



Jesus in Historical Context

By [E.P. Sanders](#)

"These are exciting days to study Jesus in context. Archaeology is flourishing, and people are coming up with all kinds of interesting proposals. Many of the most recent proposals maintain, in effect, that Jesus was not very Jewish. He lived, they claim, in an urban, cosmopolitan world, and he was at least as influenced by Greek and Roman culture as by Jewish.... When all is said and done, though, it is clear Jesus lived in a Jewish context."

How can we describe Jesus' historical context? Recently, some scholars have proposed that Galilee in Jesus' day was as Hellenistic as any other part of the Greco-Roman world, an idea that is only an extreme example of a much broader and older view, namely, that Judaism in Jesus' day to a large extent was not continuous with the religion of the Hebrew Bible. The emphasis on discontinuity springs, in part, from the Christian view that post-biblical Judaism was a debased religion. In part, however, it is merely the result of focusing on new influences that were penetrating Palestine. But to downplay the steady influence upon Jesus' historical context both of the Hebrew Bible and of the "Appointed Times" (those recurring events—such as harvest, new moon, and religious festivals—that shape and structure time in Judaism) is, in my judgment, a mistake and out of accord with the political and religious realities of Palestine in Jesus' day.¹

Not many years ago, if you asked a New Testament scholar for key terms to describe the world in which Jesus lived, you would probably have been offered "Romans," "Pharisees," "apocalyptists," and "Zealots," names that represent groups influential in Jewish Palestine. But what roles did these groups play? Here is a thumbnail sketch of the view that dominated scholarship for several decades (which we shall call "sketch one"): Romans ruled Palestine; the Pharisees controlled Jewish religious opinion and determined the outcome of any legal or

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¹ A full treatment of Jesus' historical context would, of course, require detailed attention to the Bible and to the "Appointed Times." I have recently published an extensive discussion of these issues: E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief* 63 BCE-66 CE (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992).



legislative question that was left to the Jews themselves to settle; apocalyptists dreamed of cosmic cataclysm; and the Zealots plotted revolt, most of them while hoping for the arrival of the messiah, the son of David, who would lead their victorious army. There were, of course, learned discussions about the degree to which Pharisees, apocalyptists, and Zealots overlapped or formed coalitions.

This "sketch one" picture is almost entirely absent from recent scholarship, though it lingers in textbooks. Today those writing about Jesus or about Galilee or Judea in Jesus' day no longer offer these four terms—some of them, maybe, but not all. Here are brief descriptions of two newer views of Jesus' context, one (which I call "sketch two") associated especially with Richard Horsley and S. Applebaum and, to a degree, Marcus Borg, and the other (which I call "sketch three") with a larger number of scholars, such as Richard Batey, John Dominic Crossan, Gerald Downing, Howard Kee, Burton Mack, James Strange, and several others.

Sketch Two: Jesus' world faced a severe social and economic crisis, one that grew worse day by day. Palestine's small landholders were in a "tightening noose of institutionalized injustices such as double taxation, heavy indebtedness, and loss of land."² Peasant families "fell ever more heavily into debt under the steady economic pressures of double taxation."³ The wealthy lent them money that they could not repay, charged very high rates of interest, and then foreclosed on the property, so that estates became larger and larger while more and more people were forced off the land.⁴ There was "rising indebtedness" and a "declining peasantry,"⁵ the "social-economic infrastructure" was "in decline" and poverty was "worsening."⁶

At fault were, first, the Romans, who were generally responsible for the system and who had levied a second tax on the Jews, but also to blame were the native Jewish leaders, especially the aristocratic priests, who levied the first tax on the populace. The principal institutional injustice was the requirement to pay both Roman and Jewish taxes. Allied with the priests, and therefore also culpable, were the Pharisees, who were the "retainers" of the aristocrats.⁷ They did all sorts of wicked things, such as branding social dissenters as demoniacs, thus silencing them. (Horsley here provides a novel view of the

² Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 237.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁴ Richard Horsley and John Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), pp. 60f.; *Spiral*, pp. 232-233.

⁵ Horsley, *Spiral*, pp. 11-13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30. For a similar picture of the economic condition of Palestine, see Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 84-6 (hereafter *Vision*). Though more nuanced, the view of S. Applebaum is basically the same: "Economic Life in Palestine," *The Jewish People in the First Century*, edited by Shmuel Safrai and Menachem Stern [*Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* 1.2] (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 631-700. See my discussion in *Judaism*, pp. 157-69.

⁷ Horsley, *Spiral*, p. 232.



activities of demoniacs. They engaged in social and economic criticism of the ruling class.)⁸

Sketch Three: This view, in sharp contrast to sketch two, argues that Galilee was urbanized, cosmopolitan and prosperous. In the view of one scholar, "Galilee was in fact an epitome of Hellenistic culture,"⁹ while others maintain that "life in lower Galilee in the first century was as urbanized and urbane as anywhere else in the empire."¹⁰ Jesus and his contemporaries were deeply "affected by the all-pervasive presence of the Roman city."¹¹ Jesus and his hearers spoke Greek, knew the Greek theatre (which they attended in Sepphoris¹²), and were acquainted with Cynic philosophy.¹³ Thus, in terms of economics, sketch three is radically different from sketch two: prosperity rather than poverty. Some scholars who basically agree with sketch three also claim that the Jewish religion was influential and financially oppressive. They characterize support of the temple and its clergy as "victimization."¹⁴ Many, however, imagine that the ordinary peasants of Galilee had the culture that comes only from leisure. The villagers could see and hear

Greek plays and philosophers by nipping into one of the nearby cities. For holidays, they could go to larger cities in Syria, where they could soak up still more Greek culture.¹⁵ Rome, finally, is very important in this view. Roman soldiers abounded in Galilee;¹⁶ there were Roman officials and administrators;¹⁷ there were Greek scribes and learned men, and they all had to be served in the accustomed ways. Not only was there a theatre, there was a pagan temple in Sepphoris "dedicated to Augustus and to Rome";¹⁸ farmers raised pigs for Roman appetites and sacrifices; workmen used mules-

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-190.

⁹ Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 66.

¹⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), p. 19, quoting with approval a seminar paper by Andrew Overman.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19, quoting Thomas Longstaff, "Nazareth and Sepphoris: Insights into Christian Origins," *Anglican Theological Review* 11 (1990), pp. 8-15.

¹² Richard Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City. New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

¹³ F. Gerald Downing, *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom* (London: SCM Press, 1987); Downing, *The Christ and the Cynics* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*. Downing's view is that Jesus was a Cynic, while Mack maintains that Jesus was *like* a Cynic. See also Crossan, *Peasant*, pp. 74-88, 340: Jesus established "Jewish and rural Cynicism rather than Greco-Roman and urban Cynicism."

¹⁴ E.g., Crossan, *Peasant*, p. 324: the priests taxed the people so heavily that they became ill from malnutrition, claimed that illness was the result of sin, and then charged fees to forgive sins, thus creating "a perfect circle of victimization."

¹⁵ Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Batey, *Forgotten City*, p. 80: soldiers who were construction experts.

¹⁷ Howard Kee, "Early Christianity in the Galilee: Reassessing the Evidence from the Gospels," in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, edited by Lee Levine (New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), p. 15: in Jesus' day, Sepphoris was an "important Roman cultural and administrative center." So also Batey, *Forgotten City*, p. 56.

¹⁸ Batey, *Forgotten City*, p. 56. The evidence is a coin from the period of Caracalla (ch. 1, n. 34; Caracalla ruled the empire c. 211-216). Kee imagines that Sepphoris was the home of gentile temples ("Early Christianity," p. 15).



forbidden by Jewish law.¹⁹ The imposition of Greco-Roman culture, language, and practices was thoroughgoing.

A few accurate and useful points are contained in these three views of Jesus' context-but not many. I shall not itemize the errors, but rather offer a simple description of Galilee and Judea in Jesus' day. The basic governmental structures, which are seldom understood very well and which are grossly misrepresented by scholars like Batey and Kee are the foundation for a better understanding of Jesus' context. The topic of government leads us to the questions of Hellenization and Romanization (that is, Greek and Roman influence) and into the issues of taxes and the economy. Some of these items must receive very short shrift, but I hope to establish at least a partial framework for considering Jesus' context.

I

In the Jewish Palestine of Jesus' day, there were three major governments, which we may identify by naming the office holders: (1) Herod Antipas, one of the heirs of Herod the Great, ruled Galilee; (2) Caiphas, the high priest, governed Jerusalem and, to some degree, the rest of Judea; (3) Pilate, the Roman prefect, had general oversight of three geographical areas-Idumea, Samaria, and Judea-which formed the

province of Judea. For most purposes, the least important of these was Pilate, but, since the role of the Romans is the most misunderstood topic of government, I shall start with the question of the Roman presence in Palestine.

New Testament scholars often think of Rome as occupying Palestine in Jesus' day, with soldiers on the street corners. Many older commentaries on Matthew, for example, describe Jesus' healing the servant of a *Roman* centurion in Capernaum (Matthew 8.5-13), thus importing into the story a Roman military officer. But Matthew states only that the man was a military officer. Some of the scholars who fit into sketch three, however, go much further, pointing to Sepphoris (only a few miles from Jesus' home in Nazareth) as the seat of the Roman administration of Galilee in Jesus' day, staffed by high-ranking Romans with Roman troops stationed nearby. Others write about Rome "ruling" and "occupying" Palestine in Jesus' day, and one scholar even proposes that Rome had "annexed" Palestine.²⁰

None of this bears the faintest resemblance to reality. A full understanding of the governmental structures in Palestine in Jesus' day would demand that we go back over a hundred years. It will be sufficient, though, to begin with Herod the Great, who reigned from 37 to 4 BCE and died about the time Jesus was born. His two wills divided his kingdom among some of his sons. After Augustus Caesar considered

¹⁹ Pigs and mules: Batey, *Forgotten City*, P. 140.

²⁰ On the supposed Roman government of Galilee in Jesus' day, besides Batey and Kee, cited above, see e.g., Crossan, *Peasant*, p. 19; Borg, *Vision*, p. 83 (Palestine was annexed in 63 BCE), p. 137 (gentile occupiers). Even non-New Testament scholars can fall into this error: according to Alan Segal, the Roman occupation of the land of Israel began in 63 BCE (*Rebecca's Children* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1986], p. 35).



Herod's wills and determined which points would be binding, three sons stepped into office and governed their parts of Herod's former kingdom on the same terms and conditions that had applied to their father.

What were those terms and conditions? Herod conquered his kingdom with the aid of Roman troops, but he then hastened to get rid of them, in fact paid large bribes to make sure they left.²¹ They did not return. Herod ruled his kingdom and defeated his enemies by using his own army of mixed Idumean and Jewish troops. He was probably the ablest of Rome's client kings.

Rome's client kingdoms may be compared to the countries of Eastern Europe before the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. Countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia all had their own governments. They passed laws and enforced them. They had to contribute to the Soviet Empire in various ways, but Moscow intervened directly in these countries only very occasionally, when unrest or civil tumult got out of hand or when a brash government felt too independent. That is similar to the way Rome dealt with Palestine. Herod ruled, and, as long as he ruled correctly (in Rome's view), he was left in peace. The conditions of his rule were that he pay tribute,²² that he defend his borders, that he not allow revolt at home, and that he contribute troops to any military activity Rome wished to carry out in one of the nearby countries.

As a semi-independent king-completely independent in domestic policy, provided he observed the four conditions—Herod carried out fantastic building schemes, and he probably imported gentile architects and head masons. At least one of his principal aides, Nicholaus (or Nicholas) of Damascus, was a gentile, and Herod built some cities that were heavily populated with gentiles, but these were new cities. Herod did not fill the Jewish parts of his kingdom with gentiles. A lot of Jews lived in the gentile cities, such as Caesarea, but not many gentiles lived in the predominantly Jewish cities. Herod was more a Jewish king than a

geographical king, though the thinly populated area east of the Jordan valley and north of the Sea of Galilee was predominantly gentile.

Moreover, in many ways, Herod was loyal to Jewish law and traditions. He did not put his own image, or that of Augustus, or that of a pagan god on his coins.²³ He respected the temple and lavished attention and money on it.²⁴ To comply with new pious views of purity, he even had priests trained as masons so that laypeople would never

²¹ Josephus, *War* 1.356f. I shall cite the works of Josephus as follows: *War* (*The Jewish War*); *Antiq.* (*Jewish Antiquities*); *Apion* (*Against Apion*); *Life* (*The Life*).

²² Herod's tribute was probably not excessive, since powerful Romans regarded him as a valuable ally and supported him vigorously. See, for example, *War* 1.280-285, *Antiq.* 15.342-364, *War* 1.399-400, *Antiq.* 15.366-369, *Antiq.* 15.100.

²³ Ya'akov Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage*, 2 vols. (New York: Numismatics Fine Arts, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 5-30.

²⁴ *Antiq.* 15.380-87.



step into the most sacred areas of the temple.²⁵ In all of his palaces, he installed Jewish immersion pools so that he, his family, and his staff could be pure by Jewish law.²⁶ He defended Jewish rights in the Diaspora, which shows that he thought that, *even in gentile lands*, Jews did not have to become like gentiles. They could remain partially separate; they could keep the sabbath, assemble in synagogues, and eat kosher food.²⁷

In gentile and predominantly gentile cities, both within and without his domain, Herod built numerous buildings necessary for Greco-Roman culture and entertainment. For example, he built *gymnasia* in Tripolis, Acco/Ptolemais, and Damascus; a hippodrome and an amphitheater in Jericho; a temple in honor of Rome and Augustus, an amphitheater, and agora in Caesarea; and a temple in honor of Augustus in Paneion, later called Caesarea Philippi, a gentile city north of the Sea of Galilee.²⁸

These buildings and the activities of those who used them were potentially very hateful to the majority of the Jewish populace, but Herod placed these buildings in new towns settled largely by gentiles (Caesarea, Sebaste), in areas that were already gentile (Paneion) or in places where there was only a small Jewish population (Jericho).

Most scholars, however, maintain that Herod also built a theatre, an amphitheatre, and a hippodrome in or near Jerusalem, that he held quadrennial games at Jerusalem, and that once every four years Jerusalem was filled with gentile athletes, actors, gladiators, and spectators, celebrating the glory of Rome, its emperor, and its gods.²⁹ The evidence comes from Josephus, who gives a list of Herod's offenses against the Jewish way of life: He established quadrennial games; he built a theatre "in Jerusalem" and a great amphitheatre "in the plain"; to the games came athletes and others "from every land";

²⁵ *Antiq.* 15.390.

²⁶ Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 220-221.

²⁷ *Antiq.* 16.29-58, on Ionia.

²⁸ *War* 1.414. It seems that there was already a hippodrome at Caesarea, and at some time or other a stadium was also built. Apparently all the main types of games and entertainment were offered in Caesarea.

See *Antiq.* 16.136-41; Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (here after HJP), vol. 2, revised and edited by Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1979), pp. 46f. See also *War* 1.403-404 and, on Herod's buildings, *Antiq.* 16.136-139.

²⁹ Schurer, *HJP*, vol. II, pp. 45-47; Cf. vol. I, p. 309; Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), p. 74; M. Stern, "The Reign of Herod and the Herodian Dynasty," *The Jewish People in the First Century*, p. 256; Abraham Schalit, *Konig Herodes* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969), pp. 370-371, 417-418. It is in some cases not clear whether or not these and other scholars see the implications of accepting Jerusalem as a site of games and gladiatorial combat; these implications include the presence of pagan worship near the holy city. Of the scholars just listed, Schalit drew the widest conclusions from the supposed establishment of games at Jerusalem, but even he did not mention the problem of idolatry. Batey (*Forgotten City*), on the other hand, does see some of the social implications of his view of Herod as an aggressive Hellenizer. He proposes that athletes wore hats as they walked "through the streets of Jerusalem-but only their hats" (p. 44). The Jerusalem populace, of course, would soon have covered the bodies of naked athletes-with stones.



there were wild beasts, including lions; they fought with humans; the Jews were especially irked by the trophies that adorned the theatre (*Antiq.* 15.267-276). I understand why scholars read Josephus as saying that the amphitheatre and the quadrennial games were in or near Jerusalem. Josephus (or his source)³⁰ is compiling a list of Herod's un-Jewish activities, and he does not emphasize actual distinctions. Closer inspection, however, reveals a very important difference of locale. "In Jerusalem" modifies only the theatre, while the amphitheatre is said to be "in the plain." A plain, in Josephus' terminology, was a large area, not a low spot in the midst of hills. Within Palestine, he consistently called two areas "plains": the plain of Esdraelon in Galilee, which he sometimes called "the great plain" (e.g., *Antiq.* 6.373; 15.294), and the plain of Sharon on the Mediterranean coast, which ran from Joppa to an area north of Caesarea (e.g., *Antiq.* 16.142). *Antiq.* 13.89-91 is typical of Josephus' usage: He contrasts Jerusalem "in the mountains" with Joppa "in the plain," which here is the plain of Sharon.³¹ Similarly the two indications of place in *Antiq.* 15.268 distinguish the theatre in Jerusalem from the amphitheatre in the plain-that is, at Caesarea, in the plain of Sharon. Games required an amphitheatre, and we may conclude that Caesarea was the one and only place in Herod's domain where there were quadrennial games in honor of Augustus and Rome.

Once we see the terminological distinction between "Jerusalem" and "the plain," it is easy to bring forward further arguments against the view that Herod established quadrennial games, including gladiatorial combat, in Jerusalem: (1) There are subsequent stories about the offensiveness of the theater to pious Jerusalemites, but not about the amphitheater, the games, veneration of Rome and Augustus, worship of foreign gods, and the housing of so many gentiles. Protests against games, gladiatorial combat, and homage to Rome, its gods and Augustus would have been much more substantial and would have been mentioned in one or more of our sources. (2) Remains of the theatre have been found, but not remains of a "great amphitheatre," a hippodrome, or a stadium.³² The countryside around Jerusalem has been covered very thoroughly by archaeologists and amateur explorers, and it is unlikely that an amphitheatre has escaped detection. (3)

³⁰ In this list in *Antiq.* 15, these Hellenistic buildings and institutions count against Herod; in *War* 1.400, probably because he is using Nicolaus of Damascus as a source, Josephus calls Herod's pagan temples and other buildings "works of piety."

³¹ The only exception that I have noted is that in *Antiq.* 1.179 Josephus calls the "Royal Valley," which was near Jerusalem (*Antiq.* 7.243), "the Royal Plain." This does not, however, show that "the plain," without further identification, might mean a valley near Jerusalem. That is contrary to Josephus'usage.

³² In discussing the revolt, Josephus refers to a hippodrome south of Jerusalem (*War* 2.44; *Antiq.* 17.255). The theatre that has been discovered lies 850 metres south of Jerusalem (see the note to *Antiq.* 15.268 in the

Loeb Classical Library edition of Josephus). It is possible that these are the same. Gustaf Dalman previously proposed that the hippodrome was the same as the amphitheatre, which he, like others, thought that Herod had built at Jerusalem [*Sacred Sites and Ways* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1935), pp. 277-278].



Josephus mentions the games at Caesarea several times,³³ but says nothing of games at Jerusalem.

I regard this subject—where Herod established gentile institutions—as being of great importance for understanding Hellenization and Romanization, and, thus, for gaining insight into the social context of Jesus' life. Others have thought the same. Schalit regarded Herod's introduction of games, which involved inviting "great masses of heathen" to Jerusalem, as proving that Herod wished to destroy the "spiritual wall" with which the Jewish people had surrounded themselves.³⁴ But once we note that the amphitheatre and the games were "in the plain," not at Jerusalem, we must revise this estimate. It seems to me that Herod was extremely careful not to try to push his Jewish subjects very far down the road of Hellenization and Romanization.

It is important that Herod did not build a *gymnasion* in any of the Jewish cities, or, in fact, anywhere in his kingdom.³⁵ The Greek *gymnasion* was much more than our gymnasium. It was the place where boys and youths were educated—educated in the Greek language, in literature, in religion, in philosophy, and in politics. There, too, they exercised in the nude. The *gymnasion* was the prime instrument of the spread of Greek culture. A city that received an amphitheatre but not a *gymnasion*, as did Caesarea and Jericho, did not get much Greco-Roman culture. It is more difficult to evaluate Jerusalem's theatre in comparison to a *gymnasion*, since we do not know what plays were performed, what language was used, or who attended. But a serious effort towards Hellenization would have required a *gymnasion*.

In none of Herod's cities was there a Greek style of government: there was no *ekklesia* that elected a *boule*—a mass meeting of all free adult males who elected members of a council that ruled a city. This was also essential to Greek civilization. Jerusalem had a body called a council, *boule*, but it was not elected.³⁶ And it was headed by Herod's own appointee as high priest, who probably also chose all the members. Jerusalem was not a Greek city; in technical terms, it was not a polis. Neither were Jericho and Caesarea *poleis*.

Since a great deal has been made of the Hellenistic culture disseminated via sports and gladiatorial fights, I shall offer a modern comparison. To have an amphitheater without a *gymnasion*, an *ekklesia*, and a *boule* would be about as Greek as it is American to sit in a remote dictatorship today and watch three hours a week of American football. How much of the spirit of American civilization does that

³³ *War* 1.415; *Antiq.* 15.268; 16.137-138.

³⁴ Schalit, *König Herodes*, pp. 417-418.

³⁵ In this case, the argument from silence is conclusive. Lists in Josephus both praise and blame Herod for his gentile buildings, but *gymnasia* in his own territory are never mentioned. Had he built them, some people (such as Nicolaus of Damascus) would doubtless have praised him, while most Jewish inhabitants would have condemned him. Moreover, Josephus explicitly points out that Herod built *gymnasia* "outside his realm" (*War* 1.422).

³⁶ Known from the time of the revolt; probably in Herod's day there had also been a city council.



transmit? Could one learn enough English from this sort of activity to sit and read Shakespeare and Thomas Jefferson? And would the watcher of American football be motivated by a desire to see the moral and intellectual mainsprings of such inspiring activities as the safety blitz and the chop block? Football is to English and American literature, philosophy, government, law, and political institutions as the amphitheater is to Greco-Roman culture and learning. A theater might be a powerful weapon of propaganda-as are movies today-but it is unlikely that the theater near Jerusalem served the purpose of inculcating the mores, philosophy, and religion of Greece and Rome.

Herod was a very intelligent man. He built, at his own expense, three *gymnasia* in cities that were outside his realm, but he built none *inside* his own kingdom. That would have led to very serious domestic unrest. In an earlier time, the construction of a *gymnasion* had helped trigger a revolt that succeeded (the "Maccabean" revolt: see I Maccabees 1.14). Herod was very careful about where he situated the theaters and amphitheaters that he built in his own domain. They were few and far between, and he put only the least offensive near Jerusalem. Even in the mostly gentile cities that he built, such as Caesarea, he did not install Greek educational and political institutions. Moreover, the Jews who lived in Caesarea were by no means forced to accept Greco-Roman culture and law. Jews in Caesarea coped with their environment just as did the very large number of Jews who lived in the gentile cities of North Africa, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. They partly assimilated; they partly ignored their pagan environment, and they adamantly insisted on being allowed to keep their own laws. Of great importance here is the story of the synagogue in Caesarea, which reveals how Jews in Caesarea coped with living in the midst of pagans (*War* 2.285-92) by maintaining their own way of life. It is impossible to stress too much the importance of an observation by Sean Freyne: "Cultural links at one level do not necessarily mean adoption of the values and assumptions of the larger culture at other, more intimate levels of life."³⁷

The result is this: Herod built a few cities that were heavily populated by gentiles. One of these was in Samaria, and one was a mostly new city that was the site of his great port, Caesarea. These new cities were not constructed in places where there had previously been a substantial Jewish populace. For the most part, he left the Jewish areas of his country alone. He added one of the fringe elements of Greco-Roman society to make his capital spiffy and modern, and probably also because he enjoyed the theatre. Some of the most pious Jews in Jerusalem found the theater a little disquieting because they thought it contained images, but they did not see it as threatening. There were no revolts, as there had been in an earlier period, when Hellenizing Jews had built a *gymnasion* in Jerusalem. Nor were the

³⁷ Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 173.



protests against the theatre anything like those against Pilate for introducing Roman standards into Jerusalem, or against Herod, and later Archelaus, because of the eagle that adorned the temple.³⁸ This probably means that the theater was not viewed as an attempt to introduce foreign customs into Jerusalem and that the plays did not promote pagan worship.³⁹

Herod did not make any attempt to turn the population Greco-Roman. He himself kept the Jewish law. He defended Jewish law, customs and independence against homogenization both at home and in the Greek-speaking world. He did not establish Roman courts and law or Greek educational institutions.

II

Galilee in Jesus' Day: When Herod died, one of his ablest sons, Antipas, inherited Galilee-home of Nazareth, where Jesus lived. Jesus was perhaps two or three years old when Antipas came to power. Antipas was not king, but had a lesser title: tetrarch, "ruler of a fourth," that is, a fourth of Herod's

kingdom. Antipas ruled on the same four terms and conditions as his father, meeting them all, except for a little slip, which I shall explain below. Therefore, Rome left him alone. Rome did not send officials to govern Galilee, nor did Roman troops occupy Galilee.

People who imagine that, in the Roman empire, Romans actually governed and policed every substantial city, that Roman or Greek bureaucrats kept good Roman records, and that Roman magistrates enforced Roman law, have not only failed to read Roman imperial history, they have failed to contemplate the question of numbers. There were not enough able Romans to spread around in such a prodigious way. And, besides, why should they exercise such heavy supervision? All they really wanted from a place like Palestine was loyalty and secure borders. They wanted to Romanize Gaul-modern France-and they did so to a considerable degree, but they had no such ambition in Palestine. New Testament scholars and others frequently attribute to the Romans of Jesus' day the objectives that Hadrian, a hundred years later, may have had: to homogenize the empire and to make it all Greco-Roman in culture.⁴⁰ It is, however, an error to attribute this ambition to Julius Caesar, Augustus, or Tiberius.

Herod's heir, Antipas, also lacked the desire to change the entire culture of his domain. In matters that touched the populace as a whole, he observed the Jewish law. He did not put his face, or that of Augustus, or later that of Tiberius on his coins.⁴¹ He did not build

³⁸ For brief summaries of these famous events, see Sanders, *Judaism*, pp. 38-39, 402-403.

³⁹ Cf. the later story concerning Agrippa 11: He called a pious critic to meet him in the theatre (apparently in Caesarea, but possibly in Jerusalem) and asked, "What is contrary to the law in what is going on here?" This silenced the critic (*Antiq.* 19.333f).

⁴⁰ Schalit, *Konig Herodes*, p. 421, calls this desire "the will of Rome" in Herod's day.

⁴¹ Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage*, vol. 2, pp. 35-41.



gymnasia; there were no Greek schools. He may have built a theater in his first capital city, Sepphoris,⁴² and possibly in his second capital, Tiberias. There was no reason not to do so, since his father had built a theater near Jerusalem. But the populace of both cities was Jewish. Sepphoris was a Jewish city of long standing,⁴³ and there is no indication whatsoever that Antipas offered bribes to gentiles in and around Palestine to move to Sepphoris, though he doubtless used some gentiles in the way his father had. Even the city of Tiberias, named in honor of the new emperor, which Antipas built from the ground up, was settled mostly by Jews. Since part of it was over a cemetery and since Jews tended to avoid corpse impurity, Antipas had to force high ranking Jews to move there, and he attracted others by various devices (*Antiq.* 18.36-8). Corpse impurity was not a problem for gentiles, and, had gentiles been his preferred settlers, he would not have needed special exertions to populate his new capital. Tiberias was predominantly Jewish at the time of the great Jewish revolt against Rome, which erupted in the year 66.⁴⁴

There was, however, one time when Antipas failed in his responsibilities as a client ruler. He decided to marry his half-niece, Herodias, who was already married to another of her half-uncles.⁴⁵ According to the New Testament, John the Baptist was severely critical of the move (Mark 6.18). So were Antipas' first wife and her father. The first wife (whose name is unknown) managed to avoid divorce by crossing the border to her father, Aretas, who was an Arab king. Sometime later, Aretas took advantage of a border dispute to invade Galilee and thrash Antipas' army. The Galilean populace thought that this was just retribution, because, meanwhile, Antipas had executed John the Baptist, who was a highly revered prophet. Aretas' army did not run into a Roman legion, for the good and simple reason that there were no Roman troops in Galilee. Antipas was a client ruler, and he had his own army. If Jesus healed the servant of one of Antipas' centurions (as Matthew tells us), it was not a Roman centurion.

The Roman army did, however, react to Aretas' invasion. Not only were the client rulers responsible to their patron, the emperor, but Rome reciprocated by taking care of its clients. And so, after some slow communications, a force of Roman troops was sent from Syria to punish Aretas for invading Rome's good ally. To make a long story short, the emperor died, orders were suspended, and Aretas got away,

⁴² A theatre has been found at Sepphoris, but the date of its construction is still uncertain. See Eric Meyers, Ehud Netzer, and Carol Meyers, "The Roman Theater at Sepphoris," *Biblical Archaeologist* 53 (1990), pp. 190-191; the same three authors, *Sepphoris*, Winona Lake, 1992, p. 33; Stuart Miller, "Sepphoris, the Well Remembered City," *Biblical Archaeologist* 55 (1992), pp. 77-78. Some of the scholars in our sketch two regard the matter as settled: Jesus attended the theatre in Sepphoris. See e.g. Batey, *Forgotten City*, p. 90.

⁴³ See, for example, *Antiq.* 13.338, where the city is said to have been loyal to the Hasmonean king

Alexander Jannaeus.

⁴⁴ See for example Josephus, *Life*, 32-42, 354.

⁴⁵ For the full story, see *Antiq.* 18.109-119.



but the point is clear, nonetheless.⁴⁶ The nearest substantial body of Roman troops was Syria, where there were four legions, 20,000 to 24,000 men, plus cavalry, perhaps another 5,000.⁴⁷ Aretas was no fool. When he invaded Galilee, he was not attacking the Roman army. And when it bestirred itself, he fled.

So, in Jesus' Galilee, a good and able Jewish tetrarch ruled. He used Jewish troops, presumably mixed with some Idumeans (from his grandfather's native country) and probably enhanced with foreign mercenaries-as were most armies of the day. His governors and magistrates were Jews. On the whole, in Antipas' Galilee, which was Jesus' Galilee, the law was Jewish, the courts were Jewish, the education was Jewish. Wherever there was a sizable number of gentiles, of course, their rights were respected: they were not forced to Judaize.⁴⁸

In order to clarify the extent and the non-extent of Romanization and Hellenization in Palestine, I wish now to offer one more analogy: post-war Germany. The British and Americans (I shall ignore the French) established armies of occupation in Germany after the second world war. Because of the cold war, large concentrations of English-speaking troops have resided in Germany ever since. Moreover, Germany is a frequent place of tourism for Americans. Finally, most German children study English for several years in school. The consequence of all this is that a lot of Germans know a lot of English. There has been far more Anglo-American influence in Germany than there was Greco-Roman influence in Palestine. Yet, if there arose a German evangelist who had a message for the villagers, he would not go to the small churches of the towns and villages and speak English. Much less would he speak in English aphorisms. If by some chance he wandered onto an American military base, and was stopped by the MPs, he might be very glad that he could speak and understand a little English, but otherwise he would not have much use for the language. I believe that the application to Jesus is clear enough. Some scholars propose that he taught in Greek, and specifically in Greek aphorisms.

According to the old view of Jesus' context, which is now in retreat, the Pharisees really ran everything in Galilee. No matter what anyone at the time thought, and no matter who governed, we know (scholars in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries have said) that actually the Pharisees were in charge. Everybody was afraid of

⁴⁶ *Antiq.* 18.115,120-25.

⁴⁷ On the number of legions in Syria, see *HJP*, vol. 1, p. 362 & n. 42; J. G. C. Anderson, 48The Eastern

Frontier under Augustus," *The Cambridge Ancient History* 10 (1934), pp. 279-83. I derive the number of cavalry by inference from War 3.66: During the Jewish revolt 18 cohorts of infantry and five *ala* of cavalry came from Syria (about 2,500 cavalrymen). Eighteen cohorts was about one-half the number of legionaries stationed in Syria, and so I assume that one-half the total cavalry came as well. A ratio of five to one is about right, as the same passage in Josephus indicates.

⁴⁸ Most gentiles in geographical Galilee lived in the territory that belonged to Scythopolis, which was not governed by Antipas.



them, and they always got their way. This view is unsupportable.⁴⁹ As a case in point, note the relationship between Antipas and the Pharisees. Although, like his father, Antipas generally observed the Jewish law, he did one thing that was rather sneaky. He decorated his own palace in Tiberias with the images of animals. Antipas, as we have indicated, kept the law in matters touching the populace, but he doubtless considered the decoration of his palace to be his own business. At any rate, when the revolt against Rome broke out, the Jerusalem war cabinet wanted the palace destroyed, but some sailors and poor people, led by Jesus son of Sapphias, looted and burned the palace before it could be dismantled in an orderly way (*Life* 65-7). This gives an idea of how much in favor of Greco-Roman art and culture the poor people of Galilee were.

Given the other things we know about Antipas-his change of marital partners and his execution of a respected prophet-does anyone seriously want to propose that the Pharisees encouraged Antipas to break two of the ten commandments (graven images, adultery) and also to execute a prophet? He was not under the thumb of Pharisees. This point, of course, does not answer the widespread supposition that they controlled life in the villages. For that, consider the lengthy arguments that I have presented in *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, and to some degree the prior arguments of Jacob Neusner and others (see footnote 49).

So, in Jesus' day, Herod Antipas ruled Galilee as his father had ruled a much larger realm. He did not impose Roman government and law on the Jews; he did not require them to drop the distinctive aspects of their law and their customs, the ones that set them apart from gentiles, and he did not establish Greek educational and Greco-Roman religious institutions throughout his tetrarchy. There was no Roman army in Galilee, and there were no Roman administrators.

Judea in Jesus' Day: What about Judea and, especially, its largest city, Jerusalem? It had a quite different fate after Herod died. Here we encounter the other two ruling officials in Jesus' day: the high priest Caiaphas and the Roman prefect Pilate. To explain how and why they governed Judea while Antipas governed Galilee, we have to go back to Herod's death. When Herod died, Judea, Samaria, and Idumea were combined in a political unit called "Judea"; they were governed by another of Herod's sons, Archelaus. He started out, as did Antipas, governing this region as his father had done before him. But things did not go well. Archelaus was probably less able than Antipas, and he certainly governed a more difficult region, since the Jews in Jerusalem were extremely touchy. But Archelaus seems also to have been clumsy. He did not know when to yield to the will of the populace and when to repress dissent.⁵⁰ Both the Judeans and the Samaritans complained,

⁴⁹ See Sanders, *Judaism*, pp. 388-402, 458-72. For other scholars, beginning with Morton Smith, who have held this view, see p. 401 and 535, n. 45.

⁵⁰ See *Antiq.* 17.206-18.



and Augustus deposed him after ten years, in 6 CE. Augustus decided not to give this region to another of Herod's sons, but to rule it directly, and he sent Coponius, a Roman of the equestrian order (thus, of some position in life), with a small number of troops, to govern Samaria, Judea, and Idumea. When this decision was made, there was a small uprising, but it was put down, and the Romans settled in to rule part of Palestine-*for the first time*. They had conquered Palestine seventy years earlier, but had not governed any of it before, except for a very brief period after the initial conquest when they imposed military control before deciding on which Jews would rule the country.

How did these first Roman governors in Palestine conduct their administration? Coponius and his successors lived in one of Herod's palaces in Herod's most agreeable city, Caesarea on the Mediterranean, which was heavily gentile. There they had most of the amenities of home. There, too, were the Roman troops, about 3,000 of them, not enough to put down a serious uprising, but enough for minor riots limited to only one City.⁵¹ There were, we recall, more than 20,000 troops in Syria. In addition to the cohorts settled in Caesarea, there was a garrison in a fort next to the temple complex in Jerusalem, but its soldiers seldom had police duties. A few other very small garrisons were established in existing forts in other parts of the country.⁵² Those troops, too, had no regular police duties.

Jerusalem was a center of pilgrimage, and pilgrimage was a very popular activity in the ancient world. Three times a year, throngs of Jews from everywhere-Mesopotamia, North Africa, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy-came to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the festivals, a kind of combination of state fair, silent worship, butchery of animals, eating red meat-a rare treat-and drinking wine. The population of Jerusalem suddenly swelled about tenfold (from 30,000 or so to over 300,000). Then and only then did the Roman prefect bring more troops to the city. On these occasions, they did assume some police duties, which were concentrated on the largest assembly point in Palestine, the courts of the temple. Soldiers patrolled the roofs of the colonnades that surrounded the enormous temple complex. Civil unrest was a well-known feature of large assemblies, and the Romans took due precautions. But 3,000 soldiers could not stop a serious effort by 300,000 to revolt. Real trouble required Roman troops from Syria.

During the forty-five or so weeks of each year that the Roman knight and his troops were not in Jerusalem, who policed the city and who was responsible for local government? The high priest, assisted by other aristocrats, many of whom were also priests. Police duties were the responsibility of the high priest's guards. The high priest during Jesus' adulthood was the very successful Joseph Caiphas, who held office for seventeen years, longer than any other high priest of the Roman period.

⁵¹ See Schurer, *HJP*, vol. 1, pp. 363f.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 365f.



Why would Rome decide to govern this difficult area through the local priesthood? Actually, the priests were not their first choice; they preferred a strongman, like Herod, but, in the absence of such, they fell back on the region's own tradition: rule by the aristocracy, especially the priestly aristocracy.

For over 400 years, from the late 6th or early 5th century BCE to 37 BCE, when Herod conquered Jerusalem, the Jews in Palestine had been governed by a priestly aristocracy. The biblical stories of Saul, David, Solomon, and their successors are so well known that we think of Israel as usually being a monarchy. That is an error, probably caused by the simple fact that our Bible contains many more books that reflect the period of the monarchy than the subsequent period, when priests ruled Jerusalem and Judea under a remote and usually non-interfering empire-successively Persia, Alexander the Great, Ptolemaic Egypt, and Seleucid Syria. About as many years had passed under high priestly rule as under monarchical rule, and the priestly years were very recent. First-century Jews in Palestine had before them only two

historical models of government: monarchy and priestly aristocratic oligarchy. Many, many Jews preferred the aristocracy to a monarchy, since kings tended to be dictators. Many Palestinian Jews disliked both of the two recent royal families, the Hasmoneans and the Herodians. Most of the high priests had been more collegial rulers than Herod and Archelaus, and most Jews also knew that the priests would interfere with even fewer aspects of their culture than had Herod and Archelaus. Consequently, a lot of Jews preferred the new arrangement in Jerusalem and Judea. There was a remote empire, represented on Palestinian soil by *one* Roman of rank (supported by a handful of troops).⁵³ This Roman and his small military force lived among a lot of other gentiles in Caesarea, seldom came to Jerusalem, and did nothing to plant Greco-Roman laws and customs in the Jewish parts of the country. In place of Roman officials in all the main cities of Palestine and of Roman soldiers patrolling the towns and villages, motivating shopkeepers and farmers to cater to their tastes, we should think of one Roman official, protected by a few Roman soldiers, living in or around one city, with only very small outposts occupying forts in potentially hostile territory—rather like the U.S. cavalry in Indian territory. Effective rule was in the hands of local aristocrats. This was true in smaller communities as well as in Jerusalem. Throughout the

⁵³ After Herod and Archelaus, "the constitution became an aristocracy, and the high priests were entrusted with the leadership of the nation" (*Antiq.* 20.251). See also Josephus' description of Jewish government after Pompey's conquest: With Hyrcanus as high priest, and the appointment of five regional councils, "the people were removed from monarchic rule and lived under an aristocracy" (*Antiq.* 14.91, War 1.170). Aristocracy as a form of government was opposite the despotic rule of one man, especially a king (cf., the revolt against Claudius, War 2.205). In one passage, Josephus calls this government, which he himself very much preferred, a "theocracy," rule by God (*Apion* 2.165)—since the head of the government was the high priest, and most of the other aristocrats were priests.



province of Judea, cities, towns, and villages were locally governed by leading local citizens.

Just how did this government actually work? In the first place, the aristocrats had to get along well with the prefect or procurator. They needed his backing when there was trouble, and they could not cross him in any way. They mediated between prefect and people, presenting the behavior of the populace to the prefect in a good light. On the other hand, they also had to keep the masses from offending Rome too much. If Roman soldiers and Jewish crowds came together and blood was spilled, the aristocrats failed. On the whole, they seem to have succeeded quite well.

The best way to describe this aristocratic (or, as Josephus called it, "theocratic") form of government is to narrate events. The only events that live in the pages of history are crises. I shall describe one.⁵⁴ About the year 50 CE, some Galilean pilgrims were passing through Samaria on their way to a festival. There was a dispute, and one of the pilgrims was killed. A crowd came from Galilee, bent on revenge, but "the best known" citizens went to the Roman procurator to urge him to send troops to punish the murderers, thus putting an end to the matter. In this case, the system did not work very well, since the procurator did not act promptly. News of the killing reached Jerusalem, and many of the people there rushed to Samaria, though "the magistrates," or "rulers," tried to restrain them. The magistrates, however, did not give up. Clad in sackcloth and with ashes on their heads, they went after the hotheads and tried to persuade them not to do anything rash, since a battle would surely lead Rome to intervene with a heavy hand. This appeal was effective, and the Jewish mob dispersed (though some smaller bands stayed on for pillage). "The powerful" Samaritans went to Syria to lay their case before the Roman legate, and "the best known" Jews, including the high priest, did the same. The legate came south to Caesarea and Lydda in Judea, in each place ordering executions of some of the guilty parties. He sent others to Rome to be tried by Claudius: two men of the "highest power" namely the chief priest Jonathan and the serving high priest Ananias, as well as Ananias' son, other "best known" Jews, and "the most distinguished" Samaritans.

This is a very typical narrative. Aristocratic priests are sometimes named, but sometimes lumped together; important laymen act, but are seldom named. One has the impression of leading citizens, both chief priests and prominent laymen, who cooperated in trying to restrain people, thus also protecting them from Rome. They were not always effective, but often they were; in this case they were partially effective. In the end, the aristocrats had to answer to Rome, because they were the responsible government. What titles and offices did these people have? Except for the high priest, all the terms are general: "the best known," "the most distinguished," "the most powerful," and the like.

⁵⁴ This is a summary of *War* 2.232-44. Some details are different in *Antiq.* 20.118-36.



What was the role of the Pharisees in this aristocracy? Apparently they played no part or a very small part. When a high priest such as Ananias (in our story) or Caiphas (at the time of Jesus) wanted help or advice, he turned to his peers, other aristocratic priests and laymen of wealth, not to the Pharisees. The Pharisees disappear from Josephus' history between the years 6 CE, when Rome sent its first prefect, and 66 CE, when the great Jewish revolt began. The Pharisees drop out of the story because Rome decided that its one high-ranking official would deal with the aristocrats, especially the high priest. In 66 CE, the Pharisees entered the scene only after hostility between the Roman procurator and the populace had reached a disastrous level. There were two rounds of taunts and insults by the Jews and massacres by the Romans. At each stage the priestly aristocrats tried both to pacify the procurator and to calm the crowd. Finally, they realized that the situation was getting out of control, and then they called on the leading Pharisees to help. It was too late, and full-fledged revolt would follow.⁵⁵ In the revolt itself, Pharisees played a prominent part. One Pharisee, Simeon ben Gamaliel, was a member of the revolutionary council, and other Pharisees served on an investigative committee to examine the conduct of the war in Galilee.⁵⁶ That is, at a time of great crisis, the aristocracy turned to the leaders of a more popular party, but not until then.

III

The relations of Rome to Palestine in terms of government had a direct bearing on financial issues. Modern New Testament scholars often imagine that the Palestinian Jewish farmers were taxed more viciously than any other people. On the contrary, they were almost certainly better off than Egyptian peasants, and they were probably better off than Syrian peasants. Modern scholars often show moral indignation when they discuss ancient peasants. Behind this indignation lies an implicit comparison between the poverty of ancient farmers and laborers and the prosperity of modern Westerners. We can understand the situation only if we look at the ancient Palestinian peasants on their own terms.

Most people in the ancient world, not just in Palestine, were subsistence farmers. They were, on average, about as prosperous as sharecroppers in Mississippi before World War I-or perhaps a little more prosperous. They were, however, far too poor and far too hard working for there to be much truth in sketch three, in which Galileans generally acquired the culture that comes only from leisure. Actually, farm-dwelling peasants in Galilee worked six days a week from dawn to dusk, and on the sabbath they rested. They had neither the money nor the time to jaunt into a nearby city for the afternoon drama. They may have gone to the city to sell their goods in the market, but, afterwards, they seldom had the money to stay overnight and partici-

⁵⁵ See *War* 2.301-422.

⁵⁶ For both accounts, see *Life* 189-98.



pate in cultural events. Nor did they have the money to take weekend trips to Tyre and Sidon, where there were even greater Hellenistic treats. Even if they had the money, they would have transgressed the sabbath by traveling, and very few of them did that.

What *could* they afford to do? Galilee was very fertile; it was a lot better to have a small farm in Galilee than in the Judean hills, and Galilean farmers were not the poorest in the world. Galilean peasant farmers were by no means at the point of destitution presupposed by sketch two.⁵⁷ Every seventh year they could afford to let their land lie fallow, observing the sabbatical year required by biblical law. Also, once a year, on average, they could afford to spend their second-tithe money in Jerusalem. Moreover, they could afford to support not only the priests but also the Levites, and many of them had a small amount left over for the poor.

Were there vast hordes of landless people? In discussing the landless, and blaming Roman and Jewish taxes, Horsley and others show no comprehension of the root problem: landlessness is God's fault. God often produces more than one son in a family, but God never creates any more land for the extra sons to inherit.⁵⁸ The net result is that in each generation some farmers' sons end up landless. Good king Herod, unlike some modern rulers, did something about the resulting unemployment. He launched enormous building projects that employed tens of thousands of laborers. Almost sixty years after his death, his temple was finally completed, and 18,000 men suddenly became unemployed (*Antiq.* 20.219). Herod's great-grandson, Agrippa II, hired many of them to pave the city of Jerusalem (*Antiq.* 20.222). This reveals that Agrippa II and other leaders understood the social and political consequences of very high unemployment.

In Antipas' Galilee, the situation was basically the same as in his father's kingdom. Antipas built two successive capital cities and, thus, employed thousands of laborers (*Antiq.* 18.26, 36).⁵⁹ There were still people who had to live off charity or theft, but the unemployment situation was by no means as desperate as some scholars imagine.

Nor was the populace taxed excessively, at least by the standards of the day. Today, one of the most lightly taxed citizenries of the industrialized world, the Americans, cry and lament about their taxes. It has always been so. Galileans were more heavily taxed than they liked, but modern scholars' exclamations of horror over double taxation during the Roman period, when, they claim, there was an unprecedented and outrageous extra expense added by the Romans,

⁵⁷ For sound remarks on the strength of the Galilean economy, see Douglas Edwards, "The Socio-Economic and Cultural Ethos of the Lower Galilee in the First Century: Implications for the Nascent Jesus Movement," in *Galilee*, edited by Levine (n. 17 above), pp. 55-65, esp. 63.

⁵⁸ Horsley imagines that, once upon a time, generation after generation had been supported on the same ancestral land (*Spiral*, p. 232).

⁵⁹ So also Edwards, "The Socio-Economic and Cultural Ethos of the Lower Galilee in the First Century," in *Galilee*, pp. 69-70.



reveal a failure to study ancient empires and Jewish history. When Judea was under Persian rule, farmers paid the temple dues and also supplied goods and money that went as tribute to the Persian empire. Later, Judea both supported the temple and paid tribute to the Ptolemies or the Seleucids. Under the Hasmoneans, there was no tribute to a foreign empire, but the populace had to support both the temple and the kingdom.

And, of course, under Herod, they also supported the temple and the kingdom. Herod, in turn, paid tribute to Rome. All other peasants in the Mediterranean world of the period had the same or similar expenses. With a very few exceptions, they all had two layers of government as well as religious establishments to support. Today, many people similarly support a religious establishment, a local government, and a great empire.

Was the tribute that Antipas paid Rome harsh by the standards of the day? The only major adjustment to tribute of which we have knowledge was made by Julius Caesar, in circumstances that were very favorable to the Jews. Herod's father, Antipater, and the Jewish ruler of the time, Hyrcanus II, supported Caesar in his war with the other great Roman general, Pompey. Caesar won, and in gratitude he made a very generous financial arrangement.⁶⁰ We are not sure what changes took place later, but at the outset the Jews paid relatively little tribute to Rome.

IV

These are exciting days to study Jesus in context. Archaeology is flourishing, and people are coming up with all kinds of interesting proposals. Many of the most recent proposals maintain, in effect, that Jesus was not very Jewish. He lived, they claim, in an urban, cosmopolitan world, and he was at least as influenced by Greek and Roman culture as by Jewish. Scholars create whole new worlds, or (more often) they simply shift second, third, and fourth-century evidence to Jesus' lifetime.⁶¹ When all is said and done, though, it is clear that Jesus lived in a Jewish context. Judaism was in various ways Hellenized; that is true. It was, however, more deeply Persianized in an earlier period. But throughout the Persian, Macedonian, and Roman periods, the Hebrew Scripture and the learning experiences provided by the appointed times-sabbath and the festivals-meant that most

⁶⁰ *Antiq.* 14.190-210.

⁶¹ Prime examples are the claims by Kee and Batey (see notes 17 and 18 above) that, during Jesus' lifetime, Sepphoris was the home of the Roman administration and that there were pagan temples there. Batey (for example) cites a third-century coin as evidence of the presence of a Roman temple in Jesus' day (n. 18). In fact, the government of Sepphoris, as well as its name, changed after the second revolt against Rome in the 130s C.E. Only after 135 C.E. is there any evidence for pagan temples and the presence of Roman soldiers and officials. (See, for example, Eric Meyers, "Aspects of Roman Sepphoris in the Light of Recent Archaeology," *Liber Annuus: In honor of Father E. Testa*, forthcoming.) In general, there were dramatic changes in Galilee from the second to the fourth centuries, and a lot of the developments that Kee, Batey, and others assign to the pre-70 period actually took place after 135 C.E.



Jews were reminded again and again of their inheritance. They would give up their lives more readily than their laws and traditions, and they proved that more than once. Many of the scholars whose views we have discussed make an enormous mistake in describing Jesus' context. They think that a few Greek inscriptions and the construction of a few Hellenistic buildings by Herod prove that Palestinian Jews were swamped by, and accepted whole-heartedly, the entirety of Greco-Roman culture. They gave up the Bible in favor of Homer; instead of attending the pilgrimage festivals in Jerusalem, they went to Greek plays and took holidays in the gentile cities of the Phoenician coast; their teachers modeled themselves on Cynics rather than on Elijah, Isaiah, and the other prophets-and so on. In fact, the evidence shows that Palestinian Jews were by no means inundated by Hellenistic institutions and gentile customs, and the majority resented even the fringe aspects of Greco-Roman culture that were present.⁶² Moreover, Jews in the Diaspora, who actually did live in the midst of the gentile world, were extremely careful about which aspects of Greco-Roman culture they participated in. They observed the sabbath and ate kosher food; only a few attended the theatre; they seldom married pagans, and a very small number studied Greek philosophy.⁶³ There is no

evidence to indicate that Palestinian Jews accepted a level of cultural Hellenization that Jews in the diaspora avoided, and a great deal of evidence against it: the entirety of Josephus, the Gospels, and Acts.

What about Jesus himself? The parallels between Jesus and other Jewish prophets, both biblical and post-biblical, are numerous and vital. I shall mention only one point, the topic that the Gospels single out as the major theme of his message: He taught that the kingdom of God was at hand. This depends on a very Jewish idea, that God controls history and that it has a goal. This is one of the main theological ideas in the Bible and one that was fully shared by first-century Jews. Jesus, like his hearers, was deeply rooted in study of the Bible. The belief that God controls history makes one interpret the world in a way that is very distinctive. It is quite different from the view that history is not going anywhere, or that the only operative force is chance.

⁶² Cf. the remarks of Sean Freyne, "Urban-Rural Relations in First-Century Galilee: Some Suggestions from the Literary Sources," in *Galilee*, p. 84: "Jews had learned to accommodate themselves to [a Hellenistic] environment while retaining their distinct identity, even in the Galilee, as the examples of Scythopolis and Caesarea indicate."

⁶³ Philo, of course, studied Greek philosophy, but other literature from the Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora reveals excellent knowledge of the Bible and virtually no knowledge of philosophy. Paul, for example, shows no philosophical education, though he knows and occasionally uses a favorite Stoic word or so (e.g., *autarkeia* in 2 Cor. 9.8; *autarkes* in Phil. 4.1 1). For the other points, see my *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990), ch. IV; and the summary in Sanders, *Judaism*, pp. 211-212.