



## Mini Review

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# The New Testament Parody of Pontius Pilate's Stepped Street

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This short study entertains the possibility that the current excavation of the "Stepped" or "Monumental" street of Jerusalem may reveal the historic referent behind John the Baptist's parody of the Roman road system recounted in the Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6). The excavation of the Stepped Street in Jerusalem became known to me a month after submitting my final draft of the *New Testament Studies* article, "Isaiah 40.3 and the Synoptic Gospels' Parody of the Roman Road System" (*NTS* 66.1 (Jan 2020) pp. 106-24). In that article, I proposed that the Synoptic Gospels' pronouncements of Isaiah 40.3 invite a comparison with the Roman road system and its Roman imperial ideology:

The engineering feats of raising ravines, leveling heights, smoothing terrain, and making straight highways denoted Roman expansion, conquest, and the standardization of Roman imperial ideology. In contradistinction, the Synoptic Gospels' citations of Isaiah 40.3 presage the triumph of God, while simultaneously parodying Roman imperial ideology<sup>1</sup>.

Building on the archaeology published by Nashhon Szanton, Moran Hagbi, Joe Uziel and Donald Ariel,<sup>2</sup> I here propose the more

specific thesis that Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3, and Luke 3:4-6 parody the Stepped Street patronized by Pontius Pilate in the first half of the first century CE.

News of the Stepped Street's significance in association with Pontius Pilate hit the public domain with eye-popping New Testament relevance in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Upon careful reflection, it is not an exaggeration to say with respect to Jerusalem in New Testament times that the Stepped Street is the most important archaeological discovery of our time.

The archaeology provides the following conclusions.

I. The Stepped Street stretches from the southern gate of old Jerusalem at the union of the Tyropoeon and the Kidron Valleys up along the Tyropoeon Valley past the Siloam Pool to the western side of the Temple Mount. Multiple probes along this stretch have unearthed artifacts that date the road's construction to the time of Pontius Pilate's governance over Jerusalem.

II. The Stepped Street was built as a monumental ascent to the Temple Mount. Its proportions, infrastructure, materials,

<sup>1</sup>"Isaiah 40.3 and the Synoptic Gospels' Parody of the Roman Road System," *NTS* 66.1 (Jan 2020) 106.

<sup>2</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem: The Monumental Street from the Siloam Pool to the Temple Mount" (*Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 46 (2): 147-166). I will henceforth reference this article as "Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem."

<sup>3</sup>For comprehensive bibliography on the Stepped Street, see "Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 164-66.

and engineering requirements affirm its purpose as Jerusalem's *via sacra* or sacred processional way for Jewish pilgrims making their ascent to the Temple. The street is "at least" 7.5 meters wide, bordered on both sides by 0.6 meters wide curbstones that rise 0.15 m above street level. Both the street and its curbstones are composed of "finely-carved" limestone,<sup>4</sup> the street pavers measuring "2 x 1 x 0.5 m (about 2.5 tons)."<sup>5</sup> The street stabilizes from beneath by an elaborate infrastructure of support walls, compacted back fills of various materials, and interlocking drainage channels. These raised "the street to the desired height above the drainage channel."<sup>6</sup>

III. Archaeologists leading the excavations have specified a narrow timeframe for the street's construction: "we maintain that the street's earliest foundations were prepared after 17/8 CE and that the project was completed after 30/1 or 31/2 CE and certainly before 41/2 CE."<sup>7</sup>

IV. These conclusions build on the accumulated results of 14 independent excavations that might compare to a 100 piece jigsaw puzzle from which 14 pieces have been turned over while the remaining pieces remain hidden.<sup>8</sup> Though just a fragment of the whole, the existing pieces enable confident approximations of what the original puzzle looked like.

V. Major artifacts discovered in the thick destruction layer (attributed to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE) above the Stepped Street include broken pottery, glass, a stepped podium, metal, coins dating to the first days of the Jewish revolt (66-70 CE), and a charred palm tree. This evidence confirms that usage of the street ceased upon the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

VI. Major artifacts discovered beneath the Stepped Street include coins from three probes in a stretch of the street identified as Area S. In this section, "the most recent coin dates to the year 30/1, . . . during the rule of Pontius Pilate, prefect under Tiberius."<sup>9</sup> Older coins date from 5/6-10/11 CE, the reign of Augustus, 24-15 BCE, the reign of Herod the Great, and 4 BCE-

6 CE, the reign of Herod Archelaus.<sup>10</sup> These coins verify that the Stepped Street was finished after 30/1 CE. Hence the Stepped Street was in use for approximately 40 years—between 30/1 and 70 CE.

In addition to the excavations in Area S, excavations 360 meters north of Area S at the southwest corner of the Temple Mount unearthed "pottery, glass, animal bones and coins dating to the 1st century CE."<sup>11</sup> Of the coins identified in this location (at the time of this article), the most recent date to the time of Tiberius (14-37 CE). Most importantly, the coins excavated beneath the street adjacent to the Temple Mount match the range of dates for the coins unearthed in Area S—the latest dating to 30/1 CE.<sup>12</sup> Noteworthy is the absence of coins minted by Herod Agrippa I or coins minted later. This is a significant absence since coins minted under Agrippa I have been by far the most discovered elsewhere in Jerusalem excavations. In view of Agrippa I's largescale minting of coins, one would expect to find coins of that era beneath the Stepped Street, if it was built during or after Agrippa I's reign. Hence, their absence points to the street's having been built before Agrippa I's rule.

This brings us to Pontius Pilate. Current consensus places the coins described above as belonging to the time of Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius.

"We Know that the street leading from the southern end of the city to the Temple Mount and running along the foot of the Western Wall predates the rule of Agrippa (37-44 CE). . . . Pilate seems to have been the most prominent prefect during the period in which the street's construction began (subsequent to 17/8-24/5 CE) and when it was completed (prior to 40/1 CE). He was the last prefect to mint coins in Jerusalem before Agrippa I ascended the throne in Judea and minted coins of his own".<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

How does the discovery of the Stepped Street impact understanding of the Synoptic Gospels? First, the discovery may

<sup>4</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 152.

<sup>5</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 154.

<sup>6</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 154.

<sup>7</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 148.

<sup>8</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 150-51.

<sup>9</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 154; Y. Meshorer, *A Treasury of Jewish Coins from the Persian Period to Bar Kochba* (Jerusalem and Nyack, NY), No. 333).

<sup>10</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 154.

<sup>11</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 156.

<sup>12</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 159.

<sup>13</sup>"Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem," 161.

push the historical relevance of Roman parody further back into the first half of the first century than we previously envisioned.

Second, while it is generally assumed that the Romans refrained from building highways to Jerusalem out of care for Jewish political sensibilities, the Stepped Street reveals a subtle but nonetheless overt measure on the part of one Roman provincial official, probably the Prefect Pontius Pilate, to construct a profound statement of Roman presence in Jerusalem. Remarkably, if the above dates are correct, the spectacular street's early engineering was a notorious public spectacle during the public ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. When visiting the temple, it would have been impossible not to hear and see the street's construction.

Third, while the Synoptic Gospels' parodies of the Roman road system would have been obvious in the Greco-Roman environs of the Christian diaspora where "sacred ways" (*via sacrae*) were consistent features of city plans, the discovery of the Stepped Street in Jerusalem suggests that comparison between Jerusalem's Stepped Street and Isaiah 40:3 would have been equally apparent in Jerusalem itself, well before 70 CE. The likelihood of the comparison heightens upon the awareness that the term "highway" in Isaiah 40:3 connotes processional entries frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures. N. L. Tidwell argues that twenty-two "instances of Mesillâ in the Old Testament occur in sacred processional road contexts."<sup>14</sup>

Fourth, the association of John's admonitions with Isaiah 40:3 in contradistinction to what happened with the building of the Stepped Street leading up to Herod's temple gives the theological impression that John's ministry was a "counter-temple" movement.<sup>15</sup> The Synoptic message describes John as symbolically attempting in the wilderness what popular expectations associated with the temple in Jerusalem; namely, the construction of the way upon which "all flesh" would one day see "the salvation of Israel's God" –i.e., the temple, where most first-century Jews believed God's glory resided. While conventional temple expectation foresaw the coming of Yahweh on a processional way to the temple in Jerusalem, John was preparing the way for the coming of Yahweh in the wilderness, as literally predicted in Isaiah 40:3. The relocation of

the Lord's arrival, in turn, implied the corruption of the Jerusalem establishment and indeed the temple itself. The Synoptics infer that the Roman built "monumental way" was but a counterfeit imitation, a parody, of the "highway in the wilderness" prophesied in Isaiah 40:3 and fulfilled in the ministries of John and Jesus. As the Matthean Jesus would declare, "Something greater than the temple is here"—the "here" clearly being a reference to the person of Jesus himself (Matthew 12:6).

Fifth, the Stepped Street may also have exacerbated the escalating tensions that culminated in the Jewish wars of 66-70 CE. The Jewish citizens of Jerusalem would have been naïve to miss the imperial pretense of a massive Roman engineered road through the heart of their city. They would have known that throughout the Empire, the Romans built their monumental roads overseen by Roman military engineers with Roman soldiers performing the labor. The Stepped Street not only led to Jerusalem's sacred shrine, it also provided a strategic entry for Roman infiltration and, if necessary, further military subjection, which was ever present in the Roman army and Pilate's governorship. "Indeed, the opening of a new road was considered on par with a military victory or an important political initiative."<sup>16</sup> That Roman taxation of Jews was paying for this venture irritated the tensions that eventually brought on the Jewish revolt.

Sixth, theologically, the phenomenon of a polytheistic, idolatrous, pagan empire building a religiously symbolic sacred way to Israel's holy temple would have troubled conservative Jews still religiously concerned about strict covenant fidelity. Roman influence now encroached with beachheads in the forms of the temples of Augustus and Dea Roma in Caesarea Marittima, Sebaste, and Caesarea Philippi. The Stepped Street, sponsored as it was by a Roman Prefect, was a Roman street and thus a projected extension of the Roman road network. And the goal of the Roman road system was connection of the provinces with Rome—in this case a symbolic connection and subjection of Jerusalem to Rome.

A plausible intended contrast thus emerges in the Synoptic Gospels, whose authors parody Rome's imperial pretensions elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> What the Romans had done literally in the building of

<sup>14</sup>"No Highway! The Outline of a Semantic Description of MESILLÂ", VT XLV, 2 (1995) 258.

<sup>15</sup>See Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Temple* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 17-44; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 102, 108, 129f., 338, 343, 362, 394.

<sup>16</sup>Romolo Augusto Staccioli, *The Roads of the Romans* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2003).

<sup>17</sup>See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) lxxx-xciii; Bruce W. Winter, *Divine Honors For the Caesars: The First Christians' Responses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); Monika Bernett, *Der Kaiserkult in Judäa unter den Herodiern und Römern* (WUNT 203; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Stanley Porter and Cynthia Westfall ed., *Empire in the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011); Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2001); Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda* (WUNT 2.245; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke's Narrative* (LNTS 404; London: T&T Clark, 2010); Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Allen Brent, "Luke-Acts and the Imperial Cult in Asia Minor", *JTS* 48 (1997) 411–38; David E. Aune, *Jesus, Gospel Tradition and Paul in the Context of Jewish and Greco-Roman Antiquity* (WUNT 303; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 25–56. 40:3-5). The Synoptic inference is that that place was the person of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth: "something greater than the temple is here."

the Stepped Street in Jerusalem—filling low places, leveling high places, straightening crooked places, smoothing rough places—John the Baptist accomplished symbolically in fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3. The Roman built processional way was in fact a counterfeit, a parody of the true way of the Lord that John the Baptist had prepared with his preaching of repentance in the wilderness of Judea.

The corrective implied still more; namely, that the Jerusalem temple was corrupt, as Jesus' actions made clear (Matt 21:12-16; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-47). If John was authentic and his ministry led elsewhere, then the temple was not, by implication, the place where "all flesh would see the salvation of our God" (Luke 3:6; Isaiah 40:3-5). The Synoptic inference is that that place was the person of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth: "something greater than the temple is here."