

29/01/2023

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL SETTING IN WHICH JESUS WAS BORN

(Why the first century Jews did not recognise and acknowledge Jesus as Messiah)

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INTRODUCTION

Today I want to give you some historical background of the time running up to the first coming of Christ. Very often we switch from the OT to the NT and we forget that a lot of things happened in the running up of the NT times. Between the OT and the NT there is a period we call the intertestamental period. There is a 400-year gap between the OT and the NT.

THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

Before the intertestamental period, about 600 years before Jesus appeared on the scene, the Jews went into captivity. The Southern Kingdom followed in the footsteps of the Northern tribes and started serving idols. Corruption was rampant in Jerusalem, so God raised prophets (e.g. Jeremiah) to call the Jews back to God. They did not listen. So the Lord used the Babylonians to take them into exile. The Babylonian captivity or exile refers to the time in Israel's history when Jews were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon (607-586 B.C). Seventy years later, in fulfilment of Biblical prophecy (Zec 6) and under Persian rule, the Jews returned to the Promised Land and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and again settled in the land.

The Jews knew that they brought about God's judgment on themselves and they did not want to be what they were before the exile lest they be punished again by the LORD. To avoid judgment, they became very devout and extremely legalistic during the 400 years intertestamental period. They did not have the interactive relationship with God they use to have centuries before. Various factions and groups started to form to try and live right before God to avoid another judgment. They were determined not to make the same mistake again that took them into bondage in Babylon. They waited for the fulfilment of the Micah 5:2

The prophet Micah, predicted the coming King, the Ruler, a king.

Micah 5:2

"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

From David's line, from the same birthplace as David, will come a King that will rule with all authority. In Matthew 2, wise men from the East visited King Herod in Jerusalem and asked where the king of the Jews had been born.

If you understand the cultural climate of the days of Jesus, it puts an entirely different spin on why events played out the way they did in the gospels. We jump from the last page of Malachi to the first page of Matthew and we forget there is a 400-year gap. A lot happened in this 400-year gap that greatly affected the culture in Jesus' day. Again, context is critically important because context determines the meaning. Here are some of the groups that rose to power during the intertestamental period.

THE PHARISEES

The word Pharisee comes from a Hebrew word meaning “separated”. The Pharisees were a group that decided to follow the letter of the Law exactly. They accepted the oral traditions in addition to the written Law. They taught that all Jews should observe all 613-plus laws in the Torah, including the rituals concerning ceremonial purification. In order not to break God’s commands, they introduced laws to stop them from breaking God’s law. They put a fence around the fence so to speak. They separated themselves from the population. So much so that they lost their heart for people. It was all about ritualism and keeping the law at the expense of embracing God’s heart of mercy. In their quest to appease God, they became judgmental, legalistic and merciless. The Pharisees were an overcorrection to something that had good intentions.

The Pharisees were mostly middle-class businessmen and leaders of the synagogues. Though they were a minority in the Sanhedrin and held a minority number of positions as priests, they seemed to control the decision-making of the Sanhedrin because they had popular support among the people. Among the Pharisees were two schools of thought, based on the teachings of two rabbis, Shammai and Hillel. Shammai called for a strict, unbending interpretation of the Law on almost every issue, but Hillel taught a looser, more liberal application.

The Pharisees taught the following doctrines:

1. God controls all things, but decisions made by individuals also affect life’s course.
2. There will be a resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6).
3. There is an afterlife, with appropriate reward and punishment on an individual basis. The Messiah will set up His kingdom on earth.
4. The spiritual realm, including the existence of angels and demons, is real (Acts 23:8).

Many of the Pharisees’ doctrines put them at odds with the Sadducees. They strongly believed in a natural kingdom on this earth and it is going to be war through the actions of the awaited king, the Messiah. Jesus’ doctrine is much closer to the Pharisees than the Sadducees.

SADDUCEES

An upper-class aristocratic group of Jews who came out of the Maccabean Revolt. The Maccabean Revolt was a Jewish rebellion against their Greek/Syrian oppressors (Antiochus Epiphanes IV) in Israel, c. 167—160 BC, as well as a rejection of Hellenistic compromises in worship. The history of the Maccabean Revolt is found in 1 and 2 Maccabees and in the writings of Josephus. The origin of Hanukkah is traced back to the Maccabean Revolt. The Sadducees saw themselves as a prestigious group and were a liaison between the Jewish religious institution and the current reigning governmental authority at the time, Rome. The Sadducees were a religiopolitical group that held a great deal of power among the Jews in Israel. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees worked hard to keep the peace by agreeing with the decisions of Rome (Israel at the time was under Roman control), and they seemed to be more concerned with politics than religion. Why? Because if you go against Rome, you are done. They will exterminate you very quickly.

ESSENES

The Essenes were a Jewish mystical sect somewhat resembling the Pharisees. They lived lives of ritual purity and separation. They originated about 100 B.C., and disappeared from history after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The Essenes are not directly mentioned in Scripture, although some believe they may be referred to in Matthew 19:11, 12 and in Colossians 2:8, 18, and 23. Interest in the Essenes was renewed with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were likely recorded and stored by the Essenes.

It has been popular among some scholars to claim that John the Baptist was an Essene. There are some similarities between John and the Essenes, but the evidence is not clear.

THE ZEALOTS

They were political revolutionaries. They were waiting for the Messiah who would overthrow Rome, conquer them and rule in His own kingdom. In the New Testament, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ was named Simon the Zealot (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). What was a Zealot? The Zealots were members of a first-century political movement among Judean Jews who sought to overthrow the occupying Roman government. The word zealot derives from the Greek zelotes, meaning “emulator or (zealous) follower.” The Zealots were founded by Judas of Galilee and Zadok the Pharisee. Of importance in New Testament history, the Zealots led a rebellion when Rome introduced imperial cult worship. The Great Jewish Revolt began in A.D. 66. The Zealots successfully overtook Jerusalem, but their revolt was ultimately unsuccessful. In A.D. 70, the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple. A remnant of the Zealots then took refuge in Masada.

So you have a Jewish population who desperately waited for the Messiah, the King to come and these groups formed to preserve their faith and unite the Jews towards God and against Rome. They placed their hope in whoever was a political activist because that could be the Messiah that would liberate them from the Romans. Even Jesus' disciples had this view. In Acts 1:6 we see that some disciples wonder if Jesus was now going to “restore the kingdom to Israel.” The culture was looking for a political deliverer. So Jesus appears on the scene within this context.

ROME

Rome was politically in charge, but the Jewish religious system was thriving. Rome colonised the Promised Land and they ran the legal system. Although the religious groups clashed in theology and view, they knew that Rome was in charge. Rome allowed the Jews to practice their faith as long as they don't challenge Rome's authority. Rome had the view; “behave yourselves and you can continue to practice your religion. Step out of line and you will die.” Any rebellion against Rome was met with brutal extermination. That is why Rome used crucifixion because it was such a cruel and painful way to die. Rome sometimes crucified 200 per day. People were crucified at the entrance of the city so that everyone could see what happens to those that rebels against Rome. There was one king and that was the Emperor of Rome. Any other king is a threat and will be dealt with swiftly and violently.

After Jesus' ascension, in the year 66-73 AD, the First Jewish–Roman War took place, sometimes called the Great Jewish Revolt (Hebrew: המרד הגדול ha-Mered Ha-Gadol), or The Jewish War. It was the first of three major rebellions by the Jews against the Roman Empire, fought in Roman-controlled Judea, destroying Jewish towns, the displacement of its people and the appropriation of

land for Roman military use, as well as the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 AD and the Jewish religious institution.

So building up to the birth of Christ, the Jews were actively looking for the Messiah and history books shows us that there were many possible candidates for the Messiah. Quite a few were thought to be the Messiah. We see the Pharisee Gamaliel referencing this concept in the book of Acts.

Acts 5:34-40, ESV

34 But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.

35 And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.

36 For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing.

37 After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.

38 So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail;

39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice,

40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

So the buildup in expectation for the Messiah was intensifying by the time that Jesus appeared on the scene, yet they expected that the Messiah will come to overthrow Rome.

JESUS THE MESSIAH

Jesus grew up in the culture and setting that if you claim to be the Messiah, the King, you gonna have to do something about Rome. At the time when Christ came, the people were looking for a military and political leader to liberate them, but Jesus’ Kingdom was different. It was not in competition with Rome. It is not the same type of kingdom.

John 18:36, BSB

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world; if it were, My servants would fight to prevent My arrest by the Jews. But now My kingdom is not of this realm.”

Israel today is awaiting the same thing, a political ruler that will liberate Israel. This paves the way for the antichrist to come.

Jesus was referred to as the “King of the Jews” on several occasions during his life. Most references can be found in the record of Jesus’ trial and subsequent crucifixion, noted in all four gospels. However, Jesus was also identified as the King of the Jews by the visiting wise men around the time of his birth. Having heard the magi refer to the child as the “King of the Jews,” King Herod had the baby boys put to death. God preserved the Messiah in Africa, Egypt, the very place where the Hebrews were slaves for 430 years.

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

Zechariah 9:9, KJV

Zechariah wrote: “Behold, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious. He is humble and

riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.”

By riding into Jerusalem on a colt, Christ is claiming His rightful place as the prophesied Messiah. The Sanhedrin looked at this and for them, this was either the true fulfilment of Zechariah’s prophecy or it was a false attempt to fulfil the prophecy, similar to what many other “messiahs” had done in previous years. They doubted because Jesus did nothing to overthrow Rome, so according to them, Jesus is probably just like all the others that claimed to be or that people thought to be the Messiah.

A lot of the Biblical prophecies about Jesus focus on His second coming when He comes with all authority and power to rule. Remember, for every 1 prophecy about Jesus first coming there are 8 about his second coming. They saw the second-coming prophecies as a ‘now’ thing. We know today it is a future thing but they saw it as one event without a 2000 gap. One day Jesus will bring all things under His authority at His second coming.

So when Jesus came on the donkey riding in Jerusalem and the people welcomed him as the Messiah, Rome and the religious leaders saw that as a threat. If the people call Jesus king, Rome is going to act! They will all be killed. What were they going to do to deal with this problem?

PILATE

So we have people claiming that Jesus is the king of the Jews and when Jesus appeared before Pilate, that is exactly what he asked Jesus.

Mar 15:2, ESV

And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.”

Pilate also asked the people, should I crucify your king or let him go? Barnabas or Jesus, who do you want to be free? We think that Pilate was asking this question in the sense of “is this a good idea to let him go or not”. That is not the point. Pilate is bringing to their memory their history, reminding them what Rome does with anyone who does not submit to the Emperor. You challenge the Emperor, you are dead. Pilate wanted them to remember the people who were crucified at the entrances of the towns and villages across Israel, those who rebelled against Rome. Identify yourself as a follower of this “king” and you will be next. The point is “So, do you believe Jesus is a king, are you standing with him because you know what that means. We will crush you mercilessly and in the most inhumane way.” What was the crowd's response?

John 19:14-16, BSB

14 It was the day of Preparation for the Passover, about the sixth hour. And Pilate said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” 15 At this, they shouted, “Away with Him! Away with Him! Crucify Him!” “Shall I crucify your King?” Pilate asked. “We have no king but Caesar,” replied the chief priests. 16 Then Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified, and the soldiers took Him away....

They knew what would happen if they stood with Jesus and confessed Jesus to be king. A terrifying, painful death. Don’t forget that Jesus’ forerunner had already been executed by Rome, John the Baptist.

PETER DENIED JESUS

Do you now see why Peter denied Jesus 3 times? If Rome found out that he believes Jesus is king, an opposition to Rome, he is dead. The nation was scared to acknowledge Jesus as King because it would result in the fierce judgment of Rome!

CONCLUSION

Fear blinds you from seeing the truth and standing for the truth. Put yourself in the shoes of the people in Jesus' day. What would you do? We are nearing Christian persecution, especially in the last days. What will you do? If you will die if you confess Christ, will you die, or find an excuse to deny him. "God will understand" will probably be something we are going to hear a lot in the future. I have a family to take care of. I have children to raise. I have a future, etc.

You see, the religious leaders did everything they could to silence Jesus. They broke all the rules the night when the Sanhedrin found Jesus guilty before his crucifixion. They did not have the right witnesses (2 witnesses were needed – Matt 26:59-60; Mark 14:62-64). The High Priest tore his clothes, which was not allowed. They made a same-day guilty verdict that was not allowed. They wanted Jesus gone. So they murdered him. It's either him or all of us. Either he dies or we die at the hands of Rome. He cannot be the Messiah because he is doing nothing about Rome. He is not fulfilling the criteria.

They handed Jesus over to Rome to be killed for his claim to be a king, a threat to Rome's authority.

John 19:19, NIV

Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.

Pilate did this to let the people see what happens to those who challenge Rome. Ironically, it was the truth. Jesus is the King of the Jews. Will you act like the people and the religious leaders by selling Jesus out or will you stand for the KING?

Matthew 10:32-33, BSB

32 Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father in heaven. 33 But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father in heaven.

Christ made it clear to us that "if the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). So, while it is understandable for someone to keep his/her faith in Christ a secret and/or even deny Christ to save his/her life, for a Christian, it is simply not an option.