

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

RLJ-1777

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PART 1: HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

THE AUTHOR

The Gospel according to Matthew, also called the *Gospel of Matthew*, or simply *Matthew*, is the first book of the New Testament. The author, Matthew, was one of the twelve apostles selected by Jesus. **Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13**

He was also known as Levi, the son of Alphaeus, and was a Roman tax collector. **Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27**

The New Testament does not state when his name was changed from Levi to Matthew, which in Hebrew means “God’s gift.”

His call to ministry was dramatic and upset the scribes and Pharisees, who could not comprehend why Jesus would associate with a sinner. **Luke 5:27-32**

Matthew was from the province of Galilee, but we don’t know anything else about his personal life other than he was a tax collector. Galilee was governed by King Herod Antipater (known by the nickname Antipas), a vassal king of the Roman Empire. Herod Antipas built the city of Tiberias as his capitol which was located south of Magdala on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

The Roman government demanded that local governors of conquered nations pay tax to Rome. The governors taxed people as they traveled from one city to another other with merchandise. It was necessary to stop at a toll booth where a publican (tax collector) would be in charge. This man had soldiers at his disposal to search a merchant’s wares and enforce the tax.

A tax collector was instructed to charge a certain percentage set by Herod Antipas. The Roman government demanded a certain amount each year. It was up to the vassal king to collect this sum but he extracted more tax than was needed to enrich himself. The publican had to meet Herod Antipas’ demands, but just like the vassal king, he too called for extra and was allowed to keep the remainder. It was a corrupt system and the Jews hated taxes.

POWER STRUCTURE

There were four religious/political parties at the time of Jesus:

1. Sadducees
2. Pharisees
3. Herodians
4. Essenes



SADDUCEES

The Sadducees consisted of the elite Jews descending to the priestly group of Zadokites, who were descendants of the Maccabees. The high priest ruling over the temple in Jerusalem was appointed by the vassal king. Thus, the office of high priest was political as well as religious and this man was tied to the local Roman government.

PHARISEES

The Pharisees were more militant and conservative in their biblical viewpoints. They made up the Sanhedrin, which was the highest religious court in Jerusalem.

It is important to note that the Pharisees believed in life after death, something the Sadducees denied. **Acts 23:6-10**

HERODIANS

The Herodians were Hellenistic Jews aligned with King Herod the Great, who ordered the death of children in Bethlehem. **Matthew 2:1-16**

After King Herod's death, the Herodians remained loyal to his descendants.

ESSENES

The Essenes was founded by a group of priests who disagreed with the political leadership in Jerusalem and the secularization of the office of the high priest. They moved their families to the wilderness area of Qumran on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea.

Scrolls from this community were discovered in 11 caves from 1946 to 1956. They are known today as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It is believed that John the Baptist was in contact with the Essenes, who wanted the people to return to the teaching of the Old Testament.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

John the Baptist rebuked Herod Antipas for his sinful behavior and was subsequently executed. **Matthew 14:1-13**

The apostles Peter and Andrew were first disciples of John the Baptist and then they joined themselves to Jesus. **John 1:29-42**

POLITICAL UNREST

The land of Galilee and Judah had been ravaged by war for hundreds of years. From 165 B.C., the Roman Empire began to increase its power and started a campaign to defeat the Seleucid Empire (Syria), which was a holdover from the Greek Empire under the leadership of Alexander the Great.

JOHN HYRCANUS

The Jews established some kind of self-rule because of the weakness of Seleucids. John Hyrcanus of Israel's Hasmonean dynasty, also known as Maccabean, was established as the high priest of the Jews in 134 B.C.

The death of Antiochus VII Sidetes in 129 B.C. saw the Seleucid's lose control of everything but Syria. Hyrcanus took advantage of this weakness and expanded the territory of the Judean state which was a landlocked area.

Hyrcanus ordered the Jewish army to seize control of the coastal areas from Lebanon to Gaza. He ordered Jews to settle in the cities and take control since the inhabitant of these cities were hostile to the Israelites.

The Jews had suffered great losses in their battles for independence during the previous hundred years and so Hyrcanus raised a mercenary army to augment the Jewish soldiers.

The population in Samaria was a mixture of different Gentile nationalities who were forced to settle there by Assyria after the fall of Northern Israel in 727 B.C. A remnant of the ten northern tribes had also filtered back after the fall of Assyria in 612 B.C. The Jews hated the Samaritans and refused to accept them as Israelites.

Hyrcanus ordered the invasion of Samaria in 113 B.C. and put his two sons, Antigonus and Aristobulus in charge of the campaign. Samaria was at this time ruled from its capital of Scythopolis.¹

The Samaritan leadership sought help from Syria and Antiochus IX Cyzicenus sent a force of 6,000 soldiers, but they were no match for the Judean forces, and after a series of hard-fought battles, the Samaritans were subdued.

Hyrcanus ordered the surviving Samaritan men, women and children to become slaves in the Judean kingdom. He also forced all the conquered people to adopt Judaism and circumcision was forced upon the males.² Jewish rabbis told the people to accept Judaism as presented to them and to view themselves as Jews.

Once Samaria was subdued, Hyrcanus' troops crossed the Jordan River to the east and took the cities of Medeba (a former Moabite city) and Shechem, which was located in the land given to the tribe of Ephraim.

His forces also took the mountain areas around Mount Gerizim. This was a vital area since the Samaritan temple was located on this mountain and competed against the temple in Jerusalem. The destruction of this temple solidified Hyrcanus' religious grip on the people in Judea as the high priest because it reaffirmed the temple in Jerusalem.

Hyrcanus' soldiers then attacked Edom (Idumea), which compassed the land on the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea. The mandatory conversions continued as the descendants of Esau were forced to adopt Judaism.

John Hyrcanus' desire to conquer Edom opened the door for the Herodian dynasty to take over Judea in the future. Thus, a descendant of Esau became the ruler of the Jews. Herod the Great was a power-hungry man and murder was his favorite tool to maintain supremacy. **Hebrews 12:15-17**

To be continued...

¹ The city today is known as Beit She'an.

² He set up a re-education system similar to what was done by the communists over the years once they took control.

THE WORLD OF THE APOSTLES

I am giving you the background of Judea and the violent history of the Jewish people to show the world of the parents of the men who would become apostles. They instilled in their children the struggles of the Jews and the hope of a future Messiah that would someday drive out the Romans and re-establish the kingdom of Israel.

This is why the apostles asked Jesus when He was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. The Jewish people were defeated. Tens of thousands had died violently in the 200 years prior to the coming of Jesus. The political system was corrupt. A descendant of Esau was their king. It seemed there was no hope until Jesus finally arrived.

Acts 1:4-8

Remember, it's not so important how you begin your life after salvation, but how you finish it!

Do you have an ear to hear with?