

Meeting Jesus: His Life & Times

Worksheet for Week 2

Israel and Rome

These worksheets will provide you with some historical and geographical background that will help you to make more sense of the Gospels. The worksheet will also provide you with a structured set of daily Bible readings related to the Jesus' life and times. Most of our readings will be taken from the Gospel accounts. I'd suggest you begin by reading this worksheet and then move on to the daily Bible readings. If you have a study bible, you might look up a few cross-references to other passages.

The Land of Israel

Israel is a small country. Modern Israel (setting aside the desolate Sinai Peninsula) is no larger than an area bounded by Denton, Ft. Worth, Waxahachie, and Garland. In ancient times, the entire area encompassing what we call the Holy Land was called Palestine, after the Philistines, coastal enemies of the Israelites. Sorting out all the political divisions in Palestine during Jesus' life is pretty complicated. In simple terms, Palestine was divided into three parts: Judea (in which lay Jerusalem) in the south, Samaria in the middle, and Galilee in the north. Though Jesus was born in Bethlehem, about 5 miles from Jerusalem, he grew up in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. Given its location on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, Israel/Palestine was akin to an interstate interchange. The major roads connecting the major empires to their north and east with Egypt all passed through Israel/Palestine. The great empires of the ancient near-east pushed and shoved each other all over the land God had promised Abraham.

From the coastal plains, the land in Israel sweeps upward toward the east, rising to mountainous terrain along a major rift valley. Down this valley, from north to south, runs the Jordan River connecting the Sea of Galilee in the north with the Dead Sea to the south. Jesus was baptized in the river and he spent 40 days in a wilderness area to the north of the Dead Sea. At the northern end of Palestine, Mt. Hermon rises to more than 9,000 feet and is covered with snow year-end. At the southern-end, the Dead Sea is the lowest place on earth!

Rome

With the help of Herod the Great, Rome had secured its control of Palestine about 30 years before Jesus birth. Though Herod was allowed to sit on a puppet throne, Rome wielded its power through governors and procurators such Pontius Pilate. In Jesus' day, Rome controlled a vast empire spanning the Mediterranean and reaching up into Britain.

Rome wanted two things from its governors. They had to keep the peace and collect the taxes. There was constant strife between the Jews of Palestine and their Roman lords. Rome wasn't troubled by the Jews' peculiar belief in one God (who had chosen the Jews, no less!). Instead, Rome was constantly confronted by Jewish efforts to throw off Roman rule and establish God's kingdom on earth. Indeed, Galilee was a hotbed of this revolutionary activity. In about 4BC, Judas ben Hezekiah led a Jewish revolt which the Romans ended by crucifying thousands of Jews! In 6AD, Judas the Galilean gathered some followers, declared himself the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and sought, through force, to overthrow Roman rule. Of course, it was a doomed-from-the-start effort, and Judas ended up dead at the hands of the Roman executioners just like every other would-be Messiah – and there were more than a few! The Romans were heavy-handed in their rule of Palestine and often provoked incidents with their ignorant and heavy-handed style. For example, early in his procuratorship, Pontius Pilate used money from the Jewish Temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then had to crush the resistance to his theft from the Jewish treasury!¹

¹ Wright, N.T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p. 172-174

Bible Readings for Week 2²

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. What do you find most surprising in these readings?

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| Day 1 Mark 1:1-3:12 Intro to the Gospel; Jesus' authority and responses to it | Day 2 Mark 3:13-6:6 Jesus' disciples |
| Day 3 Mark 6:7 – 8:26 Training of the Disciples | Day 4 Mark 8:27 – 10:52 The journey to Jerusalem |
| Day 5 Mark 11:1 – 16:8 Jesus in the temple and on the cross; He is risen! | Weekly Prayer Concerns |

² The outline of Mark's Gospel is from *Introducing the New Testament: its literature and theology*, by Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001. This is an excellent introductory text to the New Testament.