

## Lecture 2 –The Reliability of the Gospels; Land of Palestine & Its People

“Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke 1:3-4 (NIV)

### Key Terms

High priests, scribes, Pharisees, Saducees, Essenes, Zealots, governors, procurators

### Objectives

- \*To further understand arguments for the reliability of the Gospels
- \*To learn the basics about the land and the people of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine

### Lead Question

Describe to a young post-modern believer the importance of the historical reliability of the Gospels for his/her faith.

### The Reliability of the Gospels (cont.)

#### IV. Our Sources

##### D. The quality of the NT witnesses (cont.)

1. Education and memory
2. Standards for historiography allowed selectivity within speeches but not alteration.
3. Writing
4. Poetry and Jesus’ rhetorical style are memorable.
5. Memorable events emblazon themselves on the minds of witnesses for life.
6. Fidelity to the words of Christ. Two indicators:
  - a. 1 Cor. 7:10 ff. “The Lord says...I say.”
  - b. Title “Son of Man”
    - \*Church also faithful in transmitting difficult sayings of Jesus (Mark 10:18, 13:32)
7. Living witnesses, through Israel and in Jerusalem
8. The disciples staked their lives on Jesus and His words. People do die for a lie, which someone else persuaded them to believe. But they do not often die for a lie they invented.
9. Gospels refused to fabricate “helpful sayings” by Jesus.

##### E. Conclusions

1. The Gospels have a strong claim of historical reliability, even for a neutral historian.
2. Archaeology and history help, but in the end we must go to the texts and the Holy Spirit.

### The Land of Palestine & Its People

#### I. The Land

A. Size and boundaries. In the day of Jesus and the apostles, from 5 B.C. to 70 A.D., Palestine of the Jews was a small, divided, occupied land.

1. Nation reached greatest unified size under Herod the Great by 20 B.C. At apex, kingdom stretched 110 miles N to S, 30 to 60 miles E to W. Judea proper was ~ 30 by 50. Compare to Rhode Island.
2. Herod’s jealousies eroded his kingdom, led to the division of the land between 3 sons.

##### B. The nature of the land

1. Two American states analogous: Maryland and Colorado.
2. Relatively low, seasonal rainfall, but with wide variation from north to south. Much land looks like the lee side, the dry side, of a mountain. Grassland, bare dirt, sparse forests. Many dry river beds; water a precious resource. No meadows, but enough grazing land for

herding.

3. Temperature: August, hottest month, highs in mid to upper 80s, lows 65-73. Except average over 102 in desert of Jordan valley. January, coldest month, highs 55-60, lows 40-50.
4. Topography:
  - \*Coastal plain. Generally low, except for mid-north coast, which rises rapidly to Mt. Carmel.
  - \*Central highlands, roughly 1000 to 2500 thousand feet. Foothills, small mountains.
  - \*The Jordan valley. Lowest elevations on earth. Hot deserts.
5. Human geography. Palestine densely populated. Many small towns, separated by relatively short distances. This eased travel, minimized danger from exposure, animals, bandits.

## II. The People: Ordinary People

The common people were not writers or record-keepers.

*How are the lives of ordinary people today similar or different than those of ordinary people in Christ's time? How does this affect how we proclaim the Gospel?*

### A. Population

1. Palestine is densely populated. Its cities, though smaller, were very close together.
2. Total population difficult to assess. Perhaps 500,000 to one million.
3. Judea, Samaria, and Galilee was one of most densely populated areas of Roman Empire. East of Jordan and away from desert in southwest, small towns, 2,000-15,000 people are everywhere.
4. Perhaps half within Palestine were Romans, Greeks, or other Gentiles. Most were profoundly influenced by Hellenism, Greek culture. Cf. tomb inscriptions in Jerusalem in Greek

### B. Cultural/religious setting for common folk

1. Highly Hellenized. Very secularized, with scant observance of Judaism.
2. Architecture shows strong pagan influence. Example, Maritime Caesarea, a Hellenistic city with harbor, fortress, theater, amphitheater, hippodrome, gymnasium, libraries, baths.
3. Capernaum, base of Jesus' operations has synagogue 60' x 80'. Also has Roman bath.

### C. Personal laxity, high religiosity, monotheism

## III. The People: Official Jewish Leaders

- A. High priests: hereditary, paid office, under thumb of Rome. Dominated by Sanhedrin
- B. Scribes: the official teachers of the land. Not hereditary, not paid.

## IV. The People: Religious Parties

### A. Pharisees

B. Non-professional. Small (6,000 adherents), influential, religiously optimistic.

1. Held in highest esteem by populace, and considered themselves the true Israel.
2. Revelation + tradition + interpretation=right course of action in every possible situation.
3. Appeared to be the orthodox, zealous, even balanced, theologians of day. Resisted syncretistic impulses, loss of Jewish culture. Attempted to balance human merit and divine grace.
4. Insisted they held, preserved, rightly interpreted oral law of Moses. See Matt 5:20. Yet considered more lenient than Saducees because their casuistry took special factors into account.
5. Pharisees' beliefs
  - a. Fate, God, and human will: "They hold that to act rightly or otherwise rests, indeed, for the most part with men, but that in each action Fate co-operates." Josephus, War 2.8.14.
  - b. Soul is imperishable; "there are rewards and punishments...for those who have led lives of virtue or vice: eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while the good

souls receive an easy passage to a new life.” Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.14

c. Ideal of simple living, “making no concession to luxury.” (*Ant* 18.12).

d. High view of human capacity. Belief in the two tendencies.

6. Life of faith is conceived as life of obedience to law. De facto, tradition and interpretation supersede law, as they must. When one document definitively interprets another, removing all its ambiguities and uncertainties, it necessarily usurps the prior document’s authority.

7. Opinion leaders

8. Why opposed to Jesus?

#### C. Saducees

1. Strong adherence to biblical authority, not oral and interpretive traditions of Pharisees

2. Human agency stressed over fate and God’s activity

3. Antisupernaturalist

4. Immanentist concept of righteousness. More rigorous than Pharisees

5. Doctrine and politics

6. Lifestyle and influence

a. Priestly, aristocratic, wealthy. Associated with patricians. Learned to co-operate with Romans. Therefore the governing party, though they had fewer adherents. Very sensitive regarding temple and property. Reicke, 154-5.

b. Relatively unpopular. Known for severity in judgment, because unwilling to use casuistry to excuse behavior or mitigate law.

c. Essenes. Known through Dead Sea Scrolls, Qumran, not NT. Separatist, communal, stressed ritual purity.

d. Zealots: More a political movement than a party, agitating for revolt against Rome.

#### V. The People: Individual Governors

A. Herod the Great. King at Jesus’ birth.

1. Athlete, warrior, politician, orator, builder

2. Wife, three sons, Jewish nobility. Matthew 2 consistent with history.

B. Herod Antipas. Commonly mentioned in NT. Politically smaller than brother Archelaus.

1. Ruled over Galilee and Perea during ministry of John and Jesus.

2. John the Baptist rebuked his sinful marriage. He executed John.

#### VI. The People: Roman Government in Palestine

A. Procurators

1. Highest ranking civil servants. Role is peace-keeping and revenue.

2. Lightly armed militias at their disposal. Death penalty by their decree during NT era?

3. Pontius Pilate. Stubborn, cruel, intractable. Illustration

Shortly after taking office in 26, Pilate brought into Jerusalem Roman standards bearing the image of the emperor at night, even though there were others that bore no images! A provocation. Many Jews petitioned and interceded, not moving from Pilate’s residence for 5 days, until Pilate ordered troops to secretly surround petitioners. He revealed them suddenly, and ordered Jews to disperse or be “cut in pieces,” as soldiers drew their swords. “But they threw themselves to the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their deaths very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed.” Astonished, Pilate relented.

(Josephus, *Ant* 18.3.1; *War* 2.9.2-3; E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 331)

B. Concessions to Jews, provocation of the Jews

1. Not required to join army, participate in emperor worship.

2. Jews largely self-governing, if local government was pro-Roman.

3. Under Emperor Tiberius (14-37), Sejanus advocated strictness toward the Jews, and appointed procurators, Gratus (15-26 AD) and Pilate (26-36), both aimed to manifest Roman authority. Example, took money from temple treasury for construction of a local

aqueduct.

4. Execution of Jesus at Passover: Governor present at feasts, due to potential for unrest. Jesus clearly presented as would attract Pilate's attention - as an anti-Roman agitator.
5. The collaboration of Pilate and Jews in Jesus' death fits historical circumstances of AD 33. In AD 31 Tiberius deposed Sejanus, and ordered the provincial governors to treat the Jews more considerately. Thus Pilate was favorable to Jews' request to kill Jesus; they asked, even expected him to co-operate. It also explains why Saducees, high priests, even Pharisees were eager to show loyalty to Tiberius, even to the point of paying taxes (Luke 23:2)—to show their pleasure at the emperor's recent decisions.
6. Most Roman emperors wanted peace and taxes, but there were exceptions. Consider Apion's incitement of Gaius/Caligula and Agrippa's response. Antiquities 18.8.1-9.

*Think about why the groups in this lecture were opposed to Christ. Are there any parallels with modern religious groups, ideologies, or governments, etc.?*