

The History of Palestine in New Testament Times

Herod the Great

From 63 B.C.E. Palestine was subject to Rome. In that year the Roman general Pompey marched on Jerusalem, and after a three month siege entered the city, went into the Temple, and even inspected the Holy of Holies—a terrible desecration of the Temple. He made Hyrcanus both high priest and local ruler, thus bringing the Hasmonean line to an end. During the next two troubled decades, Antipater emerged as the most powerful figure in Palestine, although he was never designated king. Finally, in 40 B.C.E., Herod, a son of Antipater, was named king of the Jews by Rome, although it was not until 37 B.C.E. that he entered Jerusalem and gained control of his kingdom.

B.C.E., “Before the Common Era,” is a theologically neutral equivalent to B.C., “Before Christ;” just as C.E., “Common Era,” is a neutral equivalent to A.D. (*anno domini*), “the year of our Lord.”

Herod was the most competent Jewish king of this period and amply earned the title, “Herod the Great,” bestowed on him by historians. He was an able administrator, who loyally carried out the wishes of Rome. He kept the peace, reduced banditry in the land, and for his efforts was awarded additional territories to rule. His building activity was carried out on a lavish scale—aqueducts, amphitheatres, citadels, the city of Caesarea, and most notably the new Temple in Jerusalem, which he restored to the grandeur of Solomon’s time. Yet he never did gain the approval of his Jewish subjects, who always regarded him as an alien (he was an Idumean, or Edomite).

Herod dealt ruthlessly with real or suspected opponents, even having three of his sons and his wife Mariamne murdered; so the story of the massacre of the innocents (Matthew 2:16) is entirely in character. He died unmourned in 4 B.C.E.

The New Testament dates the birth of Jesus from the reign of Herod (Matthew 2:1); hence, the birth of Jesus must be dated in 4 B.C.E. or earlier. This chronological **anomaly** originated in the **miscalculation** of Herod’s death by a fifth century Roman monk, Dionysius Exiguus, who was largely responsible for the chronological system which dates events from before or after the birth of Jesus.

The Successors of Herod

Upon his death, Herod’s kingdom was divided among his sons:

- Archelaus ruled over Judea, Samaria and Idumea from 4 B.C.E. to 6 C.E., but was removed for his incompetence and replaced by a series of Roman governors or procurators, who administered his territory. The best known of these was Pontius Pilate (26-36 C.E.).
- Herod Antipas (4 B.C.E. to C.E. 39) ruled over Galilee and a strip of Transjordan called Perea (he is the Herod referred to during the ministry of Jesus).

➡ Philip (4 B.C.E. to C.E. 34) ruled over a modest area northeast of the Sea of Galilee.

It was Roman policy to allow a large measure of local freedom to the peoples of the empire, but the Jews were restive under the pagan rule of Rome, and yearned for the independence which they had enjoyed for barely a century under the Hasmonean kings. One incompetent procurator after another added to the unrest, as did a system of tax-collection which was bitterly resented: native Jews called “publicani” (the publicans or tax-collectors, referred to in the gospels) were given a concession to collect taxes for Rome and any additional amounts which they could extort for themselves.

From C.E. 41 to 44, Palestine was again ruled by a Jewish king, Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great. But a sudden illness brought the reign of this popular king to an end, and Palestine came once more under the rule of Roman procurators. The resumption of direct rule by Rome renewed Jewish hatred and fueled the activities of revolutionaries. Even wise and competent rulers would have had difficulty keeping the peace, and the procurators were neither.

The Jewish War of 66-70

In C.E. 66 the Jewish revolt broke out; in spite of some early successes, it was put down by the overwhelming force of the Roman legions in C.E. 70. Jerusalem was leveled and the Temple destroyed. Profound dislocations followed for the Jewish religion, which thenceforward was obliged to function without the Temple and its ceremonies, so central in ancient Jewish practice. Dislocations were also experienced by the Christians, for whom Jerusalem had been the center. A last desperate revolt by the Jews followed in C.E. 132-135, under Bar Cochba. It also was cruelly suppressed. A Roman colony was established on the ruins of Jerusalem, a temple to Jupiter was erected, and Jews were forbidden to enter the city.

The Language of Palestine

The common language of this period in Palestine was Aramaic, akin to the language of Syria. Aramaic terms have survived in the gospels (which were written in Greek); see Mark 5:41. Some Hebrew was spoken, and in the synagogues it was not unusual to find those who could read the scriptures in Hebrew. Some Greek was spoken by people in the cities or in territories adjacent to Hellenistic cities. While the dissemination of Hellenistic culture was generally resisted by the Jews, they did not seem to object to the use of the Greek language.

Judaism in Palestine

Although Jews of whatever persuasion shared a common loyalty to the Mosaic Law (in Hebrew, *Torah*), first century Judaism was marked by considerable diversity. The principal groups were the Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots and Essenes.

The Sadducees and the Temple

The **Sadducees** were the priestly aristocracy of the Temple. They were drawn from those who held highpriestly offices and from influential Jerusalem families. This sect controlled the Temple and its considerable revenues. The Temple was the emotional center of Judaism. In addition to the daily round of offerings, prayers and sacrifices, it was the scene of the three great pilgrim festivals: *Passover*, which commemorated God’s deliverance in the Exodus from Egypt; *Pentecost*, which celebrated the giving of the Law; and *Tabernacles*, which recalled Israel’s wilderness wanderings.

The Sadducees held to a narrow interpretation of the Law, upholding the authority of the written Law but rejecting the oral Law. Likewise, they rejected the belief in the resurrection (see Mark 12:18-27), as an innovation without foundation in the scriptures. In their position of wealth and influence, the Sadducees cooperated with the Roman occupation as an expedient way of maintaining their privileges.

The Pharisees and the Synagogue

More numerous than the Sadducees and more influential among the people was the religious group known as **Pharisees**. They were dominant in the synagogue, which in many ways was more important than the Temple, especially in daily and weekly instruction and worship. The Temple was too remote for most Jews to visit except for the major feast days, but synagogues were close by wherever Jews lived, whether in Palestine or beyond. Ten male adult Jews constituted a quorum. The synagogue was essentially a gathering of the Jewish community for study and interpretation of the Law, though worship was becoming a prominent part of synagogue life, with prayers, chanting of psalms, the recitation of the *shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), and some type of edifying discourse. While our sources are somewhat limited for reconstructing pre-70 C.E. Pharisaism, we are probably correct in the view that the Pharisees were the dominant force in the synagogue.

The Pharisees differed from the Sadducees most significantly in accepting the oral Law as well as the written Law. The oral Law was a body of unwritten legal opinions intended to make the Law applicable to changing situations. Thus the scribes, or experts in the Law, had identified thirty-nine different kinds of work in the written Law which were prohibited on the Sabbath; in the oral Law each of these types of work was expanded to include thirty-nine sub-categories of work, resulting in some 1521 different kinds of work which were prohibited on the Sabbath. Behind all this study and labor was the overwhelming conviction that God's will was perfectly revealed in the Law of Moses, and that this Law was applicable to every situation in life.

This readiness to expand and update ancient practices was matched by the Pharisees' acceptance of certain doctrines such as a belief in the resurrection of the dead. Their attitude toward Rome may be described as one of opposition, though not normally one of armed resistance.

The Zealots

The Zealots were apparently Pharisaic in their views, with the notable exception that they advocated and practiced armed resistance against the Roman occupation. This group sparked the revolt against Rome (66-70 C.E.), which had such disastrous consequences for the Jewish nation.

The Essenes

For convenience, we refer to a fourth major group in first century Palestine as Essenes; or, more accurately, as the Covenanters of Qumran. These are the people who occupied the monastic community situated on the shores of the Dead Sea. This community produced the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, writings which were hidden in nearby caves during a time of crisis. These scrolls came to light in 1947 and in the years following, and are one of the major archeological finds of the twentieth century. Excavations of the archeological site of Qumran at the northwest corner of the Dead Sea from 1951 to 1956 have provided ample illumination of the life of this sect, whose members had secluded themselves from society to devote themselves in strict discipline to the study of the Law.

The scrolls, which were copied, produced and treasured by these men—for they were a male community which lived a celibate life—give evidence of a highly organized group following the pattern laid down in *The Manual of Discipline*, a scroll found in one of the caves. Theirs was a strict religious communism requiring each new member to turn over any wealth he had to the community. They were admitted to full membership after a probation period of two years. They participated in common meals which were presided over by a priest. Their earnestness in the study of the Law is seen in a system for around-the-clock study of the Law by at least some members of the community, presumably in shifts. They were scrupulous in their attention to ritual cleanliness, and there is also some evidence that members admitted to the community by a ritual washing, which baptism resembles in some respects. This covenanting community came to an end in 68 C.E., when they were overrun by the Romans during the Jewish revolt of 66-70.

“The People of the Land”

Most Jews of this period belonged to none of these four sects; they were known as “the People of the Land,” (in Hebrew, *‘am ha-aretz*), that is, the common people, or peasants. Most people lacked the inclination or the leisure to join the ranks of the Pharisees. The Pharisees had nothing but contempt for these folk because of their casual attitude toward observance of the Law.

Post-70 C.E. Judaism

The disastrous war of 66-70 brought an end to the Sadducees, for the Temple, the foundation of their influence, was destroyed, never to be rebuilt. The Zealots, except for a resurgence in the second Jewish revolt of 132-35 C.E., lost all credibility in their program of armed resistance against Rome. The covenanting community of Qumran disappeared in 68, as we have already noted. The Pharisees were left as the major group to survive the war and to give their stamp to historic Judaism, down to the present day, but especially to what today is called Orthodox Judaism.

There are several landmark events in post-70 Judaism which may be mentioned:

- The canon of the **Jewish Bible** was finally determined, at the gathering of rabbis (or learned teachers) in 90 C.E., at Jabneh (or Jamnia). Previously, two of the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible had been fixed: *Torah* (Genesis through Deuteronomy; canonically defined in about 400 B.C.E.); and the *Prophets* (the former prophets, comprising Joshua to 2 Kings, and the latter prophets, comprising Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve [Minor Prophets]; canonically defined in about 200 B.C.E.). In 90 C.E., the third division, the *Writings*, was also declared to be scripture, including Psalms, Daniel, and all the other books of the Hebrew canon. (The term *canon* refers to the authoritative limits of which books are recognized as scripture.) In later times Jews often refer to their Bible as **TaNaK**, representing the first letter of **T**orah, or Law; **N**ebi'im, or Prophets; and **K**ethubhim, or Writings, the three divisions of Scripture.
- The sad separation between Jewish Christians and the Jewish synagogue appears to have been made final by the requirement that these Christians renounce their belief in Jesus. (As is noted in **Jerusalem Conference (1)** and **Jerusalem Conference (2)**, the decision of the apostles to approve a mission to the gentiles without the requirement of Torah observance may also have contributed to the separation between Christians and Jews.)
- In the course of time, the rabbis offered further elaborations of the oral law, to the point where the need for codification and reduction to writing was recognized. This collection of Law is called *Mishnah*, and was completed about 200 C.E. *Mishnah* was further elaborated in the Talmudic literature of the fifth and sixth centuries C.E.

Judaism Outside Palestine

The Jewish population in the first century of our era was, according to some estimates, four to four and a half million, or about seven percent of the total population of the Roman world. About seven hundred thousand Jews lived in Palestine, one million in Egypt, and even more in Syria, with some ten thousand in Rome. Jewish communities were to be found in most of the major cities of the empire. The Jewish dispersion, or **diaspora**, resulted from deportations, such as the Babylonian exile, and from migration.

The Jewish Bible in Greek

Since Greek was the universal language of the ancient world, Jews of the dispersion spoke Greek. The **Septuagint** was a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, for the benefit of these Jews outside of Palestine, who no longer knew Hebrew.

Synagogue Life in the Diaspora

In the same way as for Jews in Palestine, loyalty to the Law was the central feature of Hellenistic Judaism. Their religious life centered almost exclusively on the synagogue, except for pilgrims who were able to visit the Temple in Jerusalem for the great festivals. Yet Jews of the dispersion were more in tune with Greek culture than their brothers and sisters in Palestine. One of the great Jewish thinkers, Philo of Alexandria, sought to interpret the Law in a way compatible with Greek philosophy (or, put differently, the explication of philosophy employing the categories of Torah, in allegorical fashion).

The response of their gentile neighbors was varied. The Jews were regarded with contempt by some, and on occasion were the victims of persecution. By others, they were shown respect because of the lofty monotheism and the noble ethics of Jewish teaching. There were some gentiles who sought admission to the Jewish community. These were received on condition that they follow the requirements of the Law; that they submit to the rite of circumcision; that they receive a ceremonial washing; and that where possible they offer sacrifice in the Temple. Such converts were called "proselytes."

Other gentiles, called "God-fearers," were unwilling to submit to the ritual requirements for proselytes, but they were attracted to the religious and ethical teachings of Judaism, and were welcomed to the worship of the synagogue. It was among these God-fearers that Christianity frequently received a sympathetic hearing, as the proclamation of the Christian message spread outside of Palestine.

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