as well as preaching a message of peace and servanthood over one of war and domination. He also deliberately drove people away when His followers became too numerous (e.g. in John 6 and John 8) so that it would not seem like He was forming an army.

Day 3: Temple Mount, Bethlehem, Hezekiah's Tunnel and Old Jerusalem

On the third day of the tour we first went to the Temple Mount. Passing through security from the Jewish controlled area around the mount to the Muslim controlled mount was not as intimidating as

one might have imagined. On our way we were passed by a small but rowdy group of orthodox Jews. They protest the Muslim occupation of the mount and regularly go up to the entrance to the mount in protest, but they were a small group and nobody paid them mind or seemed concerned about them. This was the only semblance of tension which I witnessed during my short time in Israel. We spent some time on the mount learning about the history of the area. Of particular importance to John Dickson, who at that time had recently filmed a segment for the For the Love of God documentary [2] there, was to share the horrors of the Crusader invasion of Jerusalem and the absolute and unrepentant slaughter of Muslims by Christians which took place on the very spot where we stood.

Thereafter we went to Bethlehem, which is also in Palestinian territory. Many of the Palestinians there are Christians. We visited the Church of the Nativity, which was undergoing restoration work while we were there. We did not go into the cave where Jesus was born, as the queue was too long and the sight apparently not that impressive. Instead we went to a neighbouring cave, also within the church, were the ancient church father scholar Jerome spent the final years of his life.

We were supposed to go to the Israel Museum next, but it was closed on account of Angela Merkel visiting. Instead we were given the afternoon off, and I went with some people from the tour group to Hezekiah's tunnel. A single verse in the Bible, 2 Kings 20:20, mentions this tunnel. But this was no diminutive achievement: this was an impressive engineering feat, undertaken to secure a water supply for the city during a siege. Two teams dug more than 500m through rock, meeting in the middle with only a few centimetres difference in height! The museum and exhibition was very well done and conveys the weight of this achievement. At the end of the tunnel one finds the Pool of Siloam (John 9:1–11, which was only relatively recently discovered and still needs to be full excavated (pending the purchase of more land so that the archaeological dig can take place).

From there a couple of us went to go spend the rest of the day in the Old City of Jerusalem, taking pictures, looking at the market stalls, and just soaking up an atmosphere, style and lifestyle which—although not ancient—was impressively old. This experience really was reminiscent of walking in a stereotypical ancient middle eastern city, with narrow, windy streets, stalls and merchants, and the bustle of children playing and adults going about their business! The old city of Jerusalem today is divided into four quarters: Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Arminian (also Christian; they are descendants of refugees from the Arminian genocide who were granted land in Jerusalem at that time). These quarters each are small, and one easily passes from one to the next without noticing. Everyone seems to live next to each other in harmony. As the sun went down, we headed back to our hotel.

There were no lectures on this day.

After the first three days of the tour the stage of the context into which Jesus was born was set. The following day we would depart from Jerusalem to Galilee to learn about the environment where Jesus grew up and did most of His preaching.

- 1. The kibbutz movement started with young European, non-religious Jews who held to communist ideologies and who knew that they would never be at peace in Europe. They moved to what was then called Palestine, and groups of people pooled all their money and possessions to buy land. These tracts of land would become the kibbutzim. The people would live wholly with communist ideals, meaning that there was no private ownership. This extended to there being no marriage, everyone sharing in all the labour, children raised by the community and not individuals, all decisions made collectively, and all possessions shared. There was no ownership of anything; not even clothes. Over time things began to change. Some kibbutzim have become more "business-like" and relaxing their communist adherence, while others hold to their communist roots to this day.
- 2. Today, the Al Aqsa mosque stands on the city of the old Temple, and the Dome of the Rock is built over Mount Moriah. While Muslims allow non-Muslims to enter this area, the Jewish authorities in Israel forbids Jews from going there because they might accidentally walk over the site of the Holiest of Holies.
- 3. In between there were many sieges as well; one cannot overstate the suffering that has

taken place in that one city.

- 4. The walls of Jerusalem, which we see today, are only about 500 years old and date from the Muslim period. One must resist the temptation to imagine them as being reminiscent of the time of Jesus.
- 5. Two thousand years later, the remains of the Roman military camps around the plateau can still be seen from the top of the mountain.
- 6. Buff Dickson read Josephus's account of the fall of Masada—the stirring speech of the Jewish leader, the method of suicide, and the Roman's disbelief and incredulity—to us while we were there. It was a surreal experience.
- 7. More finds could potentially still happen [3].
- 8. The modern nation of Israel has learned how to farm in this desert region, but this is only possible because of modern technology and farming techniques. During the time of ancient Israel, any kind of significant farming would likely not have been possible.
- 9. Although Jews were still expected to go to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts.
- 10. Some of the Zealots became Sicarii—what is considered to be the first brand of assassins in the world. They would murder Romans and sympathisers with daggers in crowded spaces and then slip away into the crowd and escape. Needless to say, they quickly earned the ire of the Roman Empire.
- 11. This stood in contrast to the other Jewish sects where regular ritual washing was necessary; the Essenes washed three times a day to maintain their ritual purity.

Categories:

- Travel [4]

Tags:

- israel [5]
- origins of christianity [6]
- tel aviv [7]
- temple mount [8]
- mount zion [9]
- bethlehem [10]
- john dickson [11]
- dr john dickson [12]
- jerusalem [13]
- masada [14]
- qumran [15]
- wadi qelt [16]
- dead sea [17]
- dead sea scrolls [18]
- sadducees [19]
- pharisees [20]
- essenes [21]
- zealots [22]
- baptism [23]
- romans [24]
- arminian genocide [25]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1196

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1196

[2] https://fortheloveofgodproject.com/
[3] https://www.timesofisrael.com/newly-discovered-caves-may-hold-more-dead-sea-scrolls/
[4] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/886
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/494
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/884
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/896
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/897
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/898
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/899
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/627
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/885
[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/647
[14] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/888
[15] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/889
[16] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/890
[17] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/891
[18] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/650
[19] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/892
[20] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/217
[21] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/649
[22] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/893
[23] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/220
[24] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/894
[25] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/895