

What was it like to be a Passover Pilgrim?

What do you think Passover Pilgrimage was like? Imagine. You walk with your family to Jerusalem, sacrifice a lamb, eat a meal and come home. That is what it sounds like in the Bible. Now think of it again from their point of view. You travel with your people from your village for a day or more, bringing what you need. There was no TV or sports or politics. The only game, pastime, was the weather and religion. The synagogues were the town clubs. Worship some, pray some, talk. The only way to prominence for the average man was religious expertise, humility included. Each year as more and more people came for the Festival the leaders in Jerusalem, the Council, adjusted to accommodate the increasing crowds. It was a gradual process, and the income covered the expenses.

Many people seem to think cities, places were small in Jesus' day. So they totally misunderstand what His world was like. I often ask people, clergy; How many people were in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified? Clergy often guess a smaller number than laypeople, down to 5,000, seldom over 50,000. The actual number is documented. The numbers were written down by an eyewitness or shortly after.¹

Why would people think there were just a few there? How big a crowd, event have you ever been in, seen on television, in a movie? It is very hard to think of something much bigger than what you have experienced. What have you experienced in religion? What is the biggest worship group, biggest church? They were very impressive to you. If you were Islamic and made "Hajj" to Mecca, you would have a totally different understanding, over 2.5 million in 2019 participate. There is a Hindu pilgrimage that has over 50 million.² The largest gatherings in the US I am aware of were over one million on the Washington Mall. We judge on the basis of what we experience.

God had commanded His people to meet together in Jerusalem three times a year.³ They were all the "Children of Abraham" but were twelve tribes. There are natural forces to cause conflicts and separate them. The ten tribes in the North, Israel, did split off, creating their own Capital and Temple. Some northerners did remain attached to the Jerusalem Temple. Samaria also was lost, rejecting the Jerusalem Temple. Interestingly, the Ethiopians made pilgrimage as best they could from very far away. They were

¹ "the people came about him not fewer in number than three millions". Josephus *The Wars of the Jews* Book II, Ch. 14, "amounts to two millions seven hundred thousand and two hundred persons" Flavius Josephus. "The Wars of the Jews; or the history of the destruction of Jerusalem." Book VI Chapter 9:4

David Instone-Brewer *Traditions of the Rabbis in the Era of the New Testament* vol. 2A: Feasts and Sabbaths: Passover and Atonement. t.Pes.4.15 (Z.4.12): The crowded Passover of King Agrippa "One time Agrippa the King wanted to know how many workers. He said to them, the priests: Set aside for me the kidney from each and every Passover [offering]. And they set aside for him 600,000 pairs of kidneys "-Three hundred thousand Passover lambs suggests a minimum of 5 million adults

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hajj> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kumbh_Mela

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Pilgrimage_Festivals

attached to the Temple, as did other elements of the diaspora. Pilgrimage kept the faith together. The Temple, Passover, were the central focus.

For a thousand years, as times and conditions allowed, people came to Jerusalem. The Temple priesthood tried to maintain the traditions. After the return from exile in Babylon, 539 B.C., a chastised people, a chastised priesthood did better. There were priests in all the villages. The people began to meet for prayers, singing, listening, reading God's instructions, "Torah", forming nascent synagogues. With the Second Temple more and more people made pilgrimages. Under the Seleucid rule 312 B.C. conditions were somewhat stable, the economy improved, the nation, the city grew.⁴

The three annual pilgrimages were during slack times for the majority of the people, the farmers. They were between planting and harvest, between winter rains and the heat of summer. Most people camped. Their homes had no beds, heat, windows, or plumbing. For hundreds of years the same people and their descendants returned to the same locations. The property owners, stewards, were familiar with them. Adjustments had to be made at times. As the crowd grew more distant areas were occupied. If an oven and cooking pot were left with the steward, they would not have much to bring. Some might have a tent. The only thing that was needed was a curtain to put around the women if necessary.

In addition to the crowds camping around the city, in Jesus' day there were 500 guest houses. Many were owed by distant communities. They provided accommodations for their members when they came to Jerusalem for business or study. Jerusalem was the "university" for the Faith, home of nearly all the great scholars. Some listened on the fringe. These accepted as disciples were in front. The teacher was supported by gifts. The wide flung trading networks were also centered here.

The pilgrims stayed near friends and family from home, the same neighbors. Pilgrimage was a great family reunion, vacation time. Family and friends who had moved away were now near. The highpoint of each festival was a feast. All the normal features were there and since they are normal, no one bothered to make mention of them. There is no historical record. No one mentioned the sun came up either. There was singing, dancing and a great fair - buying and selling all kinds of goods. With all those people, merchants came prepared. The pictures always show Jesus with the twelve or a small group. The Scriptures mention that there were many more with him.⁵

There were religious ceremonies, grand processions, over 120 trumpeters plus other musicians and Levitical choirs. The people in the outer courts heard the words of the service by "loudspeakers" - heralds, who repeated the words in the Inner Court.⁶ The Temple courts were huge. During Jesus' time they were being expanded from holding 150,000 to 250,000. During the worship service they were packed, many people could not get in. In between the worship services, people came to see, to look at the grandeur, marvel. Josephus, who saw it, describes how it looked when the renovation and expansion was

⁴ Hecataeus of Abdera, 300 B.C. states Jerusalem had a population of 120,000. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seleucid_Empire

⁵ http://thesignofconcord.com/uploads/How_many_were_with_Jesus_at_his_Last_Supper_.pdf

⁶ The best popular source is Leen & Kathleen Ritmeyer "The Ritual of the Temple in the Time of Christ, ISBN 965-220-452-8 Carta Jerusalem 2002 <https://www.ritmeyer.com> Until the invention of electronic amplifiers, this is how large groups were addressed. Gandhi spoke to crowds of a half million this way in the early 20th Century.

finished in 66 AD. What Jesus saw, was a vast construction site. The Temple was pure white and gold, 60 cubits, 180 feet tall set in the Inner Court. The Middle Court held 10,000, surrounded by high walls. The porticos around were the places where the scholars taught. A description more than 200 years before is in the "The Letter of Aristeas".⁷

Solomon built the First Temple and a 500 cubit square platform. He gave 20 cities to Tyre for their help. A high retaining wall was made and filled in. It would have been much much easier to cut the top down to make it level. About 150 years before Jesus the Massorites expanded it with higher retaining walls to hold about 150,000 and Herod the Great began the expansion to 250,000. The highest retaining wall survives in the Southwest corner 150 feet tall,⁸ along the way great water supplies were developed.⁹

Most of Judea was within a walk of a day or two. Galilee was a longer walk. Acts 2:9 lists Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, Cretans and Arabs. That is just a short list. Phillip met the Ethiopian eunuch and Simon of Cyrene carried the cross.

To celebrate Passover in Jerusalem was the goal, the hope, the dream. The diaspora had scattered them across the world. They did not blend in their distant societies. They kept their faith, remembered who they were, where they had come from. They remembered Jerusalem, the covenant, their God. In the Judea and Galilee they farmed, but elsewhere were merchants, artisans. Their religion is family centered less dependent on priests and holy sites. They remembered and repeated the instruction of Moses, Torah. The round trip to Jerusalem from Parthia, Ethiopia, India could take more than a year. Many would finance their trip by bringing items to sell.

The Diaspora stretched from Spain to Ethiopia, South India and Central Asia. They were numerous and powerful enough in some places to dominate. Arab Yemenites conquered a large area. Near Babylon they established their own rebel state. Rebellion in Cypress massacred 240,000 Greeks. Many more were killed in other cities until repressed in Kitos War.¹⁰ Greek geographer Strabo.d. 24 AD. "This people has already made it way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received the nation and in which it has not made its power felt. (Josephus, Antiquities XIV, 115)

⁷ <https://ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/aristeas.htm> section 83fff

⁸ <https://www.ritmeyer.com/2014/11/24/the-temple-mount-in-the-herodian-period-37-bc-70-ad/> The drawings by Ritmeyer are the best archeological portrayal of the Temple.

⁹ http://www.romanaqueducts.info/aquasite/jerusalem_pools/

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_diaspora https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitos_War https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Iraq https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Syria https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Cyprus https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Armenia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Ethiopia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Egypt https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Italy https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Greece https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_India https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bukharan_Jews -https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Central_Asia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anilai_and_Asinai https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemenite_Jews https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cochin_Jews https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Greek_Kingdom

Theodor Mommsen, reckoned in the first century C.E. there were no fewer than 1,000,000 Jews in Egypt, in a total of 8,000,000 inhabitants; of these 200,000 lived in Alexandria, whose total population was 500,000. Adolf Harnack reckons that there were 1,000,000 Jews in Syria - Lebanon and the areas east of the Euphrates at the time of Nero in 60's CE, and 700,000 in Judea, and he allows for an additional 1,500,000 in other places, thus estimating that there were in the first century 4,200,000 Jews in the world. Josephus counts 1 million in Judea and another million in Galilee.

There is one area where people today wildly overestimate. Pilate had very limited authority and only 6 cohorts, 3600 soldiers for a population of over two million. In addition there were regular raids by Arab tribes and major threat from Rome only serious enemy - the Parthian Empire.¹¹ Pilate's forces were only a token. The Sanhedrin in Judea and Herod Antipas in Galilee were the government for their nations and had powerful militaries. The soldiers people saw were from their own nation not Rome. They were religiously offended that Rome claimed the highest authority. They believed, their faith, their religion was that their God was King of kings, Lord of lords, ruler of all the nations of the world. The descendants of Abraham were the rightful rulers of the world. They were insulted, appalled by Rome's claim. Even though they had invited Rome in because of their own internal conflicts.¹²

The crowds at Passover would include mentally ill and terrorists. They called terrorists "knife men" for stabbing people. We term them zealots. The night watch at the Temple was 240. Daytime would have been much larger. They were trained in crowd control and well experienced. Insurrection was always a legitimate fear. The Judean army would be at maximum force and many soldiers of Galilee would be pilgrims. In all it might total over 15,000, counting Judean, and Galilean legions and a legion of auxiliaries, Temple Watch. The average person carried a knife and many had swords. Jesus' disciples had two swords. There was no police force. People caught the criminal and brought him to the court. I expect Pilate might have brought an additional cohort. That would give a cohort for the Fortress of Antonia and one with him at Herod's Palace.¹³ He would need to leave most of his six cohorts in place.

To God alone be Glory

He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves,
but for him who died and was raised for them. 2 Cor. 5:15

See my web site for more. <http://thesignofconcord.com> Email ConcordDove@mac.com
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¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parthian_Empire

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyrchanus_II https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herodian_Kingdom_of_Judea
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_Archelaus

¹³ Antonia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonia_Fortress
Palace [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod%27s_Palace_\(Jerusalem\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod%27s_Palace_(Jerusalem))