

Notes on the “Jewish Roman World of Jesus”

The political and cultural influence of Alexander the Great (333-323 BCE) in the eastern Mediterranean is often referred to as “Hellenization.” Alexander had a vision of “one world” united through Greek language, culture, and philosophy. Greek cities were spread throughout the region and the culture flourished after his death.

The Romans brought Syria-Palestine under control in 63 BCE but the culture remained largely “Hellenistic.” After Julius Caesar was assassinated civil war broke out with Octavian in the west eventually defeating Antony and Cleopatra in the east in 31 BCE. Octavian became “Augustus,” the first Emperor of Rome (27 BCE to 14 CE). Jesus was born during his reign. Augustus boasted of the “Pax Romana” and insisted he was “First Citizen” not a despot. His long rule brought order, cities, buildings, roads, and a new level of prosperity based on trade and commerce to the western Empire.

Key cultural elements of Roman Imperial Rule: army, slavery, provincial administration, civic religion and ceremony, aristocracy and class privilege, wealth and poverty.

His adopted son Tiberius succeeded him (14-37 CE). Caligula, Claudius, and Nero follow—none of them father and son. The empire was greatly expanded in the east to include Gaul, Spain, Germany to the Rhine River, and even lower Britain. Deification of the Roman emperors began at the death of Augustus and the imperial cult became important symbolically.

Palestine (Judea and Galilee) was put under the rule of “Herod the Great” who was declared “King of the Jews” (37-4 BCE) but his father was an Edomite convert to Judaism so his bloodline was never respected by the more zealous Jewish populace. Also he was seen as a Roman puppet ruler. At his death Galilee was put under Herod Antipas his son and shortly after (6 CE) Judea under Roman procurators—e.g. Pontius Pilate (26-36 CE). Annas was high priest with six of his sons serving as high priests and also his famous son-in-law Joseph Caiaphas. The priests who controlled the Temple at Jerusalem were predominantly Sadducees.

Platonism (Plato), Stoicism (Zeno), and Epicureanism were the three dominant philosophies of the Greek/Roman culture. Gnosticism arose from Platonic dualism. Dualism is a philosophy that dominated the Greco-Roman world and had its influences on forms of Judaism as well. “This material world is not the true home of the divine/immortal soul.”

Classic Roman and Greek deities (Zeus/Jupiter, Apollo, Aphrodite/Venus, Artemis/Diana) were mixed with Egyptian and eastern gods and goddesses, including Isis, Serapis, Adonis, and Mithras. The Jews were spread throughout the Roman empire and stood out as separatist and even obstinate—though some were “Hellenized” to one

degree or another. This was primarily their view of One God—Yahweh—but also their lifestyle and dietary laws. The Romans gave them special privileges and exemptions from public offices, service in the army, and religious duties. The Temple in Jerusalem was allowed to flourish and became the center of Jewish devotion throughout the empire—despite synagogues and local places of worship in the Diaspora.

The Maccabean Revolt (167-163 BCE) offered the Jews in Palestine a brief one-year taste of religious and cultural independence before the Romans invaded in 63 BCE. Embedded deep in the homeland Jewish culture was the hope for a native king or Messiah, of the line of the ancient king David, promised by the Hebrew prophets.

This Messiah or ideal king would restore Israel as a nation and eventually spread the knowledge and ways of God to the entire world—all nations. This way of looking toward and hoping for the future can be called: Messianic, Apocalyptic, Eschatology. Isaiah 2 and 11 are key chapters for this way of thinking. Also the book of Daniel was very important, especially chapters 2 and 7 and its visions of the “beasts” or kingdoms of this world being superseded by the universal Kingdom of God.

The four main “schools” of Jewish religious/philosophical thought were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots. The question of what kind of a Jew was Jesus in this context is a most interesting one. He clearly believed in resurrection of the dead and eternal life (Pharisees and Essenes) and he was radically apocalyptic and messianic—declaring the “kingdom of God” was at hand. He conflicted with the Pharisees on interpretations of Torah observance—and surely with the Sadducees who were even more strict.

Based on the Dead Sea Scrolls (usually associated with the Essenes) he and John the Baptist, his cousin, shared some common outlooks: Apocalyptic expectations of the Messiahs and the end of the Age as near, a New Covenant, preparing the Way in the wilderness, water initiation, sacred “messianic” meals of bread and wine; sharing goods and possessions. However, Dead Sea group was extremely strict and would have considered his views of the Torah as very liberal and lax.

Jesus also fits the social model of a charismatic, wonder-working, healing, rabbi or teacher who practices exorcism and draws huge mass crowds—a potential threat to social order in both the Galilee and Judea. He was also outspoken about economic and social injustices. He seems radical and even “revolutionary” but not so much on the Zealot model (Judas the Galilean) or that of the half dozen other “messiah” figures that arise between Herod’s death and the Jewish Revolt (66-73 CE). The revolt ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the demise of the Jewish nation as a separate entity with a tax known as the *fiscus Judaicus* collected from all Jews in the empire and given to the temple of Jupiter in Rome.