



New Testament

Basic Survey of the New Testament Books

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17 Jalan Sayor, off Jalan Pudu
Kuala Lumpur, 55100 Malaysia
Phone: 03 21446773 Fax: 03 21424895
E-Mail firstaglc@hotmail.com

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NEW TESTAMENT

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Pastor Don Badham

THE POLITICAL WORLD: a brief history

1. HISTORY

a. Alexandrian Period 334 - 323 BC

Alexander the Great, the son of Philip who had forged the Greeks into a unified military state, conquered most of the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean. However by the time he reached Babylon, the luxury and revels he continually indulged in eventually weakened his constitution so that he contracted fever and died in 323 BC at the age of thirty-one.

During this period Alexander showed much favour to the Jews, and exposed them to the process of Hellenisation. By Jesus' day many Hellenised Jews had adopted the Greek ways, customs, and speech and had been freed from an exclusive spirit of Hebrew tradition.

b. Egyptian Period 324 - 204 BC

Alexander's empire did not long survive his death. He left no heirs who were capable of managing it and finally it was partitioned among his generals. Ptolomy took Egypt and southern Syria; Antigonos claimed northern Syria and Babylon; Lysimachus took Thrace and western Asia Minor; and Cassander ruled Macedonia and Greece. Later Antigonos' territory was overrun by Seleucus I in 301 BC.



The Hellenistic World C300 B.C.

From that time on there was constant conflict between the Seleucidae (descendants of Seleucus) of Syria and the Ptolomies of Egypt. Israel was in the corridor of land along which the armies of these two powers marched to war. Sometimes Palestine was under the dominion of one and sometimes it was under

the dominion of the other. During the period 324 - 204 BC it was mainly under the dominion of the Ptolemies.

During this period the city of Alexandria in Egypt founded by Alexander grew in importance, and became the capital and a great city of learning. A large number of Jews lived there. During this time the Jewish Scriptures were begun to be translated into Greek. This version, known as the Septuagint, became the popular Bible of the Jews of the Dispersion (Gk “Diaspora”) and was generally used by the writers of the New Testament. When they used the Old Testament they took most of their quotations from the Septuagint.

Many scholars believe that the seventy-member Sanhedrin (Gk “sunedrion”, meaning “Council”) of New Testament times originated around 250 BC.

The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary gives more information about the Sanhedrin.

“In the time of Christ the Sanhedrin exercised not only civil jurisdiction, according to Jewish law, but also, in some degree, criminal. It could deal with all those judicial matters and measures of an administrative character which could not be competently handled by lower courts, or which the Roman procurator had not specially reserved for himself. It was the final court of appeal for all questions connected with the Mosaic law. It could order arrests by its own officers of justice (Matt 26:47; Mark 14:43; Acts 4:3; 5:17f; 9:2).

It was also the final court of appeal from all inferior courts. It alone had the right of judging in matters affecting a whole tribe, of determining questions of peace or war, of trying the high priest or one of its own body. It pronounced upon the claim of prophets and upon charges of blasphemy. The king himself could be summoned to its bar; and Josephus relates that even Herod did not dare to disobey its summons (Ant xiv 9,4). It had the right of capital punishment until about 40 years before the destruction of Jerusalem. After that it could still pass, but it could not execute, a sentence of death without the confirmation of the Roman procurator. That is why our Lord had to be tried not only before the Sanhedrin but also before Pilate (John 18:31, 32). But for this, He would have been put to death in some other way than by crucifixion, for crucifixion was not a Jewish mode of punishment. The stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:57f. without the approval of the procurator was an illegal act - a lynching. In the case of one offence the Sanhedrin could put to death, on its own authority, even a Roman citizen, namely, when a Gentile passed the in the Jerusalem temple gate which divided the court of the Jews from that of the Gentiles (cf Acts 21:28), but even this was subject to the procurator’s revision of the capital sentence. The Roman authority was, however, always absolute and the procurator or the tribune of the garrison could direct the Sanhedrin to investigate some matter, and could remove a prisoner from its jurisdiction, as was done in the case of Paul (Acts 22:30; 23:23f).

The Sanhedrin at first met in “the hall of hewn stones”, one of the buildings connected with the temple. Later, the place of meeting was somewhere in the court of the Gentiles, although they were not confined to it. They could meet on any day except the Sabbath and holy days, and they met from the time of the offering of the daily morning sacrifice till that of the evening sacrifice. The

meetings were conducted according to strict rules and were enlivened by stirring debates. Twenty-three members formed a quorum. While a bare majority might acquit, a majority of two was necessary to secure condemnation, although if all 71 members were present, a majority of one was decisive on either side. To avoid any hasty condemnation, where life was involved judgment was passed in the same day only when it was a judgment of acquittal. If it was a judgment of condemnation, it might not be passed till the day after. For this reason, cases involving capital punishment were not tried on a Friday or on any day before a feast. A herald went before the condemned one as he was led to execution, and cried out: "So and so has been found guilty of death. If anyone knows anything to clear him, let him come forward and declare it".

Tenney 1963:752,753.

c. Syrian Period 204 - 165 BC

Antiochus the Great reconquered Palestine, and it passed back to the kings of Syria called "Seleucids". One of them, Antiochus Epiphanes (175 - 164 BC) was violently bitter against the Jews and he made a furious and determined effort to exterminate them and their religion. He devastated Jerusalem, defiled the Temple, offered a sow on its altar, erected an altar to Jupiter, prohibited Temple worship, forbade circumcision, sold thousands of Jewish families into slavery, destroyed all copies of Scripture that could be found, and slaughtered anyone discovered in possession of such copies, and resorted to every conceivable torture to force Jews to renounce their religion. This led to the Maccabean revolt, one of the most heroic feats in history.

Jewish opposition was led by a priest called Mattathias and his five heroic sons, the oldest of which was Judas, called Maccabaeus, "the Hammer". He was a warrior of amazing military genius. He won battle after battle against unbelievable odds. The Maccabean Revolt succeeded in recapturing the temple in 165. Jews today celebrate the holiday of Hanukkah, the "Festival of Lights" to commemorate this event. It was also called the Feast of Dedication. Jn 10:22.

The effect of the Seleucid dominion was tremendous. Antioch, the capital of their country, became the third largest city of the Roman Empire. Greek language and literature were quickly disseminated through the Near East and afforded a common medium of culture. Many of the cities of Palestine, especially in Galilee, were bilingual. The main internal struggle in Palestine during these years was between Hellenistic Jews and Hebraic Jews. The latter resisted all forms of diluting their Hebrew heritage. The Pharisees were successors to that group.

Many noncanonical writings were beginning to appear during this period, particularly the Apocrypha. This is the name given to fourteen books which originated during this period after the Old Testament canon had been completed. The Old Testament canon is the list of books which the Jews accepted as their divine Scriptures, and today constitute our Old Testament. The apocryphal books were never in the Old Testament Hebrew canon, although they were included in the Septuagint. Jesus and the apostles never quoted from them. During this period the Septuagint translation was completed.

d. Maccabean Period 165 - 63 BC.

This has been called the Period of Independence. Politically, it was a time of revolt by Jewish leaders against Syrian forces. Religiously, it was a time of restoring worship of the Lord to the re-dedicated Temple.

After Judas was killed in 161 BC, his brother Jonathan took over leadership. He was also appointed high priest, the first of a long line of Hasmoneans (named after Simon, the last surviving brother of Judas).

During this period the rival religious sects (Pharisees and Sadducees) became rival political enemies.

e. Roman Period began in 63 BC

In 63 BC the Roman general Pompey brought Palestine under Roman control. He had the audacity to enter the Holy of Holies of the temple, which only the Jewish high priest entered once a year. However for the most part there was little interference by Rome in the religious life of Palestine. The Jews paid taxes to Rome and were subject to the rulers appointed over them by Rome. When Jesus was born (about 5 BC) the political situation was generally stable.

Erick Sauer writes: *“Never before or since in history has there been an empire that has united in itself all the civilised peoples of its time as did the Roman”.* Sauer 1953:177

The Greek influence had not died away, however, Sauer writes:

“Although the Romans were the military and political masters of the world, culturally they were conquered by the Greeks . . .” Ibid, p 176.

Irving L Jensen writes:

Some of the characteristics of the Roman background are briefly noted here:

- i *World Centralization. The unifier was the emperor, the ruler of the Mediterranean world. Worship of the emperor was inevitable, and so religious clash with Christianity was unavoidable. As an example, Paul was executed by Nero (reign: A.D. 54-68), and John was exiled on the Island of Patmos (Rev 1:9) during Domitians’s reign (A.D. 81-96).*
- ii. *World Communication. The highways and sea lanes of the Roman Empire made world traffic possible, and when the time came for the missionary journeys of the early Christians the cities were easily accessible.*
The Roman system of roads and bridges also helped expedite mail deliveries between cities.
- iii. *World Peace. Although the reigns of some emperors were marred periodically by times of war (such as Augustus, who ruled from 30 B.C. to A.D. 14) the Roman period was a time of peace. That gave rise to the slogan Pax Romana (the Roman Peace). The benefit of international peace of the church’s birth and growth cannot be overstated. When you are studying in the New Testament you will not read about the kinds of wars that were so commonplace in the years of Old Testament history.*

- iv. *World Spiritual Disorder.* Erich Sauer describes the spiritual disarray: “Rome became a venerator of all deities, often horribly grotesque, senselessly confused, ill-formed sickly phantasies. The entire Mediterranean world resembled a gigantic cauldron of mixture.”

Aristocratic society wallowed in moral depravity, idleness of wealth, pursuit of pleasure. The middle class lived on a higher plane morally and had strong religious feelings. Members were searching for the truth but never finding it. Many religions found their way into people’s hearts. From Egypt came the worship of Isis and Osiris; from Persia, the cult of Mithras; from Asia Minor, the cult of Cybele. Many gods and idols, representing secret and nature religion, were among those who moved in from the Orient. But none brought redemption of sinners, none brought eternal salvation.

“When the fulness of time came, God sent forth his Son”. Gal 4:4.

Concerning preparation, the time was right, for the law had served its disciplinary and instructive purposes. The time also was right concerning the political, religious and social climate, because those were conducive to the ministry of the gospel. I

Jensen’s Survey of the New Testament 1981:56

2. THE EMPERORS OF ROME IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

The names of the Roman emperors that are relevant to the New Testament church are:

a. Augustus 27 BC to AD 14

Augustus was the first emperor of Rome. Previously Rome had been a Republic. He ruled wisely and well. In many places the emperor was worshipped as “Dominus et Deus” (Lord and God), although he did not demand such worship. Jesus was born during his reign. Lu 2:1.

b. Tiberius AD 14-37

At the death of Augustus, his adopted son Tiberius was chosen to succeed him. Although he was impartial and wise in his policies, he was haughty and suspicious, and so was never popular, but generally feared and disliked. Jesus’ teaching, death and resurrection took place in his reign.

c. Caligula AD 37-41

At the outset of his career, he was as popular as Tiberius was unpopular. Before long, however, he began to show signs of mental weakness. He demanded to be worshipped as a god, which alienated the Jews in his realm. His reckless expenditure of funds that Augustus and Tiberius had so carefully gathered quickly exhausted the public treasury. In order to replenish it he resorted to violent means: confiscation of private property, and extortion of every kind. He was finally assassinated.

d. Claudius AD 41-54

Claudius tried to restore the ancient Roman religion to its former prominence in society, and to stamp out other foreign cults. Suetonius states that under

Claudius, the Jews were expelled from Rome because of some riots that had taken place “at the instigation of one Chrestus”. It is uncertain whether Suetonius misunderstood Chrestus for Christus, (Christ) and was referring to a disturbance among the Jews occasioned by the preaching of Jesus as the Christ, or whether Chrestus was the actual name of some insurgent. In any case, the order of expulsion is probably the one that caused the removal of Aquila and Priscilla from Rome. Acts 18:2.

Paul traveled during the reigns of Claudius and Nero, the “Caesar” to whom he appeared at his trial. Acts 25:11.

e. Nero AD 54-68

For the first few years of his reign, he ruled wisely and well. Tenney writes: “In AD 64 a great fire broke out in Rome which destroyed a large part of the city. Nero was suspected of having deliberately set it in order to make room for his new Golden House, a splendid palace which he built on the Esquiline hill. In order to divert the blame from himself, the Christians were accused of having caused the disaster. Their attitude of aloofness from the heathen and their talk of the ultimate destruction of the world by fire lent plausibility to the charge. Many of them were brought to trial and were tortured to death. Tradition says that Peter and Paul perished in this persecution, the first one conducted by the state.”

f. Galba AD 68

g. Otho AD 69

h. Vitellius AD 69

i. Vespasian AD 69-79

j. Titus AD 79-81

This is the general who destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70 during Vespasian’s reign. He became one of the most popular emperors that Rome ever had.

k. Domitian AD81-96

He demanded worship as “Dominus and Deus” and persecuted the Christians. Probably the book of Revelation was written during his reign. This book is a witness to the growing hostility between the church and the Roman state. It does not necessarily imply that a universal policy of persecuting Christians had been adopted, but it does make clear that there can be no compromise between a pagan state and the Christian church.

3. **KINGS**

Kings were the highest local rulers of territories in the Roman Empire, subject to the central authority of the emperor at Rome. During New Testament times Palestine, in whole or in part, was ruled by kings of the Herodian dynasty.

a. Herod the Great. 37 to 4 BC.

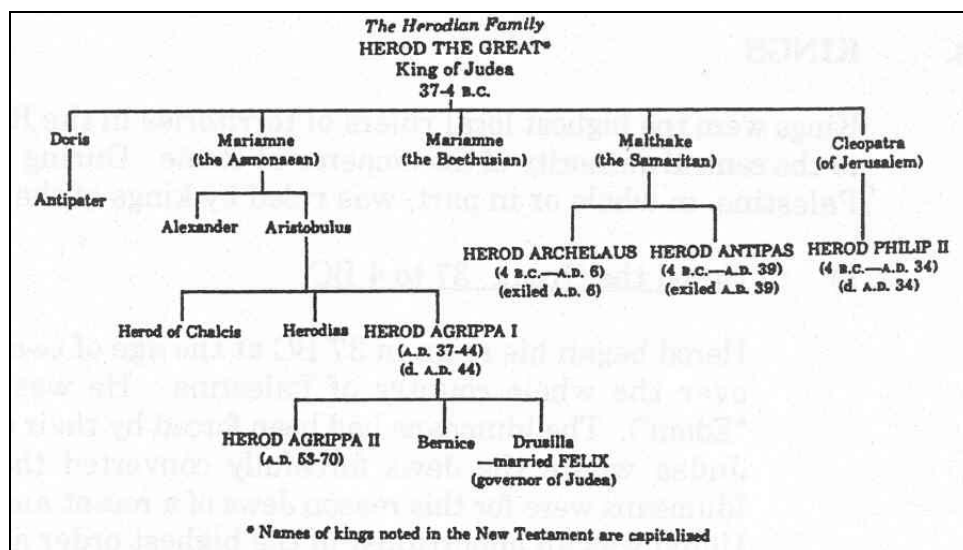
Herod began his reign in 37 BC at the age of twenty-two. He was king over the whole country of Palestine. He was an Idumean (Gk for “Edom”). The Idumeans had been forced by their enemies into southern Judea where the Jews forcefully converted them to Judaism. The Idumeans were for this reason Jews of

a recent and suspect background. Herod was an opportunist of the highest order and secured the help of the Romans to make him king. He was hated by the Jews, although he spent large amounts of money on the temple. In 20 BC he began this work of rebuilding Zerubbabel's temple on a grander scale. This work was not finally completed until AD 64. Jn 2:20.

Though successful in politics, Herod was bitterly unhappy in his private life. He married ten wives, including his beautiful Hasmonean princess, Mariamne. Though he loved her passionately, he suspected her of infidelity and had her executed. Later in 7 BC, he had her two sons killed. When he found that his favourite son, Antipater had been plotting against him, he had him executed - just five days before his own death in 4 BC. He was also the one who had ordered the massacre of the babies of Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus. Matt 2:13-18.

NOTE: Our system of dating BC/AD was devised by a monk in the sixth century AD. As Christianity had become the universal religion over what had been the Roman world, the Emperor Justinian requested the monk, Dionysius Exiguus to make a calendar, reckoning time from the birth of Christ to supersede the Roman calendar. However, long after the Christian calendar had replaced the Roman calendar, it was found that Dionysius had made a mistake in placing the birth of Christ in 753 from the founding of Rome. It should have been about 749, or a year or two earlier. Nevertheless, Jesus must have been born before Herod's death in 4 BC.

At his death Herod's kingdom was divided between his three sons. Archelaus inherited Judea (Matt 2:22), but lost the kingdom in AD 6 because of misrule - his kingdom being ruled by Roman governors from that time on. Antipas was given Galilee and Perea (Transjordan). Philip inherited largely Gentile areas east of the Sea of Galilee.



b. Herod Antipas 4 BC to AD 39