

Lutheran Foundations: A Confirmation Curriculum©

Year 2. Jesus Christ: His Life and Work

The Tomorrow River Lutheran Parish

Lessons 2. The Basics: Setting and Cast of Characters

The Cultural Times of Jesus of Nazareth

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The Historical Context (All dates in this first paragraph are B.C.)

The Old Testament ended (in the 400s B.C.) with Israel under the authority of the Medo-Persians, who allowed them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and the city. In the 300s B.C., Alexander the Great conquered the western world for Greece. After his death, the empire was divided up by four of his generals, and Greek became the language of the whole western world, thus preparing the way for an efficient spreading of the Gospel. In the 200s, the Jews were under the Egyptian/Greeks who allowed the translation of the Old Testament into Greek--a volume called The Septuagint (LXX), which was the Bible of Jesus' day. In the 100s, the Jews were captured by the Syrian/Greeks and persecuted. This led to a rebellion under the Maccabee family, who recaptured Jerusalem on December 25, 164 (Hanukkah). With the aid of an Edomite named Antipater, the Jews convinced the new Roman Emperor Augustus to allow a modified self-rule under the Jewish Sanhedrin, while paying taxes to Rome and being policed by Roman soldiers. Then Antipater convinced Augustus to appoint Antipater's son, Herod the Great, as King of the Jews.

People

In Jesus' day, Palestine had between 500,000 and 600,000 people. About 18,000, or 1 out of 30, were clergy, who seemed to be out of touch with the spiritual needs of the people (Matthew 9:36; Luke 10:2; John 4:35). Most towns were small, except Jerusalem, which was about 55,000, but could swell to 180,000 during major holidays like Passover or Pentecost. Children were to be seen and not heard (Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-14). Yet many toys have been discovered. They played games like hopscotch, jacks, and had whistles, hoops, spinning tops, toy animals on wheels, and board games. Three of every ten Jewish children died before the age of 18 (but the number was even worse for the non-Jews), and 18 was almost middle age. The average longevity was 40-45, and unlike today, men usually outlived women by as much as 10 years, so it was common for widowers to marry younger girls. Even so, there were many men and women who lived to a normal old age.

Occupations

Most people worked physically hard jobs and were generally not extremely poor. Many were shepherds (Luke 15:1-7; 17:7; John 10:1-5), the most traditional job of Israel. But many in Jesus' day were also farmers (Matthew 13:1-4; Luke 17:7), fishermen (Matthew

13:47-48; Luke 5:1-11), builders (Matthew 13:55), and various tradesmen, merchants, managers of the business of rich men (Luke 17:7; 19:12ff), and vine growers (Mark 12:1). There were also wealthy people in Palestine, but most got their wealth from inheritance or suspicious dealings (Luke 16:19). Jesus was a builder, which could mean He actually worked more with stone than wood or a wood worker who built specialty items, like furniture, doors, and windows. Either way, Jesus was neither a poor peasant nor a rich noble.

Domestic Life

Individual homes were the primary social points of the villages. Here people discussed politics, religion, and social issues, often over meals (Mark 2:1-2; 14:3; Luke 11:37). The rooms were small (about 4 x 4 meters or yards) with stone walls and often with thatched wood roofs. The furniture was usually made of wood but most reclined on pillows to eat. Bread was the basic food of all meals (wheat bread, if you were wealthier, barley bread, if you were poor--John 6:9). The next most common foods were fish or goat cheese (depending on your occupation or location), olives, and wine (Matthew 9:17). This could all be carried to your job and was the common first meal of the day, eaten in the late morning or midday. The Jews ate two meals a day. The second was usually at home in the evening. It consisted of more of the above plus sometimes lentil (vegetable) stew, fruit, eggs, and red meat on special occasions.

Language, Writing, and Education

Most Jews of Jesus' day were literate. Children were taught to read and write in the home, but the rabbis (a general term for teacher) also taught in the synagogues on certain days. The Jews spoke Aramaic in the homes (a combination of Hebrew and Babylonian, which the Jews acquired during the 70 years of captivity). But they were also educated in Greek, since that was the language of business, politics, and society in the Roman world. The Romans' Latin language never spread across the empire. The native Hebrew was generally used only by rabbis. Writing was done mostly on papyrus, a paper obtained from a reed which grew in marshy areas, especially along the Egyptian Nile. Papyrus rolls were no more than 33 feet (11 meters) long. This determined the length of many literary works such as the gospels and explains why Luke and Acts are two volumes, both about that size.

Travel

Travel was slow, difficult, and dangerous. Nevertheless, many people traveled regularly within Palestine, a distance of about 100 miles (167 km) by 40 miles (64 km). In spite of the availability of donkeys and camels, most people walked (John 7:1). Generally, one could walk about 20 miles (32 km) per day. Acts 10:23-24 records Peter walking the 40 miles (64 km) from Joppa (modern Tel Aviv) to Caesarea in two days. Travelers could be attacked by lions or bears, but the biggest danger was robbers (Luke 10:25-37). This made it safest to travel with others in a caravan (Luke 2:44). Foreigners and merchants often stayed at inns, but Jews usually stayed in homes. Hospitality to travelers was an expected part of Jewish life. Travelers could also actually buy maps, published in Rome,

of nearly every part of the empire, including roads, inns, taverns, way stations, and distances between cities. The most direct route from Galilee (say, Nazareth) to Jerusalem was through the Samaritan hill country (75 miles, 120 km), and most Jews took that route, in spite of the hatred for and inhospitality of the Samaritans. Another way was down the Jordan River Valley through Jericho (97 miles, 155 km).

Religion

Religion dominated every phase of life in Jesus' day. Here are the major religious groups:

- **The Pharisees.** At the end of the Old Testament (Malachi 3:16) and during the inter-testament period, there were conservative Jews zealous for the Law called Hasidaeans or loyalists. They joined the fight for independence against the Syrian/Greeks, but when the Maccabeans set up a non-Levitical priesthood in the temple, they separated from them and were called Pharisees (separatists). Unlike the Sadducees and Herodians, the Pharisees opposed any relations with or taxes paid to Rome (Matthew 22:15-17).
- **The Sadducees.** This was a party of rich, non-Levitical priests who claimed their origin from Zadok, the High Priest appointed by Solomon (1 Kings 2:25). Basically they were liberals. They denied the authority of tradition, doubted any Scripture after the Mosaic Law, and did not believe in angels (Acts 23:3) or the resurrection (Mark 2:18). They cooperated with Rome and welcomed the Hellenism the Pharisees hated.
- **The Scribes.** These were members of a profession whose basic job was to copy Scripture, but they came to be known as authorities on the Old Testament.
- **The Essenes.** These were monk-like, and sometimes cult-like, communities which withdrew from civilization and the opposing involvement of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Qumran community, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, was probably an Essene settlement.

The Temple and the Synagogues

These are two very different structures. The Temple was the only place of worship specified in the Old Testament. After Solomon (900s B.C.) it was in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8). Jesus referred to it as His Father's house (Luke 2:49) and treated it as a sacred place (John 2:16). The synagogue, however, was not biblically prescribed. The Jews, especially the Pharisees, created it as a convenient local place for worship (although without sacrifices and priests), prayer, education, and social interaction.

Pilate and the Romans according to Philo and Josephus (from Wikipedia)

In chronicling the history of the Roman administrators in Judaea, ancient Jewish writers Philo and Josephus describe some of the other events and incidents that took place during Pilate's tenure. Both report that Pilate repeatedly caused near-insurrections among the Jews because of his insensitivity to Jewish customs.

Josephus notes that while Pilate's predecessors had respected Jewish customs by removing all images and effigies on their standards when entering Jerusalem, Pilate allowed his soldiers to bring them into the city at night. When the citizens of Jerusalem discovered these the following day, they appealed to Pilate to remove the ensigns of Caesar from the city. After five days of deliberation, Pilate had his soldiers surround the demonstrators, threatening them with death, which they were willing to accept rather than submit to desecration of Mosaic law. Pilate finally removed the images.

Philo describes a later, similar incident in which Pilate was chastened by Emperor Tiberius after antagonizing the Jews by setting up gold-coated shields in Herod's Palace in Jerusalem. The shields were ostensibly to honor Tiberius, and this time did not contain engraved images. Philo writes that the shields were set up "not so much to honour Tiberius as to annoy the multitude". The Jews protested the installation of the shields at first to Pilate, and then, when he declined to remove them, by writing to Tiberius. Philo reports that upon reading the letters, Tiberius "wrote to Pilate with a host of reproaches and rebukes for his audacious violation of precedent and bade him at once take down the shields and have them transferred from the capital to Caesarea."

Josephus recounts another incident in which Pilate spent money from the Temple to build an aqueduct. Pilate had soldiers hidden in the crowd of Jews while addressing them and, when Jews again protested his actions he gave the signal for his soldiers to randomly attack, beat and kill – in an attempt to silence Jewish petitions.

In describing Pilate's personality, Philo writes in the 1st century that Pilate had "vindictiveness and furious temper", and was "naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness". Referring to Pilate's governance, Philo further describes "his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity".

Pilate's term as prefect of Judaea ended after an incident recounted by Josephus. A large group of Samaritans had been persuaded by an unnamed man to go to Mount Gerizim in order to see sacred artifacts allegedly buried by Moses. But at a village named Tirathana, before the crowd could ascend the mountain, Pilate sent in "a detachment of cavalry and heavy-armed infantry, who in an encounter with the firstcomers in the village slew some in a pitched battle and put the others to flight. Many prisoners were taken, of whom Pilate put to death the principal leaders and those who were most influential." The Samaritans then complained to Vitellius, Roman governor of Syria, who sent Pilate to Rome to explain his actions regarding this incident to Tiberius. However, by the time Pilate got to Rome, Tiberius had died.

Lesson 3. The Basics: Jesus, True God and True Man

The Second Article of the Apostles' Creed: Redemption

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

What does this mean? I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

– Luther's Small Catechism

Jesus. The Christ.

True God... From Eternity...

- The Eternal Word – **John 1:1-5, 10-14, 18** ¹*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* ²*He was in the beginning with God.* ³*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being* ⁴*in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.* ⁵*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it. ...* ¹⁰*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him.* ¹¹*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.* ¹²*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,* ¹³*who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.* ¹⁴*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ...* ¹⁸*No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*
- The "Son of God" (Centurion's "confession")
 - Side Question: Did Jesus Claim to be God? Yes!

- The 7 “I Am” Statements reflecting the divine name God gave to Moses from the burning bush:
 - “I Am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35)
 - “I Am the Light of the World” (John 8:12)
 - “I Am the Door of the Sheep” (John 10:7, 9)
 - “I Am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11, 14)
 - “I Am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25)
 - “I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6)
 - “I Am the True Vine” (John 15:1, 5) who is the source of their spiritual life.
- **John 8:56-58** ⁵⁶ *Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.* ⁵⁷ *Then the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”* ⁵⁸ *Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”*
- **John 10:31-39** ³¹ *The Jews took up stones again to stone him.* ³² *Jesus replied, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?”* ³³ *The Jews answered, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human, are making yourself God.”* ³⁴ *Jesus answered, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’?”* ³⁵ *If those to whom the word of God came were called ‘gods’—and the scripture cannot be annulled—* ³⁶ *can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’?”* ³⁷ *If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me.* ³⁸ *But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”* ³⁹ *Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.*
- Indirectly (but clearly!) Claimed to be God
 - Forgave Sins
 - If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father
 - Eternal Judge of all humanity
 - CS Lewis in *Mere Christianity* does some thinking about these claims of Jesus and asks us to think seriously about such claims and about anyone who would say such things about themselves:
 - Either God, the Devil or a Goof ball
 - Either of ultimate importance or of no importance. Nothing in the middle is possible.

Because of Jesus' direct and indirect claims, and because of the witness of Scripture, and with the whole church from ancient times forward, we confess that Jesus is the eternal second person of the Blessed Trinity.

- Some more cool stuff about the divinity of Jesus from the creed that we can't linger on today (but about which you are welcome to ask questions!)
 - Descended into Hell
 - Ascended into Heaven
 - The Last Judgment

True Man... of Mary...

We think that Jesus was a real, historical figure; that he was born, lived, taught, worked wonders, condemned, executed, buried... and then an empty tomb...

Just so you are perfectly clear: the ancient church never taught that Jesus' virgin birth proved his divinity. The ancients had tons of stories of various pagan gods philandering with human women giving rise to hybrid heroes.

Jesus is not the Christian version of Hercules.

We think that the resurrection from the dead proves Jesus' divinity – and all his other claims. We think that being born of Mary proves Jesus' HUMANITY. And it is important that Jesus is fully human like us. As St. Gregory Nazianzus said: "What has not been assumed has not been healed"

One final piece:

Don't depend overmuch on Jesus' repeatedly calling himself the "Son of Man" to shore up your arguments for Jesus' full humanity

- It is a reflection of the prophesy in Daniel 7 in which a heavenly figure approaches God and is given all authority, glory and an eternal kingdom.
- In Jesus' mouth, and with an awareness of Daniel 7, it is almost certainly a self-referent and not a title... it never ever shows up in the predicate nominative...

And you thought that there was no purpose to studying grammar! You were wrong! Go apologize to your English teacher and work harder!

See you Wednesday!