

# The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth

## Part I (A) Greco/Roman History and Culture

### Introduction

#### The Cultural Context.

(1) We cannot learn history in isolation.

- ▶ All of history is interconnected and has a wider context.
- ▶ Jesus and his cultural context.
  - Justo Gonzalez: “Christianity was not born in a vacuum – it arose in the midst of a world in which it took its form, and apart from which it is impossible to understand it.”

(2) We cannot fully understand the life and ministry of Jesus without an understanding of the social, economic and political milieu of his time.

- ▶ L. P. Hartley: “The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.”
  - Transcending presentism.
- ▶ Greco/Roman (Hellenistic) culture: A fusion of Greek culture and Roman imperial government.
- ▶ A skewed view of history.
- ▶ The advantage of a comprehensive and systematic study of history.



#### What Is History?

- History: A process of inquiry into the past.
- Reconstructions and interpretations of the past.
  - ▶ What happened, when, who, why and how.
  - ▶ For Biblical history: What matters most is the *meaning* of these events.
- Historical facts.
  - ▶ The issue of historical revisionism.

#### Historical Sources.

- Primary sources.
- Secondary sources.
- Oral traditions.

## **Greek Civilization (fl. 600-337 B.C.)**

### **Major Historical Epochs.**

#### **I. Minoan Civilization (c. 2000-1400 BC).**

- ▶ An advanced civilization on Crete.
- ▶ Sir Arthur Evans and the archaeological excavations of Knossos (1899).
- ▶ Destruction of Minoan Civilization.
  - The Thera (Santorini) volcanic eruption, circa 1500 BC.
- ▶ The correlation with Biblical history.

#### **II. Mycenaean Civilization (c. 1700-1200 BC).**

- ▶ The first European civilization?
- ▶ The “historical” sources:
  - Homer’s *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.
  - Hesiod’s *Works and Days* and *Birth of the Gods*.
- ▶ A galaxy of bureaucratic states ruled over by a warrior aristocracy.
- ▶ The Trojan War (c. 1250).
  - King Agamemnon.
  - Heinrich Schliemann’s discovery of Troy in the 1870s.
- ▶ Destruction of Mycenaean civilization.
  - An Indo-European invasion (c. 1200 BC).
  - The “sea people.”
  - Philistines.
- ▶ The correlation with Biblical history.

#### **III. The Greek “Dark Ages” (c. 1200-600 BC).**

- ▶ The demise of civilization.
- ▶ The correlation with Biblical history.

#### **IV. Classical Greece (c. 600-337 BC).**

- ▶ Revival of industry and commerce.
- ▶ The Greek *polis*.
  - The *acropolis* and the *agora*.
- ▶ The Assyrian conquest of Phoenicia
- ▶ Greek colonization of the Mediterranean world.
- ▶ Classical Athens.
  - Pericles” (r. 461-429) and the “Golden Age of Athens.”
- ▶ The Persian Wars (490-474 BC).
- ▶ The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC).
- ▶ Conquest of Greece by Philip II of Macedonia (337 BC).
- ▶ The correlation with Biblical history.
- ▶ Classical Greece’s contributions to world civilization.
  - (1) Humanism.
    - “Man is the measure of all things.”
    - The sophists.
      - Skepticism.
      - Relativism.
      - Individualism.
  - (2) Democracy.
    - The dirty secret of Greek democracy.



## **Roman Civilization (fl. 390 B.C. - 476 A.D.)**

### **The Grandeur That Was Rome.**

- The struggle for supremacy.
- A worldwide empire.
- An assimilated Hellenistic culture.
- Roman contributions to civilization:
  - (1) Building and engineering technology.
  - (2) Roman civil law.

### **Major Historical Epochs.**

#### **I. Latin Migration and Settlement in Italy (c. 2000-625 BC).**

- ▶ The Latins.
- ▶ The founding of Rome.

#### **II. Etruscan Period (c. 625-509 BC).**

- ▶ Italy's first civilization.
- ▶ Etruscan government.
  - The *imperium* and *fascēs*.
  - The Senate
- ▶ Etruscan society.
  - Patricians.
  - Plebeians.
- ▶ Etruscan contributions to Roman culture.

#### **III. Roman Republic (509-111 BC).**

- ▶ The political system.
  - The Senate.
  - Consuls.
  - Dictators.
  - The Tribal Assembly.
  - Tribunes.
- ▶ Conquest of Italy.
- ▶ The Punic Wars (246-164 BC).
- ▶ Subsequent conquests.
  - Greece (197 BC).
  - Egypt (168 BC).
  - Roman support of the Maccabean Revolt (167-142 BC).
  - Conquest of the Seleucid kingdom.
- ▶ Wealth via tribute.
- ▶ Corruption and exploitation.

#### **IV. Anarchy and Civil War (111-30 BC).**

- ▶ An era of social strife, political rivalries and civil wars.
- ▶ Spartacus and the great slave revolt of 73 BC.
- ▶ The rise of military dictators.
  - Gaius Marius (c. 155-86 BC).
  - Cornelius Sulla (c. 138-78 BC).
  - Gnaeus Pompey (106-48 BC).
  - Julius Caesar (100-44 BC).
- ▶ The war for the empire.
  - Octavian Caesar (63 BC - 14 AD) v. Marc Antony (83-30 BC) and Cleopatra (69-30 BC).

## V. Roman Empire and the “Pax Romana” (30 BC-180 AD).

- ▶ Caesar Augustus.
- ▶ Two hundred years of expansion and domination.

## VI. Decline and Fall of the Empire (180-476).

- ▶ A long, slow, and often tumultuous period of decline.
- ▶ Political rivalries, periodic civil wars, and barbarian encroachments.
- ▶ The economic, social, political, military factors.
- ▶ Barbarian invasions.
- ▶ The sacking of Rome.
- ▶ The survival of Constantinople.

## Roman Society.

- A highly stratified society.
  - (1)*Nobiles*.
    - Patrician/senators.
    - The aristocracy
  - (2)*Plebeians*.
    - The *proletariat*.
  - (3)Slaves.
    - The lot of the slaves.
    - Paul Veyne: “Slaves had neither wives nor children [at least, not officially]. Their lovemaking and childbearing were like the breeding of livestock.”
- Roman classism, elitism and exploitation:
  - ▶ A skewed legal and taxation system.
  - ▶ Edward Gibbon: “Under the Roman empire, the labour of an industrious and ingenious people was... incessantly, exploited in the service of the rich. In their dress, their dining, their houses, and their furniture, the elite utilized every refinement of convenience, of elegance, and of splendour, whatever could soothe their pride, or gratify their sensuality.”
- The *proletarian* threat to social order.
  - ▶ “Bread and Circuses.”
- Roman citizenship.

## Imperial Government.

- Caesar Augustus and the *Pax Romana*.
- The emperor.
- The Senate.
- Provincial governors.
  - ▶ Proconsuls.
  - ▶ Legates.
  - ▶ Prefects.
- A federation of semi-autonomous city-states (*civitates*).
  - ▶ The *curialis*.
- Socio/political corruption and injustice.
  - ▶ Paul Veyne: “In Rome every superior stole from his subordinates.... Every public function was a racket; those in charge ‘put the squeeze’ on their subordinates, and all together exploited the populace.... Even the least important public positions were sold by their incumbents to aspiring candidates, because every position carried with it a guaranteed income in the form of bribes....

“Public officials paid themselves. The troops that patrolled the countryside and were responsible for rural administration forced the towns and villages under their jurisdiction to vote them gratuities. Every official had his palm greased before taking the slightest action.... Eventually, an official schedule of bribes was established and posted in every office, an act tantamount to legalized bribery... Supplicants were careful to bring money whenever they visited [an official]....

“Demanding payment of illegal taxes was big business among provincial governors.... The central government [in Rome] allowed these abuses to continue, content to receive its due.... Imperial authorities refrained from exhibiting too much curiosity about the way in which taxes were extorted from the peasantry....

“The cardinal virtue of the [public] official was *tact*, not honesty.”

### **The Military.**

- Roman legions and provincial auxiliary forces.
- The Praetorian Guard.
- Military perks.

### **Roman Culture.**

- A common (Hellenistic) culture.
- An urban-based, cosmopolitan culture.
- Travel and communication.
  - ▶ Ivor Davidson: “Travel and trade were more efficient in the Roman world than at any time prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”
- Rome.
- Other prominent cities:
  - ▶ Alexandria, Egypt.
  - ▶ Ephesus.
  - ▶ Antioch.
  - ▶ Corinth and Carthage.
- Lifestyles of the rich and the poor.
- Dangerous times.
- Hellenistic culture and ancient traditionalism.

### **Roman Religion: General Characteristics.**

#### (1) Greco/Roman polytheism.

- ▶ Ivor Davidson: “The Roman Empire was a world full of gods.... Images of gods and goddesses were found in gardens and in shop windows, and there were shrines and statues at crossroads and along the roadsides. Temples of all shapes and sizes were a standard element of public architecture.”

#### (2) Superstition.

- ▶ A world full of *daimons*.
- ▶ Seers, astrologers, and *Lares*.
- ▶ L. Michael White: “It was a numinous world with supernatural forces all around, and one dared not show a lack of proper reverence for fear of retribution.... Thus, the ability to exercise some control over these forces was a major goal of one’s personal religious devotion. For this reason, the magical arts – astrology, divination, and magic – were extremely popular.”

(3) Religious Syncretism and Pluralism.

- ▶ A composite religion.
- ▶ Non-exclusive religion.
- ▶ Ivor Davidson: “Openness and tolerance were the norm, and most people [in the Roman world] could not understand why the practitioners of any religion should have felt the need to claim – as the Jews [and later the Christians] did – that their god was exclusive of all others.”

(4) Civil religion.

- ▶ A sacralistic system.
- ▶ Civil religion and social harmony.
- ▶ Politicized gods.
- ▶ The *pontiffs*.

(5) Emperor worship.

- ▶ Caesar Augustus and his successors.

(6) Amoral religion.

- ▶ The character of the gods.
- ▶ Sin, salvation and sacrifices.
- ▶ Non-orthodox religion.
- ▶ Paul Veyne: “Roman paganism... without theology or church, was... more an *a la carte* religion than a religion with a fixed menu.”

(7) Fate.

- ▶ The premier metaphysical force.
- ▶ Fortuna (Greek: Tyche).

## **Religion and Social Class.**

### **The Mystery Cults.**

- General characteristics:
  - ▶ A central myth that explains the mysteries of life, death, salvation, and immortality.
  - ▶ An initiation rite (such as baptism).
  - ▶ Esoteric knowledge.
  - ▶ Ritualistic fellowship meals.
- The Orphic (Dionysian) cult.
  - ▶ Myth of the death and resurrection of Dionysus (or Bacchus).
  - ▶ Bacchantes and the Bacchanalia.
  - ▶ The “feast of raw flesh.”
- The Eleusinian cult.
  - ▶ Demeter, the Earth Mother.
  - ▶ The celebration of seasons.
  - ▶ Baptism by blood.
- The cult of Cybele (or Magna Mater – “The Great Mother”).
  - ▶ The celebration of seasons and the spring equinox.
  - ▶ The *taurobolium*.
- Mithraism.
  - ▶ Celebrated of the winter solstice (December 25).
  - ▶ An all-male cult.
  - ▶ The *taurobolium*.
- The Isiac cult.
  - ▶ The myth of Isis and Osiris.
  - ▶ Serapis.

## **Mystery Cults and Christianity.**

- Some doctrinal similarities.
- *Charismata* manifestations.

## **Philosophy.**

- Philosophers as an intellectual counterculture.
- A profusion of competing philosophies and religions.
  - ▶ Walter Wagner: “Teachers of rhetoric and philosophy, preachers of Asian and African religions, and defenders of Greco-Roman traditions jostled with astrologers, proclaimers of new revelations, and outright swindlers to offer their versions of the truth and their ways of life to eager and anxious people.”
- Philosophy as an alternative religion.
- Philosophical satire.
  - ▶ Lucian of Samosata (c. 125-185)
  - ▶ Paul Veyne: “Competitive, logic-chopping, hopelessly otherworldly (if not outright hypocrites), hiding lust and ambition beneath their coarse cloaks and long, shaggy beards, the philosophers were fair game for scorn. Frescoes flanking the seats of a public toilet in Ostia show these philosophers, self-styled masters of the art of living, offering their seated clients stern counsel on the correct manner of defecation.”
- Platonism.
  - ▶ Plato (428-347 BC) and the theory of “Forms” (or “Ideas”).
  - ▶ Platonic dualism.
  - ▶ The principle of “The Good.”
  - ▶ The *Demiourgos*.
- Stoicism.
  - ▶ Zeno (c. 336-264 BC) and the Stoic concept of “God.”
    - God as *Logos*, *Pneuma*, and/or Natural Law.
  - ▶ Stoic dualism.
  - ▶ God as “Fate.”
  - ▶ The Stoic concept of “Nature.”
  - ▶ Moral rectitude, self-discipline, and tranquil resignation.
  - ▶ Stoic virtue.
  - ▶ “Moderation in all things.”
  - ▶ Stoic humanitarianism.
  - ▶ Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD) and “God-consciousness.”
    - Seneca: “God is near you, he is with you, he is within you. This is what I mean... a holy spirit indwells within us, one who marks our good and bad deeds, and is our guardian.... No man can be good without the help of God.”
- Epicureanism.
  - ▶ Epicurus (341-270 BC).
  - ▶ Epicurean deism.
  - ▶ The ultimate goal: *sophrosyne*.
  - ▶ An escapist philosophy.
  - ▶ Lucretius (c. 94-55 BC).
  - ▶ Hedonistic self-indulgence: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.”
- Skepticism.
  - ▶ A revival of sophism.



- Cynicism.
  - A nihilistic anti-philosophy.
  - Social rebellion.
  - Diogenes of Sinope (c. 400-325 BC)
- Neo-Pythagoreanism.
  - A quasi-religious mystical philosophy that emphasized asceticism, mysticism, and numerology.
  - A dualistic view of humanity.
  - The discipline of self-examination.
  - The influence on Gnosticism.

### **Social Morality.**

- *Arete*.
- Greco/Roman values and Christian morality.
  - John Kagan: “To understand the ancient Greeks and Romans we must be alert to the great gap that separates their views, and most people throughout history, from the opinions of our own time. They knew nothing of ideas such as would later be spoken in the Sermon on the Mount, and they would have regarded them as absurd if they had. They viewed the world as a place of intense competition in which victory and domination, which brought fame and glory, were the highest goals...  
“Theirs was a culture that venerated the military values [i.e., discipline, hard work, courage, obeying orders, etc.]... a society that valued power, glory, and domination” and the humiliation of one's enemies.”
- Divorce.
- Infanticide.
- Abortion.

### **Sexism and Sexuality.**

- Roman patriarchalism.
- Marriage.
- Traditional sexism.
  - Demosthenes: “We have courtesans for our pleasure, prostitutes [i.e., young female slaves] for daily physical use, and wives to bring up legitimate children and to be faithful stewards in household matters.”
- The role of women.
- Women and Roman religion.
- A naturalistic view of sex.
- Sexual promiscuity.
- The issue of homosexuality.
  - Pederasty.
  - Sappho and lesbianism.
  - Paul Veyne: “Keeping a boy for sexual purposes was a minor sin for gentlemen [of the elite classes].... Brutus, Caesar’s murderer, kept a boy so beautiful that reproductions of a sculpture of him could be seen everywhere.... Jealous wives refused to allow their husbands to kiss their boyfriends in their presence.... The first sign of a mustache resulted in a major change in the life of a page”.... With the onset of adulthood, the boy’s long, girlish locks were cut and no longer was he treated as a passive sex object.”

