

Part I

Historical Context

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I The Social and Political Milieu

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The early Christian movement emerged within the context of the Roman Empire. The battle of Actium in 31 BCE and Augustus' settlement of 28–27 BCE had ushered in a new period of imperial rule in which the extreme violence and unrest that had characterized the last century of the Republic were swept away by the new emperor. In exchange for political dominance, Augustus brought reforms, the rebuilding of Rome, and the promise of peace (*pax*).

By the first century, the Roman Empire extended across the coastal plains surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, from the Atlantic in the West to Egypt in the East. At its heart was the vast city of Rome, rebuilt by Augustus but still encompassing a diverse, cosmopolitan culture within its urban sprawl. Despite the far-reaching political changes that had taken place in this period, Roman society continued to be deeply conservative, governed by a small hereditary class of wealthy aristocrats who were bound to one another by social ties, marriage alliances, and patronage. The elite enjoyed displaying their wealth and acting as benefactors, investing in civic infrastructures such as public baths, temples, and libraries, or funding games and festivals. Great store was set upon status, whether a person was a citizen or non-citizen, slave or free, and a huge gulf divided the elite from the poor, who had no political representation or voice. Social mobility was rare, except for the very lowest, who might slip from subsistence to destitution.

While one or two New Testament texts might have been composed in the capital city of Rome, most were likely composed in the East, probably in the larger cities such as Antioch, Alexandria, or Ephesus, which continued to have strong local identities. All of these cities were home to sizeable groups of Jews, forming what is known as the Jewish diaspora, or Jews living outside the land of Israel-Palestine. These groups were thoroughly Hellenized: they spoke Greek, adopted many aspects of Greek culture, and occupied various places on the social scale, from

urban plebs to the educated elite (the writer Philo of Alexandria is a good example of the latter group). Their Scriptures were the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation that had been put together a few centuries earlier. These Jewish groups provided fertile ground for Christ-following missionaries, who preached first in the synagogues before extending the new teaching to their pagan neighbors.

As small pockets of Christ-followers began to emerge in these eastern cities, they seem to have organized themselves in a similar manner to *collegia* (associations or guilds), semi-formal groups of traders, workmen, professional associations, veterans, immigrants, or devotees of a particular cult. Members of these groups generally paid a subscription, met for shared meals, and took care of one another's needs (including arranging funerals). There is evidence to suggest that Christ-followers met in a variety of places: in houses, shops and workshops, or even outdoors and in graveyards. Although these groups were far from uniform, Paul's letters suggest that already by the 50s many of them had a strong sense of group identity: they shared initiation rituals (baptism) and a set of beliefs and convictions (perhaps something similar to 1 Cor 15:1–11, however ill-defined), met to share worship and fellowship (including celebrating the Eucharist), and referred to one another as "brothers," "believers," or "holy ones." The term "Christian" (Gk. *christianoï*) seems to have emerged in Antioch at a fairly early date (Acts 11:26), probably originally as a pejorative term coined by outsiders but later embraced by Christ-followers themselves.

Unlike other associations, however, membership of Christ-following groups could often cause serious tensions with outsiders. In the early stages, most new converts were from the Jewish synagogue, though Christian teaching here could often lead to friction or even riots. Paul was subject to synagogue discipline (he mentions receiving the thirty-nine lashes in 2 Cor 11:2), and it is clear from the gospels that conflict with local synagogues was a recurrent feature as Christ-following groups sought to establish themselves (see, e.g., Mark 13:9, John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2; Acts 7:54–8:2). On a wider level, however, commitment to Christ could lead to accusations before local magistrates (see, e.g., Acts 18:12–17). In many respects, Christian teaching was deeply countercultural: it rejected social conventions, offered a new understanding of what counted as honor and shame, and urged people to share their wealth with the poor. Commitment to the one God drew people away from the city altars and domestic deities, and adherents were unable to act as magistrates or to take part in the imperial cult, leading outsiders to regard them as anti-Roman, disloyal, and even as

atheists (in that they refused to worship the gods of Rome). Despite their similarities, Jews were in a different situation. They had been granted a certain degree of legitimacy by Rome (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.214–16; Philo, *Embassy* 311–13), were far less interested in attracting converts, and generally refrained from interfering in the religious lives of others.

Christian refusal to integrate into Roman society left them vulnerable to persecution, though, in practice, Roman attacks in this early period tended to be localized and sporadic. The earliest organized persecution seems to have been confined to the city of Rome. Following accusations that he had himself been responsible for the fire that devastated the city in 64 CE, the emperor Nero chose Christians as scapegoats, punishing them with such ferocity that even their most hostile opponents began to regard them with some sympathy (see the account in Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44). By the early second century, even bearing the name “Christian” seems to have been illegal. Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia, wrote to the emperor Trajan asking his advice on how to deal with the large numbers of Christians in his province. In response, Trajan advocated a moderate policy: Christians were not to be hunted out or denounced through anonymous pamphlets, and former Christians could be released if they were willing to offer sacrifice to the emperor. Suspects were offered the chance to deny their Christian faith, but if not, they were to be killed (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96–97). Clearly by this stage, and in certain places, Christian commitment was seen as antithetical to what it meant to be Roman.

But where did this new and subversive faith have its origins? At the heart of the Christian collective memory was the story of the death and resurrection of its founding figure, Jesus of Nazareth, in a particular – if insignificant – part of the Empire around 30 CE. It is the Jewish homeland of Israel-Palestine that provides the setting for the four New Testament gospels and the first part of Acts and that forms the geographical heart of Christian identity. In what remains of this chapter, then, I shall sketch what we know of this region – its political background and the formation of the Roman province of Judea; the centrality of Jerusalem, the high priest, and the temple; the situation in Galilee, taxation, and public opinion; and finally, the Jewish war with Rome and its far-reaching legacy. Throughout all of this, we shall continually note the complex interweaving of what we would call “politics” and “religion,” and the way that the two cannot be separated in an ancient context. First, however, we need to ask how we can know anything at all about this region, and to acknowledge both the extent and limitations of our sources.

THE LAND OF ISRAEL: SOURCES

Compared to most parts of the Roman Empire, we know a great deal about the land of Israel in this period. The first two books of Maccabees tell of the spread of Hellenistic culture under the Seleucid (Syrian) kings, of Antiochus IV Epiphanes' ban of Jewish practices, and of the subsequent Maccabean revolt that led to the rule of Hasmonean high priest-kings and a century of national independence. Our knowledge is enhanced by inscriptions (especially from urban centers such as Jerusalem and Caesarea), archaeological excavations, and the Dead Sea Scrolls (the writings of a sectarian group that lasted from the early Hasmonean period until around 68 CE). The Roman author Tacitus provides a brief overview of Jewish history and beliefs (*Hist.* 5.1–13); although unsympathetic and ill-informed, the account provides a valuable insight into the ways that Jews were regarded by elite Romans in the early-second century CE.

Most important, however, are the works of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish aristocratic priest who was born in 37 CE and fought in the Jewish war against Rome before defecting to the other side and living out his years as a writer in Rome. Josephus is the only provincial historian to describe his own society in any detail, so his works are of unparalleled value. His *Jewish War* (written ca. 75 CE) is an attempt to explain the tragedy that befell the Jewish people, particularly the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, and charts Jewish history from the Maccabean period until the Flavian triumph in 71, which celebrated Rome's victory in the war with the Jews. Josephus's second work, the *Antiquities of the Jews* (written around twenty years later), chronicles the great and glorious history of the Jewish race, recounting events from creation to the outbreak of revolt, and is clearly an attempt to counteract pagan hostility toward Jews in the troubled years after the war. At an early date, Josephus' autobiography, the *Life*, was added to the *Antiquities*, and provides a detailed (if often tendentious) account of Josephus' questionable activities as a general during the war. Josephus' works are of the utmost importance for the social and political history of this period, though of course we always need to remember that he wrote with an agenda and that he was perfectly happy to present his material in ways that suited his wider aims.

What we do not have is any direct access to the ideas and concerns of ordinary people living under Roman rule. All of our sources come from the elite, the rich, and powerful in society, and most likely from male authors. Literacy itself was extremely low in antiquity (10–15 percent is

probably an optimistic estimate), and the time and leisure required to devote oneself to writing was scarce. Moreover, elite writers tend to have had little interest in the concerns of others, such as women, the rural or urban poor, soldiers, foreigners, or slaves. In any reconstruction of the ancient world, we need to resist the dominant voices and attempt to hear those silenced by our sources, though this is no easy undertaking. Only in Egypt is this even remotely possible, where the thousands of scraps of papyrus – covering everything from tax receipts to shopping lists – provide some insight into everyday life and human concerns. In certain respects, early Christian literature is perhaps the closest we can get to “popular” literature in this period, though even here we need to be cautious. The authors of these texts may not have expressed themselves in the elegant Greek of their elite contemporaries, but they were still educated, most likely male, and more interested in expressing theological convictions than giving an assessment of first-century society. We shall need to bear all of this in mind as we map out the historical and political situation that gave birth to the Jesus movement.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL OVERVIEW

Perhaps the most marked feature of the political situation in the land of Israel is its fluidity. The period saw frequent changes between royal rule and direct Roman control, dictated largely by the exigencies of the local situation, imperial benefactions, or the strategies of particular emperors. And all the time the threat from Parthia cast a worrying shadow over the lands on and around Rome’s eastern frontier.

By 63 BCE, the century-long rule by the Hasmonean dynasty was approaching a sorry end, with two brothers locked in a power struggle for the royal title. Fresh from victory in the East, the Roman general Pompey the Great intervened. He laid siege to Jerusalem and desecrated its temple by entering the Holy of Holies. Although Pompey left a Hasmonean client king in charge, the Jewish homeland was now incorporated into the Roman Empire, the cities along the coast and in the Decapolis were annexed to Syria, and the nation was forced to pay tribute to Rome.

Rival Hasmoneans continued to assert their claims (some with help from Parthia) until the arrival of an Idumaeen aristocrat named Herod. His father, Antipater, was influential at court and Herod quickly displayed his outstanding abilities, both in putting down brigands and courting the favor of influential Romans. By 40 BCE, Herod was appointed “King of the Jews” by the Roman senate, though he would

need to besiege Jerusalem and defeat his Hasmonean rivals before he could finally claim his throne in 37 BCE. Herod possessed many of the qualities required of an ancient leader: military skill, political acumen, and long-term strategy. He enjoyed a close relationship with the emperor Augustus, and his steadfast loyalty to his patron was rewarded with the expansion of his kingdom so that it could rival that of Solomon's in extent. Throughout his lengthy reign, he presented himself as a player on the world stage, a generous benefactor of buildings, statues, and games in cities throughout the East, and a protector of Jewish rights throughout the diaspora.

At home, Herod began an impressive series of building projects, all displaying the latest architectural, manufacturing, and artistic techniques. He founded a Greco-Roman city on the northwest coast, naming it Caesarea in honor of the emperor, and furnishing it with streets on a grid-pattern, temples, and a huge artificial harbor. Throughout the land, he built theaters, racetracks, amphitheaters, and aqueducts but reserved his most extravagant projects for the capital city of Jerusalem, which was transformed by new walls, a palace, and other buildings and colonnades in Greco-Roman style. Most impressive of all, however, was Herod's refurbishment of the Jerusalem temple. The "Second Temple," as it has come to be known, was originally a fairly humble structure, completed under Zerubbabel after the Jewish return from exile in the sixth century BCE. Herod, however, doubled the size of the temple mount, filling in large sections of the valley to create immense foundations for the new enclosure (which was now one of the largest in the ancient world). The sanctuary itself was made taller and grander, with huge dressed stones, ornate friezes, Corinthian columns, porticoes, and gold and silver decorations (see Josephus' description in *Ant.* 15.394–401). The beauty of the Jerusalem temple was legendary, leading a rabbinic writer to remark "whoever has not seen Herod's temple has not seen a beautiful building" (Bava Batra 4a). Respecting the sanctity of the sacred place, Herod had priests trained as craftsmen so that they could work on the holiest parts of the temple, and while the sanctuary itself was completed within a couple of decades, the outer courtyards provided work for stonemasons until 64 CE (*Ant.* 20.219–22).

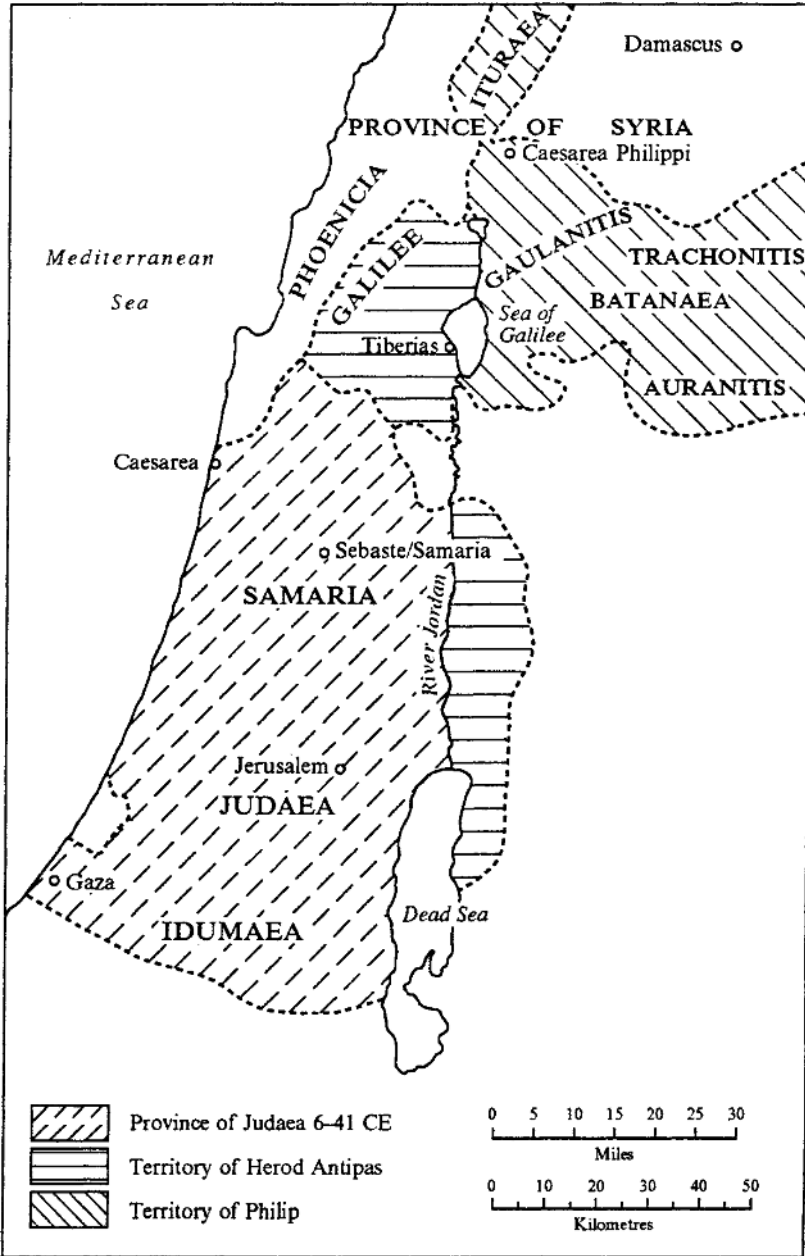
Under Herod, the nation experienced three decades of much-needed peace, but history has not remembered him kindly. Josephus describes Herod's failings in some depth (though the Jewish aristocrat's Hasmonean sympathies should always be remembered). Despite his work on the temple, Herod's Jewishness seems to have been suspect in some quarters. His family were probably converted to the Jewish faith

in the Hasmonean expansion into Idumaea in the late second century BCE, though his mother was an Arab. He seems to have suffered from paranoia, building fortresses throughout his kingdom to watch not outsiders, but his own people, and suspecting family members of plotting against him (though this may often have been true). He executed his favorite wife, a Hasmonean princess named Mariamne, his mother-in-law, and three of his sons. Whatever the truth of Matthew's claim that he executed the young boys in and around Bethlehem (Matt 2:16), it was certainly something that popular memory would find credible. What peace there was under Herod seems to have been repressive, and such was the social unrest when the old king died in 4 BCE that Roman legions were required to subjugate the region.

The future of the kingdom lay with Augustus, who decided to uphold Herod's final will and divide the territory among three of the king's sons. Herod Antipas was given Galilee and Peraea, ruling over the territory until his banishment in 39 CE. Herod Philip II was appointed ruler of the largely gentile northeastern regions of Batanaea, Trachonitis, Auranitis, and the area around Panias until his death in 34 CE. Both were given the title tetrach, literally, the ruler of a quarter of the kingdom. The largest and most prestigious portion of Herod's land – containing Judea (and Jerusalem), Samaria, and Idumaea – was given to Archelaus with the title ethnarch, a term that simply means the ruler of a particular nation or people (see Map 1.1).¹

In 6 CE, however, Augustus was forced to think again about this area, following complaints about Archelaus' cruelty (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.111–13; *Ant.* 17.343–44; see also Luke 2:22). Rather than appoint another Herod, the emperor decided to bring the territory under direct Roman rule. A census was taken for taxation purposes by P. Sulpicius Quirinius, the legate of Syria (*Ant.* 18.3–4; 20.102; *J.W.* 7.253; Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.6; Luke 2:2; Acts 5:37), and the territory was assigned to a governor or prefect (*praefectus*). Aside from the all-too-brief reign of Herod I's grandson, Agrippa I (41–44 CE), Judea would remain under direct Roman rule until the outbreak of revolt in 66. What is less clear, however, is when exactly it became an autonomous province. Although this has traditionally been dated to 6 CE, it may be that autonomy was

¹ Rather unusually, Herod's sister, Salome, also inherited a share of his kingdom. She was bequeathed a toparchy (or small state), which included the wealthy cities of Jamnia, Azotus, and Phasaelis, to which the emperor also added the palace of Ascalon (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.98; *Ant.* 18.158). On her death in 10 CE, they went to her friend Livia, the wife of Augustus.



The Roman province of Judaea, 6–41 CE

Map 1.1 The Roman province of Judaea, 6–41 CE.
 SOURCE: Bond, H. (1998). *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, p. xxvi). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511585166.002