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## **Introduction**

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The twentieth century Christian is by necessity a student of history. A time-barrier lies between us and the most pivotal events in the annals of human history. Further, those events transpired in a given cultural and political setting that are quite different from our free, democratic society.

“The revelation of God in the New Testament was imparted through men who lived in a definite locale of time and space, and who spoke in the imagery and circumstances of their own era. While the truth and application of the message are unquestionably eternal and unchanging, the correct interpretation depends largely upon a proper comprehension of its historical setting.

“Because the authors lived within the milieu they described, they took for granted that their contemporaries would understand it, too, and consequently did not attempt to explain many details which would be quite patent to their readers. To us of the twentieth century the facts which they assumed to be obvious and hence unnecessary to explain are obscure. We can comprehend the historical context of these writings only by careful research and reconstruction of the environment from which they emanated” (Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Times*, preface).

The diverse influences of Grecian, Roman and Jewish culture clash mightily over first century Palestine. The Roman Empire, Daniel’s fourth kingdom, was arguably the greatest ruling force of all time in the scope of its own world. The Jewish nation, a mere vestige of its once-glorious ancestry, chafed under this Roman trespass. They were obstinate and rebellious toward their hated Roman overlords. Into this cauldron Christ came, intent upon setting up “*a kingdom which will never be destroyed*” (Dan 2:44). Christianity was born in the cradle of Jewish persecution and grew to maturity despite Rome’s all-out opposition.

What was it like to be a God-fearing person in the first century? How would the simple lessons of Jesus from nature and daily life affect you? How courageous would you be against political threats? How clearly could you see heaven’s truths through the mist of Greek mythology or the fanatical traditionalism of the Jews? How would you receive teachings of family love, honor and loyalty amid a bloodthirsty and decadent society? This study is offered in the hope that our understanding of first century life will enhance our grasp of the Scriptures and our appreciation of the lives of the first citizens in Christ’s kingdom.

## **The Greco-Roman Influence in the First Century**

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- A. **Language:** A universal language aided in the rapid spread and uniform expression of Christian principles.

1. Over time one particular Greek dialect became dominant throughout the Mediterranean world. It is known as Koine (common) Greek.
2. Jews recognized Greek as the universal language and even the inscription on the wall of the outer temple warning Gentiles not to enter was in Koine Greek.
3. The Holy Spirit chose Koine Greek as the language of New Testament revelation. The language was fitting to express the spiritual and practical concepts which underlie a life of redemption and sanctification in the Lord.

B. **Cosmopolitanism:** Roman rule and commerce brought people together in an unprecedented way. This mixture was at the same time a strength and weakness of the Empire, but it fostered the spread of Christianity.

1. "Under the Roman empire all national barriers were removed; the great cities - Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, etc. - became meetingplaces of all races and languages. The Romans were everywhere carrying their laws and civilization; Greeks settled in thousands at all important centers as professors, merchants, physicians, or acrobats ... In the Roman armies soldiers from all quarters of the empire became companions ... And in every city of importance, East or West, large bodies of the Jewish Diaspora were settled" (*ISBE* [Orr], p. 2600).
2. "Nothing could have been more favorable to Christianity than this intermixture of all races and mutual exchange of thought. Each people discovered how much it had in common with its neighbors" (*ibid*).

C. **Transportation:** "The Romans excelled in engineering ... The roads that traversed mountain and plain in every direction from Rome to the utmost frontiers of the empire were so well drained and paved that the remains of many of them are still visible, and some are still in use" (Tenney, *New Testament Times*, pp. 76-77).

1. "The Empire had 51,000 miles of paved highways and a pervasive network of secondary roads" (Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 325)."
2. "At every tenth mile a *statio* offered a stopping place, where fresh horses could be hired; at every thirty miles was a *mansio* - an inn that was also a store, a saloon, and a brothel. Most innkeepers robbed their guests whenever convenient, and other thieves made the highways unsafe at night despite a garrison of soldiers at each *statio*" (*ibid*).
3. The rivers and Mediterranean Sea were teeming with barges and cargo ships which also provided for business and recreational sailing. Voyages were hazardous, and the open Mediterranean was rarely crossed between November and March. Piracy was uncommon as Augustus had established two main war fleets and ten smaller squadrons to combat the problem.

D. **Religious Climate:** “With the early Roman empire began a period of tremendous religious unrest. Men tried philosophy, magic, astrology, foreign rites, to find a sure place of rest ... The philosophers of Athens mocked Paul on Mars’ Hill when he spoke of a resurrection. Such was the attitude of the educated classes of the Greek-Roman world at the dawn of Christianity ... The distinction between moral and physical evil was coming to the surface, and hence a consciousness of sin ... ‘The throne of the human mind’ was declared vacant, and Christianity was at hand as the best claimant. In fact, the Greek-Roman mind had been expanding to receive the pure teachings of Jesus” (ibid, p. 2602).

1. Roman law considered Judaism to be a religiones licitae (licensed religion) and initially held Christianity to be an offshoot of Judaism. But over time the Roman Empire became gradually more hostile to Christianity.
2. What might have contributed to Rome’s suspicion regarding Christianity?
  - a. Confusion of “kingdom” concepts. Jesus explained to Pilate that His kingdom was not of this world, but those not spiritually attuned would not readily understand the nature of Christ’s kingdom.
  - b. Christianity’s intolerance. Most all the cults and religions of the day were tolerant of each other, but Christianity promoted absolute truths about the nature of God and morality and demanded complete separation from false forms of religion. Thus Christians appear to be atheists; the denial of the pantheon threatened to stir the wrath of the gods against Rome.
  - c. Aggressiveness of Christianity. “The Christians were not content with an uncompromising withdrawal from the practices of heathen worship: they also actively assailed the pagan cultus. To Christians they became doctrines of demons” (ibid, p. 2604).
3. “The Christians were bitterly hated, not only by the populace, but by the upper educated classes. Most of the early adherents belonged to the slave, freedman and artisan classes ... few were Roman citizens ... no nicknames were too vile to attach to them. Tacitus reckons the Christian faith ‘atrocious and abominable’; Pliny called it ‘vile and indecent’” (ibid, p. 2605).

## **Conclusion**

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The Greco-Roman world provided many benefits for the advancement of Christianity both from a practical and spiritual standpoint. Truly it was “*the fullness of the time*” (Gal 4:4), the right time as determined in the mind of God for His kingdom to be established and to conquer the bankrupt philosophies, ideologies and idolatries of the then-present generation of humanity. It was an exciting time as one considers the unfolding of events with eternal implications. It was an era in which the hope of every Christian today is rooted - when “*God sent forth His Son.*”

## **Questions**

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1. Why is it important to know some of the history of the era when Christianity began?
2. In what language was the New Testament originally revealed?
3. How did a common language foster the spread of Christianity?
4. How many miles of paved highways crossed the Empire? How was this useful to the apostles and their associates?
5. What is a statio? A mansio?
6. During what months did few ships travel on the Mediterranean?
7. T/F The Roman Empire was hostile to Christianity from the start.
8. What three things might have caused Rome's opposition to Christianity?
9. What does 1 Cor 1:26 say about the status of many of the first Christians?
10. Give two examples where Roman officials prevented harm from coming upon Paul.
11. What is the Jewish Diaspora? (Hint: see Jas 1:1)
12. How did Paul get from Philippi to Troas at the end of his third journey? How did he get from Troas to Assos?

### **Introduction**

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Will Durant notes: “Law was the most characteristic and lasting expression of the Roman spirit. As Greece stands in history for freedom, so Rome stands for order ... Rome has left us its laws, and its traditions of administration, as the bases of social order ... law is the essence of Roman history” (*Caesar and Christ*, p. 391). Law was necessary to social order in such a diverse Empire. It is what kept the Empire together, and it served to protect Christianity in its infancy.

### **Citizenship**

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“The first person in Roman law was the citizen. He was defined as anyone who had been accepted into a Roman tribe by birth, adoption, emancipation, or governmental grant. The most precious privilege of a Roman citizen was the safeguarding of his person, property, and rights by the law, and his immunity from torture or violence in the trying of his case” (ibid, p. 394-395).

### **Roman Emperors**

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**Augustus Caesar (Octavian) [27 B.C. - A.D. 14]:** While Julius Caesar lay the foundation of emperor rule, Octavian brought it to reality following his defeat of Mark Antony at Actium in 31 B.C. The Roman Commonwealth was in shambles economically, morally and politically, and Rome’s survival depended upon one man taking control and ruling benevolently. That man was Octavian, who became Augustus Caesar. Augustus brought stability and prosperity to the newly organized Empire and his influence was extended long after his death.

**Tiberius Caesar [A.D. 14-37]:** Tiberius was a conservative administrator who continued the policies of Augustus. He was emperor through the ministries (and deaths) of John and Jesus (see Lk 3:1ff), and He appointed Pontius Pilate as procurator over Judea (and removed him ten years later).

**Claudius Caesar [A.D. 41-54]:** Caligula, the intervening emperor between Tiberius and Claudius, antagonized the Jews by his assumption of divinity and the forced inclusion of his statue in the Temple in Jerusalem. Claudius reversed these policies and restored a good relationship with the Jews throughout the Empire. However, it was Claudius who expelled the Jews from Rome (Ac 18:2). “Classical writers report that the reign of Claudius was, from bad harvest or other causes, a period of general distress and scarcity over the whole world” (*ISBE* [Bromiley], Vol. 1, p. 717).

**Nero [A.D. 54-68]:** Though not named in the NT, Nero would have been the Caesar when Paul made his appeal in Acts 25:11-12. Nero became very hostile to Christians and killed many as scapegoats for the devastating burning of Rome in July, A.D. 64.

## Political Divisions of the Empire

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From Augustus onward, provinces of the Empire were of two broad categories: **public**, governed by proconsuls under the immediate authority of the senate, or **imperial**, managed by legates appointed by the emperor. Asia, Macedonia, Achaia, Bithynia-Pontus, Crete and Cyprus were all under the Senate. Syria was the principal imperial province in the east. Judea was considered a minor province and was ruled by procurators. “Only about twenty-five posts existed throughout the empire until the death of Tiberius, and fifty to sixty under Claudius and Nero” (*ISBE* [Bromiley], Vol. 3, p. 979).

“Civic life occupied the attention and controlled the activities of the vast majority of provincial inhabitants” (*ISBE* [Bromiley], Vol. 3, p. 1027). So long as the province remained at peace, city magistrates were in control of most day-to-day functions. Paul comes under the influence of these in Iconium (Ac 14:4-6), Philippi (Ac 16:19-23) and Thessalonica (Ac 17:6-9).

## Questions

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1. Why were the Roman guards afraid of Paul (Ac 22:25-29)? How did Paul become such? How did Lysias?
2. In what city was Paul’s citizenship rights flagrantly violated? How did the officials react to their oversight?
3. Who was emperor when Jesus was born? What did this emperor do which affected the place of Jesus’ birth (Lk 2:1)?
4. Whose image would have been on the coin in Mt 22:20-21?
5. What happened in Judea during the days of Claudius (Ac 11:28)?
6. List the three Judean procurators mentioned in the NT.
7. What kind of official was Gallio (Ac 18:12-17)? Was he favorable to Paul?
8. What kind of official was Sergius Paulus (Ac 13:7)? How is he described?
9. What power did Pontius Pilate claim over Jesus (Jn 19:10)? How did Jesus respond to this?
10. What kind of men were Felix and Festus (Ac 24:26-27; 25:9)?

**Introduction**

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The Roman presence in Palestine was very strong, due to the fact that the Jews were passionate, obstinate and defensive about their land. Their perception was that the land was theirs by divine promise and the Romans were defiled trespassers. Thus Rome had to maintain a strong military presence to keep the province in order.

**Caesarea**

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Caesarea was located on the Mediterranean coast 65 miles NW of Jerusalem. It was given to Herod by Augustus Caesar who rebuilt the city with magnificent architecture and then renamed it after Augustus. Its commercial value was due to its harbor and its position along the Tyre-Egypt coastal highway. Caesarea, not Jerusalem, was the official residence of the Roman procurators and the Herods. Several of Paul's sailings begin and end in this city; here he was imprisoned under Felix and Festus; and it was in this city that the first Gentile convert was made.

**The Procurators**

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When visiting in Jerusalem, the procurators' headquarters were in the Praetorium (see Jn 18:28, 33). The Jews considered the Praetorium unclean and would not enter; thus Pilate would meet with them outside the Praetorium in an open square known as "The Pavement" (Jn 19:13).

Three Judean procurators are mentioned in the NT. **Pontius Pilate** [A.D. 26/27-36], according to both biblical and secular accounts, seemed to have a particular knack for antagonizing the Jews. He was capable of considerable violence, as in the case of the Galileans who were massacred for reasons unknown (Lk 13:1). Pilate, of course, is most remembered for his capitulation to the Jews in the execution of Jesus. Political expediency was more important to him than justice; thus Jesus was treated with vile cruelty.

**Felix** [A.D. 52-59] was a man of extreme cruelty and avarice. Like Pilate, Felix had no regard for justice and held Paul for two years hoping for a bribe (Ac 23:24-24:27).

**Festus** [A.D. 59-61] succeeded Felix and also mishandled Paul's case in the interest of selfish, political advantage (Ac 25:1-12). Unlike Felix, who was moved by the preaching of Paul, Festus was wholly secular and thought Paul to be mad (Ac 26:24-25).

**Military Presence**

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Roman military presence in Palestine can be seen in the account of Jesus' crucifixion, encounters with centurions, and the protective custody offered to Paul when threatened by the Jews. Centurions are uniformly presented in a positive light - from the centurion in

Capernaum (whose servant Jesus heals - Lk 7:1-9) to the centurion on Jesus' execution detail (Lk 23:47) to Cornelius (Ac 10:1-4). Claudius Lysias was a military tribune or chiliarch, a leader of 1000 soldiers. These soldiers were stationed in the Fortress of Antonia which was located, much to the Jews' chagrin, right beside the temple (see "the barracks" - Ac 21:34-35; 22:24; 23:10, 16). Lysias had foot soldiers, spearmen and horsemen at his disposal (Ac 23:23ff).

## **Taxation**

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While men universally despise the payment of taxes, Roman taxation upon Palestine was a particular affront to God's "chosen people." "The tax itself was looked upon as an inherent religious wrong, as well as civil imposition, and by many the payment of it was considered a sinful act of disloyalty to God" (*ISBE* [Orr], p. 2920). The tax-collector in Judea was an especially hated individual. Aside from being in league with Rome, "he paid a fixed sum for the taxes, and received for himself what he could over and above that amount. The ancient and widespread curse of arbitrariness was in the system ... The collector was thus always under the suspicion of being an extortioner and probably *was* in most instances ... The usual combination in a publican of petty tyrant, renegade and extortioner ... was not conducive to popularity" (*ibid*).

Jesus frequently makes reference to tax-collectors to illustrate certain points: 1) The higher standard of behavior expected out of believers - Mt 5:46-47; 2) How to view a persistent sinner who will not repent - Mt 18:17; and 3) The acceptance of *any* penitent person before God - even social outcasts - Lk 18:9ff.

## **Questions**

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1. Name a Roman centurion who lived in Caesarea.
2. What evangelist lived in Caesarea with his prophetess daughters?
3. What prophecy did Agabus make in Caesarea?
4. Where was Jesus when Pilate's guards tortured Him (Mt 27:27)?
5. Where was Pilate's judgment seat located?
6. How did Felix respond to Paul's preaching (Ac 24:25)?
7. List two prominent tax-collectors named in the NT.
8. Did Jesus consider it lawful for Jews to pay Roman taxes (Mt 22:15-22)?
9. Who readily accepted the teaching of John the Baptist (Mt 21:32)?
10. What did John command of tax-collectors (Lk 3:12-13)?

**Introduction**

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The family name “Herod,” meaning “heroic,” is a misnomer. “The entire family history is one of incessant brawls, suspicion, intrigue and shocking immorality” (*ISBE* [Orr], p. 1378). “The fortunes of the Herodian family are inseparably connected with the last flickerings of the flame of Judaism, as a national power, before it was forever extinguished in the great Jewish war of rebellion, 70 A.D.” (*ibid*).

**Origin of the Herodian Family**

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The Herodian Dynasty took shape under Antipater, father of Herod the Great, an Idumean. Antipater fought loyally for Julius Caesar and was rewarded with the governorship of Judea. After a period of political unrest, Herod was named King of Judea by Antony and Octavius, but he had to secure his throne by liberating Jerusalem from Parthian invaders. Though an Idumean, Herod’s rule over Judea was made palatable by his marriage into the Hasmonean family which had ruled for over 100 years. Members of the Herodian family would then rule to one degree or another until Jerusalem’s fall.

**Herod the Great**

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Herod the Great ruled from 37-4 B.C. His rule was generally one of economic prosperity which coincided with the commerce fostered by Roman peace. Many cities, palaces, theaters and other notable public buildings were constructed. Most importantly, the temple complex in Jerusalem commenced construction in 20 B.C. Morally, Herod was a pathetic creature who, insane with suspicion, murdered among others his wife Mariamne, her mother, two of his sons by Mariamne, Alexander and Aristobulus, and another son, Antipater. Jesus was born shortly before Herod’s death, and the baby boys of Bethlehem paid for his paranoia with their blood (see Mt 2:1-18).

**Herod Archelaus**

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Upon the death of Herod the Great, three of his sons appealed to Rome for his throne. Eventually, Archelaus was made ethnarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea with the option of being titled “king” if he ruled well. He didn’t and was deposed and banished in A.D. 6. Archelaus’s treachery against the Jews is the reason Joseph avoided Judea upon his return from Egypt (see Mt 2:21-22).

**Herod Antipas**

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Upon the division of Herod’s kingdom in 4 B.C., Antipas had been made tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, and Philip was made tetrarch of Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanea and Paneas. The dynastic title “Herod” was bestowed upon Antipas by Tiberius. Antipas figures most prominently in the NT because of his rule over the territories where the prophet John

and Jesus exercised their ministries. Antipas' character is sketched by his clash with John over his marriage (Mk 6:14-29). Herodias was Antipas' own niece as well as sister-in-law; he had stolen her affections from his brother Philip. Antipas' own lusts allowed him to be maneuvered by Herodias against his will into executing John. It is Antipas before whom Jesus stands trial (Lk 23:6-12). Antipas was banished by the Emperor Caligula in A.D. 39.

### **Herod Agrippa I**

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Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great by Aristobulus and the brother of Herodias. He made friends with Caligula shortly before he became emperor, and thus Caligula gave him the title "king" and the territories of his uncle Philip. When Antipas was banished, Agrippa received all his territory and property, and when Claudius succeeded the murdered Caligula, Agrippa then acquired Judea and Samaria. Agrippa thus gathered under his rule all the land of his grandfather and further was "King" Agrippa. It is this unscrupulous man who murdered James and intended to do the same to Peter (Ac 12:1-17) and who was stricken by the hand of God and died in A.D. 44 (Ac 12:20-23).

### **Herod Agrippa II**

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Herod Agrippa II was king until the destruction of Jerusalem. He maintained an incestuous affair with his own sister, Bernice, and sided with the Romans against his own people in the wars from A.D. 66-70. Agrippa II was knowledgeable of the Law of Moses and Jewish affairs and heard Paul's defense of his apostolic preaching (Ac 25:13-26:32).

**Final Note:** The principal Herods mentioned in the NT had prophets and preachers directly address them about the kingdom of God. The gospel is a message for kings and peasants. Sadly, all the Herods rejected the gospel and lived miserable lives in rebellion to God.

### **Questions**

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1. How long had the temple been under construction early in Jesus' ministry (Jn 2:20)?
2. How did Herod react to the wise men's inquiry about the newborn "King of the Jews"?
3. What does Jesus call Herod Antipas in Lk 13:32?
4. What was Herod Antipas' "jurisdiction" (Lk 23:7)?
5. Why was Antipas at first excited to see Jesus?
6. What did Herod Agrippa I do that caused God to strike him dead?
7. T/F Paul thought Agrippa II was a stupid ruler. (see Ac 26:3, 26)
8. What did Paul hope King Agrippa would do?

**Introduction**

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It must be remembered that in the days of Jesus and the apostles the nation of Israel was but a dim reflection of the Israel of old. Its social and political framework was shaped more by the circumstances of the past two hundred years than the Law of Moses. Tradition, political expediency and Greco-Roman encroachment had so diluted the nation that it couldn't recognize its Messiah. It was soon to be permanently removed as a theocracy.

**Pharisees**

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“Pharisee” is from the Heb. *parash*, “to separate.” The name first appears during the reign of John Hyrcanus (135-104 B.C.) in reference to those who resisted the encroachments of Hellenism. At first they were representative of the rural and middle classes, united in defense of orthodox Judaism against the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes (174-163 B.C.). But over time religious convictions turned into self-righteousness and concern for prestige. “Good men, whose character and spiritual force have impressed themselves on their generation, have often peculiarities of manner and tone which are easily imitated. The very respect in which they are held by their disciples leads those who respect them to adopt unconsciously their mannerisms of voice and deportment. A later generation unconsciously imitates, “acts the part” (*ISBE* [Orr], p. 2364).

In their defense of the Law the Pharisees hedged it about with traditions and oral interpretations which effectively shaped it to suit them. They were extremely zealous and scholarly. Doctrinally, they were conservative: they believed in human free-will but acknowledged God's supernatural and providential intervention into Israel's affairs. They believed in an afterlife, and they recognized the role of angels in God's affairs. The Pharisees were the largest party numerically and enjoyed the popularity of the masses. Unfortunately, the Scriptures portray this group in a very negative light due to its opposition to Christ and His apostles.

**Sadducees**

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The name “Sadducee” is probably from Zadok, the high priest under David. The party was formed in ca. 200 B.C. It was a smaller group numerically than the Pharisees but maintained its influence through aristocratic clout and priestly connections. The Sadducees held only to the Pentateuch, rejecting the prophets, traditions and other additions advanced by the Pharisees. They did not believe in the general resurrection (Mt 22:23ff) nor did they believe in angels or spirit beings (Ac 23:8). They had a very materialistic and ritualistic concept of religion. Because of these differences the Pharisees and Sadducees despised each other: “The rivalry between the Pharisees, who claimed the authority of piety and learning, and the Sadducees, who claimed that of blood and position, was in a sense a renewal of the conflict between the prophets and priests of pre-exilic times” (*The Biblical World*, p. 327).

## **Zealots**

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The Zealots were a fanatical, aggressive group which violently opposed Roman occupation. They spawned a group of assassins called the Sicarii, a reference to the concealed daggers which they would use against any person committing a sacrilegious act or anything promoting anti-Jewish feeling. They burned storehouses of anti-siege supplies in order to stir sentiments against Rome, and it was ultimately their antagonism which exhausted Rome's patience with Jerusalem.

## **Scribes**

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The scribes were professional students and teachers of the Law and wielded great influence among the masses (Mt 7:28-29; 23:2; Mk 1:22, 27). They are often identified in Scripture with the Pharisees but not exclusively so (Mk 11:27; Lk 20:19; 23:10). The scribes were intensely jealous of Jesus and His teaching. It was an affront to them that an "unqualified" commoner was teaching against their interpretations. "When another scribe came into the picture teaching the dawning of the awaited Kingdom - a scribe neither formally trained nor ordained (cf. Jn 7:15), who nonetheless spoke with unique authority - a clash was inevitable" (*ISBE* [Bromiley], Vol. 4, p. 361). The scribes were deeply involved in the plot against Jesus.

## **Questions**

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1. Read the following verses and note a characteristic of the Pharisees from each: Mk 7:2-5; Lk 18:11-12; Rom 10:2; Mt 23:5-7; 23-28.
2. Who arrested Peter and John in Ac 4:1-3? What had they been teaching?
3. Who said that it was better for one to die than all the people (Jn 18:12-14)?
4. Of what did Jesus warn the disciples to be careful (Mt 16:6, 11-12)?
5. Name two prominent Pharisees and two prominent Sadducees from the NT.
6. What disciple was formerly a Zealot (Lk 6:15; Ac 1:13)?
7. What did Jesus say motivated many of the scribes (Mk 12:38-40)?
8. By what other term was a scribe known (compare Mk 12:28 and Mt 22:35)?
9. In spite of their scholarship, what had the scribes taken away (Lk 11:52)?
10. How did the scribes react to Jesus' cleansing of the temple (Mk 11:18)?

**Introduction**

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The term “Sanhedrin” comes from the Gk. *sunedrion* and is found twenty times in the NT, usually translated “council.” The Sanhedrin, or Jewish high court, was comprised of 71 members including the current high priest, past high priests, representatives from the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes (see Ac 4:5-6). The origin of the Sanhedrin is obscure but modeled upon the seventy elders who assisted Moses. The apocryphal books mention a body known as the *gerousia* (found in Ac 5:21) which handled national affairs. By the close of the first century B.C. this body had become known as the *sunedrion*. The Jewish high court was permanently dissolved by the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

**The Authority of the Sanhedrin**

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The Sanhedrin had its own soldiers with arrest powers. On one occasion they were sent to arrest Jesus but returned empty-handed (Jn 7:32, 45-50). Judas makes his betrayal plans with “captains of the temple” (Lk 22:4, 52), and they are later involved in the arrest of Peter and John (Ac 4:1). This arrest power did not seem to extend to Galilee in the time of Jesus as no attempt was made to arrest Jesus there. However, Paul refers to his Sanhedrin credentials when traveling to Damascus to arrest Christians: “*as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren ...*” (Ac 22:5).

The Sanhedrin had authority to pass a sentence of death but needed Roman approval to implement it (Jn 18:28-31). The high court was intent upon the death of Jesus but more restrained in the case of Peter and John. In their first arrest, the apostles were merely threatened and then released (Ac 4:17-18, 21). In their second arrest, the enraged court was ready to kill again (Ac 5:33) but Gamaliel counseled against it (Ac 5:38-39).

**The Composition of the Court**

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The current high priest was president of the Sanhedrin and many Sadducean priests sat on the court (Ac 4:1, 6; 5:17). Annas, to whom Jesus was brought first after his arrest, was a former high priest (Jn 18:12-14); his son-in-law, Caiaphas, was the current high priest and the one who presided over Jesus’ trial (Mt 26:57; Jn 18:19-24). The high priest in the first century was more a political office than the spiritual priesthood of the OT. Pharisees were also well-represented and were a powerful faction on the court (Jn 3:1; Ac 5:34; 23:6-7). There were also enough scribes to be listed as a separate group (Mk 8:31; 10:33; 11:18, 27).

**Miscarriages of Justice by the Sanhedrin**

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The Sanhedrin council proved itself to be corrupt by its handling of Jesus and His followers. Its corruption was rooted in attitude: the Sanhedrin was not interested in the truth

about Messianic prophecy and its application to Jesus; it was concerned merely with its own survival as a ruling body (Jn 12:47-53). The Sanhedrin's authority was not seen as a stewardship on behalf of the people; rather, the aristocratic leaders looked with contempt upon the common Jews (Jn 7:47-52). The court had no scruple about scheming to secretly apprehend Jesus, parading false witnesses to testify against Him, forcing testimony which they held to be self-incriminating, nocturnal meeting, intimidating those who would speak in Jesus' behalf, etc. In the case of Stephen, the court even dissolved into an outraged mob which murdered the accused without substantive charge (Ac 6:12-15; 7:1-2, 54-58).

### ***Conclusion***

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The Sanhedrin should stand as a warning to all those with decision-making power: elderships, brotherhood periodical staffs, husbands, Christian employers or bosses, etc. **Proper decisions are not insured by formal education, tradition, heritage, age or any other external factor. They begin with the deepest inward motives.** Selfishness, pride, politics, self-preservation, ignorance and blind maintenance of the status quo can derail thoughtful, sound, balanced decisions. It would have taken humility and courage for the Sanhedrin to have recognized Jesus as the Messiah and acknowledge its mistakes and misguided leadership. They did not possess those qualities, so there was no better alternative (as they saw it) than to kill the opposition.

### ***Questions***

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1. How is Nicodemus described (Jn 3:1; 7:50)? How is Joseph described (Mk 15:43)?
2. Describe the arrest detail which came to apprehend Jesus (Mk 14:43).
3. How did the Sanhedrin treat Peter and John on the second arrest (Ac 5:40)?
4. Describe the composition of the Sanhedrin from the following verses: Ac 4:5, 8, 23; Mk 15:1.
5. Who was the high priest when Paul was before the Sanhedrin (Ac 23:2)?
6. What did the Sanhedrin fear from Jesus' popularity (Jn 11:48-50)?
7. Who was Gamaliel's star pupil?
8. How many members comprised the Sanhedrin?
9. How did the rulers make themselves the standard for believing in Jesus (Jn 7:48)?
10. How did Nicodemus object to the proceedings against Jesus (Jn 7:51)?

**Introduction**

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The Sea of Galilee is a topographical feature of Palestine which figured prominently in the life of Jesus. Many of His activities took place on or near it, and several of the disciples were fishermen. Let's take a closer look at this body of water.

**Physical Features**

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The Sea of Galilee, along with the Jordan River, formed the eastern border of the region of Galilee. It was also known as the Sea of Chinnereth (OT), the Lake of Gennesaret (Lk 5:1) and the Sea of Tiberius (Jn 6:1). The Sea of Galilee is about 680 feet below the level of the Mediterranean Sea. Its greatest width is seven miles and greatest length thirteen miles. With a maximum depth of 150 feet, the Sea of Galilee is fairly shallow (Lake Tahoe's deepest point is 1,685 feet).

The Sea is notorious for sudden, violent tempests. This is caused by the surrounding mountains which abruptly rise 1,000-2,000 feet from the water. The mixture of cool, dry air from as far as Mt. Hermon in the north with the moist, hot air in the depressed seabed causes raging winds and torrential rainstorms. Another factor is the moisture-laden air from the Mediterranean which rises over the 3,500 foot Galilean Plateau and descends swiftly into the sea-basin.

Jesus and His disciples were caught in a sudden storm on Galilee (Mk 4:35-41). Jesus displayed His mastery over creation by stilling the storm. On another occasion Jesus walked upon the Sea to the disciples who were struggling to row against the wind (Jn 6:15-21; Mt 14:22-31).

**Fishing in the Sea of Galilee**

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Fishing was a profitable endeavor during the first century (and still is today). The waters of the Sea of Galilee were fresh and sweet flowing from the snow-capped mountains to the north. Dragnets, seine nets and cast nets were all used to catch fish. Small boats were used either individually or in tandem with another to catch as much as possible.

Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen by trade; they had hired servants to help in the operation (Mk 1:16-20). Peter and his associates had been fishing all night with no luck when Jesus told them to put out their nets for a catch (Lk 5:4-11). After the resurrection, when the disciples were still unsure of the significance of what had transpired, several disciples went to Galilee and resumed fishing (Jn 21:1-14). On that occasion, Jesus fed the disciples bread and fish which He had prepared. It appears that bread and fish were staples around the Sea of Galilee; on both occasions when Jesus fed the multitudes it was with bread and fish (Mt 14:13ff; 15:32ff).

## **Other Events Around the Sea**

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It was near the eastern shore of Galilee when Jesus was accosted by the two demon possessed men of Gergesa, and as a consequence of their exorcism the swine perished (Mt 8:28ff). During the period of Jesus' withdrawal to the north, He is harassed by the Pharisees as soon as He disembarks in the region of Dalmanutha (Mk 8:10-13; or Magdala, Mt 15:39). Jesus uses the Sea as a setting for teaching (Lk 5:1-3; Mk 3:7-12). Many of the events of Jesus' life take place in Capernaum which was located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

## **Conclusion**

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Though an important source of trade and food in northern Palestine in the first century, the Sea of Galilee was an ordinary lake surrounded by ordinary towns and working class people. Truly did a divine light reflect upon these waters so that men could see in Jesus the glory of God. This small sea will never be "ordinary" since Jesus walked its shores and sailed its waters.

## **Questions**

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1. T/F The Sea of Galilee is below the level of the Mediterranean Sea.
2. Can you list three cities on or very near the shore of the Sea of Galilee?
3. In which direction were the disciples rowing on the Sea when Jesus walked to them?
4. What kind of fishing were Peter and Andrew doing when called by Jesus (Mk 1:16)?
5. To what is the kingdom likened in Mt 13:47-50? What will be done with the bad fish?
6. At what time of day did the disciples fish after Jesus' resurrection?
7. In what kind of net did the disciples catch 153 fish?
8. Where was Jesus when He warned the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod (Mk 8:13-17)? Where were they going (Mk 8:22)?
9. Why did Jesus keep a small boat ready as He taught in Mk 3:9?
10. Where did Jesus tell Peter to find tax-money for the temple?

**Introduction**

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Herod's temple is the third major structure known as "the temple." It was preceded by Solomon's temple and Zerubbabel's temple. Herod's temple was the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem in the first century. Many monumental conflicts between Jesus and His enemies occurred here.

**Construction**

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Construction began in 20-19 B.C. Herod's official intent was to restore the temple to its former glory, but most likely he was interested in building a monument to his own memory. If so, he was unsuccessful as his temple lasted less than one hundred years. To allay the fears of the Jews that he would not finish the project, Herod gathered beforehand all the materials needed for the temple's construction. He had priests trained as masons and carpenters so they could work on the temple without defiling it. Ten thousand skilled workers were employed in construction. The temple proper was completed in 1½ years while the adjacent courts and cloisters took eight years more. Actually, the total project was not completed until A.D. 64, just a few short years before its destruction by the Romans.

**Materials and Layout**

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The temple was actually a complex of buildings, walls and courts, or enclosures about 26 acres in size. The main sanctuary was divided into the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. The front opened onto a porch and beyond was the altar of burnt offering. Straight ahead through the Nicanor Gate lay the Court of the Women. Around were various storerooms for musical instruments, priestly garments, wood, wine, oil and other items used in temple worship. Also in this area were chests for monetary offerings (Lk 21:1-3). Outside these limited-access areas, through the Beautiful Gate, was the Court of the Gentiles. Signs warned Gentiles that passing beyond their appointed boundaries would result in death. The seriousness of such a breach is seen in Acts 21:27-31. This would have been the scene of Jesus' attacks upon the moneychangers who were corrupting the spiritual purpose of the temple. All around the Court of the Gentiles were colonnaded porches where people could gather and converse. The porch on the east side was known as Solomon's Porch because it was thought to contain part of the original temple wall. It is here that the early Christians gathered (Ac 5:12). A portion of the western wall still remains and is called the "Wailing Wall."

So magnificent and imposing was the temple complex that the disciples reacted with curious caution when Jesus foretold "*not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down*" (Mt 24:1-2). The stones used, especially the foundation stones to build up the uneven land, were massive. But nothing in this world is permanent, especially when God's wrath is poured out.

## Jesus and the Temple

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Jesus avoided the temple for most of His adult life, but when in Jerusalem He took the fight directly to the Jewish aristocracy in the temple. He taught in the temple at the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn 7:14), and it was here that the adulterous woman was brought for judgment (Jn 8:2). Jesus was accosted on Solomon's Porch during the Feast of Dedication in the autumn before His death (Jn 10:23). In the latter days of Jesus' life He spent much time teaching and healing in the temple (Mt 21:14; 26:55; Mk 12:35; Lk 20:1; 21:37; Jn 18:20).

## Conclusion

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For a thousand years the Jews had centered their worship and national identity around a material building. Part of Jesus' teaching about the new covenant included the idea that *people* rather than stones, timber and fabric would be the new dwelling place of God among men. Let us learn from the Jews the vanity of being attached to a *building*. It is the character and actions of Christians that show God's presence in the world and will convert sinners to Christ. A building says nothing about God's character.

## Questions

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1. How long had the temple been under construction when Jesus spoke about raising the "temple" of His body (Jn 2:20)?
2. What separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies? What happened to it at Jesus' death (Mt 27:51)?
3. Where did the lame man sit and beg (Ac 3:2)? Where did Peter preach (Ac 3:11)?
4. Who asked for further clarification on the future destruction of the temple (Mk 13:3)?
5. Where did Joseph and Mary find Jesus after He had been lost (Lk 2:46)?
6. From where did Satan dare Jesus to jump (Mt 4:5-6)?
7. Research: T/F No children were allowed in the temple area.
8. The temple was intended to be a house of \_\_\_\_\_ but had been turned in a \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_.
9. What did the disciples think of the temple (Mk 13:1; Lk 21:5)?
10. When did Jesus **first** enter the temple?

**Introduction**

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Israel was predominantly an agrarian society. It was a land “flowing with milk and honey.” The productivity of the land was closely allied to the obedience of the people to the laws of God. This was designed in part to keep the people dependent upon God rather than their own ingenuity or skills. Many events of the first century and much teaching of Jesus and His apostles have agricultural connections.

**Produce of the Land**

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Four basic staples supplied much of Israel’s sustenance: grain (wheat/barley), olives, grapes and sheep. Farming in the Judean plateau was difficult due to the extremely rocky soil, primitive tools and the lack of irrigation (the Jordan River lay far below). The crops were dependent upon seasonal rainfall (and thus God’s providence) in order to thrive. Locust invasions were a periodic threat to the economy. Swarms of countless millions of the pests could strip fields and forests bare in short order and destroy an entire year’s produce. Drought was an even bigger threat both by drying up the plants and creating fire hazards. Other important food sources mentioned in the NT are figs, fish, honey, locusts, lamb, beef and eggs. These were prepared using spices such as salt, mint, anise, cummin, mustard, dill - even “*all manner of herbs*” (Lk 11:42). Leaven was used to make dough rise.

**The Seasons and Harvest**

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The “former rains” fell in October/November, softening the sun-baked soil so it could be plowed for the sowing of seed. Planting occurred in November/December and the fields were tended throughout the heavy winter rains. The “latter rains” of late March/early April swelled the grain to maturity and the harvest came in April/May. Harvesting the grain involved cutting the stalks with a sickle, threshing the grain on the threshing floor, winnowing (tossing the stalks into the air and letting the breeze blow the chaff away) and sifting the grain from the dust, pebbles and other impurities. The Day of Pentecost marked the end of the grain harvest and celebrated the temporary respite from the hard work of spring. Other crops came in during the summer months and the end of the entire harvest year was signaled by the Feast of Ingathering or Tabernacles (mid-October).

**Shepherding**

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Less is said about shepherding in the NT than in the OT but figures still are used. Shepherds were more than watchmen; they led the sheep to sufficient water and pasture. In the dry summer months this often meant extended periods away from home. Shepherds also aided in doctoring, lambing, resting and protecting the sheep. Sheep are truly helpless, dependent creatures and forge a close bond with their keepers. This makes for a

particularly apt illustration of Christians and their Lord (Jn 10:1-16). Further, Jesus is pictured as a sacrificial Lamb who offered Himself for the sins of the world (Jn 1:29; 1 Pet 1:19).

### **Some References to Agriculture**

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1. Parable of the sower - Mt 13:3-9, 18-23.
2. Parable of the wheat/tares - Mt 13:24-30, 36-43.
3. Pruning dead branches - Jn 15:1-8.
4. Grafting new growth in - Rom 11:17-24.
5. Folly of looking back while plowing - Lk 9:62.
6. Disciples criticized for eating grain - Lk 6:1-2.
7. Paul's kick against the goad - Ac 9:5.
8. Unequally yoked with unbelievers - 2 Cor 6:14.
9. A millstone about the neck - Mt 18:6.
10. Wicked vinedressers - Mt 21:33-41, 45-46.

### **Conclusion**

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The Israelites were accomplished farmers and herdsman. They knew their environment because so much depended upon the weather and seasons (Mt 16:2-3). For those of us in an industrial age and further removed from the process of food production, it is easy to take for granted our present abundance. Weather concerns for us are usually a matter of convenience - whether or not to take an umbrella on our outing. Seasons mean football, housecleaning and vacations. Let us take precautions to remember that it is God who gives the rain which sustains life (Ac 14:17; Mt 5:45) and we are indebted to Him for our every meal and other necessities of life.

### **Questions**

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1. What is "God's field" (1 Cor 3:5-9)?
2. What season is anticipated by the budding fig tree (Mt 24:32-33)?
3. Into what was new wine placed (Mt 9:17)? Why?
4. T/F Lk 12:16-21 teaches that it is wrong to store up and save for the future.
5. What is a hireling? What will he do when a wolf threatens the sheep?
6. That which is sown is not made alive until it \_\_\_\_\_ (Jn 12:24; 1 Cor 15:36). To what do the above verses refer?
7. To what agricultural item is the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees likened?
8. What does the parable of the sower teach about the preaching of the gospel?

**Introduction**

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Since the covering and adornment of the body is so essential to every person, it is not surprising that there are numerous references to it in the NT. Many references are literal, and many others are figurative applications. The clothing of the first century was very simple and appropriate to the climate variations of the Mediterranean basin.

**Types of Clothing**

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Common materials for clothing were wool, flax and cotton. A rougher material of camel's hair, similar to the sackcloth of the OT, was used by the poor and by John (Mt 3:4).

*The Tunic (chiton):* This was a tight-fitting garment worn next to the body extending from the neck to various lengths down the legs. The tunic was usually woven in two pieces with the seam horizontal at the waist. Jesus', however, was seamless (Jn 19:23).

*The Cloak (himation):* This is the outer robe, a flowing, loose-fitting garment wrapped over the left shoulder, around the back and under the right arm. This garment was not worn while working (Mt 24:18 - "clothes" = *himation*). The cloak had borders or fringes at the corners. The Pharisees enlarged these to be noticed (Mt 23:5) and the woman suffering continuous bleeding grasped this part of Jesus' clothing (Lk 8:44).

*The Stole (stole):* A fine, stately robe worn on very special occasions. The scribes loved to wear these to impress men (Mk 12:38). The prodigal son was dressed in these celebratory garments upon his return home (Lk 15:22) and the angel in the tomb of Jesus was so arrayed (Mk 16:5). These are also the garments worn by victorious saints in the Revelation (6:11; 7:9, 13-14).

1. Mt 5:40 - "... take away your tunic (*chiton*), let him have your cloak (*himation*) also."
2. Lk 3:11 - "he who has two tunics (*chiton*), let him give to him who has none."
3. Lk 9:3 - "do not have two tunics (*chiton*) apiece."
4. Mt 21:7-8 - "spread their garments (*himation*) on the road."
5. Ac 9:39 - "showing the tunics (*chiton*) and garments (*himation*) ... Dorcas had made."
6. Ac 7:58 - "the witnesses laid down their clothes (*himation*) at the feet of ... Saul."
7. Mt 17:2 - "His clothes (*himation*) became as white as the light."

**Accessories**

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*Sandals (sandalion); shoes (hupodema):* These were simple in construction, usually a sole of untanned leather bound to the foot by a leather thong. John felt himself unworthy to loose the sandal straps of the coming Messiah (Mk 1:7). Jesus sent the twelve out without sandals to prove God's care for them (Mt 10:10; Lk 22:35). When released from prison by the power of God, the angel waits as Peter ties on his sandals (Ac 12:8).

*Belts (zone):* A belt or girdle was worn around the inner garment or tunic. The belt was made of linen or leather (Mt 3:4) and provided freedom of movement for work or travel by securing the bottom of the robe about the waist.

*Phylacteries:* These were decorative articles worn by the Pharisees due to a literalist corruption of the command of Dt 6:8 and 11:18. Small leather boxes containing Scriptures were strapped to the forehead and left hand by an intricate tying process that spelled out the name of God. Jesus condemns this practice as a pretentious show (Mt 23:5).

*Finery:* Mention is made in the NT of braided hair, gold, pearls and expensive clothes, especially in reference to women (1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3). The luxurious, pampered Roman lifestyle was envied and admired by many. Cosmetics were abundant as were accessories such as tweezers, scissors, razors, files, brushes, combs, hair nets and wigs. Jewelry also was plentiful: rings, earrings, necklaces, amulets, bracelets, breast chains and brooches were the adornments of the affluent. Silks and furs were also desirable items. It goes without saying that the NT warns **against** indulgence and preoccupation with such externals to the neglect of the soul.

## **Figurative References**

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The imagery of clothing is used to express several spiritual concepts. Girding up one's mind is reference to sober, unencumbered thought (1 Pet 1:13). The Christian is to gird his waist with truth (Eph 6:14). Coming to Christ in obedient faith is called "putting on Christ" (Gal 3:27). Further, Christians are to put on certain aspects of character (Col 3:10, 12, 14). The physical creation is likened to a worn out garment to be rolled up (Heb 1:11-12). Christians who have allowed themselves to be ensnared in sin are to be pulled out of the fire "hating even the garment defiled by the flesh" (Jude 23).

## **Conclusion**

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What we wear is often an expression of inner feelings and attitudes. We must keep material things in perspective and not dress to excess. Neither should we adorn our bodies so as to be sexually provocative and alluring. Instead, we should concentrate upon the apparel of the soul and making it as presentable as possible to God.

## **Questions**

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1. Of what use was Paul's belt made (Ac 21:11)?
2. What did Paul desire as winter approached (2 Tim 4:13)?
3. With what did Jesus gird Himself during the last Passover meal (Jn 13:5)? Why?
4. What is the Christian to put on in Rom 13:12?
5. Putting on Christ stands in opposition to what in Rom 13:14?

**Introduction**

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The “Dispersion” (or Diaspora) refers to the universal presence of the Jews as a result of migration following the captivity (Jn 7:35). James writes to brethren of “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (*diasporai*) (Jas 1:1) and Peter to “the pilgrims of the Dispersion” (1 Pet 1:1), i.e., Jewish converts. This world-wide sprinkling of Jews provided both assistance and opposition to Christianity.

**Jewish Colonists**

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God had threatened to scatter the Jews from their land if they departed from the Law (Dt 4:27-28; 28:64-68). This He did during the Assyrian and Babylonian dispersions. Afterward most Jews remained in the lands of their captivity and slowly began to migrate west after the fall of Persia. Because of their industriousness and strong spiritual/mental constitution, Jews were sought as colonists. Strabo, a Greek geographer, noted:

“It is hard to find a place in the habitable earth that hath not admitted this tribe of men and is not possessed by it: and it hath come to pass that Egypt and Cyrene ... and a great number of other nations imitate their way of living, and maintain great bodies of these Jews in a peculiar manner, and grow up to greater prosperity with them, and make use of the same laws with that nation also” (Tenney, p. 89).

Many among the Dispersion were strongly influenced by Greek language, education, ideas and habits. However, in loyalty and essentials of faith, they were strongly Jewish and united with their brethren in Palestine.

**Synagogues**

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An important feature of Dispersion culture was the synagogue. The term “synagogue” means “a bringing together” or an assembly of people (Jas 2:2 - “assembly” = “*sunagoge*”). By metonymy the term then applied to the building in which the Jews assembled for worship. “Severed from the Temple by distance, many of (the Dispersion) had given their primary allegiance to the local synagogue which provided a center of worship, instruction in the Law, and a social atmosphere enabling them to maintain their distinctive identity” (ibid, p. 90). Synagogues were found in many cities throughout the Empire.

Synagogues were rather small; a portable ark contained rolls of Scripture to be read. The chief seats in front faced the audience which was divided between men and women. Synagogue officials included:

*Elders*: High ranking local Jewish officials who constituted the tribunal of the people; they wielded the power to excommunicate (Jn 9:22; 12:42; 16:2).

*Rulers:* Appointed by the elders and exercised control of the synagogue services (Lk 8:41; 13:14; Lk 18:8, 17).

*Servant:* In charge of cleaning and lighting of the building; assisted those who led in worship (Lk 4:17, 20); meted out punishment assigned by elders.

*Delegate:* Chosen by the ruler to read prayers and scriptures; not a permanent position. Jesus is invited to read as a delegate (Lk 4:16-17), and Paul and Barnabas are invited to speak to the assembly in Pisidian Antioch (Ac 13:15ff).

Proselytes who had abandoned pagan idolatry also joined the synagogues and many of these became initial converts to the gospel (Ac 13:42-43; 14:1; 17:4, 10-12).

### ***Conclusion***

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Synagogues arose out of necessity; the ideal for Israel was that they would dwell close enough to Jerusalem for the temple and its worship to serve their spiritual needs. But this geographical unity was compromised by the Jews' own disobedience, and God was 500 years in phasing Judaism out and bringing Christianity in. The spread of Judaism and its resulting places of worship became a springboard for the spread of the gospel. God's providential power is seen in this development.

### ***Questions***

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1. Jewish Christians of what regions were addressed by Peter?
2. Jews from what regions were gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost?
3. What two groups were fussing in Acts 6:1?
4. Who asked Jesus to heal the centurion's servant (Lk 7:2-5)? Why?
5. Why did the ruler of the synagogue condemn Jesus' actions (Lk 13:14)?
6. Of what distinction are Crispus and Sosthenes?
7. T/F Paul met Lydia at the synagogue in Philippi.
8. How did those of the Synagogue of the Freedmen create trouble in the church?
9. Do you think synagogues were unscriptural since they are not mentioned in the OT?
10. Why was Paul's "custom" (Ac 17:2) to go to Jewish synagogues first (Ac 13:46)? Was it merely a matter of finding a convenient audience?

**Introduction**

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Ceremonies wherein a man and woman are joined in marriage are ancient and reflect the joy and sobriety of the occasion. Several passages in the NT draw upon the imagery of weddings.

**Arrangement**

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The average Westerner, conditioned by the concepts of freedom and sensuality, is horrified by the thought of arranged marriage. But it is only fair to observe that the first-century Easterner would be equally horrified by the prospect of fickle, immature youngsters with hormones ablaze making a life-long choice. The *Handbook of Life in Bible Times* notes that arranged marriages “may not have been quite as barbaric as it seems; if indeed most marriages were between teenagers, matchmaking parents might have a shrewder idea of compatibility than inexperienced adolescents” (p. 85). Our current divorce rate may suggest that the arranged marriage concept has some merit. Further, some examples suggest that the children’s input was not completely ignored (Gn 24:8, 57-58; Jdg 14:1-3; 1 Sam 18:20). Once a proposal was made financial negotiations between the families began. Because the bride’s family was losing a valued worker, a marriage price was paid by the groom’s family. A dowry was given by the bride’s father to the new couple. The payment of the marriage price, a negotiable amount, sealed the contract.

**Betrothal**

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This was similar to though more formal and binding than our engagement period. The betrothal lasted for about one year during which time wedding day preparations were being made. The betrothal could not be broken without the responsible party incurring a financial penalty, and sexual activity with a third party constituted adultery and was punishable by death. Note that “*Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together*” but Joseph was called her husband (Mt 1:18-19). Further, the angel said to Joseph, “*do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife ...*” (Mt 1:20, 24-25).

**The Wedding and the Feast**

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Early weddings were more social/contractual events than religious affairs. The practice of an “officiating clergyman” along with spiritual overtones is relatively recent. Part of the occasion involved dressing both bride and groom in the finest clothes and adorning the bride with jewelry. On the evening of the wedding day, the groom would leave his house accompanied by his friends and family and proceed to the bride’s home to claim his wife. The whole party would then travel through the streets, lit by the lamps of guests, to the couple’s new home. A glorious feast, sometimes lasting a week or more, would then commence with the bride and groom officiating.

## **Husband and Wife Relations**

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“In the intertestamental and Roman periods, perhaps as a reaction against the growing freedom of women in Hellenism, Jewish attitudes tended to become more negative and women’s everyday life more restricted ... women continued to experience inequalities in betrothal, polygamy, levirate marriage, suspected adultery, earnings, and ownership of property ... Rabbis debated whether a woman might be divorced for trivial offenses, such as burning her husband’s dinner, or only for sexual misconduct. In public and private life a woman remained under male tutelage and control” (*ISBE*, Vol. 4, p. 1093). There were many social restrictions as well: wives did not eat with male guests; their heads were to be veiled in public; social conversation with males was taboo. “The more positive affirmations of women remain in the context of their relationship to husband and children” (*ibid*).

One thing which seemed to attract women to Jesus was His treatment of them with honor and dignity. Women supported Jesus financially (Lk 8:1-3). He not only conversed with women in public but taught them as well, a violation of social custom and rabbinical precept. Jesus restored marital security to wives by prohibiting divorce except in the case of adultery. While Jesus did retain the headship of the husband in marriage, He qualified it as a service role to be discharged according to the pattern of His own benevolent headship over the church (Eph 5:22-33).

## **Conclusion**

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Through the new covenant of Jesus, God’s original intent for marriage has been restored. God “made them male and female” and provided for husbands and wives life-long companionship, assistance, sexual fulfillment and purpose. The joyous occasion of a wedding describes various aspects of faith and sums up the relation of the church to Christ.

## **Questions**

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1. What was Joseph’s original reaction to Mary’s pregnancy?
2. How is the victory of the church over her enemies described in Rev 19:9?
3. Who was the “friend of the bridegroom” (Jn 3:29)?
4. T/F The first social event which Jesus attended after His baptism was a wedding.
5. In Mt 22:1-14 why didn’t the invited guests attending the wedding? Who is represented by these guests in the parable?
6. Why were the virgins of Mt 25:1-13 not allowed to attend the wedding?
7. If love is “deaf, dumb and blind,” how might it affect whom we marry? What can be done to avoid making a mistake in this most crucial decision?