

BACKGROUND STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Outlined Bible

Introduction: The Old Testament constantly pointed to a coming Messiah and a new covenant that He would bring. Some background information will help us better appreciate the full meaning of the New Testament and its setting. Christ came, the apostles were called, and the church grew and flourished in the following world environment.

I. The Roman World of the 1st Century.

A. The political structure of the Roman Empire.

1. By New Testament times, Rome had evolved from a republic to a monarchy.
2. The following chart lists the emperors of the first century along with New Testament references and significant biblical events.
3. While the role of the emperor was ultimately important, more central to the New Testament story was the rule of provinces.
 - a. Proconsuls appointed by the Roman Senate ruled the safer provinces.
 - b. Procurators appointed by the emperor governed the less secure areas.
4. Citizenship was a feature introduced to the world through Rome.
 - a. One could be a citizen of Rome based on birth, imperial grant, or purchase.
 - b. Later, the right of citizenship was extended to all free persons.
 - c. Paul appealed to his citizenship to stop unfair punishment. (Acts 22:25-29)
5. Roman law was a major contribution to the civilized Western world.
 - a. Roman law was direct and to the point.
 - b. Little emphasis was placed on intent or extenuating circumstances.
 - c. The enforcement of this law was swift and even-handed.
6. The travel and communication infrastructures were central to the spread of the gospel.
 - a. Generally safe Roman roads connected the cities.
 - b. The seas were cleared of pirates.
 - c. A common language (i.e., Greek) was spoken.

B. The beliefs and religion of the Romans.

1. Astrology and superstition abounded. (cf. Acts. 8:9-24)
2. Traditional Greco-Roman polytheism lingered on.
 - a. By the 1st century, these traditional deities were beginning to be mocked.
 - b. A few areas still had thriving cults. (cf. Acts 19:27. 34, 35)
3. Mystery religions had become quite popular (e.g. Zoroastrianism, Isis, and Serapis – like modern cults).
4. Emperor worship became extremely important by the end of the first century.
 - a. From Augustus on emperors were deemed deities upon their death.
 - b. This tradition seemed to combine patriotism and religion, imposing greater control on the people.
 - c. When Domitian came to the throne (A.D. 81-96) he proclaimed himself "*dominiset deus*" (i.e., Lord and God) and ordered worship of himself.
 - [1] Because of their long-standing monotheism, Jews were exempt from this mandate.
 - [2] Viewed as an upstart cult, Christianity received no such exemption.
5. Of key importance is the fact that none of the above created a great sense of morality among the people.

II. Palestine in the 1st Century.

A. The political situation in Palestine.

1. When Pompey conquered the area for Rome in 63 BC, he placed Antipater in charge of Palestine.
 - a. Antipater was officially made procurator in 55 BC
 - b. He was assassinated in 43 BC.
 - c. After some turmoil, Antipater's son, Herod (the Great), was appointed "King of the Jews" in 37 BC.
2. The New Testament has frequent references over a number of years to the Herodian dynasty. To the casual reader, they can be confusing. The following chart may be helpful:
3. Upon the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, Palestine was divided among his three sons.
 - a. Archelaus was made tetrarch of Judea.
 - b. Antipas was made tetrarch of Galilee and Perea.
 - c. Philip became the tetrarch of the northern parts of the Transjordan.
4. Archelaus was such an atrocious leader that Rome removed him from office in AD 6.
5. It was because of his removal that authority in Judea was turned over to a series of Roman procurators.

FIRST CENTURY PROCURATORS OF JUDEA

Date of reign Name Scripture

A.D. 6-10 Coponius
 A.D. 10-13 M. Ambivius
 A.D. 13-15 Annius Rufus
 A.D. 15-26 Valerius Gratus
 A.D. 26-36 Pontius Pilate Luke 3:1; 23:1
 A.D. 36-38 Marcellus
 A.D. 38-41 Maryllus**
 A.D. 44-46 Cuspius Fadus
 A.D. 46-48 Tiberius Alexander
 A.D. 48-52 Ventidius Cumanus
 A.D. 52-59 M. Antonius Felix Acts 23, 24
 A.D. 59-61 Porcius Festus Acts 24:27
 A.D. 61-65 Albinus
 A.D. 65 Destruction of Jerusalem
 A.D. 70 Gessius Florus - Destruction of Jerusalem
 A.D. 72 Vettulenus Cerialis
 A.D. 72-75 Lucilius Bassus
 A.D. 75-86 M. Salvienus
 Flavius Silva
 A.D. 86 Pompeius Longinus
 **Herod Agrippa I ruled over Judea in AD 41-44

B. The cultural situation in Palestine:

1. Most of the Jews were poor.
 - a. Fishermen, farmers, and craftsmen eked out a meek existence.
 - b. Little slavery existed among the Jews.
 - c. Few social or class distinctions divided the people.
2. A wealthy aristocracy developed among a few priestly families.

C. The spiritual life of the Jews:

1. Jewish tradition has taken precedence over the Law of Moses.
 - a. The Law had become even more precious during the Babylonian exile.
 - b. However, the very scribes who revered and taught the law soon became guilty of building a great list of traditions that came to supersede the true law. (cf. Mark 7:1-13)
2. The synagogue had become more important in everyday Jewish life than the temple.

3. The temple was primarily honored for being the focal point of the great feast days (Passover, Pentecost, and Feast of the Tabernacles).
4. The priesthood was dominated by the Jewish "liberals" who were the puppets of the Roman procurators.
5. Several parties arose in Judaism.
 - a. The Pharisees, a small strict, and respected group, committed to keeping the Law flawlessly. In their separatism, they often fostered hypocrisy.
 - b. The Sadducees were the wealthy aristocrats who collaborated with Rome. They were generally unpopular with most of the Jews.
 - c. The Zealots were a militant, radical group of Jewish patriots bent on ridding the land of Roman dominion.
 - d. The Sanhedrin was the supreme court of Judaism. It heard major disputes over social and religious issues.
6. Because Christianity was born in the bosom of Judaism, it is extremely important to understand this background.

III. A Quick Look at the New Testament.

- A. The New Testament was written over a 50-year period.
- B. We call it the New Testament, New Covenant, because that's what it is.
 1. Jeremiah prophesied that a new covenant would be established. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)
 2. The blood of Jesus established this new covenant. (cf. I Corinthians 11:23-25; Hebrews 8:6-8)
- C. We don't know exactly when or how the present canon of 27 books came together.
 1. The first grouping of accepted books dates back to about AD 140.
 2. Although there was some dispute over a few books, consensus was reached very early in the history of the church as to which books were inspired by God.
 3. Major tests for "canonicity" included:
 - a. Was it written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle (e.g. Mark and Luke)?
 - b. Content?
 - c. Corroboration with other scripture?
 - d. Was the letter or book accepted by faithful churches from the earliest of times?
 4. Undoubtedly the providence of God was the key factor in bringing the New Testament to us.