

Who may come in?

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Ottawa has not always been the capital of Canada. When Canada was not even envisioned as a nation, it was just a little lumber town.

Jerusalem was not always the city at the heart of Israel, nor was there always a Temple to mark the centre of the city.

For centuries before Jerusalem had become the City of David, Jerusalem had been a sore spot on the horizon. After Israel had entered the land of Canaan following their exodus from Egypt, most of the land fell to the Israelite armies. But for hundreds of years, Jerusalem remained a Canaan stronghold. It was a nearly impregnable fortress of the Jebusites, one of the Canaanite tribes. Even though the Israelites slowly conquered one city after another, first as a loose confederation of tribes, and then as one people under King Saul, the Jebusites held on to their mountain fortress of Jerusalem.

But, then Saul died and the Israelites put all of their hopes in David. It had been he, not King Saul, who had actually led the most successful defence against Israel's other enemies, the Philistines. David accepted the people's anointing of him as their king, with the commission to attack and defeat the Philistines once and for all. But David did something else first: he set his sights on that one remaining thorn in the side of Israel, the Jebusite mountain fortress of Jerusalem. He vowed to conquer it and make it his capital, and from there to conquer all the rest of Israel, Canaanites, Philistines, and any other foreigner who stood in his way. And so, his first action as anointed king was to march against Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, the fortress was simply too much for them. For days, weeks, perhaps even months, we don't know, David and his Israelite warriors laid siege to Jerusalem but they were held off by the Jebusites.

From their fortress walls, the Jebusite soldiers pelted David's Israelite warriors with stones and missiles. The archers found the Israelite soldiers to be easy prey: as soon as they appeared in the open, they were picked off. The Jebusites had no need to send anyone out to fight against Israel, and the Israelites were dying like flies.

To hasten their demise, to add insult to injury, the Jebusites taunted David and his troops. In addition to their missiles, they hurled at David boastings of their own strength and insults about David's weaknesses. One of the worst insults, the one that has come down in memory, even the pages of Scripture, was this: David is so weak that even the Jebusites who are blind or lame could defeat him!

David was incensed. He was already an angry young man, but these insults, and in particular, the notion that the blind and the lame alone could defeat David, made his blood boil. “The blind and the lame? They will defeat me? I hate the blind and the lame!”

David was an angry man, but he was first of all a great warrior and strategist. And it was David who found a weak spot in the Jebusite defence: their water supply. The Jebusites got water from a spot outside the walls of their fortress, down in the Kidron valley, through a long tunnel stretching from the city above to the valley below. David devised a plan to sneak his warriors up through the water supply into the city.

It was a masterful plan and it worked. David and his troops streamed into the Jebusite city of Jerusalem through the water tunnel. There was panic everywhere with the enemy soldiers now in the city itself rather than outside the walls. The Jebusites were not prepared for this.

And so it was that the Jebusite forces were routed, but not before David had ordered his troops to go systematically through the city looking for one thing: “Find me those blind and lame, the ones whom the Jebusites said would defeat me, and kill them all. Don’t let one of them survive.”

Scripture says: From that day onward, Jerusalem was called “the city of David”. And David said: “From this day forth the blind and the lame will never come into this city.... for the soul of David hates the blind and the lame.”¹

For a thousand years, Jerusalem remained at the centre of Jewish hopes. For a time, after David had conquered the city and after Solomon had built the Temple to mark the city as God’s own forever, it was glorious. Even when city and Temple were destroyed by the Babylonians some 400 years after David, the Jews rebuilt Jerusalem both as soon as the Persians had given them the right to return to their country. Again and again, foreign powers sought to defile the city and the Temple, and again and again the Jews rose up to reclaim what was theirs. Their hope was that one day, one day, God would make Jerusalem truly glorious. One day, God would put a worthy son of David upon the throne of David, a son to him who would not only make Jerusalem strong, but so strong that the whole earth would recognize Jerusalem and all the nations would stream there not to conquer it but to worship the God of Israel, the great I AM. And God would do so by destroying the Gentile armies and rendering all the peoples of the earth as slaves to Israel.²

¹The story can be found in 2 Samuel 5:1-10.

²An excellent textual reflection of this apocalyptic hope, and the placement of this hope in a Messiah, Son of David, is found in the 1st century AD pseudonymous Psalms of Solomon, particularly Psalm 17: *Behold, O Lord, and raise up unto them their king, the son of David, at the time in the which Thou seest, O God, that he may reign over Israel Thy servant and gird him with strength, that he may shatter unrighteous rulers, and that he may purge Jerusalem from nations that trample (her) down to destruction. Wisely, righteously he shall thrust out sinners from (the) inheritance, He shall destroy the pride of the sinner as a potter’s vessel. With a rod of iron he shall break in pieces all their substance, he shall destroy the godless nations with the word of his mouth; at his rebuke nations shall flee before him, and he shall reprove sinners for*

What Israel never seemed to realize was that foreign powers only took control of the city when the people's sins led God to punish them. All that Israel could think about was what David had thought about... how I hate this foreign power in our midst. It is a constant reminder of our weakness.³

And so during times of foreign occupation, every great feast in Jerusalem was an occasion for the Jews to think: will it be this year? Is this the year that God will raise up a son of David to act, to free us from these Gentiles in our midst? And so one feast of Tabernacles after another came and went, one feast of Pentecost after another came and went, one feast of Passover after another came and went... until one day...

On the horizon, to the north in Galilee, storm clouds had begun to gather. Word of a great prophet came. With marvelous signs and wonders, comparable only to the kinds of things that Moses might have done before Pharaoh, or like Elijah or Elishah might have done before foreign armies, he had attracted huge crowds.

And little by little, he created around him what looked like the same kind of warrior band that David had created.⁴ These men, none of them scholars, none of them rich, none of them entitled, but all of them able to fight, had left their jobs willingly, not because of some faint hope, but because of what they saw in Jesus: here, now, was someone who was not hoping for the kingdom of God; here was someone who was saying: The Kingdom of God is here! You know, this might just be the Messiah, the Son of David, that we have been waiting for?

the thoughts of their heart. And he shall gather together a holy people, whom he shall lead in righteousness, And he shall judge the tribes of the people that has been sanctified by the Lord his God. And he shall not suffer unrighteousness to lodge any more in their midst, nor shall there dwell with them any man that knoweth wickedness, for he shall know them, that they are all sons of their God. And he shall divide them according to their tribes upon the land, and neither sojourner nor alien shall sojourn with them any more. He shall judge peoples and nations in the wisdom of his righteousness. ... And he shall have the heathen nations to serve him under his yoke; and he shall glorify the Lord in a place to be seen of () all the earth; and he shall purge Jerusalem, making it holy as of old: so that nations shall come from the ends of the earth to see his glory ... All nations (shall be) in fear before him, for he will smite the earth with the word of his mouth for ever. He will bless the people of the Lord with wisdom and gladness, and he himself (will be) pure from sin, so that he may rule a great people. He will rebuke rulers, and remove sinners by the might of his word ... In that they shall see the good fortune of Israel which God shall bring to pass in the gathering together of the tribes. May the Lord hasten His mercy upon Israel! May He deliver us from the uncleanness of unholy enemies!

³Psalm of Solomon 17 recognizes briefly the people's sin, but sees the avenging Messiah as God's assurance that punishment for sins will not last long.

⁴These are regularly referred to through 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel as "David and his men".

So, they followed him. And when, after showing great power and teaching, he set his sights on celebrating Passover in Jerusalem, they knew that they were right: he was leading them to power, and to great glory, a whole new day in which the Romans who now occupied the land would be slaughtered in a great bloodbath the likes of which had never been seen. And it would start from Jerusalem, the city of David. These disciples, these Taliban -- that's the Arabic word for "disciples" -- could taste the moment that God would reveal His glory for all to see. Yes! The moment we've been waiting for. The son of David has set out to retake Jerusalem!

And so they started off. On the way, his closest followers Peter, and James, and John, who knew that he had chosen them for a reason, continually kept asking each other: So, what do you think? When we get to Jerusalem... who's he going to put at his right hand? Who's going to get to cut off the Roman governor's head? Who's going to get to be priest in the Temple? Who's going to get to be minister of state? Who's going to live in the great palaces? You? No, me!

The night before they got to Jerusalem, as they were camped near Jericho, Jesus asked them: "What were you talking about on the road today?" They didn't want to tell him. But, he already knew. He said to them: "Is that what you think this is about, that power and glory await me, and you, in Jerusalem? And he took an urchin from the street there in Jericho and said: "Look. Here's what the kingdom of God looks like. This little nothing of a child? That's me. And that's you. Because that is how they will treat me in Jerusalem, like something from the streets to throw away. And that is how they will eventually treat you." But, his disciples, even his closest ones, had no idea what he was saying: the glory of what they would receive from following him, the son of David, had blinded them.⁵

The next morning, as Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho for the final few miles to Jerusalem, they passed a bunch of onlookers. Among them, seated by the walls of Jericho, was a blind man, Bartimaeus. When he heard that this great prophet Jesus was passing by and was headed toward Jerusalem where everyone was saying that he would become the king, because he was surely the son of David, this blind man started to shout out: "Hey, Jesus, you, king of Israel, David's son, hey!" The crowd didn't want this nothing, this blind man, disrupting the spectacle of Jesus advancing on the city. They told him to shut up. But, that just made Bartimaeus all the more anxious: Hey, Jesus, hey you, king, David's son, hey, look at me!!

Jesus stopped. No one had ever called him Son of David, ever, but here, a few miles from the walls of Jerusalem, with the crowd convinced now that he was the one, the son of David, who would retake Jerusalem from its Gentile overlords and perhaps once and for all make Jerusalem all that it was supposed to be, just as David had, cleansing it of every impurity, Jesus stopped and called for Bartimaeus. "What do you want?"

The blind man stumbled over to Jesus. "I want to see." "And you think that I can do that for you?" "Yes, I believe that you can."

⁵The story is found in Mark 10:32-45 in one form, and in other forms, including the Palm Sunday reading from Luke 22:24-26.

“Very well. Go your way. You are no longer blind.”

And at that very instant Blind Bartimaeus was no longer blind; he could see.

And Jesus continued on toward Jerusalem, the city of David. As he did, Peter and James and John, still puzzled by what Jesus had said to them the night before, but still confident in Jesus' power to bring this all to a glorious end, looked back over the huge crowd that was now following them to Jerusalem. And there, at the end of the pack, they could see Bartimaeus, looking around taking it all in, things he had never seen before. And he still was following Jesus, all the way to Jerusalem, right into the city of David, where David had killed all the blind and the lame and said: Never again will there be blind and lame in this city.⁶

Is it a coincidence that the last healing that Jesus does before he enters the city of David is of a blind man? Coincidence? I don't think so.

David had said the blind and the lame will not enter here, and I will kill them to prevent them from doing so, but it was Jesus who said I will take upon myself their blindness, their lameness, their ignorance, their sicknesses and their sins so that they can enter. And he was going to do exactly the same for his enemies, making them whole. He was not going to do so by the sword, bringing down the mighty from their thrones and making Israel glorious in the sight of all the nations, which was the only form of power that David and military leaders like him have ever known but by giving himself as a ransom for many. Because what do you do when the enemy is not “out there” but rather “in here”... even in our own hearts?

No one could have realized how this was going to happen, but at the end of that week, on Passover, when everyone expected God's shock and awe to overwhelm the Romans, Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, was going to die. He would die alone, abandoned by all his faithful Taliban who hoped for great glory and honour, and who realized when Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified, that all their hopes had gone up in smoke. He would die not for his own glory, or for that of his followers, or for the sake of restoring Israel... he would die, as he himself had said that night in Jericho as a ransom for many, taking upon himself the weight of all those things that were killing people, their blindness and lameness and sin, not just of a few Israelites, but of the whole world, and he would bring all that blindness and sickness, all that sin, all that death and even the power of death itself, down into the depths of Hell from which it would never return.

This was no Son of David. Jesus did not do this because he was the Son of David, but because he was the Son of God ...which is what the hated, foreign, Roman centurion would see as one of the only people there, at the foot of the cross, on Friday.⁷

⁶The story of Blind Bartimaeus is found in Mark 10:46-52.

⁷Mark 15:39.