

# The historical context of the New Testament\*

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The conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great 330 years before the birth of Christ had a profound effect on the middle east. After his death his empire was carved up among three of his generals, one of whom, Ptolemy, took over Egypt and adopted the title of Pharaoh. Israel came under the influence of Seleucus and his descendants who controlled most of the rest of the fertile crescent.

But, more importantly, Alexander's Greek speaking troops settled all over the middle east, many of them in the score or more new cities called Alexandria. The most famous was built in Egypt where its library and university became the chief centre of learning for nearly 800 years. Archimedes, who lived in Sicily, sent his scientific papers to Alexandria and Euclid used the resources of the library to compile the standard maths textbook for the next 2,000 years.

At the same time, not all the descendants of the Jews who had been taken into captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians decided to return to Israel, some of their descendants only returning to Israel after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and many of them chose to move elsewhere in Alexander's former empire. Some ended up in Alexandria where the librarians expressed an interest in having a Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures. This was reputedly completed by a team of 72 translators and is therefore called the Septuagint or LXX (both Latin for 'seventy').

This was very popular among Jews living outside Israel who used Greek in their daily lives and was sufficiently well known among Jews living in Israel to be quoted by many of the authors of the New Testament. We know that Jesus was competent in Greek because there are two untranslatable plays on words — calling Simon a 'rock' and the incident with the Syro-Phoenician woman — which would have been beyond a less competent Greek speaker.

However, while Greek values permeated much of intellectual life, political life was as brutal as ever though the Jews were able to play off the two main overlords to the north and the south of them and gradually acquire a degree of self-government by the first century BC. In the course of doing this, they made a treaty with Rome and, when Julius Caesar defeated his old friend Pompey and took Cleopatra under his protection, he decided to end the political instability in the region by imposing his friend, Herod, an Arab playboy he had met in Rome, as 'King of the Jews.' Herod actually came from an area to the south east of Israel in modern Jordan but, by clever alliances, had come to be regarded as one of the most important rulers in the eastern Mediterranean.

As a non-Jew and in the aftermath of losing his protector, Julius Caesar, Herod (the Great) was petrified about being overthrown and had a reputation for political ruthlessness similar to that of Saddam Hussein in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though without the cult of personality that Saddam promoted.

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He died in 4 BC — one reason why we know that Jesus was born in 7 or 6 BC — and was succeeded by his sons, Herod Antipas who took over Galilee, Herod Philip who took over an area to the east of the river Jordan, and Herod Archelaus, who took over Judaea. Herod Archelaus is mentioned only once in the New Testament because he was such a disaster that the Romans exiled him to Lyons in France and made Judaea a Roman province.

Provinces were governed by Roman politicians who used their postings to provinces essentially as a way of getting rich enough to finance their political ambitions when they got back to Rome. It wasn't a complete free-for-all because your political enemies could charge you with extortion when you got home if you overdid things but you still had a lot of leeway.

Though the Romans prescribed what taxes were to be levied, collection was franchised in much the same way as British railways used to be franchised. Concessions were auctioned to the highest bidder who then collected enough to pay the Romans, cover his expenses and make a profit. Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, who had been the eventual winner of the power struggle that had followed Julius Caesar's assassination, tried to bring some fairness to the overall system of taxation by instituting seven yearly censuses of the empire. There was one in 14 BC and, though only Luke mentions one being held in or around 7 BC, we can reasonably assume that there was one in the absence of evidence to the contrary.

Roman citizenship had originally been confined to Romans but, as the Roman Empire expanded, it began to be used as a reward for good service to anyone who was not a citizen — 27 years in the army got you citizenship as did serving in the Roman administration as a magistrate. For example, it is generally thought that Paul's father (or grandfather) must have been a magistrate (since Jews did not normally serve in the army) for Paul to have been born a Roman citizen.

Some people have suggested that, because Luke changes from Saul (his Hebrew name) to Paul (his Roman name) when Paul meets Sergius Paulus in Cyprus, Paul's father (or grandfather) may have been sponsored by someone from Sergius Paulus' family to take up Roman citizenship and adopted his family name as his Roman name. Paul is a Roman 'surname' or family name whereas Mark, for example, is a Roman 'first' or familiar name.

Herod Antipas nicked his brother Philip's wife for which John the Baptist criticised him and, after he had imprisoned John in a bid to shut him up, his step-daughter Salome tricked him into beheading John. It is interesting that Herod Antipas, though not a Jew, was apparently fascinated by John's teaching and his successor, Herod Agrippa, heard Paul speak.

The pride of the Jewish nation was the Temple, partly rebuilt in the early 6th century BC and extended by Herod the Great and considered by many as one of the wonders of the ancient world. Jews would visit the Temple as Muslims visit Mecca today which is why there are so many references to Greek speaking Jews or Jews from places a long way from Israel in the New Testament. They would come to offer sacrifices, as Mary and Joseph did after Jesus was born, but were required to use Jewish money in the Temple precincts because non-Jewish coins usually had 'graven images' on them, forbidden under Jewish law. Hence the need for money changers as well as traders selling animals and birds for sacrifice in the Temple precincts.

Jewish men were allowed into the innermost parts of the Temple but women and non-Jews were restricted to the outer courts. This caused some problems for the early church because Jewish Christians and Jewish converts, or 'proselytes,' who became Christians were allowed to go further into the Temple than non Jewish Christians. So the fact that Christianity allowed women to take full part in its ceremonies tended to make it attractive to women believers.

As is clear from the gospels, many Jews were looking for a Messiah who would kick the Romans out and there were plenty of pretenders to this crown who started insurrections against

the Romans. It all came to a head in 63 AD when yet another insurrection started. Most of the country was subdued fairly quickly but the diehards rallied to Jerusalem and held out until 70 AD when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. Many leading Jews and Christians left the area never to return.

But to understand where they went we need to understand what the Arabs were up to. They had opened up trade routes down the coast of Africa and across to India and they brought back many of the exotic spices and wild animals sought by the Romans. Jews had joined in this trade and there were Jewish communities across these areas (some of which have only recently gone into decline as the descendants of these settlers have returned to Israel) as well as all round the eastern Mediterranean.

Antioch in Syria, on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire, became one of the chief centres for Roman/Arab trade and it took over from Jerusalem as the HQ for the Christian church after 70 AD. Gradually, over the next 300 years, Christians were to move the centre of Christian activity into Turkey but Christianity remained largely an eastern Mediterranean religion with outposts in Iraq, India, Ethiopia and Armenia and a growing presence in western Europe.

So, as a child, Jesus grew up in a Greek influenced culture. He probably spoke Aramaic, a colloquial form of Hebrew, at home and learned classical Hebrew well enough to dispute with the scribes and Pharisees. He will have been aware of many different cultures through contacts with Jews visiting Jerusalem. He will have been aware, as he moved between Galilee and Judaea, of the differences between living in a Roman client state and a proper Roman province and may have picked up enough Latin to deal with any Roman soldiers who weren't fluent in Greek. He was certainly familiar with the relatively enlightened conventions the Romans had when dealing with domestic slaves, many of whom could expect to be freed as a reward for good service, as he uses this knowledge in three parables involving slaves.

He was also aware of the wide variations in attitudes to the Romans among Jews. The scribes and Pharisees barely tolerated the Romans whereas the Sadducees took a much more pragmatic view in their dealings with the secular state and preferred to get concessions by being 'reasonable' with their rulers. Perhaps the only thing which united them was their hatred of the Samaritans, the descendants of Jews who had rejected the move of the ark to Jerusalem by David and the building of the temple by Solomon and who, much later, had been left in the country by the Assyrians after their invasion six centuries earlier and who had intermarried with the colonists brought in by the Assyrians.

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