

What Influenced Life's Daily Routines for Jesus



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I. Introduction to Physical, Political, and Gentile Religious Settings

In this second part of the New Testament setting, we will discuss the topography of Palestine, its climate, and everyday life. We will then examine the political environment and the Gentile religious setting of the New Testament world.

II. Topography of Palestine

The topography of Palestine can be divided into four zones which run north to south. These are (1) the coastal plain, continuous with the Phoenician coast; (2) Galilee and the central hill country, continuous with the Lebanon Mountains; (3) the Jordan rift valley, continuous with the Bekaa (Beqa) Valley; and (4) the Transjordanian highlands, continuous with the Anti-Lebanon Mountains.

A. The Coastal Plain

The coastal plain extends northward from Sinai along the Mediterranean Coast to the border of modern Lebanon. It narrows progressively from a twenty-mile width near Gaza on the Philistine plain to twelve miles near Joppa on the border of the Plain of Sharon, to less than two miles along the Plain of Dor, south of Haifa. Mount Carmel, a northwesterly extension of the central highland, interrupts the coastal plain where it meets the Mediterranean Sea at the modern city of Haifa. North of Mount Carmel the Plain of Acco, some five to seven miles in width, ends abruptly at the white limestone cliffs of Rosh Hanikra.

B. Galilee and Central Hill Country

The hills of Galilee comprise one of four main regions into which the central highlands can be divided. The Galilee

consists of alternating ridges and valleys running east-west. Then comes the Jezreel plain, enclosed by mountains, but with gates to the coast, the Sea of Galilee, and the Transjordan. South of it stretches the central range from the north to south. It dips to the Beersheba depression, which runs east-west. The land then rises into the mountain wilderness of the Negev and Sinai.

C. Jordan Rift Valley

The Afro-Syrian rift is a north-south fault that runs from Asia Minor to Africa. This cleft in the earth's surface begins in the plain between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains to the north and extends southward through Palestine, the Gulf of Eilat (Aqaba), and on into Lake Nyasa in Africa, a distance of 3,000 miles. The rift valley in Palestine averages ten miles in width and varies in altitude from about 300 feet above sea level in the north to 1,290 feet below sea level on the surface of the Dead Sea, the lowest place on earth apart from the ocean depths. The rift valley can be divided into five areas: the Huleh Valley, the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, and the Arabah.

D. Transjordanian Highlands

The Transjordanian hills that rise sharply from the eastern floor of the rift valley are broken into regions by wadis, which penetrate into the valley from the east. In the north, the Yarmuk River enters the valley slightly south of the Sea of Galilee. It provides a natural boundary between the present states of Syria and Jordan, while in biblical times Bashan to the north was separated from Gilead to the south. No natural boundary separated the region of Moab from that of the Gilead, but the northern boundary was generally eastward from the north end of the Dead Sea. The Wadi el-Hasa, the biblical brook Zered, provided a natural boundary between Moab and Edom to the south. The mountains of Edom rise in places to a height in excess of 5,000 feet.

III. Climate

Palestine contains the same latitudes as the southern United States. Its climate is controlled generally by the prevailing westerly winds from the Mediterranean Sea. However, because of

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Climate: Winter/Summer

the diversity of topography, the climate varies considerably from place to place. Overall, there are two distinct seasons: a warm dry summer and a cool winter with rain. Sometime in October the first of the early rains moistens the ground enough for plowing and planting. The late rains of April and early May are needed to help the crops reach full maturity. With the onset of spring, vegetation begins to wither and die, and by midsummer drought conditions prevail. The only climatic relief to the summer drought comes in the form of characteristically heavy dews, particularly in the coastal plain and the higher elevations. The hot, dry blast of the sirocco, a southeast wind from the desert areas, makes its presence felt from April to early June and from September to November. Average temperature ranges for Jerusalem are 41 to 54 degrees Fahrenheit in January and 65 to 85 degrees in August.

The amount of rainfall in any given place in Palestine is controlled by a combination of factors, primarily geographical position and altitude. Precipitation tends to be heavier in the north and west and lighter in the south and east, while at the same time higher elevations tend to get more rain than the lower. As it works out, the central hill country and the Transjordanian highlands usually receive the heaviest rainfall, and within these areas the rainfall tends to be heavier in the north. Thus, Upper Galilee averages about forty inches of rain a year, the Ephraimite hill country (Samaria) around thirty, Jerusalem twenty-four, and Hebron twenty-two, while Beersheba in the Negev only receives about nine inches a year.

IV. Everyday Life in Palestine

Palestine in antiquity was largely an agricultural nation. Because the coast offered no suitable harbors (except Acco), there was little maritime trade. It is difficult for us in modern times to imagine what life was like in Palestine during the time of Christ, but archaeological research is especially useful in this regard. Material remains, such as houses, official buildings, tools, weapons, pottery vessels, and coins, which all contribute to a better understanding of everyday life in Palestine.

A. Agrarian Society

The rhythm and routine of life in pre-industrial Palestine was thoroughly immersed in the climatic and agricultural

patterns of the land. Fall plowing and sowing, winter pruning, spring harvesting, early summer threshing, and late summer gathering set the dominant agricultural chores. Pastoral pursuits were carried out in the context of this same larger rhythm of life. During the rainy months, when crops were growing, the wilderness areas provided pasturage; in the summer, the freshly harvested lands could be grazed and the crop residue, after threshing, used as fodder.

B. Diet

Since there was no means of refrigeration, the diet of fresh food was seasonal. As fruits and vegetables ripened, they were consumed before they spoiled. Some could be cured and preserved in various forms: grapes became raisins and wine; figs were dried; olives were pickled or made into oil; beans and lentils were dried; and cereal grains needed merely to be preserved from dampness. The diet was essentially vegetarian, with meat consumed only on special occasions.

C. Towns and Villages

Farming families lived in small towns or open villages, not in houses on the land they farmed. They walked to the fields in the early morning and returned in the evening, except perhaps during the harvest when they might stay in lean-tos. Inside the walled towns, living quarters were tightly packed together, with space at a premium. The courtyard of the main city gate provided opportunities for gathering and socializing. Here court was held, vendors sold their wares, speeches were made, elders philosophized and gossiped, and one could find company and watch neighbors come and go.

D. Family Life

Large families were considered a blessing, since they provided labor, social security for a person's future, and continuation of the family name. It has been estimated that the infant mortality rate may have been as high as forty percent and that as many as thirty percent of the female population died in childbirth. The elderly and the sick were the responsibility of the family. To be an orphan or widow without family was to be in a state of destitution. Crafts and special skills tended to be handed down from parent to child.

PROVINCES

- Proconsuls
- Governors

The lack of major technological innovations meant that the skills of one generation rarely differed from those of its predecessor.

V. Political Setting

The Roman Empire was the culmination of a long, complex process of political, military, cultural, and social development that gives a lasting significance to Roman history. Rome did not superimpose a uniform governmental procedure upon its conquered territories. All areas were naturally subject to the emperor and to the Roman armies, but many localities were permitted to govern their own affairs so long as they did not violate Roman sovereignty or directives (Ac 19:35-41).

Subjugated areas were generally organized into provinces. There are at least fifteen mentioned in the New Testament, for example, Cilicia (Ac 6:9) and Judea (Gal 1:22). Provinces were ruled in two different ways. Proconsuls (Ac 13:7; 18:12), who were responsible to the Roman senate, ruled over those areas where the inhabitants were submissive to Roman law. Those provinces considered to be troublesome and possible breeding grounds for rebellion (for example, Judea) were ruled by governors called procurators, propraetors, or prefects. Proconsuls gained and kept their positions by annual appointment and renewal; procurators were assigned directly by the emperor and kept their offices as long as the emperor wanted them there.

VI. New Testament Roman Emperors

The Roman Empire was the resolution of 700 years of struggle by various social classes and competing political systems. During that period, the Roman Empire, with its vast dominions, had been converging both from internal and external causes toward a one-man government. Caesar was the title assumed by the Roman emperors after Julius Caesar.

A. Augustus (Octavian; 27 B.C.–A.D. 14)

The battle between Octavian and Antony with Cleopatra of Egypt, on the field of Actium on September 2, 31 B.C., decided the fate of the old Roman republic. The commonwealth had sunk into exhaustion after protracted

civil and internecine strife. Octavian realized that supreme power was the only possible solution for surviving the crisis. On his return to Rome he began to do what Julius Caesar had done previously: he gathered the reins of government into his own hand. He succeeded with caution and shrewdness, and became the founder of the Roman Empire, which formally began January 16, 27 B.C. The Roman senate also conferred upon Octavian the title Augustus, which implied divinity, although he did not claim such for himself. The genius of Augustus' reign was that he acted as a constitutional monarch while maintaining the outward trappings of the republic. Further, the machinery of government was so well thought out that not only was it passed on smoothly at his death, but it continued to function and keep the peace at home, for the most part, for another two centuries.

B. Tiberius (A.D. 14–37)

Augustus chose Tiberius, the son of his wife Livia by a previous marriage, born in 42 B.C., to be his successor. For the people of the provinces, Tiberius' reign was a peaceful and well-ordered time. Governors behaved themselves, and there were no destructive or expensive wars. In the domestic sphere, however, the concentration of power in one person made all the greater the threat of misbehavior by ambitious subordinates like Sejanus, the prefect of the praetorian guard. As a result, although he was not a tyrant himself, Tiberius' reign sporadically descended into tyranny of the worst sort. Over time, Tiberius began to believe the allegations that Sejanus wanted to become emperor, and denounced Sejanus. The emperor died in March 37 and Caligula, his nephew Germanicus' son, was proclaimed emperor. Tiberius' reign was generally marked by restraint, fiscal thrift, and capable administrators.

C. Gaius Caligula (A.D. 37–41)

Caligula's reign was too short, and the surviving ancient accounts too sensationalized, for any serious study of his policies. Son of the popular Germanicus, he spent much of his youth living in army camps, from which he got the nickname Caligula ("little boots"). During his reign, Mauretania was annexed and reorganized into two provinces;

Herod Agrippa was appointed to a kingdom in Palestine; and severe riots took place in Alexandria between Jews and Greeks. Caligula went north and discovered there the beginnings of a conspiracy under the commander of the Upper German legions, Lentulus Gaetulicus. The subsequent events are shrouded in uncertainty, but it is known that Gaetulicus and Caligula's brother-in-law, M. Aemilius Lepidus, were executed and Caligula's two surviving sisters, implicated in the plot, suffered exile. Caligula's enthusiasm for divine honors for himself and his favorite sister, Drusilla (who died suddenly in A.D. 38 and was deified) are often presented as a clear sign of his madness. But it may have been no more than his tendency to tactlessly push the limits of the imperial cult, already established under Augustus. Caligula's excess in this regard is best illustrated by his order that a statue of himself be erected in the temple at Jerusalem. Only the delaying tactics of the Syrian governor, P. Petronius, and the intervention of Herod Agrippa prevented riots and a potential uprising in Palestine. In January 41, Caligula was assassinated by some of his own praetorian guard while on his way to lunch from the theater.

D. Claudius (A.D. 41–54)

Claudius was a most unlikely candidate for emperor. The uncle of Caligula, he had been pointedly kept out of public office and affairs by both Augustus and Tiberius. Where Claudius was both strongest and most controversial was in his development of the administrative structure. His motive seems chiefly to have been a concern with efficiency, but the result was a considerable step toward centralization, as well as the embryonic stage of a later bureaucracy. Under Claudius are attributed the first issues of standing orders (mandata) from emperor to governor. In the organization of the provinces, Claudius appears to have preferred direct administration over client kingship. Under him the kingdoms of Mauretania, Lycia, Noricum, and Thrace were converted into provinces. Stable kingdoms, such as Bosphorus and Cilicia, were left untouched. When Claudius died suddenly in 54, the story was that his second wife, his niece Agrippina, had given him a dish of poison mushrooms. Her son, Nero, became the next emperor over Claudius' own son Britannicus.

E. Nero (A.D. 54–68)

Nero, last of the Julio-Claudians, had been placed in the difficult position of absolute authority at a young age coupled with the often contradictory efforts of those in a position to manipulate him. Nero's reign was not without military operations (for example, the campaigns of Corbulo against the Parthians, the suppression of the revolt of Boudicca in Britain), but his neglect of the armies was a critical error. He was also blamed for the great fire of Rome in the summer of 64, although this is probably slander provoked by his evident enthusiasm for rebuilding the city according to his own plans. The suspicion, which surrounded him after his reintroduction of treason trials and the outbreak of several real or imagined conspiracies, set the stage for a series of civil upheavals. Nero was proclaimed an enemy by the senate and took his own life in June 68, at the age of 30.

VII. New Testament Kings

Kings were the highest local rulers of territories in the Roman Empire, subject to the central authority of the emperor at Rome. The king's office was approved by the Roman senate. During New Testament times Palestine, in whole or in part, was ruled by kings of the Herodian dynasty (technically, however, only the emperor was king).

A. Herod the Great (37–4 B.C.)

Herod the Great was the son of Antipater, an Idumean, and Cypros, an Arabian of noble descent. In the year 47 B.C. Julius Caesar made Antipater procurator of Judea, who divided his territories between his four sons. Galilee fell to the lot of Herod, who was afterward appointed tetrarch of Judea by Mark Antony (40 B.C.), and also king of Judea by the Roman senate. Alarmed by the tidings of one "born king of the Jews," he sent out soldiers who were to "kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under" (Mt 2:16). Herod was fond of splendor and lavished great sums on rebuilding and adorning the cities of his empire. He rebuilt the city of Caesarea on the coast, and also the city of Samaria, which he called Sebaste, the Greek equivalent of "Augustus." He also restored the ruined temple of Jerusalem, a work that was begun in 20 B.C., but was not finished until after his death.

Matthew 2:1-2

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."



Matthew 2:22

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

Matthew 16:13

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

B. Herod Antipas (4 B.C.–A.D. 39)

Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great and his Samaritan wife, Malthace. He was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea during the time of Jesus' earthly life (Lk 23:7). He had John the Baptist beheaded at the instigation of Herodias, the wife of his half-brother Herod Philip, whom he had married (Mt 14:1-12). Pilate sent Christ to him when he was at Jerusalem at the Passover celebration (Lk 23:7).

C. Archelaus (4 B.C.–A.D. 6)

Archelaus was also the son of Herod the Great and Malthace. He was educated along with his brother Antipas at Rome. He inherited from his father a third part of the kingdom: Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, and hence is called king (Mt 2:22). It was for fear of him that Joseph and Mary turned aside on their way back from Egypt and did not settle in Bethlehem as they seem to have intended.

D. Herod Philip II (4 B.C.–A.D. 34)

Herod Philip II was the son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra of Jerusalem. As tetrarch of Batanea, Iturea, Traconitis, and Auranitis (Lk 3:1), he rebuilt the city of Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:13; Mk 8:27), calling it by his own name to distinguish it from the Caesarea on the coast, which was the seat of the Roman government. He married Salome, the daughter of Herodias.

E. Herod Agrippa I (37–44)

Herod Agrippa was the son of Aristobulus (son of Herod the Great) and Bernice. He was educated in Rome and lived there many years. While there he became friends with Caligula, who turned over Philip's tetrarchy to him, granting him the title "king." He soon took over Herod Antipas' territory as well, ultimately possessing the entire kingdom of his grandfather, Herod the Great. According to Acts 12:1-19, he had James, the brother of John, killed and Peter imprisoned. After Agrippa's death the kingdom came under the control of the prefect of Syria, and Palestine was fully incorporated into the empire.

Acts 12:1

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

Acts 26:2

King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews . . .

F. Herod Agrippa II (53–70)

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I and Cypros. He was only 17 years old when his father died in A.D. 44. Because he had been educated in Rome he was well known to Claudius, but it was not until A.D. 48 when Herod of Chalcis died, that Claudius presented the kingdom to Agrippa II (Ac 25:13; 26:2). His privileges included appointing the high priests, and he was given authority over the temple, even though he did not rule over any Judean territory. In 53, Claudius assigned a new kingdom to the Jewish king, that of his great-uncle Philip (Traconitis, Batanea, Gaulanitis) plus Abila, the former kingdom of Lysanias, and the former tetrarchy of Varus; however, rulership of Chalcis was taken away. When Nero came to office, he gave Agrippa the Galilean cities of Tiberias and Tarcheae, as well as Julias in Perea. It was before him and his sister, Bernice, that Paul made his defense at Caesarea (Ac 25:12-27).

VIII. New Testament Procurators

Prefects (governors) were rulers of designated territories, appointed by the emperor and directly responsible to him. Much of their work involved finances, such as taxes. They also had supreme judicial authority, such as Pilate used regarding Jesus. The official residence of the Judean procurators was located in Caesarea Maritima. The area of their responsibility was usually that area not ruled by a contemporary king. For example, Herod Antipas was a tetrarch of Galilee, while Pilate was governor of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Most of the New Testament references to procurators are to Pilate, Felix, and Festus.

A. Pontius Pilate (26–36)

Pontius Pilate's reign extended over the period of the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. He was sent out in 26 when Tiberius' advisor Sejanus, militantly anti-Jewish, was at the peak of his power. Inadvertently or on purpose, he seems to have often angered the Jewish populace by his blasphemous activities. He brought Roman standards bearing images into the city of Jerusalem and placed Roman votive shields in the old palace of Herod, and he compelled the priests to contribute money to the sacred Corban, trust funds belonging to the temple, for the construction of an aqueduct

Acts 21:38

Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?

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Acts 25:12

After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

into Jerusalem. In A.D. 36, Vitellius, the governor of Syria, brought serious charges against Pilate about his treatment of a large group of Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, and he was banished to Vienne in Gaul, where, according to tradition, he committed suicide.

B. M. Antonius Felix (52–59?)

The high priest Jonathan, on embassy to Rome, appealed for the influential freedman M. Antonius Felix as procurator. Formerly married to the granddaughter of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Felix tried to consolidate his power in Judea by marrying the young daughter of Agrippa I—even though she was already wife of the king of Emesa. His administration, however, was not a success. His period in office was troubled by religious-minded rebels who led crowds into the desert, promising them “wonders and signs” or “signs of freedom.” A prophet from Egypt led a crowd to the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, promising them that at his command the city walls would fall and they could enter. Cavalry and infantry sent by Felix killed 400 and captured 200 of them. This is why a Roman tribune, who later arrested the apostle Paul, supposed that he might have caught “the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert” (Ac 21:38).

C. Porcius Festus (59?–62)

Felix’s successor, Porcius Festus, also attempted to deal with the major threat to Roman order: the numerous brigand groups and the Sicarii. The cavalry and infantry once more proceeded against these troublemakers, capturing and killing many, although to what extent he was able to achieve success in clearing the country of the menace is difficult to say. It was Festus who sent Paul to Rome because he was a Roman citizen (Ac 25:12). He is the only known Judean procurator to die in office.

IX. Gentile Religious Setting

A. Greek-Roman Gods

Greeks supplied the Romans from very early times with many of the myths and ideas about their own gods, so that

Greek:
Zeus



Roman:
Jupiter

*There is grove below the Aventine,
dark with the shade of oaks, and
when you saw it you would say
“there is a deity there.”*

Fasti III, 295-296

*Jupiter is called Best and Greatest
because he does not make us just
or sober or wise, but healthy and
rich and prosperous.*

On the Nature of the Gods III, 87

it is difficult to speak about “Roman” religion as a separate phenomenon. Roman religion was essentially the result of the fusion of primitive Latin and Greek elements. The chief feature of Roman religion was the belief that all the important processes in the world were divinely activated and, conversely, that different gods had charge of particular functions and spheres of activity. In this way, most of the things that were vital for the well-being of society were thought of as functions of a god or as gods functioning.

Also, many natural objects in themselves provoked the kind of wonder that led people to think of them as more than natural. In the hot, sunny climate of Italy, a spring of fresh water or a copse of trees inspired grateful respect. The Romans thought of them as sacred places in which a spirit dwelt. In a famous passage of *Fasti* (III, 295-6), Ovid writes, “There was a grove below the Aventine, dark with the shade of oaks, and when you saw it you would say ‘there is a deity there.’”

Roman religion was concerned with success, not with sin. “Jupiter is called Best and Greatest,” Cicero comments (*On the Nature of the Gods III*, 87), “because he does not make us just or sober or wise, but healthy and rich and prosperous.” Happiness was the aim of life and happiness depended upon the successful outcome of all one’s day-to-day activities, in private life, in business or agriculture, and in the wider sphere of national affairs, and not upon one’s moral condition. The object of religion was to discover the correct procedure for securing the good will of the gods in making these activities successful.

B. Emperor Worship

Augustus tried to breathe new life into Roman worship. He aimed at an imperial and popular religion similar to what had long prevailed in the East, where kings were often regarded as divine by their subjects. When Augustus brought peace to the world, the Orient was ready to hail him as a god. Out of this evolved the cult of the reigning emperor and of Rome personified. This worship may have given a semblance of religious unity to the empire, and it magnified the emperor, but it became a deadly engine of persecution when Christians refused to worship the emperor and were treated as traitors.



New Testament Magic

Acts 8:9-11

Acts 19:19

Eventually, emperor worship died out. In the third and fourth centuries, oriental worship became supreme, and the religion of the empire soon became cosmopolitan and eclectic, according to the spirit of the new era.

C. Occult

The late Roman republic and the Roman Empire were characterized by a widespread, almost universal, belief in the influence of the sun, moon, planets, and stars upon events on earth. Astrology had spread from Babylonia and Egypt to Italy in the second century B.C. and soon gained a stronghold over unwary minds. Most people, including the emperors, firmly believed that by studying the stars astrologers could predict the future, and they paid special attention to their horoscopes. According to R. M. Ogilvie, “To learn what the stars had in store was only to discover what the gods intended” (*The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus*, p. 55).

Belief in magic flourished at the same time. Examples of magic in the New Testament are provided by the Samaritan magician Simon (Ac 8:9-11) and the magical books, worth 50,000 drachmas, burned at Ephesus (Ac 19:19). Many magical papyri, still extant, reflect the use of nonsense syllables (for example, “abracadabra”) and words taken from Jewish and Christian sources in order to work the magician’s will by demonic aid. Much magic was directed against other people, as we learn from curses still preserved on stone or metal. Excavations in Italy have unearthed hundreds of astrological amulets, charms, and such like.

D. Philosophical Speculation

Many pagan intellectuals had become thoroughly disenchanted with their religious heritage and had moved into philosophical speculation. Paul encountered such at Mars Hill in Athens. Luke reports, “All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (Ac 17:21). These philosophies did influence some Christian thinking and some converts brought into their new faith faulty mental concepts framed by these pagan ideas. False teachers had wedded misinterpreted scriptural concepts with



Greek philosophy and had penetrated the churches with their intellectual messages. Several epistles were written to warn believers about the errors of this syncretism—for example, Colossians, 1 John, and Jude.