

Biblical transport, walking in the narrow way



The best transport in biblical times was of course a privilege of the rich. Rulers would expect to use wheeled chariots and ships. King Solomon's fleet of ships was used for trade goods. We are also told in 1 Kings 10, 26 and 28 that King Solomon "had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses which he stationed in the chariot cities and with the King in Jerusalem...A chariot could be imported from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred and fifty." Solomon exported these through traders to other rulers and potentates. Chariots and horses were especially bought in for the use of armies. However, to be transported by someone else was a sign of your wealth and superior station. In Acts 8, verses 28, 29 and 38 we are told of how Philip ran up to and joined the Ethiopian eunuch in his personal chariot and how the eunuch commanded it to halt when he wanted to be baptised. Jesus himself understood the statement the mode of transport made and so in his entry into Jerusalem came in riding on a humble donkey, not on a horse or in a litter like the conquering ruler people both wanted and expected. His mode of transport indicated his refusal to accept or use temporal power. His kingdom was not of this world.

For the majority, including Jesus and the disciples, getting around the mountains and river valleys was a quite different story. Like most people, they went from place to place on foot using pack animals for baggage if necessary. For this reason, people often travelled in groups, sharing pack

animals to transport food for the journey and their belongings, or to carry the sick or weak. We hear of one such group expedition in the story where the young Jesus is left behind (Luke 2, 41ff).

Moving about from place to place therefore took time and journeys could be difficult, not to say perilous. Jesus' parable of the man fallen among thieves reminds us of the danger of walking or riding in the narrow trails through the mountain regions. People (including Jesus) also used boats as a means of crossing large lakes rather than going around, though these could be dangerous in rough weather. In general then, although moving about was an important part of life, it could be hazardous and difficult with the transport that was available. So it is unsurprising that Jesus' stories include hospitality and caring for the traveller, looking after the weary and perhaps most poignant of all, washing and drying the feet of people whose primary mode of transport is simply walking. Yet the urge and desire to go from place to place despite inconvenience and danger (think of Paul's shipwreck), to trade and disperse, was facilitated by road building and increasing international connections. It was the provision of such roads and sea crossings, and the will to travel that meant the gospel was able to pass from its origins to the rest of the world as we have it today. ⁿ

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