

THE GREEK AND ROMAN Worlds

The world of the New Testament was the Greek and Roman world. The events of Christ's life and ministry and the mission of his apostles took place in the confines of the Roman Empire and, for the most part, in the Greek cultural context of the eastern Mediterranean. Judea and Galilee of Christ's time had been strongly influenced by the surrounding Greek kingdoms of the Hellenistic Age, and the early Christian church was largely an urban phenomenon in which the gospel was preached in cities that traced their civic institutions, philosophy, and customs to the city-states of Classical Greece. The development and spread of Greek culture help us understand why Paul preached in Greek and why all the books of the New Testament were originally written in Greek.



GREEK VASE, c. 450 B.C.

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Used by permission,
Zev Radovan/BibleLandPictures.com

THE ROMAN EMPIRE ALTERED THE GOVERNANCE OF THE HOLY LAND, BOTH directly and indirectly. Herod and his heirs reigned as clients, or vassals, of the Romans; at other times, Roman governors controlled all or parts of the Jewish homeland directly. It was under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, of course, that some of the Jewish leadership and the Roman authorities crucified Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the empire provided the political unity, ease of travel, and generally peaceful conditions in which the “good news” spread so easily after Pentecost.

EARLY AND CLASSICAL GREECE

Greek culture had its roots in the Bronze Age Aegean civilizations of the Minoans and Myceneans. Both of these civilizations were based on vast palace centers and centralized economies that had much in common with the great states of the Near East, from which they seem to have borrowed many elements of their writing systems, religion, art, and architecture. The Minoans were overrun by the Myceneans about 1400 B.C., and Mycenaean civilization subsequently collapsed about 1150 B.C. in the great upheavals and migrations at the end of the Bronze Age, occasioning the settlement of the Philistines, the early adversaries of the Israelites, in Judea. With the fall of the Mycenaean palace centers, Greece entered a dark age until about 800–750 B.C., lacking literacy, monumental architecture, and other outward signs of material culture. Nevertheless, a vibrant oral tradition kept alive the memory of Bronze Age places, events, and perhaps even individuals, all of which became the stuff of Greek legends such as that of the Trojan War.

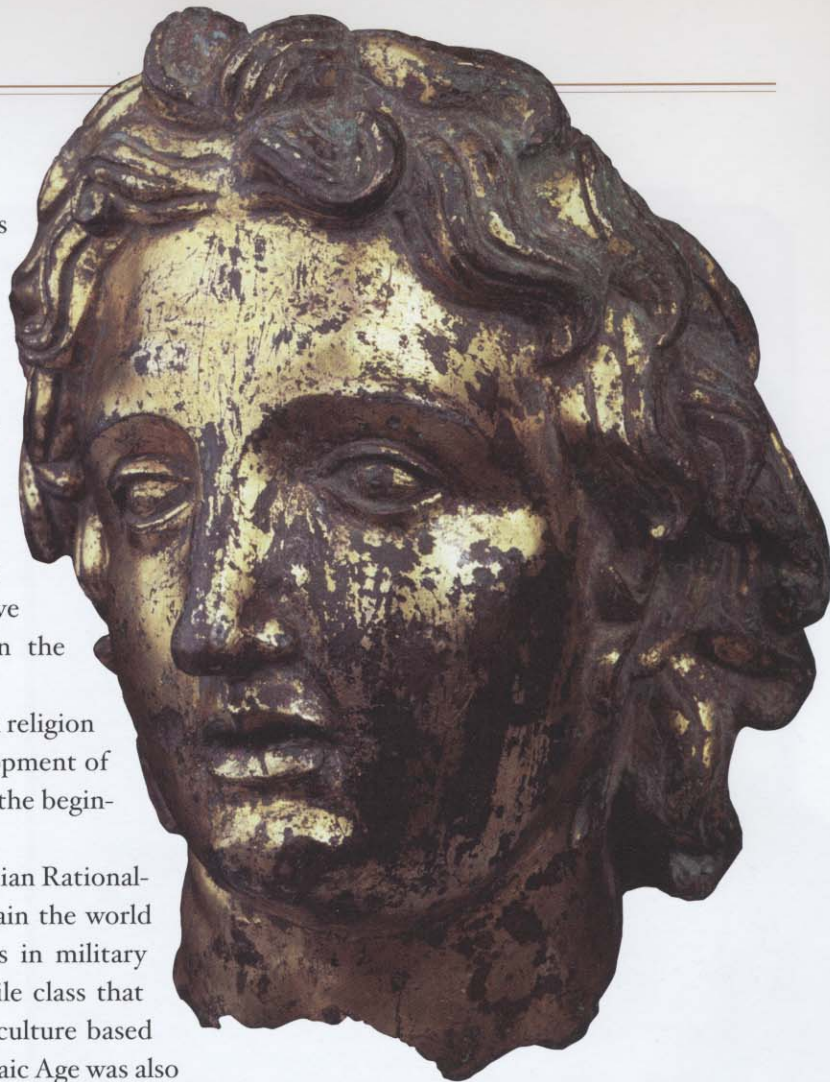
This Greek Dark Age was, in many ways, fortuitous because it gave the Greeks a fresh start, allowing them to produce a new culture different in many ways from others in the Near East and elsewhere in the Mediterranean. As agriculture and trade revived, the Greeks again began establishing settled states, but these were focused on the local city-state, or *polis*, as monarchies gave way to aristocracies and broader forms of government in the Greek Archaic Age (c. 750–490 B.C.). Although the epitome of Greek culture is usually seen as being represented by Athens in the Classical period (c. 490–404 B.C.), many of the distinctive characteristics of Greek civilization were developed in the Archaic Period.

The poetry of Homer and Hesiod helped shape Greek religion into its most commonly recognized forms, and the development of the Greek alphabet preserved this poetry and allowed for the beginnings of Greek literature.

At the same time, an intellectual movement called Ionian Rationalism gave birth to natural philosophy, an attempt to explain the world in reasoned rather than supernatural terms. Innovations in military techniques and social changes created an upwardly mobile class that involved larger numbers in government, creating a civic culture based on the citizen rather than the ruler. Significantly, the Archaic Age was also the great period of Greek colonization. In the very centuries when Israel and Judah were being captured and their populations scattered, the Greeks were voluntarily dispersing throughout the Mediterranean, establishing cities in the regions bordering the Black and Mediterranean seas and taking their culture and new ideas with them.

The fifth century B.C. comprised the great Classical period of Greek culture. At the beginning of this period, the cities of Greece faced their greatest challenge in an invasion by the Persian Empire, the very state that had captured Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judea. Although the Persians were seen as liberators by the Jews, the Greeks saw them as a threat to their independence, one trying to impose Eastern despotism upon the West. The Greeks repelled the Persian invasions, and this victory was seen as a vindication of their lifestyle and their new forms of government, especially by Athens, which played a major role in opposing the Persians and which had recently developed a broad political system, *dēmokratia*, that gave power to the people—or at least to the free male citizens.

Over the course of the next fifty years, Athens became supreme in the Greek world, building an alliance of anti-Persian states and building a naval empire in the Aegean. During this period of her power and prosperity, Athens became the scene of many of Greece's greatest cultural achievements. This was the time of the great Greek playwrights, of the beginning of historical writing, and of great works of art and architecture. Classical Greece also saw the flowering of rhetoric, the art of speaking and writing both artfully and persuasively. A decline in public virtue mirrored individual moral decline, as the drive for power and wealth proved disastrous for Athens. Much of Greece combined against her, and Athens lost her empire and



ALEXANDER (GILDED) BUST,
first century B.C.

*Used by permission, Museo Nazionale Romano,
Rome, Italy*

The poetry of Homer and Hesiod helped shape Greek religion into its most commonly recognized forms, and the development of the Greek alphabet preserved this poetry and allowed for the beginnings of Greek literature.

preeminence to Sparta in 404 B.C., although her cultural ascendancy continued, and it was in this city that the Apostle Paul gave his famous rhetorical sermon on “The Unknown God” at Mars Hill (Acts 17:22–31).

DETAIL

GREEK PHILOSOPHY

For the Greek-speaking people of the cities of the Eastern Roman Empire, many people turned to philosophy to describe morality, the afterlife, the nature and existence of deity, and guidelines for living. The upper and middle classes were widely aware of philosophical thinking and the ways in which different philosophers answered such difficult questions as the nature of existence after this life. The dominant philosophies of the day were the Stoics, Epicureans, Platonists, Cynics, and Pythagoreans. Each of these schools sought to provide an alternative to popular Greek religion, which they considered immoral or amoral, and demanded a moral basis for religion and for life.

Paul, in attempting to communicate with an audience familiar with such discussions, sometimes couched his language in the terminology of popular philosophy. For example, “study to be quiet,” an Epicurean epithet, and “work with your own hands,” with its strong Stoic parallels, would have had an air of familiarity to a Greek or Roman audience (1 Thessalonians 4:11). Paul at one time quoted a philosophical riddle that raised the following question: If a liar claims to be a liar, does that indicate he is a liar, or is he truthful in his confession that he is a liar and therefore not a liar? (compare Titus 1:12). Luke also indicates that Paul quoted directly from Greek philosophers, Aratus and Epimenides, when he felt it would help him proclaim the good news (see Acts 17:28).

MARBLE BUST OF ARATUS, c. 385 B.C.

Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. Used by permission, (Harvê Lewandowski) Réunion des Musées Nationaux/ Art Resource, NY

ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE HELLENISTIC WORLD

Sparta’s hegemony in the Greek world after the defeat of Athens was short-lived. In the fourth century B.C., she was challenged by Thebes and a revived Athens, but no single Greek city was able to achieve dominance. The Greeks fought divisive wars against each other throughout the century and increasingly came under pressure from states on the periphery of the Greek world, such as Macedonia in the north. Nevertheless, Greek cultural and intellectual development continued. Greek orators continued to refine their speaking skills, but new attempts were made to bridle men’s skills and ambitions by applying the rational skills of the philosophers to the moral realm. Plato, continuing in the steps of his teacher, Socrates, whom the Athenians had executed through forced suicide in 399 B.C., taught and wrote about virtue and ideals. His idealistic school was followed by the more empirical but equally profound Aristotle. Further philosophical developments, such as the development of Stoicism and Epicureanism, have left traces in some of the writings of Paul.

In 338 B.C., Philip II of Macedon defeated the Greeks and brought all of them but Sparta into a subservient alliance. His son, Alexander the Great, led the united Macedonians and Greeks in a crusade against Persia that changed the course of history.

Alexander was born in July 356 B.C. to Philip II and Olympias. In his early youth, Alexander was given a command in the army of his father, eventually commanding the entire left flank. He proved himself an able leader, especially gifted in leading cavalry. When Philip divorced Olympias for Cleopatra, Alexander and his mother were

worried that the lines of succession had been blurred. Both were careful to maintain Alexander’s position within the Macedonian hierarchy. Upon Philip’s death, Alexander was proclaimed king of Macedon both by the people and by Philip’s generals. Alexander continued with the expansionist policies of his father, ultimately overthrowing Persia under the guise of protecting oppressed Greeks in the East.

In the years 334–323 B.C., Alexander conquered all of the eastern Mediterranean, including Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Near East as far as the modern central Asian republics. During his early conquests, Alexander proved to be extremely gifted in inspiring his men, but he was not always a brilliant strategist. His siege and eventual capture of Tyre, for example, were successful because of the sheer tenacity and pugnacity of the Macedonian

BARBARIANS

The Jewish worldview divided humanity into two groups, Israel (the descendants of Jacob who were the people of the Lord) and all other nations (*goyim* in Hebrew, *ethnē* in Greek, *gentiles* in Latin). Likewise, the early Greeks distinguished themselves from all others, differentiating people according to those who spoke Greek and those who did not. Indeed, an early classical reference to people speaking another language appears in Homer (*Iliad* 2.867), where he refers to the Carians as being *barbaraphōnoi*, or “those who speak harshly.” Apparently, *barbaros* was an onomatopoeic word reflecting how foreign speech sounded to the early Greeks, whose smooth speech seemed to contrast with the unintelligible *ba-ba-bar* utterances of foreigners (see, for instance, Strabo 14.2.28).

As the Greeks began colonizing the Mediterranean world and encountering the different, often older, civilizations of the Near East in the Archaic Period (c. 750–500 B.C.), the term *barbaros*, or “barbarian,” came to refer to anyone whose culture or way of life—and not just language—was different from that of the Greeks. Although Greek culture came to be the equivalent of “civilized,” the cultures of the Medes, Persians, Babylonians, and even the venerable civilization of the Egyptians were considered as barbarian as those of the less-developed peoples of western and central Europe. Thus, the front metope panels on the great Athenian temple at the Parthenon commemorated the victory of the Greeks over the Persians as a struggle between civilization and barbarism, portrayed through the figures of gods fighting giants, male warriors subduing Amazons, Greek Lapiths wrestling centaurs, and Greeks conquering Trojans.

During the Hellenistic Period (c. 336–164 B.C.), the Greek city came to be the preeminent means of propagating Greek culture in the regions of the Near East under the control of Alexander the Great (ruled 336–323) and his successors. Although many Greeks settled in these Hellenistic cities, the new urban centers also became the means by which native elites could aspire to “become Greek” by

adopting Greek names, language, dress, and way of life. And though citizenship in many Hellenistic cities remained the privilege of those actually descended from Greeks and Macedonians, in some areas wealthy and urban Syrians, Anatolians, and even Jews could, if they Hellenized, become citizens of new Greek cities in their midst, whereas their fellows remained “barbarians.”

Civilization was thus the province of city dwellers—Greek, and later Roman, cities in particular. Though Roman culture was distinct from that of the Greeks, the Romans adopted the dichotomy of urban and civilized versus rural and barbarian. Although technically themselves barbarian—that is, non-Greek—the Romans viewed anyone outside of the urban and educated elite of the Roman and Greek cities as being barbarous. Consequently, the empire, once described as a “federation of city-states,” actually had only a veneer of urban civilization that dominated dozens of different ethnic groups. Some were the non-Hellenized or non-Romanized masses in the cities themselves; others were the millions of peasants in towns and villages throughout the provinces. Thus, Paul and his shipmates could refer (without being pejorative) to the simple people of the island of Malta as “the barbarous people” who “shewed us no little kindness” (Acts 28:2).

The urban-rural divide continued with the spread of Christianity, which was a predominantly city religion. Peasants, living in the *pagi* or countryside districts, clung to the old ways and religions longer; *pagani*, or “pagans,” thus became the new Gentiles. Ultimately, “barbarian” came to mean simply “other” or “those outside,” so the quintessential barbarians were those outside the borders of the Roman Empire, both the less-developed, non-Christian tribes of central Europe and the culturally advanced enemy peoples such as the Parthians and Persians to the East. Set opposite this divided social construct was the unity offered by the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul preached, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).



army, who continued to fight despite staggering losses. Nevertheless, Alexander's military achievement in conquering the Persian Empire was unprecedented, and he set the standard for all future would-be world conquerors, such as Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar.

This military accomplishment was dwarfed, however, by its cultural repercussions. Asia was thrown open to Greek trade and settlement, a process accelerated by Alexander's policy of settling his veterans and other Greek colonists at strategic points throughout his empire. The attractive Greek culture was made more appealing by Alexander's policies: according to later, perhaps overly idealistic sources, he envisioned an *oikoumenē*, or world-empire, where all nations would be united. He was tolerant of subject peoples, but he also encouraged their elites

to learn Greek, adopt Greek names and customs, and, essentially, become Greek. The culture that spread throughout the East was known as Hellenistic, or "Greek-like." *Koinē*, or "common," Greek became the *lingua franca* of the eastern Mediterranean, and this was the language in which the New Testament would eventually be written.

The legacy of Alexander has often been described in terms of the Hellenization of the eastern Mediterranean; however, his adoption of Eastern customs and his demands that he be worshiped as deity also left a lasting influence.

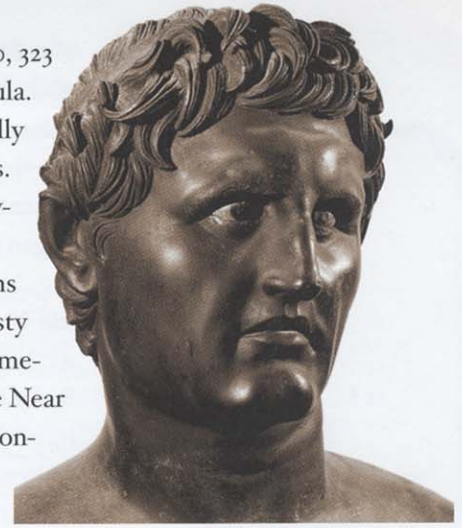
Thus, the legacy of Alexander has often been described in terms of the Hellenization of the eastern Mediterranean; however, his adoption of Eastern customs and his demands that he be worshiped as deity also left a lasting influence. Toward the end of his life, Alexander became increasingly immersed in Persian culture, adopting the title and practices of Eastern kings, who were deemed to be the emissaries of the gods. His appropriation of Eastern customs deepened his conviction that he was a descendant of the gods and therefore should be worshiped as such. Alexander's orientalizing tendencies were unpopular among his countrymen, yet they laid the foundations of what would later become the worship of the Roman emperor as deity, as well as the first- and second-century A.D. fascination with oriental religions, such as the worship of Isis, Mithras, and Magna Mater; Judaism; and, ultimately, Christianity.



This process of Hellenization continued despite Alexander's early death on June 10, 323 B.C., when he succumbed to illness while preparing for an attack in the Arabian Peninsula. He had hoped to be buried in his native Macedon, but instead his body was eventually taken to Alexandria in Egypt, a city he had founded, where it lay for several centuries. Alexander's body was later moved from Alexandria, but his burial site remains undiscovered to this day. His empire was divided among some of his chief generals.

After a long struggle among these *Diadochoi*, or successors, three new kingdoms emerged, each named after the Macedonian family that established itself as a new dynasty in that region. In a delicate balance of power, the Antigonids ruled the Macedonian homeland and much of Greece; the Seleucids controlled Syria and much of Asia Minor and the Near East; and the Ptolemies governed Egypt. Despite this division, each of these dynasties continued the Hellenizing policies of Alexander, and a cultural unity continued to grow. Alexandria, founded by Alexander and later the capital of Ptolemaic Egypt, became the largest Greek city in the world and a cultural rival to Athens. To its library and museum came the Greek world's greatest scholars, writers, and thinkers, and here the Hebrew Bible was translated into a Greek edition, the Septuagint. The Seleucids pursued a policy of Hellenism intently, establishing Greek cities throughout Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Syria, and even Judea. These cities, nominally independent under the protection of one of the Hellenistic kings, all had the political and cultural institutions characteristic of a Greek city, such as local government and a town council, a theater, a gymnasium, libraries, and schools of philosophy and rhetoric, all of which served to spread Greek culture into the surrounding territories.

The Hellenistic Age (c. 336–164 B.C.) had a great impact upon the Jewish people and prepared the way for the spread of the early Christian message. In Palestine, located between Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria, competing families within the Jewish aristocracy allied themselves with one dynasty or the other, seeking patrons to increase their own influence. Particularly after the Seleucids gained control of Jerusalem, even priestly families were seduced by the attractive Hellenistic culture, and there were high priests from this period with such Greek names as Jason and Menelaus. Although a reaction against this Hellenizing tendency eventually took place, the Sadducean aristocracy of Christ's time was still largely Hellenized. Outside of Palestine, most of the Jews of the Diaspora used Koinē Greek as their primary tongue. The Seleucids settled numerous Jews from Babylonia in Asia Minor, and others moved freely throughout the Mediterranean for trade and other opportunities. These Jews probably formed the core of the Jewish communities initially preached to by Paul in his missionary journeys. Indeed, Paul's own education, whether in the Greek city of Tarsus or in Jerusalem, prepared him to take the gospel message both to the Jews of the Diaspora and also to the Gentiles.



SELEUCUS I BUST, fourth century B.C. Seleucus I (312–281 B.C.) was a close associate of Alexander the Great and the founder of the Seleucid Empire. At its zenith, his empire reached from modern Turkey to Egypt and from Israel to India, representing the bulk of Alexander's former conquests. This bust is likely a copy of an original carved by Sisyphus (fourth century B.C.) and was found at Herculaneum, Italy.

Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy. Used by permission, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

THE RISE OF ROME

The empire of Augustus, which dominated the world when Christ was born, began independently of Greece, traditionally in 753 B.C. when neighboring villages on the banks of the Tiber River in Italy joined together under their first king. When the last king was overthrown in 509 B.C., the Romans established a new form of government, the *res publica*, an aristocracy with some democratic elements. The Roman Republic had annually elected executives called consuls, an aristocratic senate, and an assembly of the people. During the Early Republic (509–264 B.C.), Rome spread its control over the length of the Italian peninsula. During this period of Roman expansion, Rome adopted freely from those whom she conquered and, at the same time, organized a confederacy in Italy by extending her citizenship to some communities and making close, permanent military alliances with others.

During the Early Republic, Rome spread its control over the length of the Italian peninsula, dominating first her Latin neighbors and then conquering the Samnites, Etruscans, and other Italian opponents. Rome also drew the Greek colonies of southern Italy into her orbit. Previously, most Greek influences on Rome had been mediated by the Etruscans, but now educated Romans began to learn Greek as a second language themselves, and Greek culture began to have some influence on Roman literature and art.

Not until the Middle Republic (264–133 B.C.), when Rome began expanding overseas, did she gain an empire in the modern political sense. During the First Punic War (264–241 B.C.), fought with the Phoenician city of Carthage in North Africa, Rome won the island of Sicily. Rather than extend her citizenship to the cities of Sicily, she organized it into her first province. The cities of the province remained self-governing for the most part, but they were subject to Roman taxation and the oversight of a Roman governor. After taking the islands of Sardinia and Corsica from Carthage, Rome fought the Second Punic War (218–201 B.C.) against her foe, this time winning much of Spain, which was organized into two more provinces. The Third Punic War (149–146 B.C.) at last destroyed Carthage and organized her home territory in North Africa into a province roughly equivalent to modern Tunisia.

In these regions in the western Mediterranean, Rome seemed eager for territorial acquisition and worked actively to Romanize her new possessions. This was not necessarily the case in the eastern Mediterranean, where Rome was drawn into conflicts, often reluctantly, with the Hellenistic kingdoms. After a series of wars, Rome extinguished the Antigonid Empire in 164 B.C., organized a Roman province of Macedonia, and progressively reduced the Seleucid Empire, confining it to Syria. Syria, however, was not converted into a Roman province until 64 B.C. As often as not, Rome was content to establish a system of subservient but nominally independent client-states in eastern territories rather than set up provinces. Under the native Hasmoneans and then the Herodians, the Jews thus managed to maintain effective self-rule until after the birth of Christ. Ptolemaic Egypt managed to preserve itself as an independent kingdom until 31 B.C. These areas remained Hellenistic and their elite citizens Greek-speaking under the shadow of Rome.

ROMAN CRISES AND THE AUGUSTAN PRINCIPATE

The acquisition of an empire outside of Italy in the Middle Republic proved to be the undoing of the Roman political system. Rome's prosperous farmer class, which as a citizen militia had provided the backbone of the Roman army, was decimated by incessant and long overseas wars. An influx of wealth from booty, tribute, and taxes destabilized the economy, causing the rich to grow richer and the poor poorer. Political upheaval followed in the Late Republic (133–27 B.C.) as the senatorial class turned upon itself when prominent families sought dominance. When Rome tried to respond to its military crisis by developing a professional army of recruits from among the landless poor, the new armies proved more loyal to their generals than to the state, leading to a series of civil wars in the first century B.C. Prominent among the names of these general-politicians are Marius, Sulla, Pompey (who conquered the Holy Land for Rome), and the famous Julius Caesar, who became dictator for life.

Caesar managed to defeat all his enemies, maintain the loyalty of his legions, and gain the adoring support of the Roman masses. His autocratic tendencies turned some of his own senatorial class against him, however, when it appeared that his position as dictator-for-life was a step toward the reintroduction of kingship, something the Romans abhorred. His assassination in 44 B.C. led to a final series of civil wars. From these emerged Caesar's grandnephew and adopted heir, Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus. When Octavian, as he is known by Roman



AUGUSTUS PONTIFEX STATUE, first century A.D. This statue, also known as *Augustus of the Via Lubicana*, is made of different types of marble with traces of purple polychrome on the toga.

Museo Nazionale Romano (Terme di Diocleziano), Rome, Italy. Used by permission, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

historians, defeated his final enemies, the Roman general Mark Antony and his Ptolemaic ally, Cleopatra VII of Egypt, in 31 B.C., Octavian found himself in complete and sole control of the Roman world.

After adding Egypt to the empire as a Roman province, Octavian set his mind to reforming the government and finding an acceptable way to maintain power for himself while avoiding Julius Caesar's fate. His answer in 27 B.C. was the principate, or "rule of the first citizen," whereby he "restored" the outward forms of the republic, governing henceforth as elected consul while keeping control of the most important provinces where the bulk of the legions were located. He was *princeps*, or first man, in the Senate and among the citizenry, and in recognition of this, he was given the venerable name *Augustus*. He also used the title *Imperator*, or "victorious general," as his first name, from which title we derive our word *emperor*. Further constitutional adjustments in 23 B.C. allowed him to exercise complete control without needing to be elected consul.

Augustus' achievements cannot be underestimated. At Rome, he controlled the government behind the scenes in what has been described as a "disguised monarchy," allowing the people and the senatorial class to go through the motions of elections and governance. By giving one man control of the armies, he decreased the probability, although sadly not the possibility, of future civil war. Augustus and his successors were in a better position to administer the provinces efficiently than were the numerous and often corrupt senatorial governors who had previously ruled without sufficient supervision. All of these developments led to greater peace, stability, and prosperity than the regions of the Mediterranean had ever experienced before. Particularly in the East, which had suffered severely from the Roman civil wars, Augustus was hailed as *Sotēr*, or Savior, and following the practice of Hellenistic ruler cult, he was increasingly given divine honors.

ROMAN GOVERNANCE

Rome's policies toward its allies and provinces greatly affected the Jews and Christians of the empire. Initially, the Jews found themselves in a favorable position as Roman allies. Soon after the Maccabean Revolt, by allying themselves with the new Jewish Hasmonean Dynasty, the Romans helped strengthen the newly independent Jewish state against the Seleucids. Only with Pompey's capture of Jerusalem in 63 B.C. did Rome begin to interfere directly in Jewish affairs, either as a result of internecine strife among the Hasmoneans or as a way of forestalling alliances with Rome's enemies, the Parthians. In her interventions, Rome proved repeatedly hesitant

PORTRAIT

TIBERIUS

Tiberius, the second Roman emperor, succeeded Augustus, ruling alone from A.D. 14–37. He is the Caesar of the Gospels (except Luke 2:1), and his reign is used by Luke to establish the date for the ministry of John and the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:1). He also appointed Pilate to serve in Judea during the period of Christ's ministry and crucifixion. The silver coin (a Roman denarius) mentioned by Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 22:15–21; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:20–26; 23:2) bore his image and the inscription "Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus."

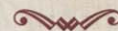
Before becoming emperor himself, Tiberius had been both Augustus' stepson and son-in-law. Following the death of Gaius and Lucius Caesar, Augustus' grandsons, Tiberius began his rise to power. Adopted by Augustus in A.D. 4, Tiberius became Tiberius Julius Caesar and shared Augustus' military and political authority for the last ten years of the first emperor's life. Already Augustus' political successor in fact, he became his personal heir upon Augustus' death in A.D. 14, inheriting the title *Augustus* as well as the emperor's fortune, which he shared with Augustus' widow, Tiberius' own mother, Livia.



Conflicts with his mother added to the political intrigues in Rome and led him to leave the imperial capital for the island of Capri, southwest of modern Naples, in self-imposed exile, from where he governed through lieutenants like the infamous Aelius Sejanus (Sejanus). His unpopularity among the aristocracy notwithstanding, Tiberius' administration appears to have been sound, while Rome and the provinces enjoyed economic prosperity and domestic peace.

TIBERIUS CAMEO, c. A.D. 14. *This glass cameo most likely depicts the Emperor Tiberius and is signed in the lower right edge by "Herophilus, son of Dioscorides," the artisan who created it.*

Das Kunsthistorische Museum, Vienna, Austria. Used by permission, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY



to administer Judea directly, preferring to install a different Hasmonean prince and eventually Herod the Great. These rulers governed as Roman clients, preserving their autonomy while agreeing to protect Roman interests.

Herod the Great and his descendants thus fell into the category of client-kings and princes that were found throughout the eastern Mediterranean. These small kingdoms usually had formal treaties with Rome, but the greatest binding tie was a personal one between the local ruler

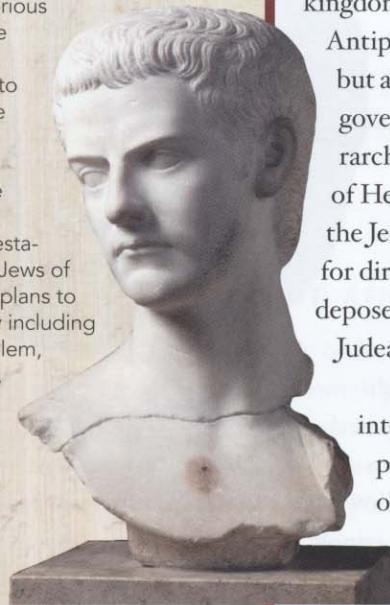
PORTRAIT

GAIUS “CALIGULA”

Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, the third Roman emperor, ruled from A.D. 37–41. He was the son of Germanicus, the grandson of the empress Livia and of Vipsania Julia, the granddaughter of Augustus, and thus united the two lines of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. When he was a young boy, his mother dressed him in a small soldier's uniform to gain the favor of the troops, and from this he took his childhood nickname *Caligula*, which means “military boot.” Gaius never seems to have used this name as an adult, however, and no contemporary documents or inscriptions refer to him as Caligula while he was emperor.

When Tiberius, the second emperor, died, the Senate, under pressure from the praetorian guard, voted all the constitutional powers of Tiberius to Gaius for life. Only twenty-five at the time of his accession, Gaius' rise to power contrasted with that of Tiberius, who had gained considerable military and political experience first and then received the powers of Augustus only incrementally. Although the rule of Gaius was initially benevolent, following a serious illness early in his reign Gaius' behavior became increasingly erratic. Conspiracies made him suspicious and violent, and apparent attempts to introduce elements of Hellenistic ruler cult were resisted by the Roman aristocracy.

Although Gaius is not mentioned directly in the Bible, his relations with the Jews made him an important influence on the world of the New Testament. He helped settle a dispute between the Jews of Alexandria and their gentile neighbors, but his plans to introduce the Imperial Cult in Judea, ostensibly including a statue of the emperor in the temple at Jerusalem, led to tensions in Judea. The governor of Syria, however, delayed carrying out Gaius' order, and a conspiracy at Rome succeeded in assassinating Gaius in A.D. 41 before the statue could be installed, thus forestalling a Jewish revolt at that time.



MARBLE BUST OF CALIGULA, c. A.D. 39–40.

Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. Used by permission, Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

and a great Roman general or, later, Augustus himself. As a client of the emperor, Herod was bound to be loyal to his patron, publicly honor him, and, on certain occasions, send him gifts or tribute. As a Roman ally, he was expected to help protect the Roman frontier and keep the peace within his own realm. Nevertheless, he was technically independent, and no Roman legions occupied his kingdom. Likewise, Judea did not pay taxes to Rome, nor were its residents counted as or considered Roman subjects. The “taxation” of Luke 2:1, which was actually an enrollment or census (Greek *apographesthai*), might have been Herod's attempt to take a census of his own people in accordance with what was happening in the empire proper or might be a misplaced memory of the census presumably taken of the Herodian Kingdom when Judea was converted into a Roman province in A.D. 6. Upon Herod's death in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided among his sons. Two of them, Herod Antipas and Herod Philip, continued with the obligations but also with the relative independence of client-princes, governing portions of the kingdom with the title of tetrarch. A third son, Herod Archelaus, inherited the bulk of Herod's territories, but his rule was so oppressive that the Jerusalem aristocracy sent an embassy to Rome to ask for direct Roman rule instead. Accordingly, Archelaus was deposed in A.D. 6, and a Roman province was established in Judea, Idumea, and Samaria.

Ironically, although previous Roman military interventions had not led to annexation, at this point Judea became a Roman province at the request of the Jews themselves. This province, however, was hardly the oppressive military occupation of popular imagination. In most provinces, the Romans preferred to allow the province's cities to manage most local affairs (including taxation), making the governor responsible for defending the borders of the provinces, keeping the peace within the province, and adjudicating court cases involving Roman

citizens or interests. Because Jewish cities and towns in the Holy Land generally did not have the civic structure of most Hellenistic cities, self-government, including security, was left largely in the hands of the Sanhedrin and local councils. The early Roman prefects, or governors, had very small forces on hand, perhaps as few as three thousand locally raised troops.

The Jews of the Diaspora found themselves in a distinctly privileged position in the

The Emperors of Rome

A Roman man generally had three names, the *tria nomina* that was an indication of citizenship. The nomenclature of the emperors, however, was often even more complex: they were born with one name, sometimes were adopted by their predecessor and took on a new set of names, and added further names and titles upon their accession.

What follows is a list of the emperors who were important during the events of the New Testament and the period that immediately followed. The more familiar names by which the emperors are usually known today appear in bold.

Julio-Claudians

Imperator Caesar **Augustus** (27 B.C.–A.D. 14)

Tiberius Caesar Augustus (A.D. 14–37)

Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus

(sometimes known as Caligula, A.D. 37–41)

Tiberius **Claudius** Caesar Augustus Germanicus (A.D. 41–54)

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (A.D. 54–68)

"Year of the Four Emperors"

Servius **Galba** Imperator Caesar Augustus (A.D. 68–69)

Imperator Marcus **Otho** Caesar Augustus (A.D. 69)

Aulus **Vitellius** Imperator Germanicus Augustus (A.D. 69)

(The year A.D. 69 also includes Vespasian, who founded the subsequent Flavian Dynasty)

Flavians

Imperator Caesar Vespasianus Augustus (**Vespasian**, A.D. 69–79)

Imperator **Titus** Caesar Vespasianus Augustus (A.D. 79–81)

Imperator Caesar Domitianus Augustus (**Domitian**, A.D. 81–96)

The "Adoptive" Emperors

Imperator **Nerva** Caesar Augustus Germanicus (A.D. 96–98)

Imperator Caesar Nerva Traianus Optimus Augustus

(**Trajan**, A.D. 98–117)

Imperator Caesar Traianus Hadrianus Augustus

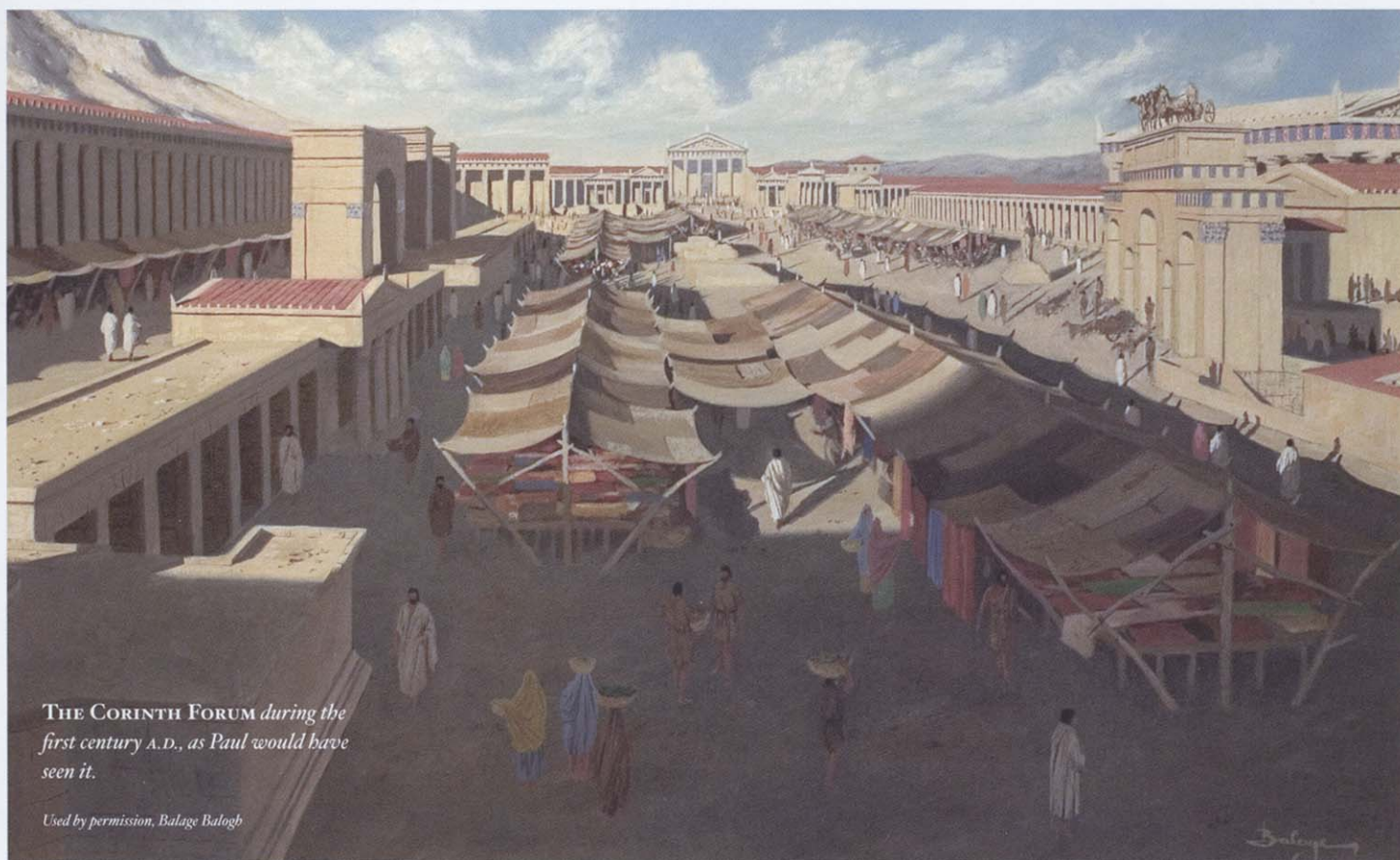
(**Hadrian**, A.D. 117–138)

Imperator Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus **Antoninus** Augustus **Pius**

(A.D. 138–161)

Imperator Caesar **Marcus Aurelius** Antoninus Augustus

(A.D. 161–180)



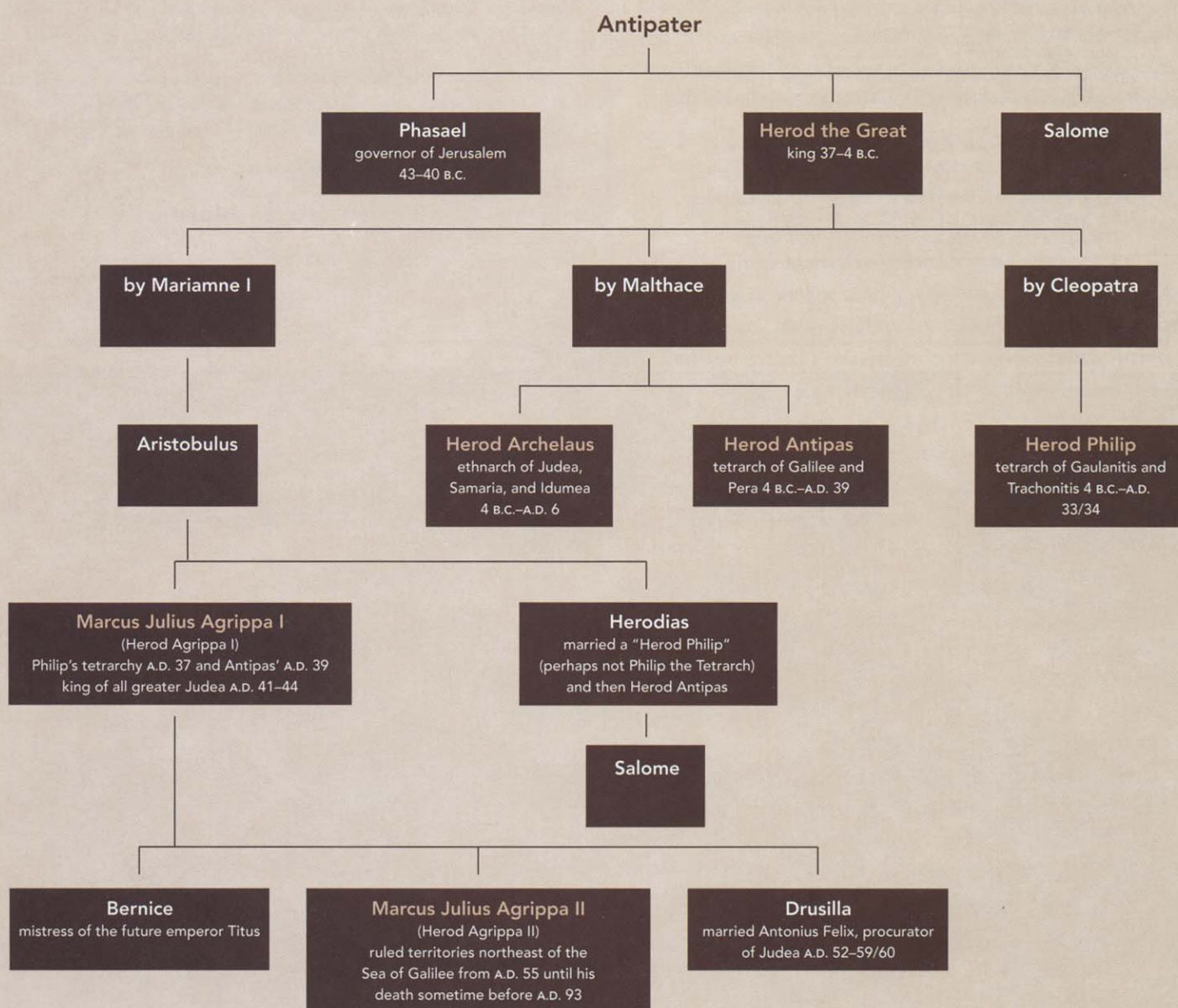
THE CORINTH FORUM during the first century A.D., as Paul would have seen it.

Used by permission, Balage Balogh

HERODIAN DYNASTY

Members of the family of Herod the Great controlled all or parts of Palestine from 37 B.C. until sometime before A.D. 100, when the last known Herod, Agrippa II, died. The family originally came from Idumea, a part of southern Judea that had been occupied by descendants of the ancient Edomites in the fourth century B.C. The area had been Judaized following Hasmonean expansion by John Hyrcanus I soon after 129 B.C. Their path to power was laid by Herod's father, Antipater, who, after serving as the Hasmonean governor of Idumea, came to dominate Jewish affairs by supporting Hyrcanus II against his brother, Aristobulus II. Gaining the support of the Roman general Pompey for Hyrcanus II in 63 B.C., Antipater effectively ruled Judea on behalf of his Hasmonean overlord and began the family's policy of collaborating with the Romans.

As a Roman client-king, Herod controlled Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Perea across the Jordan, Galilee, and, eventually, the northeastern territories of Gaulanitis and Trachonitis. He married ten different women, three of whom were important for the later dynasty. In 37 B.C., he married a Hasmonean princess, Mariamne, the daughter of Hyrcanus II. By her he had five children; although none of them succeeded to power, through her son Aristobulus they had a grandson and great-grandson, each of whom was named Agrippa and both of whom eventually attained the rank of king. In 28 B.C., Herod married two women, a Samaritan named Malthace and a woman from Jerusalem named Cleopatra. After Herod's death, his kingdom was divided among Malthace's sons, Herod Archelaus (Matthew 2:22) and Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:1), and Cleopatra's son, Herod Philip (Luke 3:1). Only Philip died in power, the Romans having deposed Archelaus in A.D. 6 and Antipas in A.D. 39.



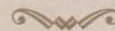
THE ROMAN EMPERORS

When Tiberius, Augustus' successor, died in A.D. 37 without having adequately prepared for his own political successor, the Senate and military granted all the powers of the emperor to his young grandson and heir, Gaius Caesar. Tiberius himself had acquired the different powers of Augustus incrementally over the latter part of the first emperor's reign, but Gaius now gained them all in a single act, establishing a pattern of succession that made the principate, or "rule of the 'first citizen,'" a true monarchy. Gaius, popularly known today by his childhood nickname "Caligula," was cruel, and his reign was erratic and brutal, leading to his murder in A.D. 41. Nevertheless, the system established by Augustus functioned well even without sound leadership at its helm. Two more emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty followed—Claudius (ruled A.D. 41–54) and Nero (ruled A.D. 54–68)—but the last committed suicide during a revolt against his perceived faults and poor government.

A period of civil war following the overthrow of Nero led to the "Year of the Four Emperors." The eventual victor was Vespasian (ruled A.D. 69–79), who had been appointed by Nero to suppress the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66–73. He was succeeded by his sons Titus (ruled A.D. 79–81)—who captured Jerusalem and burned the temple in A.D. 70—and Domitian (ruled A.D. 81–96). This short-lived dynasty was known as the Flavians.

In Rome itself, the emperors continued the constitutional fictions of Augustus' "disguised monarchy" whereby as "first citizens" they ruled with a collection of republican legal powers that obscured the fact that they had actually become monarchs. The subjects of the empire, however, saw them for what they were—absolute rulers. Particularly in the eastern Mediterranean, they were seen in the guise of the great Hellenistic monarchs and were frequently referred to by the Greek term *basileus*, or king. Hence, the mob before Pilate could declare, "We have no king but Caesar!" (John 19:15).

Although the Roman Senate deified some emperors after their death, in the eastern provinces divine honors were commonly accorded to emperors during their lifetimes. This led to the evolution of the Imperial Cult, adherence to which became a sign of loyalty to the empire. Jews, as a recognized religion, were generally allowed to excuse themselves from the outward forms of the Imperial Cult, but Christians lost this right when they became distinguished as separate from Judaism. Because Christians steadfastly refused to honor a man as divine, their rejection of the Imperial Cult became an important factor in their persecution.



ROMAN HELMET AND MILITARY MASK, first century A.D. *The bronze helmet was found in Judea and the silver military mask was found at a Roman legionary campsite in Germany. Helmets were always worn during battle, and some also wore military masks to protect themselves.*

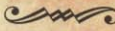
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Used by permission, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

Museum and Park Kalkriese, Germany. Used by permission akg-images/Museum Kalkriese

other provinces of the empire. Because of the lobbying of Hasmonean and Herodian princes, Jews throughout the empire were exempt from military service, were excused from civil actions on the Sabbath, and were permitted to organize and build synagogues, whereas other citizens and subjects were banned from such *collegia*, or private associations. Judaism was, in fact, a recognized religion of the empire, a position enjoyed by early Christians as long as they were still seen as being part of the Jewish community.

Indeed, the Roman attitude toward religion was generally tolerant, and the book of Acts repeatedly shows Paul as the beneficiary of Roman protection (Acts 22:27–30). This attitude, together with the political unity, freedom of movement, and increased safety in travel afforded by the Roman peace, allowed the apostles and other early Christian missionaries to travel and preach widely. Only later in the first century, when Greeks and Romans began to see the Christians as distinct from Jews, did opposition arise.

More serious legal problems included the definition of the local house-church as a banned *collegium*, or association, and the refusal of the Christians to participate in the Imperial Cult designed to honor deified past emperors (and sometimes current ones). Despite local persecution in Rome for a brief period under Nero (ruled A.D. 54–68) and expanded persecution later under Domitian (ruled A.D. 81–96), Christians benefited in many ways from the Greek and Roman worlds they lived in, and those worlds provided the historical, cultural, and linguistic context for the New Testament. 🐾



THE WORLD OF King Herod

Herod was the son of Antipater of Idumea, an area of the preexilic kingdom of Judah that was occupied by the Edomites in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. A decade after Herod's birth, an internal struggle for power in the Hasmonean family between Hyrcanus II and his brother Aristobulus II instigated civil war, leading the Roman general Pompey to intervene. Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C. and appointed Hyrcanus II, who was already high priest, as ethnarch, or ruler of the Jews under Roman domination.

HEROD'S FATHER SUPPORTED HYRCANUS, ACTING AS HIS ADVISER while increasingly dominating political life in Judea. Herod's rise to prominence was propelled forward when his father was granted Roman citizenship in 47 B.C. (an honor transmitted to Herod and his descendants) by Julius Caesar, who also appointed Antipater as Hyrcanus' deputy or governor (*epitropos*). Eventually, Antipater appointed his sons governors of regions of the Jewish state: Herod of Galilee and Phasael of Jerusalem. Herod was twenty-five and soon gained a reputation for his military and administrative abilities.

In 42 B.C., Cassius appointed Herod governor of Coele-Syria (the area around Damascus). Aristobulus' son, Antigonus, in an effort to supplant Hyrcanus (and therefore Herod and Roman influence), joined Parthian forces during their invasion of the eastern Mediterranean. Warned of an impending attempt to capture him, Herod fled Jerusalem and made his way to Rome, where he was appointed king of Judea in 40 B.C. by the Senate and Mark Antony. Not until 37 B.C., however, was he actually able to capture Jerusalem and take up his crown.

As a third-generation Jew, Herod took great interest in protecting the Jewish people. With his help and influence, the Jews of the Diaspora were guaranteed freedom to worship, follow their dietary and sabbatical laws, send the temple tax to Jerusalem as prescribed in the Law, and avoid military service in the Roman army. Herod may have even helped finance a

synagogue in the imperial capital, and the Jews there named a synagogue in his honor. It seems obvious why Diaspora Jews were favorable to Herod: they experienced an unprecedented time of prosperity and security under his patronage.

Herod's greatest achievement for his nation and for Judaism was the reconstruction and expansion of the temple, later known as Herod's Temple, in Jerusalem. Another symbol of his deep attachment is seen in his use of temple motifs on coins and public buildings rather than animal or human representations, which were forbidden by the commandment prohibiting graven images.

Nevertheless, the life of Herod is shrouded in controversy. Opinions range from describing Herod as a genius to a lunatic and from a despot to a king with his country's interests at heart. However, the traditional view of a despotic Herod, characterized best by Matthew's account of the slaughter of the innocents, has recently been reevaluated by scholars who claim that this massacre included at most fifteen to twenty babies. Although the slaughter of even one child is despicable, the "cruel" Herod of history was no more nor less despotic than other client-kings of the time. Herod's era saw a marked improvement over previous eras. He posed as a devout Jew but also as a loyal Roman citizen. Although a minor client-king of the Roman Empire, Herod profoundly influenced the history of his land and his people. 🏰



Having fled to Rome as a refugee following the Parthian invasion that had installed his rival Antigonus as king of Judea, Herod saw his fortunes quickly reverse when the Roman Senate appointed him king. Although his initial grant included the districts of Judea, Idumea, Perea, and Galilee, all of these territories at the time were held by Antigonus.

In 39 B.C., Herod returned first to Galilee, where he earlier had been governor under his father Antipater and the previous Hasmonean ruler Hyrcanus II and where he now raised an army. Although he was able that same year to occupy some of Samaria and most of Idumea, his family's ancestral homeland, his first attempt to capture Jerusalem failed. Not until the summer of 37 B.C. was he able, with Roman help, to take Jerusalem by siege and occupy Judea and Perea.

Herod temporarily lost some territory in 36 B.C. to Cleopatra, ruler of the neighboring Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt, but he was shrewdly able to regain these areas when Cleopatra and her ally, Mark Antony, were defeated by Octavian in 31 B.C. By transferring his loyalties to Octavian and becoming his client, Herod was reconfirmed in his kingship and regained his lost lands.

Herod pacified the lawless regions of Batanea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis east of the Sea of Galilee c. 24 B.C. Augustus then added Gaulanitis (the Golan) and Panias in 20 B.C., when Herod's kingdom reached its greatest extent.