

Chapter 3 - The World of Jesus: History and Politics

Major Concepts and Review

Jesus the Jew. To properly understand Jesus and his message, we must recognize that Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew and that he preached his message in that context.

A Brief History of the Jewish People. Jewish history began with Abraham, nearly 2,000 years before Jesus. God established a series of covenants with Abraham's descendants. Over time, led by Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, they became the People of God, or Israel. A succession of conquerors, along with the people's own sinfulness, prevented Israel from settling peacefully in the Promised Land.

The Political World of Jesus. The world of Jesus' day was politically dominated by the Romans. Even so, the people of Israel continued to be culturally influenced by the Greek rulers of the past. The New Testament mentions Jesus' encounters with the Sadducees and the Pharisees, Jewish political factions that had formed during a period of Jewish independence.

An Oppressed People Dream of a Liberator. Out of the complex religious and political history that preceded Jesus' birth, there emerged within the minds and hearts of the Jews the dream of an "anointed one," the Messiah, who would liberate them from their oppression.

List two major characters in ancient Jewish history who received new names. Give both their original and their new names. Briefly explain the significance of their receiving a new name from God.

Abram was given the name Abraham, and Jacob was given the name Israel. Each was given a new name as a sign of the new and unique relationship that God had established with him.

Identifies Saul, David, and Solomon and briefly explain the relationships among the three.

Saul was the first king of Israel. He was very jealous of one of the leaders of his army, a young man named David. After the death of Saul, two of the 12 tribes of Israel recognized David as their king, and eventually all the tribes became unified under him. Solomon, the son of David, became king after David's death.

Define the term Diaspora.

When the kingdom of Judah was overrun by the Babylonians, many of the people who were not captured left the country and formed small colonies along the Mediterranean Sea. These people made up a settlement called the Diaspora, from a word meaning "dispersion" or "those who have been dispersed."

Briefly explain how the Greeks -- in particular the Syrian Greeks -- came to dominate the people of Israel.

Alexander the Great led the Greeks to a military conquest of much of the Mediterranean world, including Palestine. After Alexander's death, Palestine was divided between two of his generals. These men and their successors dominated Palestine for one hundred fifty years. One of the lines of generals was centred in Syria; the other, in Egypt. For about the first one hundred years after Alexander's death, most of the people of Israel were ruled by the Greek power located in Egypt, and that Greek power seldom interfered in the affairs of the Jews. But in 198 B.C.E., all of Palestine came under the control of the Syrian Greeks, who taxed the people heavily.

Identify two major Jewish reactions to Greek rule.

1. The Jewish leaders, the wealthy landowners, and the priestly class tried to get along with the Greeks, simply because they had the most to lose in any conflicts with them.
2. Another group, called the Hasidim, meaning "the pious ones," represented the Greek rulers and felt that any compromise with them amounted to a rejection of the Jewish faith.

Identify and define three major political factions within Judaism that developed during the period of Jewish independence.

- ! The Sadducees were the priestly class that worked out accommodations with the new political leaders.
- ! The Essenes withdrew from Jewish society altogether in order to observe strict religious traditions.
- ! The Pharisees tried at first to find a middle ground between the political accommodations of the Sadducees and the withdrawal of the Essenes. In the end, however, they refused to compromise their religious beliefs. They therefore lost some influence in the higher levels of power outward very much respected among the common people.

Explain the origins of the Jewish hatred for the Samaritans.

The Samaritans were among the descendants of the old Northern tribes of the kingdom of Israel (conquered by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E.). They had not been sent into Babylon during the Exile, and they had lost touch with their Jewish "cousins" in the south. As a result many of the Samaritans' religious practices and traditions differed from those on the main line Southern Jews, and when the remnant returned from the Exile, they completely rejected the Samaritans

Briefly explain the origins of the ancient Jews expectations of the Messiah.

The expectations of the Messiah were strongly associated with the kingship of David. For generations to Jews had yearned for a "son of David," who would restore them to their place of prominence in the world and bring them into an age of peace and prosperity. Over the many years of waiting, the son of David that the people yearned for took on mythic qualities. By the time the Jews were dominated by the Romans, the Messiah had taken on the image of a mighty warrior-king, a great military leader, who would overthrow the Romans.