

THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST

WEEK ONE – SETTING THE SCENE

In Galatians 4:4-5 Paul writes: *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”*

The place and time of Christ’s coming was not an accident nor insignificant. For over 700 years, both Jewish and world history had been setting the stage for His arrival. Then, at the exact moment the Father had set, Jesus was born; the Creator became part of His creation; God became man; Redemption was provided for all who will come in Faith.

So we start our study of The Life of Jesus Christ by taking a step back in history, to the days of the divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Then we will start to move forward, until we arrive in Jerusalem, the day before Zechariah is chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place to pray for the nation of Israel.

THE TIME LINE

1. 721 BC – THE EXILE OF THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

After 200 years of growing idolatry and ignoring the prophets sent by God, the 10 tribes that make up the northern Kingdom of Israel are conquered by Assyria and deported out of Palestine and dispersed throughout the Assyrian Kingdom. These 10 tribes never returned to Israel.

2) 586 BC – THE EXILE OF THE SOUTHERN KINGDOM OF JUDAH

Unlike their northern neighbors, Judah had a number of godly leaders as well as ones who did not seek or worship God. However, the weight of idolatry eventually brought the hand of God’s discipline on Judah through Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Jerusalem, including the Temple is destroyed and the survivors taken to Babylon.

➔ DEVELOPMENT OF THE SYNAGOGUE

The prophets had warned that God was going to discipline Judah for her idolatry by exiling her out of the land. Once this was fulfilled by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, the Jews were permanently cured of this sin! Once they found themselves in Babylon, the Jews were determined to preserve their faith. Since the Temple had been destroyed, they began to build small and simple structures where the Law could be taught and God could be worshipped on the Sabbath. These were called ‘Synagogues’ (meaning ‘assemblies’). When they returned to Palestine, the Jews brought the concept of the local Synagogue with them. Every town and village with at least 10 adult male Jews built a Synagogue. Even after the Temple had been rebuilt, the Synagogue remained the primary place where Jews gathered to learn the Law and worship God on the Sabbath. Note that this never included sacrifices, for that was reserved for the Temple only. Local Synagogues will play a key role in the life and ministry of Jesus.

3) 537 BC - PERSIA CONQUERES BABYLON AND ALLOWS THE JEWS TO RETURN TO PALESTINE

Cyrus, king of Persia grants permission for the Jews to begin to resettle in Palestine. Slowly, over a period of decades, groups of Jews return. The Temple is rebuilt under Zerubbabel, the walls are rebuilt under Nehemiah and people begin to settle further and further away from Jerusalem.

➔ THE SCRIBES ARE FORMED

According to tradition, this group of men originated with Ezra. They were lawyers, scribes and teachers of the Law. They interpreted and taught the Old Testament and ruled on judicial cases brought to them. They were often sought out to answer questions regarding the application of the Law to daily life. They not only copied the OT, but memorized large sections of it.

4) 400 BC – MALACHI, THE LAST OT BOOK, IS WRITTEN

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” With those words, God closes His OT revelation. It will be 400 years before He speaks fresh prophetic words again. These will be known as the ‘400 silent years’.

5) 335-330 BC – ALEXANDER THE GREAT CONQUERS PERSIA, INCLUDING PALESTINE

As Alexander brings much of the known world under his rule, he seeks to bring the Greek language and culture to the world. This is called ‘Hellenization’. The Greek language and culture sweeps through the Middle East, including Palestine. When Alexander dies in 323 BC, his kingdom is divided among his key generals. Two of these will play an important role in the history of Israel:

Ptolemies – The area around Egypt

Seleucids – The area around Syria

Israel, located between these two, will be valued territory.

➔ THE IMPACT ON GREEK CULTURE IN PALESTINE

Some Jews will embrace Hellenization and will become known as Hellenists. Other Jews will fiercely resist any part of the Greek culture becoming a part of their lives. They will become known as Hasidic Jews. This clash of culture will still be dividing Jews when Jesus is ministering. It will also impact the early church, especially in Acts 6.

6) 320 – 198 BC – PTOLEMIES (EGYPT) DOMINATES PALESTINE

Under these rulers, Israel enjoys a season of stability and prosperity. Egypt has no interest in changing the culture or the religion of the Jews.

7) 198 – 167 BC - SELEUCIDS (SYRIA) DOMINATES PALESTINE

The leader of the Seleucids during this time is Antiochus Epiphanes. He placed a Hellenizing Jew named Menelaus, who promised to collect higher tribute from the people, as High Priest. In addition, he supported the efforts of Antiochus to bring Greek culture to Palestine. When the Jews resisted this, Antiochus sent 22,000 soldiers to punish the Jews, outlaw Judaism and enforce paganism. He had a pig slaughtered on the altar of the Temple, ransacked the Temple, carrying away anything of value and slaughtered thousands of people.

8) 167 - 160 BC - THE MACCABEAN REVOLT

In 167 BC an agent of Antiochus went to the village of Modein, north-west of Jerusalem. He encouraged an elderly priest named Mattathias to set a good example for the villagers by offering a pagan sacrifice. When he refused, the agent asked another Jew, who agreed. However, as the Jew moved towards the altar, Mattathias killed both the Jew and the agent and then fled into the hill country with his 5 sons and some sympathizers. This started the Maccabean revolt. The family is known as the Hasmoneans, (their family name) or the Maccabees (which means hammer), a nick name given to Judah, son of Mattathias. Overcoming tremendous odds, the Maccabees expelled the Syrians from Jerusalem. There was also a civil war between the Hellenist Jews and Hasidic Jews. Ultimately, the Jews regained their religious freedom, rededicated the Temple and reconquered Palestine. The Jewish festival of Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Temple.

9) 142-37 BC – HASMONEAN DYNASTY

After the Maccabees consolidated both religious and political power, the family quickly become embroiled in power struggles. The constant strife alienated many of their former supporters. This weakened the nation of Israel, and left them vulnerable to the up and coming influence and power of the Romans.

➔ THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PHARISEES, ESSENES, SADDUCEES

- *PHARISEES – “separated ones”. They rose up during the Hasmonean dynasty in reaction to Hellenization in Palestine. They were committed to scrupulously observing the Law and rabbinic law/traditions. While only numbering several thousand, they were admired by most Jews. While their desire to apply the OT Scriptures to daily life is commendable, they created a sometimes hypocritical form of legalism and pride severely condemned by Jesus.*
- *ESSENES – Disgruntled with the political infighting and Hellenization under the Hasmonians, these people settled in monastic communities around the Dead Sea. They were more legalistic than even the Pharisees. They carefully copied the Scriptures and other religious writings. One such collection of writings was the Dead Sea Scrolls.*
- *SADDUCEES – They were the aristocracy of Jewish society. They were heirs of the Hasmonians, and held both religious and political power, since they controlled the Priesthood. They only regarded the first five OT books as inspired; did not believe in angels or demons; did not believe in the immortality of the soul. They were politically motivated and desired to see the status-quo preserved.*

10) 63 BC - SUBJUGATION OF PALESTINE BY ROME

The turmoil within the Hasmonian family led to the intervention of Rome. Jerusalem was occupied by Roman troops in 63 BC, as the Roman general Pompey entered the Temple itself. This act brought on the hatred and distrust of the Jews that would simmer for the next 100 years, ultimately ending in revolt and the total destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. However, Roman power was here to stay!

➡ *THE SANHEDRIN – The Romans allowed the Jews to handle their own religious and domestic affairs. As a result, there were various councils and courts throughout Israel. Over them all was The Sanhedrin, which met daily in Jerusalem except on the Sabbath and Jewish holy days. The High Priest presided over 70 other men, evenly divided among the Pharisees and Sadducees. There were cases where they could make a ruling, while other cases needed to be taken to the Roman authorities.*

11) 37-4 BC – THE RULE OF HEROD THE GREAT

In response to his father's support, the Romans placed Herod the Great as king over Palestine. He was a gifted administrator, but was also paranoid and vicious. He was married to a descendent of the Maccabean family. He was also an Idumean, a descendent from Esau, Jacob's brother. He considered himself a Jew, though the Jews themselves considered him a Gentile. He was a prolific builder, whose greatest project was the expansion of the Temple. He was also ruthless, and in time killed his wife and three of his sons. As he was dying from abdominal cancer, he ordered 100 key Jewish leaders to be held and executed upon his death. This was to ensure that there would be mourning, even if it

➡ *Herod the Great's kingdom was as large as David and Solomon's. Upon his death, Herod's kingdom was divided among three of his sons. Herod Antipas was given Galilee. He will have John the Baptist beheaded. Herod Philip was given Phoenicia, north-west of Galilee. Archelaus was given Judea. His rule was so ineffective that he was removed from power in AD 6 and replaced by a Roman Governor. One of those governors is Pontius Pilate.*

➡ THE RISE OF THE ZEALOTS AND HERODIANS

- *ZEALOTS – Revolutionaries dedicated to the over-throw of Rome. They refused to pay taxes and regarded support for Rome in any form to be a sin. They believed in using force if necessary to drive the Romans out.*
- *HERODIANS – A small group of influential Jews located mostly in Galilee who supported to Herods and thus the Romans, who had put them into power.*

THE SCENE IS SET

1) Israel is groaning under the double weight of the Herods and Rome. They long for a political Messiah who will set them free from this dual tyranny.

2) The key players and institutions in the Life of Jesus Christ are in place:

- The Temple
- The Synagogues
- The Sanhedrin
- The Sadducees
- The Pharisees and Scribes