



THE HISTORICAL JESUS VI:

The Hidden Years of Jesus

VIRTUALLY NOTHING IS KNOWN about the life of Jesus from the time he returned to Nazareth with his parents (5 CE) until he began his ministry (ca. 30 CE). We only know that he “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52). For 25 years the life of Jesus remained hidden except that, as an artisan, he belonged to a middle-class family. He had four brothers — James, Joses (Joseph), Simon and Judas (Jude) — and two sisters — Salome and Mary (Matthew 13:55, 56).¹ His legal father, Joseph, undoubtedly died during those years, for there is no subsequent record or reference to him. Jesus probably helped support the family by working as a carpenter in rebuilding the neighboring provincial capital of Sepphoris. As both student and worshiper, Jesus also must have attended the synagogues in Nazareth and Sepphoris as well as the annual festivals at the Temple in Jerusalem.

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Political, Religious and Cultural Context

Meanwhile, much is known of the political, religious and cultural context of those hidden years:

1. The tiny land of Israel (Palestine) was crucially important in those days, just as it remains today. It was the central location for three international trade routes — the Via Maris, the Kings Highway and the mountain Ridge route. These routes constituted lifelines for much of the civilized world.
2. Israel was regarded as part of the critical wedge between the two antagonistic empires of Rome to the west and Parthia to the east.

3. It is estimated that the Jews constituted about 10 percent of the world population at that time, and they were widely distributed not only in Israel itself but across much of the known world.

4. The Jews were noted as being culturally and religiously adamant as well as economically impressive.

It was in this context that Rome attempted to confront and to accommodate Judaism. Beginning with Julius Caesar, the Jews were granted exemption from military service and from quartering troops. They were allowed to abstain from work and to assemble on their Sabbath. Also, they were given tax benefits and were permitted to offer sacrifices on behalf of Caesar rather than to worship Caesar himself. It was under these circumstances that Caesar Augustus remained the Roman emperor until his death in 14 CE. According to the imperial cult, at his decease Augustus became god, while his stepson and successor, Tiberius (14-37 CE), became the son of god. Earlier, Herod the Great (37 BCE – 4 BCE) not only had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem on behalf of the Jews but, in honor of the imperial cult, had erected three Augusteums. These were temples to Augustus that surrounded Galilee – in Sebaste (Samaria); Caesarea Maritima, on the Mediterranean coast; and Omrit, near Iturea (Northern Galilee).² These monuments to the imperial cult probably were deeply disturbing to the devout Jewish inhabitants of Galilee.

Upon the death of Herod the Great (4 BCE), Caesar Augustus largely approved Herod's last will and testament. Augustus then appointed Herod's son, Philip, as tetrarch of the tiny territories of Auranitis, Batanaea, Gaulonitis, Iturea, Pnias and Trachonitis, north and east of Galilee; Herod's son, Antipas, as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; and Herod's son, Archelaus, as ethnarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Philip proved to be a benign official, Antipas was much like his father, and Archelaus was profoundly brutal and tyrannical.

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The installation of Herod's sons was immediately followed by a rebellion led by Judah, the son of Hezekiah, who had earlier confronted Herod the Great when he was governor of Galilee (47 BCE). This later rebellion (4 BCE) was opposed by the Syrian legate and general, Quintilius Varus. It ended in the destruction of Sepphoris, the crucifixion of over 2,000 Galileans, and the enslavement of thousands of others.

However, Judah ben Hezekiah survived this rebellion and, 10 years later (6 CE), led another rebellion with the support of Zadok, a Pharisaic priest. It was in this context that Judah and Zadok founded the sectarian cult known as the Zealots (also known as the "Fourth Philosophy"), who were dedicated to armed rebellion against Rome and to the restoration of the Jewish theocracy. During this rebellion Judah – known as Judas the Galilean – perished (Acts 5:37).

This rebellion was triggered by vigorous protests — particularly against the tyranny and brutality of Archelaus — preceded by a delegation of Jews who went to Rome and appealed to Augustus. Augustus responded by calling Archelaus to Rome and then exiling him to Gaul (modern France).

With the expulsion of Archelaus, Augustus placed Judea and Samaria under the rulership of Roman procurators, based in Caesarea Maritima, who reported to the governor of Syria. Augustus then authorized the Syrian legate, Quirinius, to initiate a census throughout the entire Herodian domain. Intended to levy additional taxes on the Jews, this census further infuriated them. These disturbing events occurred exactly one year after Jesus accompanied his parents to Jerusalem in observance of the Passover (5 CE). Jesus and his family survived the rebellion of 6 CE, but we know nothing of the tribulations they endured.

Eleven years later (17 CE), just when the Jewish city of Sepphoris had been fully restored as the provincial capital of Galilee, Herod Antipas (4 BCE 39 CE) decided to abandon Sepphoris and establish a new capital city on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Since his decision coincided with the emperorship of Tiberius, Antipas named the new capital Tiberius. Antipas deliberately

located the new city on the exact site of a Jewish burial ground. This made the location profane to the Jews, and they could not/would not enter the new capital city. Antipas did this intentionally to further separate himself from his Jewish opponents and to exclude them from any participation in or access to the government. In order to populate the city, Antipas had to import Greeks, Romans and other foreign immigrants. Obviously, Jesus did not enter or participate in the construction of Tiberius during these hidden years.

In response to their exclusion from Tiberius, the Jews developed the neighboring village of Capernaum, just north of Tiberius on the western shore of Galilee. Here Jesus later transferred himself and his family at the beginning of his ministry. Capernaum was sufficiently close to Tiberius that the Jews were able to monitor substantial activity in the capital.

Meanwhile, Judah and Samaria remained under the governorship of a series of Roman procurators who largely ruled from Caesarea Maritima and who reported to the Syrian governors. These procurators or prefects included Coponius (6-9 CE), M. Ambibulus (9-12 CE), Annius Rufus (12-15 CE), Valerius Gratus (15-26 CE) and Pontius Pilate (26-36 CE).

Throughout this period the Temple at Jerusalem was governed by a series of high priests appointed by Herod Archelaus and by subsequent procurators. They were no longer hereditary Zadokite or Hasmonean priests but simply Roman appointees. Furthermore, their priestly vestments were held by the Roman governorship and had to be regularly secured by permission. The priests who served during these hidden years included Annas (6-15 CE),

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Ishmael, son of Phiabi (15-16 CE), Eleazar, son of Annas (16-17 CE), Simon, son of Kamithos (17-18 CE), and Joseph Caiaphas (18-37 CE), son-in-law of Annas.³

The tension of the Jews under the dominion of Rome was intensified not only by the brutality of Roman and Herodian rule but by the Jewish conviction that the end time — the messianic apocalypse — was about to occur. While the Sadducees focused on the Temple and its services, the Pharisees focused on their table fellowship and the immanence of the Torah/Yahweh within themselves. The apocalyptic Essenes withdrew into monastic communities, awaiting the coming of their kingly and priestly messiahs. Meanwhile, the Zealots continued their armed opposition.

Then, about 27/28 CE, a monumental event occurred. John the Baptist began his ministry beyond the Jordan River. He was perceived as the return of the prophet Elijah and as a profound threat to the existing political and religious power structures. Delegations of Jerusalem leaders went to the Jordan in an attempt to determine what was happening. John was not afraid to confront them. “. . .

[W]hen he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matthew 3:7).

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Implications of the Hidden Years

What must have been the implications of the 25 hidden years for Jesus? Undoubtedly, he experienced the same predicaments, the same challenges and the same disappointments that have afflicted all humanity. These must have included repeated exclusion from others (self-existence) as well as subjection to command, to attempted possession, to conflicting power structures, and to the consequences of natural free process — disease, disaster and death.

It was in this overall context that Jesus finally left his family and his trade in Nazareth and journeyed to the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin, John. It was in this setting that Jesus recruited his disciples. And it was under these circumstances that Jesus launched his ministry.

Endnotes

1. See Richard J. Bauckham, “All in the Family: Identifying Jesus’ Relatives,” *Bible Review* 16, no. 2 (April 2000): 20-31.
2. See J. Andrew Overman, Jack Olive and Michael Nelson, “Discovering Herod’s Shrine to Augustus,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29, no. 2 (March/April 2003): 40-49, 67.
3. See “List of Jewish High Priests,” at www.bible-history.com/HighPriests/NTHIGHPRIESTSList_of_Jewish_High_Priests.htm.

Primary Sources

1. Shaye J. D. Cohen (revised by Michael Satlow), "Roman Domination: The Jewish Revolt and the Destruction of the Second Temple," in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999), pp. 265-298.
2. Louis H. Feldman, "Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism in the First Century," in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of their Origins and Early Development* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), pp. 1-39.
3. Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961).
4. Moses A. Shulvass, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. 1, *The Antiquity* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1982).
5. Stephen M. Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).
6. "First Century Context of Palestine (Israel)," at www.jesus-institute.org/historical-jesus/jesus-firstcenturycontext.shtml.
7. "Birth of Jesus to the Start of His Ministry," at www.ccel.org/bible/phillips/CN610CHRONO.htm#2.

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