



The town of Bethlehem as it appears today.

The Setting for the Messiah

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The Roman Empire was the setting for the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New.

Rome was founded, according to legend, in 753 BC, on the banks of the Tiber; and first headed a league of city-states. It was then governed by Etruscan Kings. In 509 BC, Rome became a republic, governed by an assembly of the people and a senate. The Republic united Italy under the government of Rome.

When the Roman Republic came into being in 509 BC, the Judahites had returned from the Babylonian exile and had rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple. In the Far East, Hinduism was already an ancient religion. Buddha and Confucius were alive and active. The heartland of Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific islands were already populated and, in many cases, enjoyed highly developed cultures.

All these regions, and others, had indigenous religions which sustained the people, and, in spite of their understandable shortcomings, undoubtedly served as instrumentalities of God's saving grace, given in view of the future coming of the Savior.

In Rome, after 265 BC, the Senate took over control and the people exercised a diminishing direct voice in government. To the east, the Greeks dominated the political scene. To the west, Carthage vied with Rome for domination.

Wars with Syria, between 192 BC and 189 BC, gave Rome a footing in the eastern Mediterranean. In the Macedonian Wars, which ended in 168 BC, Rome extinguished the Kingdom of Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great. In 148 BC, Macedonia became a Roman province. The three Punic Wars, which ended in 146 BC, established Rome over Carthage and Rome became the strongest political and military power in the western hemisphere.

This supremacy was exercised within the framework of the Hellenism by which Alexander the Great had established Greek ideals as the ideals of civilized western man.

In the second century before

Christ, philhellenism became a passion in Rome itself and koine (popular Greek) became the language of the people in Rome; and also saw the introduction of mass slavery into Rome.

From 133 BC, though the Senate remained in control, individual personalities began to dominate Roman politics: the Gracchi and, from 118 BC to 100 BC, Marius.

In the year 67 BC, the Senate gave extraordinary authority and powers to Pompey, a general, and sent him, with his armies, to push the power of Rome still further to the east. Pompey established Roman domination to the banks of the Euphrates, bringing to an end the power of Syria and of the Seleucid dynasty.

While Pompey was campaigning in the east, the Hasmoneans, descendants of the Maccabees, were fighting among themselves for control in Jerusalem. Pompey, having liquidated the Seleucid dynasty, reorganized the Province of Syria so that it included Syria and Palestine. Scaurus was appointed governor.

The Hasmonean brothers, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus, were struggling for the high priesthood. In 63 BC, Pompey stunned and horrified the Jews when he strode into the holy of holies of the Jerusalem Temple and took control. He appointed Hyrcanus II to be the high priest, but denied political power to him. Judea, Galilee and Peraea were united into one administrative unit for the benefit of those who worshipped at the Jerusalem Temple. The Decapolis (10 cities east of the Jordan), Samaria and the coastal cities, were established as a separate administrative unit. Political power was given to Herod Antipater. When Pompey returned to Rome in 63 BC, all these actions were ratified by the Senate.

The next period was a period of civil war in Rome. Out of this the First Triumvirate was formed, a coalition of Pompey, Julius Caesar and Crassus. Though the Senate continued to function, the Triumvirate actually controlled the government.

The years 48 to 44 BC were the years of the dictatorship of Julius Caesar. He controlled

the legions of the army and governed the provinces through his personal legates. Caesar assumed the title "Imperator" (Emperor). He centralized executive authority over the entire empire. Though the old constitution, the assembly and the Senate remained, in 45 BC the Senate, by decree, granted "perpetual dictatorship" to Caesar.

Caesar was, undoubtedly, one of the great military and political geniuses of all times. Officers of state, consuls, praetors, aediles, quaestors, and tribunes continued to function, but Caesar made the appointments and governed with a firm hand. He reformed the calendar and initiated extensive building and welfare programs. He was murdered on the Ides of March in 44 BC.

During the civil war in Rome, Hyrcanus II, the high priest, and Antipater, the politician, had supported Caesar. They were richly rewarded. Antipater was given Roman citizenship and made procurator of Judea.

From 43 to 28 BC, Rome was governed by the second triumvirate: Mark Anthony, M. Amelius Lepidus and Octavian. Mark Anthony, famous for his love affair with Cleopatra, assumed the government of the eastern part of the Empire. M. Amelius Lepidus governed Africa. Octavian, Caesar's great nephew, governed Italy and the west. In 27 BC Octavian became Emperor. By Senate vote, he became "princeps" (prince) for a term of ten years, which was subsequently renewed four times for periods of 5, 5, 10 and 10 years, respectively — which was for life. Octavian assumed the name Augustus. He was Emperor when Jesus was born.

No provision was made for succession to imperial authority. While he still lived, Augustus appointed his nephew, Tiberius, as co-regent. Tiberius was Emperor when Jesus died.

Rome continued to be a republic, in name, to the third century. In fact, however, the rule of the Emperor was absolute. In the city of Rome itself, all power silently and gradually became personal and absolute in the hands of the emperor. The empire was governed by a system of officials appointed personally by the emperor and responsible to him.

This official generally bore the title of "governor" in a given province. Officials for lesser territories were called by a variety of titles, the most common of which was, perhaps, "procurator".

Judea was administered by a procurator, who was subject to the legate, or governor, of Syria, except for the reigns of Herod (37-4 BC) and Agrippa (41-44 AD). The procurator had troops under his command, but these were in units smaller than legions. He had responsibility for the collection of taxes and for the death penalty. He also had authority to name and depose the high priest. Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea from 26 to 36 AD.

Now we turn our attention to Herod the Great, king of Judea, as he appears in the Gospels. Herod was the son of Antipater, procurator, appointed by Pompey. Antipater was an Idumean. Idumea was the region immediately south of Judea. The Idumeans had been forced to accept Judaism by the Hasmonean, John Hyrcanus. They were looked upon with suspicion and considered foreigners by the Jews. Antipater supported Caesar in the civil war. He was a favorite in Rome and spent a great deal of time there. He married an Arabian princess. From Herod's background, his Judaism was suspect.

Herod received the title "King of the Jews" while an exile in Rome. At that time, Antigonos, a brother of Hyrcanus II, was in political control of Judea. Herod had to fight for his position as king. He did and he won. Still, the Jews considered him a foreigner and a tool of the Romans.

He was two-faced about religion, and observed Jewish practices when he was in a Jewish situation, and pagan Greek practices when he was among the Greeks. His friends, Augustus and Anthony, expand-

ed his kingdom to include Judea proper, Idumea, Samaria, Galilee, Peraea and Bashan.

In spite of tragic weaknesses, shortcomings and mistakes, Herod was, in many ways, an effective ruler. He rebuilt the City of Samaria. He built the harbor and seaport city of Caesarea. He rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple. He rebuilt Jericho. He constructed fortresses and palaces throughout his jurisdiction with fortresses on both sides of the Dead Sea. John the Baptist was beheaded in one of these.

Herod's personal life was immoral and dissolute. He repudiated his Idumean wife, Doris, and married Mariamme, the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II.

The family was torn by strife and intrigue, caused very largely by Salome, Herod's sister. He put many of his own children to death and finally executed Mariamme and Salome themselves. The last version of his will, approved by Augustus, gave to Archelaus, a son, the title of king, without jurisdiction. He named two other sons, Antipas and Philip, as tetrarchs of part of his territory. Antipas (Herod Antipas) is mentioned in the passion of Jesus (Luke, 7-12).

Herod the Great was married five times. Two of his wives were named Mariamme. The duplication of names in the family creates difficulties.

Though Herod the Great died in 4 BC according to our present calendar, Jesus was born in his reign. Dionysius Exiguus (Denis the Little), a Roman monk, in the first half of the sixth century, computed the birth of Christ. After this time, the custom of indicating dates from the birth of Christ, instead of from the founding of the City of Rome, spread. Later information makes clear that Denis the Little missed his computation by from four to seven years.

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