



CONTEXT FOR THE CHRIST EVENT:

Galilean II

THE TINY TERRITORIES of Judea, Samaria and Galilee, on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, played a critical role in the stability of the Roman empire:

1. These territories were traversed by three international trade routes that linked the vast mercantile exchange with continental Europe, Asia and Africa:

a. The Via Maris (Way of the Sea) stretched along the Mediterranean coast from Egypt, through Palestine, and northward to Syria, Anatolia and Europe.

b. The Kings Highway, with its merchandise from Asia and Africa, linked the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea, northward to Syria and beyond. This highway was located in the Rift Valley on the eastern side of the Dead Sea and Jordan River.

c. In between, the Ridge Route wandered through the central highlands from south to north. All three highways were then united by an east-west highway between Astaroth in Transjordan and Acco (Acre), on the Mediterranean coast. A principal axis of these highways was the provincial Jewish city of Sepphoris, in Galilee.

2. The Palestinian territories were largely occupied by devout Jews. These Palestinian Jews, together with the Jews of the Diaspora, constituted nearly 10 percent of the Roman population, and they had a profound impact on Imperial Rome's prosperity.¹

3. A significant proportion of Jews lived beyond the borders of the Roman Empire in such key locations as Parthia (Persia). Since the Parthians were long Rome's bitter rivals, the Diaspora Jews in Parthia were the cause for profound concern by Roman officials.

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When the Seleucid empire collapsed (ca. 84 BCE), Syria became a Roman province and the bulwark for protection against the Parthians to the east. The Roman general, Pompey, was stationed in Syria in 63 BCE, when he received a request from the Hasmonean brothers, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, to intervene and help resolve the sibling dispute over the governance of Palestine. Pompey immediately responded, leading his Roman legions southward to Jerusalem. There he decided to support Hyrcanus II against his brother, Aristobulus II. In the ensuing struggle Pompey besieged the Temple mount and slew thousands of Aristobulus' supporters. Pompey then entered the sacred precincts of the Temple itself — including the Most Holy Place — and desecrated the Sanctuary.^{2, 3} The Jews were deeply offended, but “Pompey reinstated Hyrcanus as high priest and ruler of Judaea under Roman sovereignty.”⁴ Nevertheless, when years later (ca. 50-48 BCE) Pompey and Julius Caesar opposed each other for political power in Rome, the Jews emphatically sided with Julius against Pompey. Julius was deeply grateful for this support and granted the Jews a number of benefits — e.g., exemption from certain taxes along with permission to focus on their own religious worship.^{5, 6}

In 47 BCE Antipater II, the Idumean and friend of Caesar, had his son, Herod (the Great), installed in the provincial capital of Sepphoris as governor of Galilee. When the devout scribe, Hezekiah, resisted the installation of Herod, Herod responded by summarily executing him and his followers without due process. The Sanhedrin then met in Jerusalem and had Herod arrested and tried for murder. However, Hyrcanus II was able to slip Herod out of court, and he immediately fled to Roman Syria. Nevertheless, with the help of his Roman overseers, Herod soon was able to return to Jerusalem. In 43 BCE Antigonus II, son of Aristobulus II, invaded Galilee but was expelled by Herod. Then, in 40 BCE, the Parthians invaded both Syria and Palestine and installed Antigonus II as ruler over Israel. Again Herod escaped and fled to Rome. There, within three years, Herod recruited enough mercenary soldiers to return to Palestine, overthrow Antigonus, and expel the Parthians (Persians) with the help of Mark Antony's large army. Herod then assumed power and took control of the government with the support of Rome.⁷

Although Herod proved to be a masterful politician and brilliant general, he also was a brutal murderer — particularly of his own family. Even Caesar Augustus once said, “I would rather be Herod's pig than his son.”⁸ Herod devoted enormous time, energy and resources to erecting his own palaces and retreats and developing the impressive seaport at Caesarea Maritima. Furthermore, as a converted Jew from Idumea, Herod began rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple. He then declared himself to be the long-promised Jewish messiah and thus the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.⁹

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Meanwhile, the Roman imperial cult had emerged through legislation by the Roman Senate. Upon the death of Caesar in 44 BCE, the Senate declared that the deceased Caesar (Julius) was god. Later (27 BCE), they affirmed that the reigning Caesar (Octavian/Augustus) was to be worshiped as the son of god (*divi filius*).¹⁰ Herod endorsed the imperial cult by placing the Roman eagle, in honor of Caesar, on the entrance gate to the Temple and by approving the offering of sacrifices on behalf of Caesar. Herod then began to erect impressive temples to Caesar Augustus. These temples were called Augusteums. The first was located in Caesarea Maritima, on the Mediterranean coast. The second was situated inland in Samaria Sebaste (Augustus). The third was built near the foot of Mount Hermon at Omrit in Galilee, overlooking Lake Huleh and the Sea of Galilee.¹¹ Interestingly, these temples, dedicated to the imperial cult, formed a geographic triangle, with the Jewish provincial capital of Sepphoris situated at the very center. It was therefore no coincidence that Sepphoris was the alternate site for periodic meetings of the Jewish Sanhedrin.¹² It also was the hotbed of resistance, determined to break out of Jewish submission to the imperial cult. Furthermore, Sepphoris was the provincial metropolis for which Nazareth was the suburb, where artisans like Joseph and his family lived. Perhaps this background explains why, some years later, Nathaniel, a disciple of Jesus, asked, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). For a similar reason the Pharisees responded to Nicodemus by saying, “Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet” (John 7:52).

Endnotes

1. See Jeff Malka, “Jewish Population Numbers,” at www.jewishgen.org/SefardSIG/popul.HTM.
2. See Stephen M. Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 38.
3. See Moses A. Shulvass, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. 1, *The Antiquity* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1982), p. 83.
4. Ibid.
5. See Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1944), pp. 180-186.
6. See Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 69.
7. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. Shimon Applebaum, “Herod I.”
8. Quoted in Tim Pauls, “Rachel’s Comfort,” at www.scholia.net/mat_2_13_18.htm.
9. See Louis H. Feldman, “Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism in the First Century,” in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), p. 6: “The first messianic claimant of whom we hear is the infamous Herod.”
10. See “From Jesus to Christ: Chronology,” at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/cron.html.
11. See J. Andrew Overman, Jack Olive and Michael Nelson, “Discovering Herod’s Shrine to Augustus,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29 no. 2 (March/April 2003): 40-49, 67, 68.
12. See “Sepphoris — A City Set on a Hill,” at www.heraldmag.org/literature/arch_1.htm.