

Perseverers Class

Introduction to NT Part 2: The Buildup to Christ

Dr. Lamar Allen

1. **Rome Begins to Rule Jerusalem:** In 6 B.C. Pompey captured Jerusalem for Rome and began reorganizing the eastern Mediterranean world. To aid the absorption of Israel as a Roman territory, Pompey appointed Hyrcanus II as high priest in Jerusalem. Things were relatively smooth in Israel for a few years.

Rome had become a republic in 509 B.C. and remained so until 27 B.C. Julius Caesar, a powerful general and good politician, was made one of the three ruling consuls of the First Triumvirate in 60 B.C. His conquest of Gaul added a great territory to Rome. He and Pompey struggled against one another for supreme power. There was a civil war in which Pompey was defeated. In 46 B.C. the Roman senate made Julius Caesar to be dictator of Rome for 10 years. Later that was changed (44 B.C.) to a lifetime appointment. That act by the Senate changed the view of government and led to the declaration of an empire ruled by an emperor in 27 B.C.

2. **Octavian Rises in Power:** When Julius Caesar was assassinated on March 15, 44 B.C. all Roman territories, including the Middle East, were cast into turmoil. In his will, Julius Caesar declared his great-nephew Octavian (age 18 at the time) to be his adopted son and heir. Antony and Octavian, both defenders of Julius Caesar, fought Cassius and Brutus (killers of Julius Caesar) for power to rule. Antony and Octavian prevailed. With Cassius and Brutus defeated, Antony and Octavian began to struggle against one another, each seeking supremacy. Antony was married to Octavian's sister but divorced her and married Cleopatra of Egypt. The struggle for power continued. Octavian eventually won, defeating the combined fleets of Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Anthony and Cleopatra committed suicide in 30 B.C. At that point Egypt was annexed to Rome. Octavian continued to gain honors and power.
3. **Meanwhile in Israel:** About 40 B.C. Hyrcanus, the high priest, was taken prisoner by Parthians and mutilated (cut off his ears) to disqualify him for priesthood. He was replaced by Antigonus II. Antigonus conspired with the Parthians to capture Jerusalem. They succeeded. Antigonus was made king and priest. Herod, the young son of deposed king Antipater fled to Rome. There, he became a favorite winning the favor of Mark Antony. Antony bestowed on Herod the title "King of the Jews." Herod returned to Jerusalem and with the help of Rome drove out the Parthians, establishing himself as political ruler of the Israel under Rome.
4. **Octavian Becomes Emperor:** After Octavian's great battle defeating Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian's power and recognition greatly increased. So much so that in 27 B.C. Rome was declared an Empire with Octavian as its first emperor (actually Octavian never used that title himself, but he was indeed supreme ruler). He was known as Caesar Augustus and reigned until 14 A.D. He was emperor when Jesus was born. When Augustus died, Tiberius, the oldest

son of Augustus' wife (by a previous marriage) became Emperor (14 A.D. to 37 A.D.) Tiberius was emperor during the active days of Jesus' ministry.

5. **Herod's Reign:** With the death of Antony and Cleopatra, Herod shifted allegiance from Antony to Caesar Augustus. In 31 B.C. Augustus confirmed Herod as king. Eventually Herod became known as Herod the Great. His total rule was from 37 to 4 B.C. Herod was a brutal man who executed everyone he deemed a threat, including wives, sons, and other family members. On the plus side, he was a master-builder of cities. He built the port city of Caesarea, beautified and refortified other important cities. He rebuilt Jerusalem including the Temple. Herod's Temple was the one Jesus knew. With cunning political skill, Herod managed to keep Rome satisfied, enabling a stability that Israel had not experienced for a long time.

The territory of Herod's kingdom, situated at the east end of the Mediterranean Sea, was on average about 145 miles north to south and 45 miles west to east. The capital was Jerusalem. The spectacular port city of Caesarea was created at a lovely spot on the coast which previously had no harbor. The harbor was made by installing huge blocks of stone to define a safe partially enclosed zone.

There are physical barriers which divide Israel into 5 longitudinal zones, narrow from west to east and long in the north-south direction. From west to east, the first zone is the coastal plain, the second foothills, the third the central mountain range, the fourth the wilderness and the Jordan Valley, and the fifth the eastern mountain range. The topology varies so much, there can be snow in a place and sunshine and palm trees a few miles away.

6. **Birth of Jesus:** From Scripture we know Herod was king when Jesus was born. Jesus' precise birthdate is not known. It had to be before Herod died in 4 B.C. In fact, 4 B.C. is often given as the year of His birth. Sometimes dates as early as 6 B.C. are cited. No one really knows.
7. **Government of Israel After Herod's Death:** When Herod died, Rome split his lands between several of his descendants. Rome added levels of government. The Jewish Sanhedrin (ruling council) was charged with administering biblical law. Procurators (Roman officials), supported by a military force of some 3,000 men, supervised and watched over the Herodian rulers as well as the people as a whole. Rome held final authority. Only the Roman governor could pass a sentence of death. The various levels of authority made life complex. Each level had to be financially supported, thereby placing a substantial tax burden on the people. Pontius Pilate, that ill-famed man who sentenced Jesus to death, was the 5th Roman Procurator of Judea (26 A.D. to 36 A.D.). He had a reputation as an arrogant and stubborn man.
8. **Population @ Time of Jesus:** During the time of Tiberius when Jesus was active in ministry, the population of the Roman Empire was about 45 million. Some 30-40 % of that population were slaves. About 10% of the total population were Jews (about 4.5 million) scattered over the entire empire. Only about 10% of those Jews lived in Israel or about 500,000 to 600,000.

9. **Religious Groups:** There were several active religious groups in Jesus' day. At that time, Judaism was more like a way of life than a defined and accepted set of doctrines. Theological ideas were important, but no one interpretation dominated. The most important thing in unifying the Jews was their understanding of their unique relationship with God. They had been chosen by the one and only living God, chosen to fulfill His plans for them. God established an eternal covenant with them. The destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the exile which followed was a shocking experience. In the end they understood that experience as punishment for their sins, especially the sin of putting other gods before the LORD. Exile, and the experiences with Babylon and Persia it produced, demonstrated to them how very small their nation was in comparison to the huge world empires. They could only marvel at being chosen by God to be His own rather than Him choosing any of the great nations of the world. God had chosen them and put them in a special place that was to be their own forever. But, their special place was now occupied by the Romans. How could that possibly fit God's plan?

(1.) The best known religious group were the Pharisees (about 6,000 in number). They had great influence. Many people (perhaps most) agreed with their point of view on most issues. The Pharisee rabbi Hillel had revolutionized rabbinic thought with an exegesis method allowing a more liberal interpretation of the law. The Pharisee Gamaliel (Hillel's son) was Paul the Apostle's teacher. Gamaliel was the leader of the Pharisees from 25-40 A.D. Pharisees were devout followers of OT law. They were zealous that the law be obeyed. To make it easier for people to obey, Pharisee wisemen interpreted the law into a set of rules they said were equivalent to the law. Pharisees were often hostile to Jesus believing Him to be lax in obedience to the law, too accepting of sinful people, and too open to contact with gentiles.

(2.) The 2nd major group were the Sadducees, probably a few hundred in number. They had a significant role in the Sanhedrin and the priesthood. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D, they disappeared from history. The Pharisaic view became the dominant view. Sadducees were part of the priestly aristocracy holding power through their connection to the high-priest's and other aristocratic families. Sadducees sought to discredit Jesus by attacking His belief in the resurrection. Usually opposed to the Pharisees, they joined forces with them to get rid of Jesus who apparently was a threat to their privileged positions.

(3.) The Essenes (about 4000 in number) were a pious group who believed in separating from worldly things, devoting their lives to the study of Scripture. The Essenes at Qumran were a strict, highly disciplined community living together communally rejecting anything that hinted at luxury. They practiced celibacy. New members were admitted only after 2 or 3 years of a strict novitiate and a series of solemn vows.

(4.) The Zealots were zealous for the law, willing to do anything to advance the cause of God, including violence. They were anxious to rid the nation of Roman control and willing to die striving to make that happen.