

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ROME AND PARTHIA ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

Today I would like to give you some historical background of Rome and Parthia and the Holy Land that will help you better understand the context of what is covered in the New Testament. This is just background information that I hope will help you to better understand the context of what will be covered in later studies. We'll try and have a little fun along the way as well.

Who can tell me the major power that ruled most of the Middle East before the Romans came along? ... Yes, the Greek empire. Alexander the Great around 330 BC conquered the lands of the Persian Empire but he died on his way back from his conquests. Can anyone tell me what happened to the lands he conquered after that? ... His kingdom was divided amongst his four generals as prophesied in the book of Daniel 200 years earlier. The division based in Syria to Israel's north was ruled by the Selucids. The other division based in Egypt was ruled by the Ptolemies.

The kings of these two Greek kingdoms are referred to as the king of the North and the king of the South in the many amazing detailed and accurate prophecies about them in Daniel 11 with Israel being piggy in the middle as these two kingdoms fought for control of the land of Israel. One of the Selucid rulers from the north was Antiochus Epiphanes. There is a famous prophecy in Daniel 8 about him. Can anyone tell me what this event is usually referred to as? ...Yes, the abomination of desolation. He defiled the Temple by offering a pig sacrifice to the god Jupiter Olympus. Now he did fulfill the prophecy in Daniel 8 about the abomination of desolation in 168 BC but nearly 200 years later Jesus in his famous Olivet prophecy in Matthew 24 said "Therefore when you see (future tense) the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place then let those in Judea flee into the mountains." This is a dual prophecy with another yet future fulfillment to occur in the end time.

The original defilement of the Temple and attempts to enforce idol worship didn't go over well with the Jewish people and they rose up in rebellion. After a great struggle they succeeded in liberating the land of Israel. Can anyone tell me the name that that these leaders are referred to as?...Yes, they were the Maccabees who are also known as the Hasmoneans. They liberated Israel from the Greeks in 164 BC. The Jewish festival of Hannukah, also known as the Feast of Dedication or Feast of Lights, comes from this time when the Temple was cleansed and rededicated following its defilement. Hannukah occurs in late December.

One miracle alleged to have occurred at this time is where the Jews only had enough oil for the Temple lights for one day but the lights miraculously stayed on for 8 days when they finally had some new undefiled oil. A Jewish mother was trying to explain this to her teenager but the teenager just couldn't get it until she explained it this way...Imagine your iphone continuing to work for 8 days without having to recharge it! That would take a miracle for an iphone but I can easily get that with my old school phone. There is evidence to indicate that the Maccabees rebuilt the Temple stone by stone interpreting the defilement as similar to the Old Testament statute about mould rendering a house no longer livable and needing to be pulled down and rebuilt.

To the west of Greece a new power was emerging on the Italian peninsula – Rome. Rome was believed to have been founded around 750 BC by Romulus and Remus, names used for planets in the Romulan empire in Star Trek. By 100 BC Rome had conquered eastern Spain, southern France, Greece, western Turkey and Carthage in north Africa. Rome conquered Syria in 64 BC. After Salome Alexandra, queen of the Maccabean kingdom over Israel, died her two sons divided into civil war. One of them bribed the Roman general Pompey to side with him. Pompey then took advantage of the invitation by conquering Jerusalem and the Maccabean kingdom in 63 BC thus bringing it under the Roman empire.

What you have to appreciate in the New Testament is the recentness of the independence that the Jews enjoyed for almost 100 years under the Maccabees. This fed their strong desire for independence in the time of Jesus.

Following the Roman conquest of the Holy Land Rome conquered Egypt in 31 BC. Can anyone tell me who was the last ruler of the Ptolemies kingdom that controlled Egypt? I'll give you a hint – the last ruler was a woman? ...Yes, Cleopatra was Egypt's last ruler. Contrary to how she is pictured in movies she was in fact of Greek descent and looked like this.

The Roman republic, which was ruled by the Roman Senate, was severely destabilized in a series of civil wars and political conflict, during which Julius Caesar, who conquered much of France, was appointed as perpetual dictator and then assassinated in 44 BC. Civil wars and executions continued, culminating in the victory of Octavian, Caesar's adopted son, over Mark Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC and the annexation of Egypt.

Octavian's power was now complete and in 27 BC the Roman Senate formally granted him the new title Augustus. His other title of Caesar has also been carried on through the titles of the Russian tsar and German kaiser. Augustus Caesar was the first Roman emperor and ruled for 40 years from 27 BC to 14 AD. As you can see from the statue on the right he was also quite the fan of disco dancing. Jesus was born during his reign. His successor was his son Tiberius who was Roman emperor at the time of Christ's ministry and death. Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas built and named the city of Tiberias on the SW shore of the Sea of Galilee after the Roman emperor Tiberius.

After Rome took over Judea in 63 BC Pompey's Judean representative, Hyrcanus, was succeeded by his courtier Antipater the Idumaeen as the first Roman Procurator over Judea. Antipater was the father of Herod the Great who was an Idumaeen, a descendant of Edom, who have been traditional enemies of the Jews.

Herod the Great ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC. The reason that the first Herod was called "the Great" probably has a lot to do with his building accomplishments. Herod had some very talented builders working for him. Some of his great building achievements include the Herodium, a man-made mountain with a great palace on top not far from Bethlehem, his palace with 3 tiers with great pools with mountain views on the top of Masada, his great maritime port and palace out in the Mediterranean Sea at Caesarea which included a Roman theatre and hippodrome for chariot racing and you might be able to see the top of the photo part of the great water aquaduct he had built for bringing in fresh water. Herod also enlarged the Temple in Jerusalem. Under the great stone platform built in Herod's time where the Dome of the Rock stands and close to the Wailing Wall is one raised stone about 15 metres long and 3 metres high that weighs 520 tonnes that engineers even today would struggle to lift with the world's largest cranes.

I'd like to now play a video clip from an excellent Faith Lessons video series put out by Focus on the Family shot on location in Israel that I highly recommend that gives some background on Herod and his family and the area where Jesus grew up.

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In the video it was mentioned how Herod's son Herod Archelaus killed the Jews that protested his taking over Judea after his father died in 4 BC. Ten years later in 6 AD the Jews appealed to Augustus Caesar again to have Herod Archelaus removed because of how badly he ruled. This time they actually succeeded and Augustus Caesar removed him as ruler over Judea. Herod's other two sons, though, continued to rule in Galilee and further north but Rome began to more directly rule Judea in the south of Israel by appointing a Roman Prefect over Judea.

The fifth Roman Prefect over Judea from 26-36 AD was Pontius Pilate. An inscription with his name was found at the port of Caesarea north of today's Tel Aviv. According to one legend Pilate is

believed to have committed suicide and was buried at Mount Pilatus in Switzerland overlooking Lucerne which legend says was named after him. There's an apocryphal lost chapter of Acts which talks of Paul after his trial in Rome leaving for Spain and then to Britain for he had heard "that certain of the children of Israel, about the time of the Assyrian captivity, had escaped by sea to 'The Isles afar off'" called by the Romans Britain where he spoke at Mount Lud near St Paul's Cathedral in London and converted many people.

After passing through France and Belgium it speaks of him going to Mount Pilatus, one of my favourite places I've been to in Switzerland, where he and others see a great sign in Lake Lucerne relating to Pilate and the crucifixion. It is very unlikely to be inspired and should be taken with a pinch a salt but I have to admit I am curious on a purely historical level how accurate the story is. Most commentators note that the book of Acts does end abruptly without the usual salutation and Amen as its conclusion. At the end of the book of Romans Paul spoke of his desire to go as far as Spain after going to Rome.

From 6 AD Judea is ruled by Roman Prefects though the Galilee and Perea on the east bank of the Jordan continued to be ruled by Herod Antipas up until 39 AD. Herod Antipas was the Herod who had John the Baptist decapitated. He happened to be visiting Jerusalem at the time that Jesus was crucified. Pilate initially passed the buck of convicting Jesus to Herod Antipas when he found out Jesus was a Galilean which was governed by Herod Antipas.

There was a brief restoration of the rule of Herod's family over Judea between 41 and 44 AD when Herod Agrippa I successfully lobbied to rule over Judea in place of the prefect. Does anyone remember the story of how he very suddenly died? It's over in Acts 12.

Acts 12:21-23 And on a certain day, Herod sat on his throne, dressed in royal clothing, and made a speech to them. And the people gave a shout, *saying, It is the voice of a god and not of a man!* And immediately the angel of *the* Lord struck him, because he did not give God the glory. And he was eaten by worms and gave up the spirit.

A Roman representative was again appointed over Judea after his death. Two of these governors are noted late in the book of Acts. One was Felix who ruled from 52-60 AD and the other was his successor, Festus who ruled from 60-62 AD.

Paul was kept bound at the prison at Caesarea. Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice were visiting Festus at his seaside palace at Caesarea when Paul pled his case to Festus.

Herod Agrippa II was the son of the Herod Agrippa I who died for not giving God the glory. From 53 AD he was the ruler of the area ruled by Herod the Great's son, Philip, on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee – the area known today as the Golan Heights and as far north as Tell Dan. His other sister was the second wife of Felix, Drusilla.

Tiberius, like in Captain James Tiberius Kirk, was the Roman emperor when Jesus performed His ministry and was crucified. Tiberius was followed by the very hedonistic Caligula who ruled for 4 years from 37 to 41 AD. Following Caligula were Claudius who ruled between 41 and 54 AD then Nero who ruled from 54 to 68 AD. Most of the New Testament was written during their reigns.

Most of Paul's epistles were written between 50 and 64 AD. Nero was Roman emperor when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. There were then 3 emperors who ruled less than a year before Vespasian ruled for 10 years between 69 and 79 AD.

The Jewish revolt that saw Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed happened during his reign in 70 AD. The Roman general who led the destruction of Jerusalem was Titus who became the next Roman emperor for a couple of years between 79 and 81 AD. He was followed by Domitian who reigned from 81 to 96 AD.

Shortly before Jesus' ascension to heaven the Roman emperors began the practice of calling themselves divine. After Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC a comet appeared in the sky for seven days and witnesses came forth saying we saw Julius ascending to heaven to sit at the right hand of Zeus (or Jupiter as he was called by the Romans) and that Julius is a god and Augustus Ceesar is the son of a god. In a sense this was a counterfeit of Jesus' ascension to sit at the Father's right hand as witnessed by His disciples. From that time on witnesses came forward publicly after the death of an emperor saying we saw his ascension and his son therefore is a divine ruler. Emperor worship became more commonplace and went to a whole new level under Domitian where it was demanded. Ephesus in western Turkey or Asia Minor, where the Apostle John was based at the time, really jumped on the bandwagon supporting Domitian in this. An enormous statue of Domitian was found here as part of his emperor worship. Perhaps not bowing down to the emperor here at Ephesus is why John may have ended up on the island of Patmos where he wrote the book of Revelation.

In the minds of most people Rome ruled the whole civilised world at this time as an unchallenged superpower. The great British historian George Rawlinson wrote:

"...the picture of the world during the Roman period...put before students in 'Histories of Rome' was defective, not to say false, in its omission to recognise the real position of Parthia...as a counterpoise to the power of Rome, a second figure in the picture not much inferior to the first, a rival state dividing with Rome the attention of mankind and the sovereignty of the known earth" (The Sixth Oriental Monarchy, p.5-7).

The material that I am about to cover comes mostly from Steven Collins' series of books on the Lost Tribes of Israel which I recommend. Apart from his prophetic views and view that Germany comes from Gad, they are historically solid in my point of view and really add very well to what we teach about the modern identity of the tribes of Israel.

Parthia is a forgotten ancient superpower that was based around the area south of the Caspian Sea where the Assyrians deported the House of Israel several hundred years earlier. Steven Collins provides much historical support to show that the ruling class was descended from the tribes of Israel. While its empire included different ethnic peoples a great many Israelites and Jews resided in its empire. The Euphrates formed part of its western border with the Roman empire and Josephus alludes to this when he speaks of where the so-called lost tribes were in the first century. He wrote:

"The ten tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now, and are **an immense multitude**, and not to be estimated by numbers" (Antiquities of the Jews, Book XI, Chapter V, Section 2).

The Parthians took over most of the lands previously controlled by the Seleucid Greeks who were based in Syria. While Parthia was ruled by a dynasty known as the Arsacids there was no custom of the throne being inherited by the oldest son. Any relative of the king could be chosen as the king. The Roman historian Strabo wrote:

"The Council of the Parthians...consists of two groups, one that of the kinsmen, and the other that of [note this] **the wise men and magi**, from both of which the kings were appointed."

They even had the power to depose and a replace a king as in the case of Mithridates in 56 BC.

The Roman general Crassus, known for his greed and avarice and for defeating the slave army of Spartacus, invaded a few of the vassal states of Parthia in the Middle East for its gold and treasure including a solid gold beam weighing over 300 kilos from the Temple in Jerusalem. It was offered by the high priest in exchange for him sparing the rest of the Temple's gold but he broke his oath and took all the gold. At the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC he lost his life in one of Rome's greatest ever defeats with seven Roman legions being massacred. Carrhae is also known as Harran, near the

Syria-Turkey border where Abraham lived before he moved to the land of Canaan. Parthia's superior archers on horseback broke the back of the Romans much like Henry V's longbow archers at the famous battle at Agincourt when the English beat the much larger French army. The untrustworthy Crassus had his right hand cut off as well as his head into which molten gold was poured into in front of the Parthian and Armenian kings when they made peace after the battle.

In 40 BC Parthia attacked the Romans and defeated them again conquering Syria and Judea and parts of Turkey. The Jews re-asserted their independence and a Jewish prince Antigonus ruled Palestine as a Parthian satrap for 3 years to 37 BC when Rome counterattacked and reclaimed their lost territories including Judea which Herod the Great then began to rule. Rawlinson records that the short period of Parthian rule was mild and just and preferred to Roman rule. Like the 100 year period of independence under the Maccabeans this brief period of Parthian rule played a part in the strong desire for Jewish independence from the yoke of the Romans.

After recapturing their lost territories of Syria and Judea the Romans under Mark Antony invaded Parthia in 37 BC with a force 3 times that of Crassus'. The Parthian army wiped out Antony's supply columns and 10 000 Romans. Mark Antony was lucky to escape with his life and as many soldiers as he did as the Roman invasion turned into a complete Parthian victory.

A ceasefire of hostilities between the two great empires followed this second great Roman defeat. In 1 AD when another Roman invasion seemed imminent Parthia and Rome avoided hostilities diplomatically as each army stood on either side of the Euphrates. It was Roman policy at this time not to do anything that would provoke a war with the Parthians who had kicked their behinds twice before.

This background helps to explain certain events in the life of Jesus Christ. We saw in an earlier quote that the wise men of the Parthian nobility and their priesthood were known as Magi and we know from Matthew 2:1 that wise men or magi from the East came to visit Jesus when He was born. The ruling family of Arsacids often bore names that derive from Phares, one of the sons of Judah and possibly may have even been related to the royal family of David. The magi enquired of him who was to be born king of the Jews. They had an interest in His royal bloodline and it is possible Jesus could have been considered closely related enough to the Parthian royal line to be a candidate for the Parthian throne given the lengths they went to travel from Parthia into Roman territory.

Herod the Great, known for his cruelty, is surprisingly deferential to the Magi when they enquire of him who was born king of the Jews. This is only understandable in light of the relations at the time between Rome and Parthia and Caesar's policy of not provoking the Parthians. In Matthew 2:3 it says that "ALL Jerusalem was troubled" when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem. It was a very public affair. Given the treasures they presented to Jesus, which could have been later used to fund His ministry, it is likely that there would have been a huge escort of perhaps a few thousand Parthian soldiers to protect these Parthian nobles and the treasures they brought with them.

Luke 4:16 says of Jesus "And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up." From this we have to conclude that he did spend most of his childhood years in Nazareth. This is all that is written of Jesus' life between 12 and 30.

We read in Matthew 13:54-56: "And when He had come into His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so much so that they were astonished and said, From where does this *man* have this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And his brothers, James and Joses and Simon and Judas, and his sisters, are they not all with us? Then from where does this *man* have all these things?"

Their quizzical response to Jesus may indicate that after he grew up and entered His 20's that Jesus had been gone from Nazareth for a long time. It seems very surprising in such a small town

as Nazareth was that the locals spoke as if they were unaware of either His wisdom or power and so He may have been away for some time.

In Matthew 17:24-27 we read the story of Jesus being pulled up to pay a tax from which, by His reply, He indicates that He didn't have to pay but He paid it anyway through the miracle of the coin in the fish so as not to cause offence. Some commentators feel that this was a stranger tax, which, being originally from Nazareth He was not obligated to pay but since He was away for so long He paid it anyway.

The term honourable counsellor applied for Joseph's uncle, Joseph of Arimathea in Mark 15:43 is translated from the word "Decurio". Raymond Capt notes that "In the Roman world a decurio denoted an important Roman office usually connected with the general management of a mining district."

This gives us a hint as to where Jesus might have travelled during his 20's. Given his royal bloodline and that the Parthians showed much interest in him at His birth He may have visited Parthia where many of the House of Israel were. There is also a significant amount of legendary evidence supporting the view that He travelled to western Britain such as Cornwall where most of Rome's tin came from.

A 15th century document notes that Joseph of Arimathea converted King Arviragus, an early British king, to the Christian religion and gave him and his party 12 portions of tax free land around Glastonbury noted also in the Domesday book. Jesus may have travelled with his uncle to Britain who was apparently involved in Rome's mining industry. Joseph would, most likely, have had Roman citizenship and maybe Jesus as well.

In Matthew 15:24 Jesus said: "I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the House of Israel". Now the House of Israel is generally a term that is more often used for the ten tribes rather than to the Jews. In John 10:16 to the Jews Jesus said "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold."

Just as a fun little aside, have you ever been struck by the similarities between Jesus and the fictional hero Superman? Just like Jesus the story of Superman starts with him as a baby sent away to avoid destruction then jumps to him briefly in his adolescent years while his human father is still alive before jumping again to when he is 30 years old where his human father is no longer alive and then starts to serve humanity in a public way. The story of him being sent away as a baby also mirrors the birth story of Moses. This is not surprising when you realise the creators of the Superman comic were actually a couple of Jewish boys.

We saw before how Rome's policy of not antagonising the Parthians explained Herod's deferential response to the Magi. It also explains the great reluctance by the cruel Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas to convict Jesus. It was like the two rulers were playing pass the parcel in an Irish pub when they tried to pass the buck of being the one to convict Jesus. They were well aware of the interest that the Parthian Magi had showed in Him and desperately avoided being the one to convict Jesus. Pilate's public act of washing his hands was an attempt to avoid personal responsibility of Jesus' death as demanded by the crowd that refused to relent.

There is one more sidenote regarding the connections between Jesus and Parthia. There is a preserved record quoted in Steven Collins' book of a correspondence between a Parthian vassal king called Abgar of the city of Edessa and Jesus. Abgar wrote of hearing the miracles of Jesus and asked him come and cure him of a sickness that he had, even offering him sanctuary in his city. The reply from Jesus sounds very much in the style of things He says in the gospel of John and Jesus says that he has to complete what He has been given to do before being taken up to the One who sent Him but mentioned he would send one of his disciples to cure him. Thaddaeus, mentioned in Mark 3:18, according to records did go to Edessa and Abgar was healed. Abgar is quoted as saying

that he believed in Jesus so strongly that he wanted to take an army and destroy those who crucified Him had he not been prevented by the imperial power of Rome to do so.

It is interesting to note the locations of the visitors to Jerusalem that saw the miracle of the tongues of fire over the disciples on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia are at the top of the list. All these were within the Parthian empire at the time.

The original apostles were sent primarily to the House of Israel while Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. Many of them went into the Parthian empire with the gospel. Peter himself went to Babylon (1 Peter 5:13).

James opened his epistle by saying: “James, a servant of God and of *the* Lord Jesus Christ, **to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion**” (James 1:1). Like Josephus, he would have been aware that the descendants of the ten-tribed northern kingdom of Israel taken into captivity by the Assyrians centuries earlier lived mostly in the Parthian empire.

I would like to conclude with one of the most brilliant pieces of detective work on Parthia in Steven Collins’ books that I would love to see included in our book on America and Britain in prophecy and that is his connection of the fall of Parthia with the great Caucasian migration into Europe.

Like the Persians before them the Parthians showed a high degree of religious tolerance. Not so their conquerors, the Sassanid Arabs who conquered Parthia in 226 AD. Gone was the old Parthian custom of religious tolerance. In its place Zoroastrianism was imposed as a state religion. Their religious intolerance not unlike that seen in the Muslim world today saw the majority of white peoples still dwelling in the Middle East being driven out. This not only included those descended from the tribes of Israel but Assyrians and Elamites as well.

The term ‘Caucasian’ is a traditional, historic name commonly applied to the white race. It gets its origin from the major Caucasian migration into Europe mostly via the Caucasian Mountains that occurred after the fall of Parthia. At this same time a whole host of so-called barbarian tribes pour into central and eastern Europe and into the Roman empire itself and contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. The Israelites migrated to NW Europe and behind them were the Assyrians who migrated to Germany and the Elamites who migrated to eastern Europe.