

The Cultural Times of Jesus of Nazareth

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- *What was daily life like at the time of Jesus?*
- *What were the religious issues of Jesus' day?*
- *What political ideas impacted life at that time?*

The Historical Context

The Old Testament ended (in the 400s B.C.) with Israel under the authority of the Medo-Persians, who allowed them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and the city. In the 300s B.C., Alexander the Great conquered the western world for Greece. After his death, the empire was divided up by four of his generals, and Greek became the language of the whole western world, thus preparing the way for an efficient spreading of the Gospel. In the 200s, the Jews were under the Egyptian/Greeks who allowed the translation of the Old Testament into Greek--a volume called The Septuagint (LXX), which was the Bible of Jesus' day. In the 100s, the Jews were captured by the Syrian/Greeks and persecuted. This led to a rebellion under the Maccabee family, who recaptured Jerusalem on December 25, 164 (Hanukkah). With the aid of an Edomite named Antipater, the Jews convinced the new Roman Emperor Augustus to allow a modified self-rule under the Jewish Sanhedrin, while paying taxes to Rome and being policed by Roman soldiers. Then Antipater convinced Augustus to appoint Antipater's son, Herod the Great, as King of the Jews.

People

In Jesus' day, Palestine had between 500,000 and 600,000 people. About 18,000, or 1 out of 30, were clergy, who seemed to be out of touch with the spiritual needs of the people (Matthew 9:36; Luke 10:2; John 4:35). Most towns were small, except Jerusalem, which was about 55,000, but could swell to 180,000 during major holidays like Passover or Pentecost.

Children were to be seen and not heard (Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-14). Yet many toys have been discovered. They played games like hopscotch, jacks, and had whistles, hoops, spinning tops, toy animals on wheels, and board games.

Three of every ten Jewish children died before the age of 18 (but the number was even worse for the non-Jews), and 18 was almost middle age. The average longevity was 40-45, and unlike today, men usually outlived women by as much as 10 years, so it was common for widowers to marry younger girls. Even so, there were many men and women who lived to a normal old age.

Occupations

Most people worked physically hard jobs and were generally not extremely poor. Many were shepherds (Luke 15:1-7; 17:7; John 10:1-5), the most traditional job of Israel. But many in Jesus' day were also farmers (Matthew 13:1-4; Luke 17:7), fishermen (Matthew 13:47-48; Luke 5:1-11), builders (Matthew 13:55), and various tradesmen, merchants, managers of the business of rich men (Luke 17:7; 19:12ff), and vine growers (Mark 12:1). There were also wealthy people in Palestine, but most got their wealth from inheritance or suspicious dealings (Luke 16:19). Jesus was a builder, which could mean He actually worked more with stone than wood or a wood worker who built specialty items, like furniture, doors, and windows. Either way, Jesus was neither a poor peasant nor a rich noble.

Domestic Life

Individual homes were the primary social points of the villages. Here people discussed politics, religion, and social issues, often over meals (Mark 2:1-2; 14:3; Luke 11:37). The rooms were small (about 4 x 4 meters or yards) with stone walls and often with thatched wood roofs. The furniture was usually made of wood but most reclined on pillows to eat.

Bread was the basic food of all meals (wheat bread, if you were more wealthy, barley bread, if you were poor--John 6:9). The next most common foods were fish or goat cheese (depending on your occupation or location), olives, and wine (Matthew 9:17). This could all be carried to your job and was the common first meal of the day, eaten in the late morning or midday. The Jews ate two meals a day. The second was usually at home in the evening. It consisted of more of the above plus sometimes lentil (vegetable) stew, fruit, eggs, and red meat on special occasions.

Language, Writing, and Education

Most Jews of Jesus' day were literate. Children were taught to read and write in the home, but the rabbis (a general term for teacher) also taught in the synagogues on certain days. The Jews spoke Aramaic in the homes (a combination of Hebrew and Babylonian, which the Jews acquired during the 70 years of captivity). But they were also educated in Greek, since that was the language of business, politics, and society in the Roman world. The Romans' Latin language never spread across the empire. The native Hebrew was generally used only by rabbis. Writing was done mostly on papyrus, a paper obtained from a reed which grew in marshy areas, especially along the Egyptian Nile. Papyrus rolls were no more than 33 feet (11 meters) long. This determined the length of many literary works such as the gospels and explains why Luke and Acts are two volumes, both about that size.

Travel

Travel was slow, difficult, and dangerous. Nevertheless, many people traveled regularly within Palestine, a distance of about 100 miles (167 km) by 40 miles (64 km). In spite of the availability of donkeys and camels, most people walked (John 7:1). Generally, one could walk about 20 miles (32 km) per day. Acts 10:23-24 records Peter walking the 40 miles (64 km) from Joppa (modern Tel Aviv) to Caesarea in two days. Travelers could be attacked by lions or bears, but the biggest danger was robbers (Luke 10:25-37). This made it safest to travel with others in a caravan (Luke 2:44). Foreigners and merchants often stayed at inns, but Jews usually stayed in homes. Hospitality to travelers was an expected part of Jewish life. Travelers could also actually buy maps, published in Rome, of nearly every part of the empire, including roads, inns, taverns, way stations, and distances between cities. The most direct route from Galilee (say, Nazareth) to Jerusalem was through the Samaritan hill country (75 miles, 120 km), and most Jews took that route, in spite of the hatred for and inhospitality of the Samaritans. Another way was down the Jordan River Valley through Jericho (97 miles, 155 km).

Religion

Religion dominated every phase of life in Jesus' day. Here are the major religious groups:

- **The Pharisees.** At the end of the Old Testament (Malachi 3:16) and during the inter-testament period, there were conservative Jews zealous for the Law called Hasidians or loyalists. They joined the fight for independence against the Syrian/Greeks, but when the Maccabees set up a non-Levitical priesthood in the temple, they separated from them and were called Pharisees (separatists). Unlike the Sadducees and Herodians, the Pharisees opposed any relations with or taxes paid to Rome (Matthew 22:15-17).
- **The Sadducees.** This was a party of rich, non-Levitical priests who claimed their origin from Zadok, the High Priest appointed by Solomon (1 Kings 2:25). Basically they were liberals. They denied the authority of tradition, doubted any Scripture after the Mosaic Law, and did not believe in angels (Acts 23:3) or the resurrection (Mark 2:18). They cooperated with Rome and welcomed the Hellenism the Pharisees hated.
- **The Scribes.** These were members of a profession whose basic job was to copy Scripture, but they came to be known as authorities on the Old Testament.
- **The Essenes.** These were monk-like, and sometimes cult-like, communities which withdrew from civilization and the opposing involvement of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Qumran community, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, was probably an Essene settlement.

The Temple and the Synagogues

These are two very different structures. The Temple was the only place of worship specified in the Old Testament. After Solomon (900s B.C.) it was in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8). Jesus referred to it as His Father's house (Luke 2:49) and treated it as a sacred place (John 2:16). The synagogue, however, was not biblically prescribed. The Jews, especially the Pharisees, created it as a convenient local place for worship (although without sacrifices and priests), prayer, education, and social interaction.

Questions and Answers

Q: *What was daily life like at the time of Jesus?*

A: Daily life was simple, but most, like Jesus, were neither rich nor poor.

Q: *What were the religious issues of Jesus' day?*

A: The key questions were, "How much should the Jews follow the traditions?" and "How should they be interpreted and applied?"

Q: *What political ideas impacted life at that time?*

A: The main political question was how much Roman domination and Greek/Roman influence should be tolerated.