



## **The World Before Jesus: Political, Religious, Social, and Historical Context of Palestine**

## **1 Introduction**

This report examines the multifaceted context of Palestine before the birth of Jesus Christ, focusing on the political, religious, social, and historical dynamics that shaped the region. By analyzing these elements, we gain insight into the environment into which Jesus was born and the conditions that influenced his life and ministry. The report includes relevant scripture references to provide a biblical perspective, with full text quoted for clarity.

## **2 Political Context**

Palestine in the centuries leading up to Jesus' birth was a region marked by foreign domination and internal division. By the 1st century BCE, the Hellenistic and Roman empires profoundly influenced the area.

### **2.1 Hellenistic Influence and the Hasmonean Dynasty**

Persian Empire (539-332 BCE):

- The Jewish exiles in Babylon were allowed to return to Jerusalem following the conquest by the Persians under Cyrus the Great. (Ezra 1:1-4)

### **2. Hellenistic Rule:**

- **Following Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BCE, Greek culture pervaded the region.**

- **Post-Alexander, his empire fragmented, leading to the rule of the Ptolemies and Seleucids.**

Following Alexander the Great's conquests in the 4th century BCE, Palestine fell under Hellenistic control, first under the Ptolemies and later the Seleucids. The Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE) imposed Hellenistic culture, leading to tensions with the Jewish population. His desecration of the

Jerusalem Temple sparked the Maccabean Revolt (167-160 BCE), led by Judas Maccabeus. The revolt resulted in the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty, which restored Jewish autonomy and rededicated the Temple (commemorated as Hanukkah).

The Hasmonean rulers, initially priest-kings, expanded Jewish territory but faced internal strife over their dual roles as priests and kings, which some Jews viewed as illegitimate. Hasmonean Dynasty (167-63 BCE):

A period of Jewish autonomy initiated by the Maccabean Revolt. This era saw the expansion and fortification of Jewish rule. By the 1st century BCE, civil war weakened the dynasty, paving the way for Roman intervention.

## **2.2 Roman Domination**

In 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem, incorporating Palestine into the Roman Republic. The Romans appointed local rulers, such as Herod the Great (374 BCE), as client kings. Herod, an Idumean with nominal Jewish allegiance, was a polarizing figure. He undertook massive building projects, including the expansion of the Second Temple, but his loyalty to Rome and ruthless governance such as the massacre of infants in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18) alienated many Jews.

The full text of Matthew 2:16-18 (NIV) is as follows:

*“When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through*

*the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

After Herod's death, Palestine was divided among his sons, with Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Philip ruling as tetrarchs under Roman oversight. By 6 CE, Judea became a Roman province governed by prefects, such as Pontius Pilate (26-36 CE), whose administration was marked by tensions with the Jewish population.

### **3 Religious Context**

The religious landscape of Palestine was diverse, with Judaism at its core, shaped by centuries of tradition and external influences.

#### **3.1 Second Temple Judaism**

The Second Temple, rebuilt after the Babylonian exile (circa 516 BCE), was the focal point of Jewish religious life. Daily sacrifices, festivals, and pilgrimages to Jerusalem reinforced Jewish identity. However, religious practices varied among Jewish sects:

- **Pharisees:** Emphasized oral traditions and the Law (Torah), believing in resurrection and divine providence. They were popular among the common people.
- **Sadducees:** Elite priests who controlled the Temple, adhered strictly to the written Torah, and rejected resurrection.
- **Essenes:** Ascetic communities, possibly including those at Qumran, who emphasized purity and apocalyptic expectations.

- **Zealots:** Advocated violent resistance against Roman rule, seeking to establish a theocratic state.
- Beliefs:
  - - Monotheism remained central, with a strong emphasis on the covenant with God (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).
  - - The anticipation of a Messiah who would deliver Israel from oppression was prevalent.

### 3.2 Apocalyptic Expectations

Many Jews anticipated a Messiah to deliver them from oppression, influenced by prophetic texts like Isaiah 11:15:

*“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.”*

These expectations fueled hopes for a political or spiritual savior, setting the stage for Jesus ministry.

## **4 Social Context**

Palestinian society was hierarchical, with significant disparities between elites and commoners.

### **4.1 Social Hierarchy**

The ruling class included Roman officials, Herods court, and the Jewish priestly aristocracy. Below them were merchants, artisans, and farmers, with peasants and day laborers forming the majority. Women had limited public roles, though some, like those referenced in Luke 8:23, supported religious movements:

and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herods household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

### **4.2 Cultural and Linguistic Diversity**

Greek culture influenced urban areas, with Greek as the lingua franca alongside Aramaic, the common language of Jews. Hebrew remained in religious contexts. Roman infrastructure, such as roads and aqueducts, facilitated trade but also symbolized foreign control.

## 5 Historical Context

Palestine's history before Jesus was shaped by successive empires: Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman. The Babylonian exile (587-538 BCE) profoundly impacted Jewish identity, leading to the development of synagogues and a focus on the Torah. The return under Persian rule allowed the rebuilding of the Temple, but Hellenistic and Roman domination introduced cultural and political challenges.

The Roman occupation, beginning in 63 BCE, intensified Jewish resistance, ranging from peaceful adherence to the Law to violent uprisings. These tensions are reflected in texts like Daniel 7:13-14, which envisions divine intervention:

*“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”*

## 6 Conclusion

Palestine before Jesus was a region of complex political, religious, social, and historical dynamics. Roman domination and internal divisions created a volatile political landscape, while diverse Jewish sects and messianic hopes shaped religious life. Social hierarchies and cultural influences further defined daily existence. These conditions set the stage for Jesus' life and teachings, which

would resonate with and challenge the world of 1st-century Palestine.

## **RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

### **Books:**

1. "The World of Jesus: First-Century Judaism in Crisis" by Stephen J. Patterson

- This book explores the complex social changes in Judaism leading up to Jesus's time.

2. "The Hellenistic Age: A Short History" by Peter Green

- Offers insights into the Hellenistic period, which significantly influenced the cultural and political landscape prior to Jesus's time.

3. "From Babylon to Bethlehem" by Randall Price

- Traces Israel's history from the Babylonian exile to the birth of Christ, providing context on the political and religious background.

4. "Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus" by Joachim Jeremias

- An in-depth examination of the city's social structure and religious practices leading up to the New Testament period.

5. "The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt" by Aryeh Kasher

- Discusses the interplay between Jewish and Greek cultures within the political framework of Egypt before Jesus.

### **Articles and Papers:**

1. "Second Temple Judaism" (available in various academic journals)
  - Research articles on the religious practices and social dynamics of Judaism between the construction of the second temple and its destruction.
  
2. "Roman Influence on the Near East before 70 CE" by various scholars in Classical Review journals
  - Articles analyzing Roman political and cultural influence on the regions surrounding Judea before the emergence of Christianity.
  
3. "The Persian Empire and the Rise of Greek States" available in history journals
  - Insightful articles on how the Persian Empire's expansion affected the political and cultural shifts in the ancient Near East.

### **Online Courses and Lectures:**

1. "The World of the Hebrew Bible" on Coursera
  - Offers a historical perspective on the period leading up to biblical times, focusing on cultural and religious contexts.
  
2. "The Hellenistic World: Using Coins as Sources" on edX
  - A course that explores the wider Hellenistic influence through the lens of numismatics, shedding light on economic and political conditions.
  
3. "Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean" from Open Yale Courses
  - Provides a broad overview of religious beliefs and practices before the rise of Christianity.

### **Documentaries:**

1. "The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization" (PBS)

- A detailed look at Greek culture and politics, which played a crucial role in shaping the world before and during the early years of Jesus.

2. "Jerusalem: Center of the World" (National Geographic)

- Explores the historical and religious significance of Jerusalem, setting the scene for its pivotal role in ancient history.

3. "Rome: Rise and Fall of an Empire" (History Channel)

- While mostly about Rome, this series helps contextualize the socio-political environment of the time.

### **Podcasts:**

1. "The History of Rome" by Mike Duncan

- Covers the extensive political and military history of Rome, helping understand its influence before and during Jesus's time.

2. "The History of Ancient Greece" by Ryan Stitt

- Focuses on Greek political systems and societal shifts that occurred before and during the Hellenistic period.

These resources provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse and intricate world leading up to the life of Jesus, from various perspectives and disciplines.