

2nd Lesson in the Synoptic Gospels

THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND RELIGIOUS SITUATIONS OF PALESTINE AT THE TIME OF JESUS CHRIST

Introduction: Studying Jesus' history in his time enables us to develop better understanding of Jesus which helps us to grow in our relationship with him at present. There is a history behind math, science, economics, biology, engineering, etc. None of these fields developed in a vacuum. All of these fields developed within broader political, social, cultural, and religious contexts and they continue to influence us in our everyday life. "Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it," said Denning. It is very important that we know the world of Jesus in his time in order to understand his teachings and lessons from his life.

POLITICAL SITUATION OF PALESTINE It is very important to know and care about politics because politics determines our life and the political decisions affect our life and therefore we should know what is going on around us. In order to understand who Jesus was and his preferences, values, philosophies and commitments, we must know the politics of Jesus' time. When Jesus was born, there were two active political forces in Palestine. Local Power and Foreign Power. The foreign power was the Romans and the local power was Herod the great.

Foreign Power: The Roman Empire is one of the greatest civilizations in history. In 63 B.C. the Roman army commanded by General Pompey invaded and conquered Syria and intervened in the turmoil and civil war in Jerusalem, thus extending the Roman influence to Israel. In 37 B.C. the Roman Senate installed Herod as King of Judea, but Israel officially became a Roman province, under a complete and direct Roman administration. In the first century A.D., at the time of Jesus and his first disciples, Rome had dominion over Israel.

Emperor Caesar Augustus came to power after a period of political unrest and civil war in Rome, following the murder of Julius Caesar, and was in power during the time of Jesus' birth. The New Testament makes reference to him in Luke 2:1 - "It came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." Quirinius was the governor of Judea to collect the money at the time of Jesus birth.

Tiberius Caesar: When Augustus died, he was succeeded by his son Tiberius. Luke tells us that John the Baptist began preaching during the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1-2). Tiberius was followed by his great-nephew Gaius, called Caligula.

Claudius: Claudius was the emperor in 44AD at the time of the famine that prompted Saul and Barnabas to take a gift from the church in Antioch to the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30).

Local Power: Herod the great: He was an Idumean by ethnicity but became a ruler of the Jewish people, appointed by the Romans. He was a cruel, selfish, power monger and married many

wives. He was a puppet in the hands of the Romans. His terrible quality is his cruelty and insecurity, suspecting and killing anyone (whom he considered) who would pose threat to his position. He was troubled at the birth of Jesus. He tried to trick the wise men who instead cheated him and infuriated by their act, He killed the babies in Bethlehem. It is said that he killed his own sons and wives. He had three sons.

Herod Archelaus was the first son of Herod the great. He received one-half of his father's territory, the area surrounding and near Jerusalem (Judea and Samaria). Joseph was unwilling to move Mary and toddler Jesus to Bethlehem after fleeing to Egypt because Bethlehem was in this Herod's territory and, like his father "the Great," Herod Archelaus was a cruel guy.

Herod Antipas Jesus called him "the Fox" (Luke 13:32). Received a quarter of his father's territory (Galilee and Perea). Divorced his first wife and married Herodias, the wife of his brother. He killed John the Baptist when he was confronted by him. Pontius Pilate sent Jesus to see this Herod as part of Jesus' trial since this Herod was visiting Jerusalem at the time Jesus was sentenced to death. (Luke 23:12).

Herod Philip the Tetrarch got the remaining quarter of his father's territory (north and east of Galilee). Married his niece, Salome, the daughter of Herodias.

Herod's Grandsons

Herod Agrippa I was the Grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herodias. In the book of Acts he is known as the one who put Peter in prison (Acts 12:1-5). He called himself as a god and forced the people of Tyre and Sidon to consider him as a god and thus was thus struck by an angel and "eaten by worms" (Acts 12:20-23).

Herod Agrippa II Like his father Herod Agrippa I and great-grandfather Herod the Great he ruled over a large territory. He's the one who interviewed Paul along with the Roman procurator Porcius Festus when Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea (in Palestine) after Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 25-26). Agrippa exclaimed to Paul (literal translation): "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

ECONOMIC SITUATION OF PALESTINE: Most Palestinian Jewish farmers and herdsmen earned enough to support their families, pay their taxes, offer sacrifices during the annual festivals. There were Jewish aristocrats with large estates and grand houses and the merchants who served the Temple (supplying, for example, incense and fabric) could become very prosperous. Galilee in particular was relatively prosperous since the land and climate permitted abundant harvests and supported many sheep. The Herodian dynasty was careful to organize large public works projects that employed thousands of poor people. There were also a great majority of the poor people All sorts of people belonged to this class, such as orphans and widows, the blind, the crippled, and the mentally ill. Having no other means of livelihood, people with physical and mental handicapped became beggars.

SOCIAL SITUATION OF PALESTINE: There were many socially marginalized groups.

Samaritans: At the time of Jesus, the Jews and the Samaritans were two mutually antagonistic communities. (Luke 9:52–56.) The Jews refused to consider the Samaritans as Israelites, mostly because of political and religious reasons. The Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch as the only inspired scripture, and they offered their sacrifices on Mount Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem. The Samaritans originated from a mixture of people living in Samaria and others who migrated into the area following the 721 B.C. conquest of Samaria by Assyria (2 Kgs 17.) When the Romans gained control of Palestine, they gave more power to Samaritans. After the Romans expelled the Jews from Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Samaritans remained in Palestine, where they maintained their communities through the following Christian and Moslem eras. Today, a few hundred of them still reside in Israel.

Publicans: Originally Publicans were men who served in the public works or farmed public lands for the Roman government. They later became known as professional tax farmers, who made their profits from the excess taxes they collected. The right to collect taxes was sold at public auctions to private corporations of Publicans who gave the highest bid. Since the Publicans were native Jews of Palestine, they were detested, ostracized, and often excommunicated by most Jewish groups. But some Publicans, such as Matthew, received the gospel very readily, and Jesus associated frequently with them. (Matt. 9:9–10; Matt. 21:31–32; Mark 2:15.)

Tax collectors and Sinners: Sociologists assign people to upper, middle, and lower classes. In industrialized nations, the middle class is relatively large. In Palestine in the time of Jesus, what we know as middle class was rather small. It was made up of professional people such as shopkeepers, tradesmen, fishermen, and educated people such as the Pharisees and scribes. Being a carpenter, Jesus most likely belonged to this class. This class included the very wealthy such as the aristocratic families of the Herods, the high priests, and the rich nobility that owned most of the land.

Tax collectors: There are a few reasons for the low view of tax collectors in the New Testament era. **First**, no one likes to pay money to the government, especially when the government is an oppressive regime like the Roman Empire of the 1st century. Those who collected the taxes for such a government were seen as enemies.

Second, the tax collectors in the Bible were ‘Jews’ who were working for the hated Romans. These individuals were seen as traitors to their own countrymen. Rather than fighting the Roman oppressors, these tax collectors were helping them and enriching themselves at the expense of their fellow Jews.

Third, it was common knowledge that the tax collectors cheated the people they collected from. By hook or by crook, they would collect more than required and keep the extra for themselves. Everyone just understood that was how it worked. The tax collector Zacchaeus, in his confession to the Lord, mentioned his past dishonesty: But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord,

“Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over(Luke 19:8).

Fourth, because of their skimming off the top, the tax collectors were well-to-do. This further separated them from the lower classes, who had resentment towards their lavish lifestyle. The tax collectors, ostracized as they were from society, formed their own clique, further separating themselves from the rest of society.

Jesus taught that we should love our enemies. To emphasize the point, He said, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?” (Matthew 5:46). The word even is significant. Jesus was telling the crowd they needed to rise above the level of publican behavior. If our love is only reciprocal, then we’re no better than a tax collector! Such a comparison must have left its mark on Jesus’ hearers.

Sinners: They were sinners SOCIALLY and not MORALLY. The sinners who are grouped with the tax collectors were not ordinary sinners. The Pharisees had a dislike for the Sinners because they were viewed by the Pharisees as deliberate and persistent transgressors of the law of Moses. Included in this group would be money-lenders who charged interest on loans advanced to fellow Jews. This was a clear violation of the law of God stated in Leviticus 25:36-38. Also in this group of sinners might be prostitutes who made their living by their ill-gotten gains. These were individuals who sold themselves to a life of sin in deliberate disregard of the law of God. This sinner group included anyone who did menial work, sick people, workers and sweepers and so on. Yet, Jesus apparently associated with such people at dinner parties. The Pharisees charged that Jesus was "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). Even though Jesus belonged to the middle class, he reached out to people of the lower class. On one occasion Jesus said to some religious leaders in Jerusalem, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matthew 21:31).

Pagans: The word ‘Pagan’ comes from the Latin word ‘*paganus*’ which means “country dweller”. Paganism can refer to polytheism or the worship of more than one god, such as in ancient Rome. A pagan is also considered to be one who, for the most part, has no religion and indulges in worldly delights, sensual pleasures, self gratification and material possessions. From a Christian viewpoint, pagans are generally characterized as those who practice any religious ceremony, act, or practice that is not distinctly Christian.

Some of the pagan beliefs and practices: The physical world is a good place, one to be taken pleasure in by everyone. • Everyone is considered to be part of this Mother Earth. • Divinity reveals itself in every facet of the world. • Every being, man and animal, is a derivative of the Divine. As such, all are gods and goddess. Solar and lunar cycles are significant in pagan worship.

Gentiles: The word Gentile is an English translation of the Hebrew word *goyim* (“people, nations”) and the Greek word *ethne* (“nations, people groups, people”). The Latin Vulgate translated these words as gentilis, and this word was then carried over into English as “Gentile.” The term refers to a person who is not a Jew.

From the Jewish perspective, Gentiles were often seen as pagans who did not know the true God. During Jesus' time, many Jews took such pride in their cultural and religious heritage that they considered Gentiles "unclean," calling them "dogs" and "the uncircumcision." Gentiles and the half-Gentile Samaritans were viewed as enemies to be shunned (John 4:9; 18:28; and Acts 10:28).

In the **Sermon on the Mount**, Jesus alluded to the common association of Gentiles with paganism: "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:47). In another place in the same sermon, Jesus noted, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7).

Jesus came to offer salvation to all people, Jew and Gentile. The prophet Isaiah predicted the Messiah's worldwide ministry, saying He "will bring forth justice to the Gentiles" and would be "a light to the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:1, 6). In Mark 7:26, Jesus helps a Gentile woman who had asked for her daughter's freedom from a demon. Interestingly, both Jews and Gentiles are mentioned in the account of Jesus' death. The Jewish leaders arrested Jesus, but it was a Roman (i.e., a Gentile) who sentenced Him to death and Romans who carried out the execution.

As the gospel spread in the early New Testament era, many Gentiles were converted. Acts 11:18 records the reaction of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who "praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'" When the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch heard the good news, "they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48).

Gentiles were long seen as enemies of the Jewish people, yet Christ provided good news for both Jews and non-Jews. Paul praised the Lord's goodness in his letter to the (mostly Gentile) church in Ephesus: "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:12–14).

Women and children: In Matthew's account (Chapter 14) of Jesus feeding the five thousand, we find a note which needs an attention and explanation. Matthew relates that after the crowd has eaten and were satisfied, the disciples gathered up the leftover loaves and fishes in baskets. The account concludes, "And those who ate were five thousand men, not counting women and children. Sociologists comment that if women and children were included, the size of the crowd would be much larger. They suggest that women were the ones who would have taken care to pack provisions in baskets when families set out to follow Jesus. Our experience teaches it is usually women who plan ahead, cook, bake and pack the food to be eaten at a church potluck or family gathering. According to this scenario, women and children outnumbered the men, and women played a key role with Jesus in feeding the crowd. Their presence was significant, yet it is overlooked by Mark and Luke and given only a sideways glance by Matthew.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS OF JESUS' TIME

Group's description	Description	Agreement with Jesus	Disagreement with Jesus
Pharisees	Strict religious group who advocated obedience to the most minute portion of Jewish law and traditions. Mainly middle class. Very influential in the synagogues and believed in oral traditions.	Respect for law, belief in the resurrection of the dead, spirits and angels.	Rejected Jesus as the Messiah because Jesus did not follow all their traditions and they did not like Jesus' association with wicked and sinful people
Sadducees	Wealthy, upper class people, Jewish priestly class. They profited from the temple business. Major party of the Jewish council.	Showed respect for the first five books of Moses (Torah or Law books – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Believed in the sanctity of the temple.	-Rejected the authority of the bible beyond the five books of Moses. -Denied the resurrection of the dead - Denied to believe in Spirits, angels...
Scribes or Teachers of the Law	Professional interpreters of the law, stressing the traditions and many teachers of the law were Pharisees	Respect for the law and committed to obeying God	Denied Jesus' authority to reinterpret the law. Rejected Jesus as the Messiah because he did not obey all of their traditions.
Herodians	A Jewish political party of King Herod's supporters. Tried to trap Jesus with questions and plotted to kill Jesus	Believed in the Messiah but did not recognize Jesus as the One sent by God	Saw Jesus a threat to their political future
Zealots	Jewish nationalists who were determined to end Roman rule in Israel	Believed in the Messiah but did not recognize Jesus as the One sent by God	Believed that Messiah must be a political leader who would deliver Israel from Roman occupation
Essenes	Jewish monastic group practicing ritual purity and personal holiness	Emphasized justice, honesty and commitment	Believed ceremonial rituals made them righteous.

JESUS MOVEMENT: The Jewish people expected a Political Messiah because they were slaves to foreign powers all along in their history from the time of OT. When Jesus was born they were under the Romans and the Herodians. They had hoped that their messiah would liberate them politically and reestablish Davidic kingdom. But Jesus came as a religious Messiah and not a political Messiah although he had political forces against him right from the beginning of his birth.

Jesus realized the longing of his people's liberation from their enemies. After the baptism, he went to his hometown Nazareth and on the Sabbath day and he read the passage about his Messianic Ministry quoting the book of prophet Isaiah

He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" future Messiah passage from the Isaiah Scroll and began to reveal who he was and what he wanted to do in his public ministry (Luke 4:16-22)

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me - He was born of the Holy Spirit and anointed by the Holy Spirit in the river Jordan on the day of his baptism and the Heavenly Father clearly revealed: He is my beloved Son and with whom I am well pleased. This is his self introduction as the Son of God, Anointed one.

He has anointed me to bring glad tidings (good news/ gospel) to the poor: His preferential option is the poor people. He came to liberate people from their real poverty by siding with the poor people although he came for everyone.

Proclaimed liberty to the Captives: Ministry to the gentiles, Samaritans, Sinners and Tax collectors and Poor people.

Oppressed People went free: Liberation and healing from demons and possessions.

Sight to the Blind: So many physically blind people were healed and he also healed the spiritually blind religious leaders through his preaching and confrontations.

Proclamation of the Acceptable Year: It is not a literal year, but rather a space of time that is characterized by God's grace, redemption, and deliverance. In Isaiah, the acceptable year of the Lord refers to God's restoration of His people from Babylonian captivity, possibly with the

intention of likening it to the Year of Jubilee, when liberty was proclaimed throughout all the land (Leviticus 25).

Palestinian Map during Jesus' time:



Jesus' Ministry in Galilee: Galilee is the place where Jesus lived most of his public life and appeared to his disciples after the resurrection. Jesus began his Galilean ministry after the death of John the Baptist. Here is located the house of St. Peter's mother-in-law, and thus, the house of Peter, where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-15) It is here Peter declared that Jesus is the Son of the living God. More than likely, Jesus spent much time in Peter's house. Here is Capernaum, Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John (Matt 4:18-22) The healing of the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5-13) The healing of the paralytic and many others (Matt 9:1-7; 8: 16-17), the calling of Matthew (Matt 9:9) Eating with the tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:11-13), Raising Jairus' daughter (Matt 9:18-19; 23-26) healing of the woman with a hemorrhages (Matt 9:20-22), the multiplication of 5 loaves and two fish and feeding 5000 men and it is here Risen Jesus appeared to the disciples and sending them on mission before ascension.

Jesus' Ministry in Judea: Although he was born in Judea, Jesus grew up in the small Galilean village of Nazareth. Jesus' ministry in Judea is often called "The Later Judean Ministry" of Jesus. After Jesus' baptism, he ministered in this region for a short time, gathering the disciples of John the Baptist to himself (John 1). Jesus leaves Capernaum and Galilee for the last earthly time (Mt 19:1; Mk 10:1) and heads for Jerusalem (Lk 9:51; Jn 7:10). Travelling by Samaria, he heals the ten lepers (Lk 17:11) but is rejected in a Samaritan village (Lk 9:52).] Arriving in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Tabernacles (Jn 7:10), Forgiving the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:2) and healing the blind man who is taken before the Sanhedrin (Jn 9:1). During his travels in Judea, Jesus visits Martha and Mary in Bethany (Lk 10:38), returning to Jerusalem for "Hanukkah", the Feast of Dedication. Following the death of Lazarus, Jesus returned to Bethany near Jerusalem, and raises Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11:1). He then crosses the River Jordan and works in Perea (Modern day Jordan). There he blesses the little children (Mt 19:13, Mk 10:13; Lk 18:15) and speaks to the rich young man (Mt 19:16; Mk 10:17; Lk 18:18). Jesus now traveled towards Jerusalem for the last time (Mt 20:17; Mk 10:32; Lk 18:31). Passing through Jericho he healed one (or two) blind men (Mt 20:29; Mk 10:46; Lk 18:35) and converts Zacchaeus the tax collector (Lk 19:1). Reaching Bethany (Jn 12:1) the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, Jesus is anointed by Mary (Mt 26:6; Mk 14:3) after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21:1; Mk 11:1; Lk 19:29; Jn 12:12).

Jesus' Ministry in Samaria: There are two famous episodes that speak about Jesus' ministry in the region of Samaria. The hostility against Samaritans continued well into the first century, so much so that devout Jews would actually go many miles out of their way to avoid traveling through that hated land.

The first episode was the discourse with **the Samaritan Woman** in John 4. On his way from Judea to Galilee, Jesus deliberately cut through Samaria, where he had the famous encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. He revealed to her that he was the Messiah. John's Gospel tells us Jesus stayed two days more in that village and many Samaritans believed in him when they heard him preach. His reception was better there than in his home town of Nazareth.

The second episode was Jesus' parable of the **Good Samaritan** in Luke 10:25-37. Jesus turned his listeners' thinking upside down when he made a despised Samaritan the hero of the tale. Further, he portrayed two pillars of Jewish society, a priest and a Levite, as the villains. This would have been shocking to his audience, but the message was clear. Even a Samaritan knew how to love his neighbor. Respected religious leaders, on the other hand, were sometimes hypocrites. Jesus had a heart for Samaria. In the moments just before he ascended into heaven, he told his disciples: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)