The Origins of Christianity Tour: Part 4 **[1]**

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The bus comes to a stop and the doors open. Slowly, the passengers disembark. Some are sleepy, some are groggy from not having had enough coffee that morning, some are simply tired. We had been touring Israel for a week now, and programme has been jam packed, with little time for rest. But suddenly everyone perks up and is astonished at the sight before them: Jerusalem bathed in the golden light of sunrise.

Day 7: Jerusalem

We were standing on the Mount of Olives. A thousand years before, here crusaders stood—while listening to the rousing sermon of Peter the Hermit, they looked out over a city full of terrified Muslims and Jews during the first crusade. Soon the city would fall, and these soldiers would be wading through streams of blood. A thousand years before that, here Jesus looked out over a city which looked very different, and He was thinking of blood as well: the sacrament of bread and wine which He would soon be instituting with His disciples when He eats His last meal before His death. The bread symbolises His body being broken; the wine His blood being spilt, so that curse of Cain, Adam, and the countless generations since could be broken.

Today there was no threat of violence or blood being shed: only some tourists from another hemisphere standing in awe looking at a city which was not there in the time of Jesus. Still, there (it is pointed out to us) is where the Temple would have been, there the remaining walls and steps of the Temple, there is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre...

We listened to John Dickson as gave us an overview of enacted parables. Enacted parables are outward and physical demonstrations by prophets which emphasise their message. There are many in the Bible. For example, Jeremiah for a time preached while carrying a yoke, symbolising that Judea would be placed under the dominion of Babylon (and that they should subject themselves willingly to this dominion, just like an ox does to its owner; Jeremiah 27–28). Another example is that the prophet Hosea married the promiscuous woman Gomer. This marriage, and the children which resulted from it, symbolised the relationship between God and Israel, where Israel is the unfaithful and unclean wife, and God is the devout husband trying to rescue His bride from her own foolishness. Enacted parables were common in ancient Israel and widely understood. Even false prophets made use of them (for example, in 1 Kings 22:11). Jesus also used enacted parables, and those observing Him would have understood what He was communicating. For example, His forty days in the Judean wilderness were reminiscent of the forty years spent by Israel wandering the desert. His choice of twelve disciples for His inner circle would immediately have reminded others of the twelve tribes of Israel[1]. And Jesus entering on a colt was not an extraordinary coincidence and He was not ignorant of the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9. Instead, He was deliberately making a claim

that the Zechariah prophecy was about Him, and His followers would have recognised it as such, hence their reaction in Matthew 21:8–11.

From the Mount of Olives, we descended towards the Kidron valley, crossed it, and entered Jerusalem. (We were not walking the Via Dolorosa.) On our way we made several short stops. The Mount of Olives is crammed full of Jewish graves. Both Jews and Muslims believe that final judgement will take place on the Mount of Olives, and so those who are buried there will have a front row seat to judgement day. We stopped by the modern garden of Gethsemane. There is no proof that this site is where the ancient garden was, although excavations have revealed the presence of an ancient olive grove. Today it is lovely and tranquil. It is slightly larger than the garden of a typical home, but not by much and not as the garden of an estate. When we had crossed the Kidron valley, we saw (looking back at the Mount of Olives) the many caves in the sandstone rock face. Ancient Jews would place their dead into caves such as these. A body would be left for around a year to decompose, after which time the bones would be collected and placed in ossuaries (bone boxes), which would then become the final resting place of the deceased. The cave would then be available again for another body. From a natural cave, small grottos (not much larger than the size of a human body) might be hewn so that several bodies could be placed in one cave[2]. The cave would then be sealed with a stone, so that the odour of a decomposing body would not escape (Matthew 27:60; John 11:38–39).

When we entered Jerusalem, we were met with a mirthful bustle. It was a Monday: one of the days on which Bar Mitzvah celebrations take place in the streets of Jerusalem. Bar Mitzvahs are celebrated when a Jewish boy turns 13 and symbolises that they are coming of age and ready to take on responsibilities (and of being held accountable for their actions). It is a festive celebration, and we saw several groups making music and carrying boys on their shoulders.

We were on our way to the Western Wall; but not the part which is famous. After passing through a museum, we came to another part of the Western Wall which is not used for prayer, but part of an archaeological conservation. What is remarkable about this part of the wall, is that it contains the visible remains of where a grand staircase joined up with an entrance which existed in the time of Jesus. This entrance has long since been sealed up, but it provides the faintest glimpse of the grandeur and structure of the Temple complex which Herod the Great had built. On the ground below can clearly be seen an impact crater of when the staircase collapsed when the Roman army destroyed the city.

Turning the corner, we came to another surprising remnant of the Second Temple: the south staircase. Here were stairs (worn and weathered, to be sure), on which it is almost certain that Jesus Himself would have walked to enter the southern gate of the Temple. Today the stairs lead straight up to a wall with no entrance, and an oddly placed window right in a corner. This strange sight is a stark reminder of how Jerusalem (and its walls) were rebuilt and rebuilt again over the last two millennia by people with different ideas and agendas. But the stairs (or at least, parts of them) are original. As we sat down on them, we listened to a lecture about crucifixion, and why Jesus was arrested and executed. First the history and process of crucifixion was explained to us. In essence, it was the worst and most humiliating of the three official capital punishments which were available in the ancient Roman world. Its brutality was meant to deter other people from rebellion and crime. After suffering immense pain and humiliation, a person being crucified typically died of asphyxiation[3], because the position in which a person was crucified made breathing laborious. Then, putting theological reasons aside, we looked at the religiopolitical reasons why Jesus—despite enjoying the support of many people—was arrested and executed. In summary, when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a colt, He was unmistakably (through an enacted parable) identifying Himself as the promised Messiah. All the Jews—whether supporters or opponents of Jesus—recognised this. With this came the expectation of the Jewish people that the Messiah would be a political and military leader. The Sadducees[4], being in charge of the Temple and therefore enjoying a position of prominence and prestige, did not want to upset the status quo. They therefore painted Jesus as a source of sedition and rebellion to the Roman authorities. The Romans, always seeking to maintain peace, executed Jesus to prevent a possible rebellion. We also have evidence that Christians, at an incredibly early stage, attached significance to Jesus's death: that His death was an atoning sacrifice sufficient to wash away an individuals sins completely. This was in the vein of Isaiah 53. But the cult surrounding Jesus likely may not have become as prominent as it did it the story ended at Jesus's

crucifixion and death.

Having wrapped up the lecture, we went to the part of the Western Wall which is more famous: the part where people go to pray. Some of us had already visited there previously, but for others in the tour group, this was their first time there. We should see people writing down prayers, praying at the wall, and leaving the written prayers in crevices in the wall. There were facilities for washing one's hands, and there we could see the ancient ceremonial hand washing over which the Pharisees chastised Jesus's disciples two millennia ago (Mark 7:1–5) still be dutifully observed.

After a delightful lunch in a small establishment just off the square where the Western Wall is, we left for the Israel Museum. We were supposed to visit this museum during our first stay in Jerusalem [2], but on that day it was closed because the German chancellor—Angela Merkel—was visiting. Now, as our tour was approaching its end, we got to see this marvellous place, truly as if it were a highlight. Indeed, I believe that if one flies to Tel Aviv, drive straight to the Israel Museum, then straight back to the airport, it would still be very much a worthwhile trip.

First we encountered a scale model of what Jerusalem likely looked like outside the museum in the open air. Previous models which we had seen could be measured in centimetres; this one could be measured in decametres (tens of metres). This was a fascinating model, and it really hit home how grand the city must have been in its heyday.

From here we proceeded to The Shrine of the Book; and indeed it did feel like a hallowed place. Inside were (some replicas, some authentic, and most under strict lock and key) the Dead Sea Scrolls. It really was an unbelievable experience, being so close to those famous documents and their tenacity for survival, which enlightenment of our understanding of an ancient time!

Passing on to the main museum, we encountered there many more treasures. Many are so old and wondrous that one's brain struggles to comprehend it. The museum is divided up into different exhibitions, and each exhibition is typically an era of Israel's history: Egyptian, Canaanite, the Kingdom of Israel, the Roman occupation, the Muslim occupation, the Crusader occupation, and so forth. A small sample of the treasures which are on display:

- Human-shaped coffins which are 15,000 years old
- Ghoulish stone masks, which are believed to be oldest (11,000 years) masks in the world
- Relics of the Roman X legion
- Sennacherib's account of his triumph over Hezekiah on a hexagonal cylinder
- Two tiny pieces of silver, positioned behind magnifying glasses, are the oldest known biblical inscriptions which have been preserved (Numbers 6:24–26)
- Miniature Canaanite idols
- The heel bone of a crucified man
- Ossuaries, including one belonging to the family of Annanias, who was high priest during Jesus's lifetime
- Bullae (document seals), which have long outlasted their documents, give us clues about who wrote in the ancient world, including Hezekiah and Jeremiah
- An inscription in Greek indicating a synagogue in Jerusalem for people who could not speak Hebrew or Aramaic.
- Large statues of Roman deities
- Coins, combs, lamps, toys, tools, earrings and rings, which all give a brief glimpse of what everyday life was like thousands of years ago

I could easily have wandered through that museum for a whole day or more, soaking up every item on exhibit and pondering its history. But the bus was picking us up at a set time. Wrapping up this incredible experience, we were given the late afternoon and evening off. Some people went on to Yad Veshem: the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. While this too would have been an unforgettable experience, I had visited a Holocaust museum before, and at this stage I was somewhat sunburnt and in need of rest (not to mention that I was not mentally prepared for a visit to a Holocaust museum), so I retired to our hotel.

Day 8: Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Caesarea Maritima

On our last day of the actual tour, we woke up early again. This time we were not rushing to watch the sunrise, but to beat the crowds. We had one last location to visit in Jerusalem: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This church, tradition tells us, is built over both the cave where Jesus was buried, as well as the location where He was crucified.

In relative terms, not long after Christianity started to spread as a religion, some early pilgrims arrived at Jerusalem. They asked the local Christians to show them where Jesus was crucified and had been buried. They were taken to a site within the city walls. This baffled the pilgrims, because they knew from the gospels that Jesus was crucified and buried outside of the city. The local Christians then explained that, not long after the Resurrection, the city became overcrowded and its walls needed to be expanded. When the authorities enlarged the city, these sites were incorporated within the city limits.

And so, not long after the events in the gospels, the mirage of history already started playing tricks on those who wanted to look back into it. Archaeological evidence suggest that at one point a pagan Roman temple was build over the site, possibly during the time when Jerusalem was known as Aelia Capitolina. Eventually, the current Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built. Needless to say, the church draws many Christian pilgrims, and so we needed to be there early to avoid too many people.

Our first introduction to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was not a happy one. The so-called "Immovable Ladder" was pointed out to us. This ladder was likely put in place when maintenance or restoration work needed to be done to the church in the 18th century. Several different churches (e.g. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Armenian, etc.) have joint control over the church. No alterations to the church can be made without the consent of all parties. When a worker put up the ladder to begin his work, there was outrage because there had been no unanimous agreement about the work. The work was halted summarily, and today even the ladder cannot be moved without consent of all parties involved. While I am sure that they could all today agree to remove the ladder (and it has been moved over the years)[5], today it has become a symbol of the division which exists in the Christian Church. The Body of Christ, sadly, does not seem to be able to even bathe itself.

Entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, there is a large, prominent slab of stone. This stone, tradition tells us, is the stone on which the body of Jesus was laid in the cave. One devout woman was lying on top of the stone, weeping and praying. However, this stone is almost certainly not original, and probably did not fit the dimensions of the cave in which Jesus was laid. This was a puzzling sight to me: a woman of obvious and sincerely devoutness, but holding on to traditions which are unfounded. She seems the opposite of me in this context, who did not experience much in the way of religious emotions towards objects and places on the tour. Yet she, too, is a child of Christ. We Christians come in all kinds.

The cliff around the cave in which Jesus was supposedly buried had been hewn away long ago. The landscape would be unrecognisable to a first century citizen of Jerusalem. Only the cave itself remains, and is encased in a small building within the church. Despite our early arrival, there was already a queue. Like with the Church of the Nativity, we went into an adjacent room to see another example of such burial caves, even if they were not "the" cave. Then we sat down and quietly had a lecture on how historians view the Resurrection.

For serious scholars, the Resurrection is a historical anomaly which cannot be ignored or brushed aside. This is demonstrated in the work of Christian scholars such as Gary Habermas and Michael Licona[6,7]. They demonstrated that objections to the Resurrection do not hold much water when subjected to rigorous historical interrogation. But it is not only Christian scholars who come to this conclusion: secular and Jewish scholars do as well. Some historians leave the matter as an open question[8]. Others venture to speculate that something supernatural may have happened, though it may not necessarily validate the Christian claim[9]. Yet, as many Christians believe today, the Resurrection may well have been a historical and supernatural event which was the culmination of generations of prophecies and salvation work wrought by the Author of history Himself: the compassionate Creator-God of the universe. The Resurrection event is the validation of a future hope for judgement on evil and a renewing and perfection of what is created. The question of the

Resurrection is simply too important for anyone to ignore.

After a wander through other parts of the church, including a gallery where tradition holds Jesus was crucified, we concluded our visit. We boarded the bus, and left Jerusalem behind us once again.

In the history of Christianity, we had reached a peculiar and precocious time. The Resurrection event hangs as a question mark in history; today as much as in the middle of the first century. But what came afterwards was truly remarkable: the small movement of people who followed Jesus were not dispersed and disgraced by His execution, but grew in boldness. The numbers of the Galileans (as they were then called) grew. Soon it started drawing attention to itself, but even persecution could not contain it. Soon it spilled over the walls of Jerusalem into the rest of Judea, and into Samaria. Now we were heading towards the Mediterranean sea: the border of the Jewish homeland. Our destination was Caesarea Maritima[10]: an ancient portal to the rest of the world.

Caesarea Maritima was another grand building project of Herod the Great. This one would not last, though: despite spending an incredible amount of resources to build an artificial port, it would not withstand the forces of nature, and within a few hundred years the port was useless. Yet for a brief period in time it was an important trading city, bringing travellers and their wealth and knowledge to Judea. And also taking the same out.

Some magnificent sites are preserved here. The most impressive is the hippodrome, where Roman chariot races were held. Here John Dickson told us another captivating story: this time from when Pontius Pilate arrived as governor of Judea. He challenged the monotheism of the Jews, which his predecessors had tolerated. The Jewish leaders came out from Jerusalem to request him to withdraw his challenge. Pilate responded by threatening to have them executed in the hippodrome. As one man, the Jewish leaders lay down on the ground and offered up their necks to the executioners. Pilate's bluff was called: he told the executioners to stand down, and he withdrew his challenge. So began Pilate's precarious governorship: a man of clear ambition, but ultimately not able to control situations around him as he should have been able to in order to fulfil those ambitions.

Caesarea Maritima features a number of times in the book of Acts. It was the place where the first gentile became a Christian (Acts 10). It is also where Herod Agrippa died (Acts 12:20–24; Josephus gives a similar account in his *Antiquities*). It is where Paul's arrest in Jerusalem was prophesied (Acts 21:8–11), and where he was imprisoned in Herod's palace and was tried in the governor's villa (Acts 23:23–35, Acts 25:4–6). And it is where Christian missions throughout the Mediterranean began and ended (Acts 18:22, Acts 21:8).

It was sitting in the amphitheatre where Herod Agrippa was stricken that we had our final lecture. Christianity was contrasted with Rabbinic Judaism, which long ago was tentatively a proselytising religion, but no longer is. Jews would go out and try to convert people (cf. Matthew 23:15), but it was a difficult religion to enter into, not only because of all the laws which needed to be kept, but particularly because of circumcision. In contrast, the fervor with which the early Christians preached, combined with a simple message of repentance without circumcision, drew many gentiles who were disillusioned by a large amoral pagan culture and were attracted to Jewish monotheism. Truly, a tiny mustard seed, which first need to die in the ground, sprouted into a mighty tree, and from Caesarea Maritima its branches first began to spread!

We finished with a lovely lunch before continuing to Tel Aviv (particularly the area where Joppa used to be), where we booked into a hotel, had a celebratory farewell dinner, and spent our final night in Israel.

Epilogue

The following day we had a slow start, but went to the airport relatively early: three hours before our departures. Some of the tour group went on to a second tour into Jordan. Others simply returned home. And while the Australians had a relatively easy time (we all did wait in a long queue for an initial security check before we could check in), I was unceremoniously pulled into another long line for another security check (apparently because I am South African). I didn't have time to say

goodbye to everyone in the group, and because of additional problems at passport control I nearly missed my flight. But, soon I was on my way to Istanbul[11] for another mini adventure. But that is a story for another time.

The tour had met and exceeded all of my expectations. It was a privilege travelling with such knowledgeable guides (both John Dickson and our Israeli tour guide). Our tour was very narrowly focused, and there is a great deal of Israel still left to be discovered. But for my interests in history and Christianity, it was a phenomenal experience. It ranged from the amazement of what we know and still have from two thousand years ago, to the grief and sorrow of what we no longer have [3]. The Bible, and in particularly the gospel stories, had been opened up for me in a special way. Suddenly Jesus's words and parables ring rich with cultural and geographical context. Jesus became more human for me: and through His resoluteness and unique perspective, more divine.

The purpose for me of going on this tour was never for it to be leisure or a holiday. It was to learn and to grow. That I feel has happened. Like some of the others on the tour, this was a knowledge gathering experience so that we then can enrich others as well. In other words, then end of the tour was only the beginning of several journeys; may they be richly fulfilled!

- 1. Note that the disciples without Jesus numbered twelve, thereby indicating that He is not part of the earthly nation of Israel, but stood apart as their leader, just as God would be in relation to the twelve tribes of Israel.
- 2. This clarifies the details given by Matthew and Luke about the burial of Jesus in Matthew 27:57–60 and Luke 23:50–55.
- 3. See Matthew 27:50 and John 19:30, which explain the manner in which Jesus died. This also explains why the other two people who were crucified alongside Jesus were killed by having their legs broken. Having one's legs broken is not fatal, but a person being crucified needs to lift himself up using his arms and legs in order to take a breath. As a person becomes more and more tired (from the trauma of the flogging and crucifixion process, but also being left on a cross for hours or days), it becomes more and more difficult to breathe, until a person simply is no longer able to draw a breath and dies.
- 4. The Pharisees had little or no part in Jesus's passion narrative. Despite being featuring prominently in stories throughout Jesus's ministry, the Sadducees were the leaders of the Temple and orchestrated His arrest and trial.
- 5. Restoration work has since been approved at the church and there even was a recent such restoration job [4].
- 6. Licona, Michael R. The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach *[5]*. Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010.
- 7. These arguments are briefly summarised here [6].
- 8. Vermes, Géza. The Resurrection: History and Myth *[7]* In *The Resurrection*. Doubleday Religion, 2008.
- 9. Lapide, Pinchas. The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective *[8]*. Wipf & Stock Pub, 2002.
- 10. Caesarea Maritima should not to be confused with Caesarea Philippi. The former was a port city on the Mediterranean, while the latter is an inland city north of the Sea of Galilee. The Bible refers to both as merely "Caesarea". Both cities were named in honour of Emperor Caesar Augustus.
- 11. Not having followed the news for the past two weeks, I was blissfully unaware of the Jamal Khashoggi saga [9] which had in that time been taking place in Istanbul.

Categories:

- Travel [10]

Tags:

- israel [11]
- origins of christianity [12]
- dr john dickson [13]
- john dickson [14]
- jerusalem [15]
- caesarea [16]
- caesarea maritima [17]
- resurrection [18]
- crucifixion [19]
- church of the holy sepulchre [20]
- pontius pilate [21]
- josephus [22]
- gary habermas [23]
- michael licona [24]
- mike licona [25]
- geza vermes [26]
- pinchas lapide [27]
- bar mitzvah [28]

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Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1202
[2] https://siyach.org/node/1196
[3] https://siyach.org/node/1161
[4] https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-39357170/holy-sepulchre-church-discovery-at-jesus-s-tomb-in-jerusalem
[5] https://siyach.org/node/1043
[6] https://siyach.org/node/107#the-historical-facts-concerning-the-life-death-resurrection-of-jesus
[7] https://siyach.org/node/1200
[8] https://siyach.org/node/1201
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[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/885
[14] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/627
[15] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/647
[16] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/916
[17] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/917
[18] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/282
[19] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/374
[20] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/918
[21] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/919
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[23] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/921
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[26] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/924
[27] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/925
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