

## Spotlight Lesson 17 "Messiah Revealed"

### POLITICAL SITUATION IN 1<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PALESTINE

The Jewish nation has been under occupation by the Greeks from 260 BCE to the Roman conquest in 63 BCE. Rome ruled Palestine for several centuries.

1<sup>st</sup> century (BCE & CE) Jewish society is built on the ancient "domination system:"\* *ruled by few, economic exploitation, and religious legitimization* with the most wealthy as land barons and established trade brokers, wealthy community leaders and businessmen. The less fortunate on the domination social strata are day laborers, farmers, craftsmen, and fishermen who keep the economy chugging away, as do servants and slaves. It is an unjust and cruel life for all but those at the top who agree to be Rome's representative to the occupied.

Contrary to what can be gleaned from Mark's Gospel, the upper class Jews are quite wealthy, as Jerusalem is a destination hot spot and trading center for the known world (especially with Herod I's building campaign). The vast working class are controlled and dominated by the wealthy. Those in the upper class (which includes Temple priests) are heavily taxed by Rome and extract taxes from their "subjects." Rome expects them to keep the peace and squelch any uprising by "the people."

Under Romans (and Greeks) Jewish high priests are no longer chosen from the "God-ordained" priestly tribe of Levites, but are the wealthy and powerful Jewish nobles, chosen by their occupiers. High priests are "hired & fired" at the whim of whoever is in charge at the moment. To participate in the power structure of Rome, and to maintain wealth, the Temple priests and high society have to cooperate with the "higher" powers. Of note: the family of Annas occupies the high priest position for nearly a quarter of a century (beginning in 6 CE), and his son-in-law, Caiaphus, high priest during Jesus' life, maintains his position for 18 years in the century when 4 years was average for most high priests. Alluding to his cozy relationship with Rome.

Changes made in 6 CE have resulted in the temple becoming the center of economic and political power in the country. The temple is now collaborating with the Roman government, who insist their Ceasar is the son of God.

*"The priest who represented the people before God on the Day of Atonement represented the people before Rome the rest of the year."*<sup>1</sup>

Keep in mind that the office of High Priest is the representative of all the people before God. The temple sacrifices and sacred rituals are God-ordained and not evil practices. Jesus is not entering Jerusalem to decimate the role of the Temple. Jesus is setting himself against the unjust occupiers of the temple and the ruling class because they place temple worship, obedience to the law, and deference to Roman rule above justice and mercy. He doesn't rail against the Pharisees (*and Sadducees, Scribes, Temple leadership*) because they are Pharisees, but because they do not follow the Spirit of the Law that calls for loving God and serving humanity. The position of Pharisee is not bad. The self-serving lifestyle of a Pharisee is what is an abomination to Jesus.

This is the Jerusalem into which Jesus enters, his last week on earth. Jesus has already established his connection with John the Baptist in offering forgiveness of sin outside of the Temple, which sets the temple leadership against both prophets.

The city's population is around 40,000, but swells to over 250,000 as pilgrims arrive for Passover. They don't all fit, or stay, in the city, but fill the surrounding villages, setting up camps around the countryside. Considering the crowds previously mentioned in Mark's gospel, perhaps thousands have followed Jesus to the Holy City as well, salivating for a Messianic clash with the Romans. Travelers and pilgrims are going in and out of Jerusalem, sight-seeing, dazzled by the city's wealth, beauty, and fabulous Herodian structures.

\* See "World Systems" handout

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week*. Harper Collins. ©2006.