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### In the Days of Jesus

A full-scale presentation of the social setting of the biblical writings would include Palestine during the succeeding stages of its history, Babylon during the Exile, and the Mediterranean world of the Roman empire into the second century A.D. Our scope here is limited to political and religious factors found in the Palestine of the first century A.D. up to the fall of Jerusalem in 70. The historical information in chapter 5 may provide helpful background for understanding the political situation of Palestine described here.

### Land

The size of Palestine varied during biblical times, but its classical dimensions are Dan in the north to Beer-sheba in the south (2 Sm 3:10) between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The distance from north to south covers about 150 miles (roughly the same as from Washington to Philadelphia or Austin to Houston), from east to west 50 miles. The area is about that of New Jersey. Most people travelled on foot at a pace of about twenty miles a day.

The land divides into three geographical terrains. To the west is the plain bordering the sea. The Carmel range juts out to the

sea to form the harbor at Haifa; south of this are the fertile areas of Sharon and the Shephelah. In the center of the country, like a backbone, stands a ridge of hills running north and south. To the east lies the Jordan valley. Near the Jordan the land is sometimes fertile, but much of this lowland is wilderness. Around the Dead Sea it turns into desert.

The political and religious center of Palestine was Jerusalem in the southern province of Judea. Many of the Jews here descended from the pioneers who returned from the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C. The geographical center of the country was Samaria. The Samaritans observed the Law of Moses and wanted to think of themselves as full-fledged Jews, but the establishment Jews of Judea considered them renegades because they had intermarried with foreigners and (in desperation) built their own temple. Galilee was in the north, united with Judea in religion but separated by the hostile presence of Samaria between them. This was and is the most fertile of the provinces. The Sea of Galilee is a fresh-water lake eight miles wide and twelve miles long. The region was called “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Mt 4:15) because of the many non-Jews who dwelt there. Galilean Jews made up for their distance from the Jerusalem Temple by religious zeal and tenacity.

### **Political Situation**

Pompey’s conquest of Palestine in 63 B.C. ended a period of Jewish independence and brought the nation under Roman control as part of the province of Syria. Herod the Great showed adroit political skill in surviving upheavals in imperial leadership during the mid-first century B.C. He began to reign

in 37 B.C. as the king of Judea directly under the emperor without the Roman legate in Syria as intermediary authority. The Jews had always been jealous of their independence as God's people. They chafed under Roman domination, and Herod's appointment did little to lessen the tension. The Romans looked on Herod as a Jew, but to the Jews themselves he was an interloper, an Idumean with Semitic blood but no religious faith.

At Herod's death in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided among three of his sons: Archelaus ruled the key area of Judea and Samaria, Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea (in Transjordan), and Philip ruled the Decapolis east of the Sea of Galilee. These political divisions remained during the ministry of Jesus, except that Archelaus had been removed in A.D. 6 for mismanagement and replaced by a Roman governor, called a "prefect" and later a "procurator." The procurator held full jurisdiction over his territory, gathering taxes for Rome, insuring the peace, and deciding in cases of capital punishment. The Bible mentions three governors—the prefect Pontius Pilate (A.D. 25-36) in the Gospels, and the procurators M. Antonius Felix (52-60) and Porcius Festus (60-62) in the Acts of the Apostles.

Some Jews supported Rome. The most outspoken were the group known as the Herodians, supporters of the family of Herod in their unswerving loyalty to Rome. At the opposite extreme were the Zealots, a revolutionary group dedicated to the ousting of Rome from Palestine. The Zealot reaction had been precipitated by the imperial census under Quirinius in A.D. 6. Agents of the group committed acts of terrorism against Roman soldiers and against Jews they considered Roman sympathizers. The Zealots initiated the rebellion which ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. Simon the

Zealot, one of the Twelve (Lk 6:15), was probably a former member of this group.

Anti-Roman sentiments were kept seething especially through the system of taxation. Herod the Great taxed the Jews heavily to finance his vast construction operations. After his death, a delegation of the Jews went to the emperor to ask that Herod's sons not be allowed to continue the exorbitant taxes, but their plea was ineffective. Conditions became even worse in the eyes of many Jews in A.D. 6, when the newly appointed Roman governor introduced Roman taxes. Now not only were the taxes heavy, they were paid to a foreign power.

The Romans applied two kinds of direct tax and many indirect taxes. The direct taxes were a property tax and a personal, or poll, tax (Rom 13:7). Jesus was questioned about the lawfulness of this poll, or census, tax (Mk 12:13-17). The indirect taxes included mostly tolls at crossroads, bridges, entries into towns and marketplaces. The state employed tax gatherers who were charged a fixed sum for a particular territory. The tax collectors then set the rates in order to pay this charge and enrich themselves. The abuses encouraged by this system only increased hostility toward Rome. Matthew, one of the Twelve, was a tax collector (Mt 9:9).

### **Religious Groups**

Several religious groups and institutions in the Judaism of Jesus' time are reflected in the Gospels. They include Pharisees and Sadducces (Mt 3:7), scribes (Lk 5:30), lawyers (Lk 7:30), a high priest (Jn 11:49), chief priests and elders (Mk 14:53), priests and Levites (Lk 10:31-32), and an official body called the

Sanhedrin (Mk 14:55). In addition, discoveries at Qumran have focused attention on a Jewish group called the Essenes. What was the nature of these various religious elements?

The Gospels frequently mention the Pharisees as opponents of Jesus. They were a lay group which originated as a reform movement within Judaism during the Hasmonean dynasty about 150 B.C. The Pharisees opposed Hellenistic adaptations in Judaism and especially the politicizing of the high priesthood in the time of John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.) and his successors. Their name, which means "Separated Ones," probably began as a nickname imposed by their opponents. Like the names "Christian" and "Puritan" later on, this name became accepted as a mark of honor.

The Pharisees were very popular with the ordinary people and were looked up to as holy examples of religious observance. They vigorously interpreted the Law, which for them meant not only the first five books of the Bible (the Torah), but many other holy writings and the oral interpretations which had been passed down by earlier teachers. Their legalism in the applications of the 613 prescriptions and prohibitions of the Torah brought them into conflict with Jesus.

The Sadducees were the aristocratic ruling class who controlled the Temple. Many of them were priests. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees were generally despised by the common people. They favored the rule of Rome which guaranteed the continuation of their authority, and they allowed latitude in adapting to political realities and Hellenistic patterns. The Sadducees accepted only the first five books of the Bible as authoritative, rejecting some teachings which were fundamental to the beliefs of the Pharisees: resurrection of the body, the existence and activity of angels, God's active involvement in daily

affairs (see Mk 12:18-27; Acts 23:6-10). In general, the Sadducees were more secular than religious.

The institution of the scribes, or expert teachers of the Law, developed after the Babylonian Exile, and grew stronger in reaction to the persecution by the Seleucid overlords. The scribes set up schools of instruction and were addressed by the title “Rabboni” (“my master”). The Gospel of Luke sometimes calls them “lawyers.” At the time of Jesus most of the scribes were Pharisees. The grouping “scribes and Pharisees” is familiar in the Gospels, but not “scribes and Sadducees.”

According to the Book of Exodus, at the time of Moses the priesthood was awarded to the tribe of Levi for its fidelity (Ex 32:25-29). But other texts make it clear that it was not all the Levites but only the family of Aaron which was set aside to offer the sacrifices (Ex 40:12-15; Lv 8). This was later limited to one family within the clan of Aaron, the sons of Zadok (Ez 40:46). At the time of Jesus, only certain members of the Zadok (Sadducee) family, who were able to prove their qualifications for the office, were accepted into the priesthood. The other members of the tribe of Levi (the “Levites”) were assigned the secondary duties of providing for the cleaning and upkeep of the Temple, arranging material for the services, and guarding the precincts.

The position of head or high priest came into prominence after the Exile. During the Hasmonean era, the offices of high priest and king were combined (1 Mc 14:41-47). In Jesus’ time the high priest possessed extensive power as supervisor of the official religion, and exclusive rights and duties in the Temple ritual. High priests were appointed to their office by Rome and had to preserve their place by assuring good order and loyalty among the people. Some high priests held office for only brief periods but maintained prestige and influence after they were

deposed. This explains the plural “high priests” or “chief priests.” The family of Annas produced several high priests over a period of almost six decades. Annas himself held office from A.D. 7 to 11. His son-in-law Caiaphas, high priest during the trial of Jesus, held office almost continuously from 18 to 36, while five of Annas’ sons were high priests at various times up until 63. Annas evidently still held great power long after his tenure in office. John reports that at his trial Jesus was taken to Annas first, then to Caiaphas (Jn 18:13, 24). Luke refers to both Annas and Caiaphas as high priests at the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist (Lk 3:2).

The high priest presided over the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews composed of seventy-one members, in memory of the tradition of Moses and the seventy elders (Nm 11:16-17). In the time of Jesus, membership in the Sanhedrin was distributed among members of the high priestly families, the elders (influential members of the Jewish community), and the scribes (Lk 22:66). Small councils to decide local matters required a minimum membership of 120 men (Acts 1:15).

The Essenes, another major group among the Jews of Jesus’ time, remained outside the structures just described and were aloof from the ordinary religious life of the country. They adhered strictly to the Law of Moses and separated themselves from the mainstream of religious observance, living in various enclaves throughout the land. The largest group probably lived at Qumran on the Dead Sea, where the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered (see chapter 8). The Essenes of Jesus’ time, never mentioned in the New Testament, were the heirs of the Jews who split away from the Temple when Jonathan Maccabeus, a non-Zadokite, accepted appointment as high priest (152 B.C.: 1 Mc 10:18-21).