The Political Background of the New Testament

From at least 280 B.C. onward Rome had slowly been growing by deliberate expansionist policies. By 148 B.C., for example, Macedon had fallen to the Romans. A subsequent near-century of civil war kept Rome from conquering far more territory more quickly, yet by the time of Pompey's invasion, Rome was already knocking on Israel's door. Egypt fell in 30 B.C., and the Roman empire continued to grow well into the second century A.D., by which time it embraced the largest geographical expanse ever unified by one political administration in antiquity, including major sections of what today are Britain, France, Spain, and Germany, as well as the former Persian and Hellenistic empires.

When Pompey entered Jerusalem, Aristobulus II decided to resist but was defeated. Pompey recognized that Hyrcanus II would likely prove more loyal to Rome and so installed him as the high priest. An Idumean by the name of Antipater, the son of a man with the same name whom Jannaeus had made governor over Judea, was given the local political leadership. In general, Rome established client-kings at the provincial or regional levels. Antipater ruled from 63 to 43 B.C.

The Roman emperor during these years was Julius Caesar. Because of Antipater's crucial help for imperial troops in 47 B.C. in Alexandria, Julius reduced Israel's taxes, gave it permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and fortify other cities, and supplied Judaism with unique freedoms of religion. This was the origin of Judaism as a *religio licita* (Latin, *legal religion*), which later exempted it from the requirement of sacrificing to the emperors who came to believe themselves to be gods.

From 42 to 40 B.C. another power struggle ensued, this time between Herod, Antipater's son, and Antigonus, son of Aristobulus II and rightful heir to the Hasmonean throne. From 40 to 37 Antigonus gained the upper hand, but by 37 B.C. Herod had finally triumphed. He ruled as client-king over Israel for the next 33 years. The high priesthood remained a separate institution; its occupants were Roman appointees. This explains, for example, why the Gospels depict hearings of Christ before both Annas and his son-in-law, Caiaphas (see John 18:13). Although in Jewish law the high priesthood was for life, political fortunes under Rome were less secure. Annas had been appointed in A.D. 6 and deposed in 15. Caiaphas followed a short time later after three brief appointees and held his office until 37.

Historians have given Herod the title Great. He ruled in Israel from 37 to 4 BC. His reign was marked by massive building projects funded by heavy taxation in addition to his ample private means. The most astonishing of all was the temple in Jerusalem, rebuilt from ground up after the old remains were entirely razed. Although Herod's temple was completely destroyed by Roman armies in A.D. 70, the western retaining wall around the temple precincts was allowed to stand. It became known as the wailing wall, where faithful Jews to this day go to pray. Other projects, the ruins of which are still visible, include fortresses at Herodion

just south of Jerusalem and at Masada atop a huge natural outcrop of rock overlooking the Dead Sea, an amphitheater (now restored), and an aqueduct at Caesarea Maritima. Herod also rebuilt the capital city of Samaria and renamed it Sebaste (from the Greek equivalent of *Augustus*).

Before the start of Herod's reign, Julius Caesar had been assassinated (44 B.C.). Originally allies, Octavian, Caesar's nephew, and Mark Antony eventually vied for power. Octavian's defeat of Antony at Actium in 31 B.C. led to the suicide of both Antony and his wife, Cleopatra. Taking the title of Augustus, Octavian reigned as the new emperor until A.D. 14. Herod had originally been a staunch supporter of Antony, but he quickly convinced Augustus that he could prove equally loyal to him. Most historians credit Herod's success to his good relations with Rome. Indeed, he pursued an active policy of Hellenization and Romanization in Israel but more subtly than some of his predecessors, all the while insisting that he was a genuine and obedient convert to Judaism. Though never well liked by the masses of Jews, he gained a significant number of close followers who continued to support the dynasty of his descendants. They appear on two occasions in the Gospels and were known simply as Herodians (see Mark 3:6; 12:13).

Toward the end of his life, however, Herod became increasingly paranoid about potential coups and had several of his sons and his most beloved wife, Mariamne, executed to forestall what he feared were attempts to overthrow him. At one point Augustus ironically remarked that he would rather be Herod's pig (which a Jew would not kill) than his son (whom Herod would kill). Although recorded in Latin, the remark probably preserves a play on words in Greek because of the similarity between hus (pig) and huios (son). Thus, although there is no independent confirmation of the story in Matthew 2:16 of Herod ordering the massacre of the young children of Bethlehem, the account is entirely in keeping with his character and actions at the end of his time in office. After changing his will several times in his dying days, Herod finally bequeathed his kingdom to three of his surviving sons: Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip.

When Herod died, Archelaus instigated several oppressive measures against the Judeans that led the Jews to send an embassy to Rome to appeal the disposition of the will. Antipas and Philip eventually appeared as well, with Augustus deciding to give Judea (including Idumea) and Samaria to Archelaus. Antipas received Galilee and Perea; Philip, the remaining provinces to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee (see Luke 3:1).

Jesus' parable of a nobleman who went to a distant land to receive a kingdom and was opposed by an embassy of citizens (see Luke 19:11-27) may reflect these events. Archelaus's cruel treatment of the Jews continued, however, and subsequent appeals to Rome led to his banishment in A.D. 6. Little wonder that Matthew 2:22-23 describes Jesus' family avoiding Judea and returning to Galilee after Archelaus replaced his father as ethnarch in the south.

Antipas's rule in Galilee was far more benign and included the rebuilding of Sepphoris and the construction of a new capital city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee named Tiberias in honor of the emperor who succeeded Augustus. Since Sepphoris experienced a construction

boom in the early 20s, just five miles or so from Nazareth, scholars wonder whether Joseph and Jesus may have plied some of their trade there, but the Gospels never mention either city. Perhaps Jesus, at least during His ministry, deliberately avoided these bastions of Hellenization and Romanization. Antipas retained his tetrarchy until A.D. 39, when he too finally fell into Roman disfavor and was banished. Antipas is the Herod who appears at several points in Jesus' adult life on the pages of the Gospels (see Mark 6:14-29; Luke 13:31-33; 23:6-12).

After Archelaus's banishment from Judea, Rome began to appoint a series of procurators or prefects in the southern half of Israel—Roman governors sent to ensure a more direct link with and control by the empire. The most famous of these today, because of his appearance in Scripture, was Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26–36). Pilate succeeded in alienating the Jews more than all of his predecessors. Josephus recorded three key incidents surrounding his governorship (*Jewish Antiquities,* 18.3.1–2; 18.4.1–2): installing military standards and shields in Jerusalem with imperial images that violated the second of the Ten Commandments, taking funds from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct, and putting down an uprising of Samaritans.

The first incident ended peacefully after a nonviolent Jewish protest; the latter two, in mass bloodshed. While Luke 13:1-2 does not exactly match any of these incidents, it is in keeping with the spirit of Pilate that Josephus described.

The picture of Pilate in the Gospels as in some ways more weak than cruel does not conflict with Josephus's portrait. If Christ's crucifixion is dated to A.D. 33, it would have occurred shortly after the demise in A.D. 31 of Sejanus, the praetorian prefect in Rome, whose previous actions unofficially branded him as anti-Semitic. Without imperial support Pilate could not afford to be as repressive against the Jews as he once was. But even if the crucifixion took place in A.D. 30, Pilate still would not have been in a position of great strength. Alienating the Jews too much could have led to deposition, as in the case of Archelaus. But Pilate demonstrates strength in publicly acknowledging Jesus' innocence. At the same time, a Judean procurator had to take quite seriously any charge that he was "not Caesar's friend" (John 19:12). Being sent to govern the out-of-the-way and rebellious Judea was no great Roman honor, and one senses that such governors were regularly caught "between a rock and a hard place."

After Antipas was banished from Galilee, all of Israel was temporarily reunited under Antipas's nephew, Herod Agrippa I (41–44). Agrippa, sympathetic to Judaism, was a friend and political appointee of the emperor Caligula (37–41) who had succeeded Tiberius (14–37). Herod Agrippa I was the Herod who appears throughout Acts 12, first martyring James the apostle, then imprisoning Peter, and finally being struck dead himself for his blasphemy. When Agrippa died, the emperor Claudius (41–54) returned Judea and Samaria to the hands of procurators. Acts mentions two of them in conjunction with the imprisonments of Paul: Felix (52–59) and Festus (59–61 or 62). Agrippa II, however, eventually succeeded his father as client-king in Galilee and ruled for nearly half a century (49–92), gradually regaining territory until he controlled about as much territory as Herod the Great originally held.

Until the Roman emperor Nero (54–68) instigated a short-lived but intense persecution of Christians in Italy in 64–68, the period of Roman rule over Israel and, indeed, over the rest of the empire was primarily a positive one for the spread of Christianity. Seven major factors may be listed.

1. Greek continued as the *lingua franca* of the empire. A politically unified realm preserved a linguistically unified people. No attempt was made to impose Latin on the masses outside Italy, although some would have been used in military and trade relations. When one compares the dozen or more major languages spoken today in the same territory that Rome once occupied, one understands the boon to communication of having a common language.
2. The pax Romana (Roman peace) gave the heart of the empire freedom from warfare over an expanse of time and space previously unparalleled in Middle Eastern history. True, Rome continued to fight skirmishes with Parthia to its northeast and with Germany to the north, but these battles did not directly affect the daily life of most people in the lands depicted in the New Testament.
3. A direct outgrowth of the first two points was the development of the most advanced transportation and communication systems in the ancient world, perhaps never again matched until the time of Reformation Europe in the 1500–1600s. "It has been estimated that the Roman government's mail service covered 75 km per day; messengers on horseback using relay stations, could cover as much as 100 km per day. Soldiers were expected to march 30 km daily."[1]
4. A cosmopolitan spirit grew, particularly in the cities, which transcended national barriers. Old tribal distinctions and identities were breaking down, leaving people ripe for new religions or ideologies to fill the gaps. The gospel would meet many felt needs in this climate.
5. Many cross-cultural barriers to dialogue were eliminated, and new worldviews were disseminated because of increasing cultural and political unification.
6. As long as Christianity was viewed as just another Jewish sect, it too received protection as a *religio licita*. Throughout the events of Acts, all of which were completed by about 62 (before Nero's persecution), Roman rulers consistently came to the rescue of Christians, particularly Paul. Only by the decade of the 60s was it clear to all that Christianity was significantly transcending its Jewish roots and was becoming a major world religion, at which point it was no longer granted the legal status it previously enjoyed.
7. Rome implemented perhaps the most enlightened and advanced judicial processes of antiquity. It had its tyrants and despots, to be sure, along with various breaches of conduct, but due process of law brought justice, at least for citizens, more consistently than in other ancient empires. Jesus, of course, was not a Roman citizen, but Paul was. One repeatedly reads of his receiving the legal benefits of his citizenship (see Acts 16:35-39; 22:23-29; 25:10-11). Little wonder that many Christian historians have seen not only a theological but also a historical application of Gal 4:4: "When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son" (KJV).

Following the time of Felix and Festus in Judea, two particularly repressive and ruthless procurators were appointed who brought Israel to the brink of revolt: Albinus (62–64) and Gessius Florus (64–66). Taxation had steadily increased, although Galilee to the north remained relatively prosperous. But many farmers had lost their fields to absentee landlords, who held vast tracts of property and, in turn, hired their employees for irregular work at minimal wage, much like migrant workers today. Increasing indebtedness created foreclosures and, in extreme cases, jail sentences in debtors' prisons.

Despite Judaism's protection as a *religio licita,* not all had proceeded smoothly between Jews and Romans. In 41 Caligula tried to erect a statue of himself in the temple in Jerusalem. The fierceness of the protests would almost certainly have led to a horrible massacre had word not reached Israel that Caligula had suddenly died. Under Claudius, in the late 40s, the empire experienced a famine that seems to have been most severe in Judea (see Acts 11:27-30; 2 Cor 8:1–9:15). In 49 Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome (many returned after his death in 54) because of frequent disturbances, which the Roman historian Suetonius described as coming at the instigation of a man named Chrestus (*Claudius,* 25.4). Most scholars believe that this is a garbled reference to Christus (Latin, *Christ*) and that conflicts between Christian and non-Christian Jews had provoked the riot. Then in 64, after the great fire of Rome, the emperor Nero looked for a scapegoat on whom to blame the destruction, particularly in view of rumors that he had started it. What resulted was the first state-sponsored persecution of Christians (Jewish or Gentile), now viewed as distinct from the historic Jewish community per se. But, for the most part, it was limited to Rome and its environs on the Italian peninsula.

Meanwhile, tensions were building between Jews and Romans in Judea. In 61 the Greek residents of Caesarea erected a building partially walling in the local Jewish synagogue, and Nero replied to Jewish protests by revoking their status as legal equals to the Gentile inhabitants of the city. By 66 there was fighting in the streets. Gessius Florus ordered that the temple treasury be raided for political purposes. A combination of military, religious, and socioeconomic factors thus sparked the Jewish War with Rome, which lasted until A.D. 70. Nero's general Vespasian probably would have squelched the rebellion even faster were it not for Nero's suicide in 68 and the uncertainty of imperial succession. Eventually, in 69 Vespasian himself became the emperor—after the very short-lived tenures of Galba, Vitellius, and Otho—and left Titus, his commander, to complete the invasion of Israel and the recapture of Jerusalem. Titus destroyed the temple, burned various parts of the city, and took numerous prisoners of war back to Rome. The year 70 marked a decisive turning point in Jewish and Christian history. Never again were the Jews a credible political or economic force in Israel (until today), and if anyone still confused Jews and Christians, Christian refusal to join the Jewish revolt clearly separated the two religions from that point onward. Sporadic fighting continued at Zealot outposts until 73 or 74, when Rome besieged Masada, constructing a huge earthen ramp so as to storm the rocky stronghold, only to discover that virtually all of the 960 Jews defending it—men, women, and children—had committed mass suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. Or at least that is the way Josephus told the story as part of his Jewish War, a detailed account of the exploits of those years.

Casualties in Jerusalem were enormous, and the numbers of those deported sizable. D. A. Carson claims that "the savagery, slaughter, disease and famine (mothers eating their own children) were monstrous" and that "there have been greater numbers of deaths—six million in the Nazi death camps, mostly Jews, and an estimated twenty million under Stalin—but never so high a percentage of a great city's population so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the Fall of Jerusalem."[2] This could partly explain Jesus' extravagant language in Matt 24:21: "Then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again" (NIV). The temple tax was now to be paid directly to Rome, and Roman troops were headquartered in Jerusalem.

While the war was still raging, one nonparticipating rabbi, Johanan ben Zakkai, requested and received permission to found a rabbinical school at the coastal town of Jamnia (Javneh). Following the war, Judaism as a religion largely survived thanks to the study and leadership provided from this academy. Jamnia is probably best known for its late first-century discussions about the biblical (that is, Old Testament) canon and for its increasing dissociation from Christians. By the 80s or 90s synagogue liturgies in various parts of the empire had added a 19th benediction, inserted as 12th in the sequence, to those regularly recited. But this blessing was a euphemism for a curse—a curse on all heretics, with Christian Jews prominently included. The Sanhedrins were replaced by the *beth din* (*house of judgment*) as the new court of law for Jewish religious affairs. Rabbinic Judaism as a movement had begun, and the seeds were planted for a greater uniformity of belief and practice that did not exist in the days of the highly diverse sects of the pre-70 era or during the birth of Christianity.

A final Jewish revolt in Palestine took place in 132–35 under a man named Simeon, who was given the title bar Kokhba (*son of a star*) and proclaimed the messiah by Rabbi Akiba. This uprising was also decisively squelched. Historians disagree over whether two edicts were the cause or the result of this rebellion: a ban on circumcision and plans to make Jerusalem a major center of pagan worship named Aeolia Capitolina. Economic conditions had also deteriorated again under the emperor Hadrian (117–38). At any rate, Jews were evicted from Jerusalem and forbidden to enter on pain of death, except for one day a year when they could lament their fate at the wailing wall. From this point on, Jewish Christianity also largely disappeared from view.

Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels,* 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 20–27.

1. Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1995), 314.
2. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 501.

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