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# The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON III : INTRODUCTION -- THE POLITICAL TIMES

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## THE POLITICAL WORLD: ROME

Gal 4:4 “when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son”

With the exception of little-known kingdoms of the far East, the entire world was under the dominion of Rome (from the Atlantic Ocean to the Euphrates and Red Sea; from the Danube, Black Sea, and the Rhone to the Sahara Desert)

under one “dictator” Emperor, called in NT “king” (1 Pet 2:17) and “Augustus” (Lk 2:1)

Roman empire took its name from its capital city in Italy, and accepts 753 BC as when it was founded. About the beginning of the fifth century BC, it had achieved a political organization as a republican form of government. It went from that point to the ruling empire of the world through a series of almost uninterrupted war for 500 years.

As Rome expanded, the generals began to use their armies to not only foreign conquest but also to gain power at home. From 146 BC until the death of Julius Caesar, there were almost constant civil wars between Marius, Sulla, Caesar, Antony, and Octavian to gain control of the Roman state. Octavian (called by the Senate “Augustus”) succeeded in exterminating his opponents in 30 BC and became their first emperor.

As for the Jews, they had been under Greek authority under the successors of Alexander the Great (330 - 166 BC). In 168 BC Antiochus polluted the Jewish temple by offering a pig on the altar. A year later the Maccabees revolted and gained Jewish independence in 166 BC. The Jews remained independent until 63 BC when the Roman General Pompey captured Jerusalem and made the provinces of Palestine tributary to Rome.

### *Augustus Caesar, 27 BC - 14 AD*

Under Octavian’s rule, the Roman “*imperium*” (“*power of the Imperial State*”) was thoroughly established. Augustus became the “*princeps*” (“*first citizen of the land*”). Politically, the new government was a compromise between the old republican and the dictatorship Julius Caesar had advocated. The Senate was retained as a theoretical ruling body, and they made Augustus Commander in Chief of the armies in 27 BC.

Augustus ruled wisely and well, introducing many reforms for the good of Rome. Among these were the revival of the state religion which worshipped Rome itself. The emperor was worshipped himself in many places, although he did not demand such worship.

To consolidate the empire, he took a census of the population for the purpose of raising an army and taxation. It was during this time that Jesus was born (Lk 2:1). During the 41 years of Augustus’ rule, he brought order out of chaos and boasted “he had found Rome brick and had left it marble”.

### *Tiberius Caesar, 14 - 37 AD*

Tiberius, Augustus’ adopted son, was chosen to succeed him. He was 56 years old when becoming emperor, and had served in the political realm most of his life. Augustus had insisted however that he divorced his wife that he loved and marry Augustus’ daughter Julia, a woman who was openly profligate. This soured Tiberius’ temper permanently, making him distant, haughty, and suspicious. He was never popular and generally feared and disliked. Discovered and foiled a plot against him in 31 AD, which made him even more suspicious and cruel. When he died in 37 AD, the Senate rejoiced.

It was during the reign of Tiberius that Jesus’ public ministry and death occurred (Lk 3:1).

### *Caligula, 37 - 41 AD*

Made Tiberius’ successor by the Senate. He was as popular at the beginning as Tiberius had been unpopular. He pardoned political prisoners, reduced taxes, and gave public entertainments. However, he soon demanded to be worshipped as a god, which immediately alienated the Jews. His reckless spending exhausted the funds in the public treasury. In order to replenish it, he resorted to violent means, including the confiscation of private property and extortion of every kind. His tyranny became so unbearable that the imperial guards assassinated him.

### *Claudius, 41 - 54 AD*

Came out of relative obscurity, not having taken part in the political processes during Tiberius and Caligula. Physically, a childhood illness made him look idiotic in his public appearances (drooling mouth, shambling form) but intellectually he was very capable. Under Claudius, Rome became a bureaucracy governed by committees and secretaries. He extended citizenship to the

provincials. Religiously, he strongly disliked foreign cults and attempted to renew Rome's ancient religion to its former prominence. It was under Claudius that the Jews were expelled from Rome due to riots "at the instigation of one Chrestus." (Christus?, referring to the preaching of Christ?) Probably the order which removed Aquila and Priscilla from Rome (Acts 18:2).

### ***Nero, 54 - 68 AD***

Adopted by Claudius, Nero reigned after Claudius died. His first five years of rule were peaceful and successful, thanks to two close advisors. In 59 AD however he murdered his mother to take full charge of the government himself. As Caligula, he emptied the treasury then resorted to oppression and violence to replenish it. In 64 AD a fire broke out in Rome which was blamed on the Christians (Nero is suspected to have begun the fire to make room for his new Golden House palace). Many Christians were tortured and executed, and tradition says Peter and Paul perished in this persecution. Nero became increasingly unpopular and several attempts at his life failed. Finally a revolt in Gaul and Spain proved successful, and Nero had himself killed by one of his own freedmen at his command in order to avoid capture as he fled Rome.

### ***Galba, 68 AD***

The revolt of the legions showed the empire that they were really commanded by the army, and it could place an emperor without regard to the Senate. Galba however was not the unanimous choice of the legions, and when he appointed Otho as his successor, Otho persuaded the praetorian guards to kill Galba and make him emperor.

### ***Otho, 69 AD***

Although the Senate concurred with his appointment, Vitellius, the legate of Germany, marched on Rome with his troops and Otho was killed in battle.

### ***Vitellius, 69 AD***

Vitellius was recognized by the Senate, but was unable to control the army. The army in the east made Vespasian emperor, who was at the time engaged in the siege of Jerusalem. Vespasian left the siege in charge of his son Titus, then proceeded to Egypt from whence he cut off Rome's food supply. As Rome was marched upon, Vitellius was killed and Vespasian was proclaimed ruler.

### ***Vespasian, 69 - 79 AD***

Vespasian restored order to Rome, suppressing revolts and replenishing the treasury. He built the now-famous Colosseum. He died in 79 AD, leaving the rule to Titus who had been his co-regent.

### ***Titus, 79 - 81 AD***

Although he ruled only a short time, he was one of the most popular rulers Rome ever had. His generosity calmed the Senate who feared he would be like his father. During his reign Vesuvius erupted and Titus did his utmost to rescue as many of the victims as possible. A few months later Rome suffered a severe fire, after which Titus even sold some of his personal furniture to contribute to the general need.

### ***Domitian, 81 - 96 AD***

When Titus died in 81 AD he had no son, so the Senate conferred the imperial power to his younger brother Domitian. He tried to raise the moral level of Rome by restraining the corruptions of the Roman stage and prostitution. The temples of the older gods were restored, and Domitian suppressed foreign religions. It is believed that during his reign John was banished to Patmos, although extensive legislation or action against the Christians during his reign is lacking.

His last years were a nightmare to the Senate since Domitian was hard and suspicious. Even his own family did not feel safe from spies, so in self-defense they had him assassinated.

### ***Nerva, 96 - 98 AD***

Mild and advanced in years, the Senate felt safe in selecting Nerva. His reign was relatively free from internal tensions. He appointed Trajan as his successor, and died in 98 AD.

### ***Trajan, 98 - 117 AD***

A soldier by profession, Trajan marched to enlarge Rome's borders but died en route to the capital in Cilicia in 117 AD.

## **THE POLITICAL WORLD: HEROD AND THE JEWS**

**tetrarch:** originally, one who ruled over the fourth part of a kingdom or province. The Romans used the word loosely for a petty

subject prince, even though the land was not divided among four such rulers. Therefore it became a convenient title for a prince to whom they granted a small territory only, and whom they were unwilling to dignify with the authority and rank of a king. In the NT, a tetrarch was sometimes in courtesy called a king (Mt 14:1,9; Mk 6:14).

63 BC Pompey brings Palestine under Roman control and forms the Decapolis league in Transjordan to balance the power of Judea which was reduced to its former smallness. Rome controls Palestine from 63 BC - 135 AD.

55 - 43 BC Antipater the Idumaeen ruled Palestine under Roman grant.

41 BC Herod and Phasael, Antipater's sons, were tetrarchs

40 - 37 BC Antigonos, Aristobulus' son, was high priest and king by aid of the Parthians.

37 - 4 BC Herod the Great king of Judea by Roman senatorial grant.

### *Antipas*

appointed governor of Idumaea by Alexander Jannaeus

died 78 BC, succeeded by his son Antipater

### *Antipater*

described as cunning, resourceful, and having unbridled ambition

when Caesar defeated Pompey (48 BC), Antipater and his companion Hyrcanus II availed themselves as subjects of Caesar. Caesar rewarded them by making Antipater procurator of Judea in 47 BC and made Hyrcanus the high priest.

died at the hands of an assassin 43 BC, leaving four sons (Phasael, Herod, Joseph, and Pheroras) and one daughter (Salome)

### *Herod the Great*

encouraged the circulation of the legend that his family descent was from an illustrious Babylonian Jew, but it has no historic basis -- he was Idumaeen which at one time was subdued by John Hyrcanus in 125 BC and embodied into the Asmonean kingdom by enforced circumcision, but their allegiance never changed

Phasael was nominally his co-regent but figures very little in history, and he as well as his sister Salome proved to be an endless source of trouble to Herod due to their family brawls. While Herod was tetrarch of Judea, Phasael was governor of Jerusalem. While Herod was away in Rome on business, Jerusalem was attacked by the Asmoneans and Phasael taken. While in prison awaiting his fate, he committed suicide by dashing his brains out on the prison walls.

began his career as governor of Galilee while yet a young man (15-25 years old?) and ruled for 42 years; became well known early for ridding his dominion of looters and raising tribute money for Rome, both of which gave him additional powers with Rome

appointed tetrarch of Judea in 41 BC by Antony, then king of all Judea in 37 BC. Once becoming king, Herod returned to Judea while Jerusalem under control of an Asmonean, Antigonos (in which his brother died). Taking Jerusalem, Herod kills Antigonos along with 45 of his chief adherents. This bloodshed and actions of Herod turned his wife Mariamne's love for Herod into bitter hatred, herself being of Asmonean blood (the granddaughter of Hyrcanus).

Although Antony always defended Herod, Herod quickly aligned himself with Augustus when he conquered Antony in 31 BC. Augustus rewarded Herod by having his boundaries extended to Rome.

Herod became afraid of leaving any Asmonean power alive, so he sacrificed his wife and mother-in-law in 28 BC, then ultimately his own two sons by her in 7 BC, not too long before he died.

While pretending to obey the Jewish laws, he continually defied the Jews by bringing in Roman sports and temples. His influence was felt on the younger Jew in this regard, and a partly-political, partly-religious party arose called the *Herodians*, Jews in outward religious form but inwardly Gentiles by their view of life and dress. Although opposed by the Jews, they were associated with the Pharisees and Sadducees in their hatred for Jesus (Matthew 22:16; Mk 3:6; 12:13).

To placate the Jews for his obvious violations of their laws, he rebuilt the temple of Zerubbabel, attempting to make it even more glorious than Solomon's temple. This work was accomplished between 19 BC and 11 or 9 BC, although the entire work was not finished till 62-64 AD (cp John 2:20; Mk 14:57-59; Mt 24:1,2). So beautiful was the temple that even Titus sought to spare the building in the final attack on the city in 70 AD.

Jews saw Herod as a usurper to the throne of David and made several attempts on his life, all of which failed. To give gifts to Rome, he robbed his own people, even robbing the grave of King David of its treasures.

In his dying days of his life, Herod remained true to nature by ordering the execution of his son Antipater who had instigated the murder of his half-brothers, Alexander and Aristobulus. Another order to be carried out after his death was the execution of a number of nobles who were guilty of a small outbreak in Jerusalem.

Josephus wrote of Herod: "A man he was of great barbarity toward all men equally, and a slave to his passions, but above the consideration of what was right. Yet was he favored by fortune as much as any man ever was, for from a private man he became a king, and though he were encompassed by ten thousand dangers, he got clear of them all and continued his life to a very old age." ISBE states: "His intellectual powers were far beyond the ordinary; his will was indomitable; he was possessed of great tact, when he saw fit to employ it; in the great crises of his life he was never at a loss what to do; and no one has ever accused Herod the Great of cowardice. There were in him two distinct individualities, as was the case with Nero. Two powers struggled in him for the mastery, and the lower one at last gained complete control. During the first part of his reign there were evidences of large-heartedness, of great possibilities in the man. But the bitter experiences of his life, the endless whisperings and warnings of his court, the irreconcilable spirit of the Jews, as well as the consciousness of his own wrongdoing, changed him into a Jewish Nero: a tyrant, who bathed his own house and his own people in blood. The demons of Herod's life were jealousy of power, and suspicion, its necessary companion."