

# Epistles: Jesus and His Pilgrimage Practices

By Jeffrey P. García

Jesus's pilgrimage routes in the Gospels are an important witness for ancient Jewish travel during the three pilgrimage festivals: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover; Hebrew: **הַמַּצוֹת** **הַזֶּה**), the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot; Hebrew: **הַשַּׁבּוּעוֹת** **הַזֶּה**), and the Feast of Booths/Tabernacles (Sukkot; Hebrew: **הַסֻּכּוֹת** **הַזֶּה**);

*Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:16*). During these feasts, journey to Jerusalem was expected, but not required.

Apart from the Jewish historian Josephus's reports about pilgrims crossing the Jordan River, coming from Jericho, and traveling through Samaria (*Antiquities* 17.254; 20.118), information about particular routes in the Land of Israel is slim. Narratives about these travelers before the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple are altogether missing. Still, there is little doubt that many practiced pilgrimage on the three holy days—even if, for some, it was a once-in-a-lifetime journey.

Historical and archaeological evidence indicates a vibrant practice of pilgrimage beginning in the Hellenistic period (by the second century B.C.E.). Both Josephus and the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria describe the myriads of Jews in the land and the diaspora who made pilgrimage (*Antiquities* 20.118–119; *Special Laws* 1.69, respectively). Josephus comments that pilgrimage was intended to “render thanks to God for benefits received, to intercede for future mercies, and to promote by thus meeting and feasting together feelings of mutual affection” (*Antiquities* 4.203). Additionally, the Theodotus Synagogue Inscription, the so-called Pilgrimage Road (a monumental staircase and street that led from the Siloam Pool to the Temple), and several freshwater pools reveal aspects of Jerusalem's infrastructure that were used by pilgrims.

According to the Gospels, Jesus participated in more than one pilgrimage. <sup>061</sup>At the age of 12, he accompanied Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem for Passover, a practice that Luke describes as happening “every year” (Greek: *κατ' ἔτος*; *Luke 2:41-52*). His best-known pilgrimage in the Gospels, although it is not often noted as such, is his final journey to Jerusalem. Sometimes obscured by its tragic end, Jesus's travel to Jerusalem was intended to celebrate and eat the Passover meal with his disciples (*Luke 22:15*).

Beginning in *Luke 17:11*, the first geographical detail describes Jesus as traveling through an indistinct area “between Samaria and Galilee.” While the precise location is unknown, Jesus's route with his disciples probably began in Capernaum (see *Mark 9:33*). If so, their route would have led south along the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, cutting west through the Arbel Pass not far from Magdala and intentionally avoiding Tiberias. The pass provided the quickest access to Nazareth in the west and the Jezreel Valley in the south.

An earlier reference in *Luke 7:11* to Jesus at Nain suggests

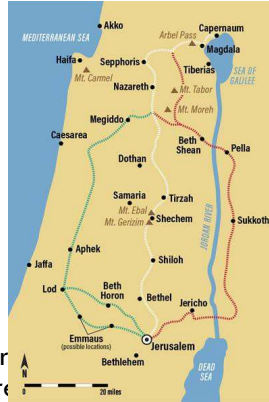


that on occasion he continued south from Arbel into the Yavne'el Valley and used a local road that emptied in the Harod Valley. This road met with biblical Endor (*Joshua 17:11*; *1 Samuel 28:7*) continuing south on the eastern side of the Hill of Moreh. Finally reaching the Harod Valley, a more significant road moved east to Beth Shean (Scythopolis). This eastern pass from the Jezreel Valley to Beth Shean could be described as "between Samaria and the Galilee."

Near Beth Shean, the route crossed the Jordan River, probably not far from where modern travelers enter the country of Jordan through the Beth Shean/Sheikh Hussein crossing. Passing southeast into Transjordan, the pilgrims could reach the city of Pella in the region of Perea, which in Jesus's day was administrated by Herod Antipas. Because conditions along the western side of the Jordan River were unfavorable for travelers, this circuitous route was necessary.

Jewish communities in Perea would have welcomed pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Despite being the longer route to Jerusalem (taking five to seven days by foot, shown in red on the map), it avoided the region of Samaria where violence had occasionally flared while Galileans were on pilgrimage (e.g., *Antiquities* 20.118). Jesus's stop in Jericho (*Matthew 20:29*; *Mark 10:46*; *Luke 18:35*; *Luke 19:1*) strengthens our suggestion that Jesus traveled through Perea on his way to Jerusalem. There would have been no other reason for him to pass through the biblical city. It stood west of a ford in the Jordan River and today is called Qasr al-Yahud (western bank), Arabic for "Fort of the Jews," and alternatively Al-Maghtas (eastern bank), meaning "immersion" or "baptism" in Arabic. Since at least the fourth century C.E., this area has been identified as the traditional location of Jesus's baptism.<sup>9</sup>

Departing Jericho, travelers would have entered Wadi Qilt and the difficult, biblical Ascent of Adumim (*Joshua 15:7*). Jesus and his disciples followed the southern side of this ascent to Bethpage, Bethany, and finally Jerusalem. The dangers along this route, which the Roman general Pompey wanted to quell (Strabo, *Geography* 16.40), were the inspiration for the story of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:25-37*).



Pilgrimage might be indicated elsewhere in the Gospels.

Before meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus is said to depart from Galilee and go to Judea and Jerusalem. John, of course, does not explicitly state that Jesus is on pilgrimage; in fact, Jesus appears to travel to Jerusalem for different reasons (e.g., *John 10:22*).



three times a year demonstrated a continued piety to the God of Israel and increased economic life for the villages (and Jerusalem) that supplied their needs.

Footnotes:

a. Rami G. Khouri, "Where John Baptized—Bethany Beyond the Jordan," **BAR** January/February 2005.

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THEODOTUS INSCRIPTION. Excavated from a cistern in Jerusalem, this inscription commemorates the rebuilding of a synagogue in Jerusalem by Theodotus, son of Vettenu. The synagogue functioned while the Temple was still standing, prior to its destruction in 70 C.E. The Greek inscription references accommodating those who have been abroad, which suggests that the synagogue was largely intended for Jewish pilgrims.





RECENTLY UNCOVERED STONE STEPS

PILGRIM PATH. Archaeologists have found roads used by pilgrims on their way to the Jerusalem Temple. Stone steps recently uncovered in Jerusalem belong to the pilgrimage road that connected the Pool of Siloam with the Temple. Dated to the first century B.C.E.—first century C.E., the Pool of Siloam was a freshwater pool in Jerusalem that may have functioned as a ritual bath, or *mikveh*.



HERSHEL SHANKS

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PILGRIMAGE ROUTES. These routes reflect ways of traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem.

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