

YOU ARE THERE: Some Historical Context for Mark's book

Three hundred years before Jesus is born, Alexander the Great is inadvertently preparing the world for the great Roman Empire and the Incarnation. He establishes the world's first common language, Greek, consolidates trade routes and roads which the Romans build to accommodate commerce and safe travel. By the end of the first century BCE Greece, Italy, and North Africa, Europa, Germania, all the way to the British Isles have all been united under the reign of Gaius Octavius the first emperor of the newly formed Roman Empire. The Jewish people have established synagogues in every major city. Gaius Octavius now rules the known world as Caesar Augustus. Augustus is not only Rome's first Emperor, but is hailed as the Prince of Peace and Son of God (Apollo), and descended from the goddess Venus. The Roman method of conquering, is to install the local wealthy elites as heads of local government. These new leaders are responsible for governing their people, collecting taxes for Rome and maintaining peace – by whatever means necessary.

This is the world in which the Jews are living in the first centuries BCE-CE. Their daily struggle is under oppressive occupation. The Emperor has chosen men from the wealthy Jewish Herodian family to rule Judea. King Herod the Great is vicious and violent, and means to ingratiate himself to Caesar. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Herod transforms the high priesthood by appointing and removing priests at will. (*Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews*, books 15 & 16) He appoints high priests who will help him maintain peace and power. He deposes, and murders those who will not comply. He executes his own wives, sons, and sons in law in order to maintain his position as king. He designs a golden statue of an eagle (the symbol of Rome) to hang over the main entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem. Around 4 BCE two Jewish teachers and 40 students tear down the statue and smash it. They are arrested, tried, and put to death by fire. This is the same Herod who, according to Matthew's gospel, slaughters the infants of Bethlehem in order to kill the newborn King, Jesus.

Herod dies in 4 BCE. His son, Herod Archelaus rules from then to 6 CE. He is besieged by a revolt of up to 3000 citizens because of the Golden Eagle incident. Archelaus has them all massacred. A rebellion, led by Judas of Galilee, attacks Herod's capital and home, the city of Sepphoris, just 4 miles north of Nazareth. Roman Governor Quintilius Varus responds by sending troops to crush the revolt, burning the city, effectively destroying it and selling its inhabitants into slavery (Luke 13:1) sparking the formation of the Zealots.

Archelaus' brother, Herod Antipas rebuilds and fortifies Sepphoris. This reconstruction takes place during Jesus' youth, and may have employed his father, Joseph, a carpenter.

After 10 years of violent rule, Archelaus is removed and the territory of Judea is put directly under Roman rule and under the Governor Quirinius.

Quirinius, governor of Roman Syria, causes more tensions by enacting a census (*Luke 2*) leading to a second uprising by the same Jewish rebel, Judas of Galilee, (6 CE). The revolt is sparked because the census will result in the imposition of more taxes. Judas and Zadok, a Pharisee, equate the taxes to slavery and encourage Jews not to register for the census. He and his followers target those Jews who do register. The Zealot revolt leads to 64 years of violence, murder, and the eventual destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Jesus, his human family, his disciples and friends do not live in a vacuum. This the situation into which Jesus is born; a Jewish life of oppression, set within the Roman empirical system and within constant revolt against it.

They are desperate for a Messiah. But what kind of Messiah are they seeking, human or transcendent, violent or nonviolent? Their common core messianic understanding is as a warrior king, as the Romans continue oppressive rule. Judah is looking for a king like the great King David, a future and forever king, violent and victorious. Jesus proves to be something completely unexpected.

Keep in mind the chronology of our New Testament. The earliest book written is most likely Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Paul's entire ministry happens prior to the writing of the first gospel, Mark. Paul and Peter are already martyred before Mark's gospel is finished. Matthew and Mark's gospels are written a decade later, and John writes his around 90 CE.

By the time Mark writes his gospel the Roman Empire is on its eleventh emperor. The fledgling Jesus movement continues to grow with the inclusion of Gentiles. Intense persecution of Christians begins with Caesar Nero (54–68 CE). After Nero, Rome goes through three emperors in one year, ending with Vespasian, who rules 69-79 CE. During Vespasian's rule, Jerusalem is destroyed by his son and general, Titus, 70CE.

As Jesus is born into the beginning decades of the new Roman Empire and insurrections, Mark is writing about it from his location a half century later, also under intense turmoil and persecution. Interestingly, Mark does not mention Roman leadership or activity in his story of Jesus. For him, Jesus is Lord, and not Caesar.

ROMAN - JEWISH TIMELINE FROM 63 BCE - 100 CE

