

# The Reliability of the Gospels - 2

## Historical Background

To understand the writing of the Gospels it is a good idea to have a picture of the history of the period in which they were written. This detailed review helps us to see that the Gospels were set in a real context, against the background of real events and real people.

Jesus worked and taught in Galilee and Judea, at a time when Judea was governed by the Romans and Galilee was governed by a minor king from the Herodian dynasty.

### Romans and Jews

While the Roman governor Pontius Pilate nominally ruled Judea, there were only a handful of Romans in the province and much of the real power lay with the priests and scribes of the religious establishment in Jerusalem. In Galilee the king was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who managed to balance Roman power with his own authority.

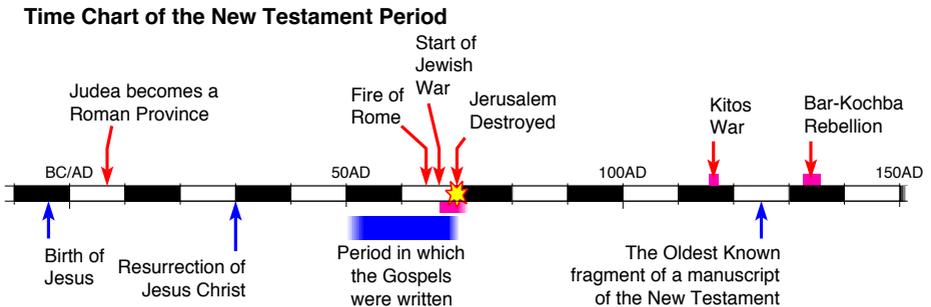
Both of these rulers had to keep the Romans happy, but as long as they could do this they had considerable autonomy.

However, as time went on relations between Romans and the local Jewish authorities grew worse. Both Judea and Galilee had considerable non-Jewish populations who spoke Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic and who were highly antagonistic to the Jewish religion.

### Conflict

As matters grew worse, violence increased until in 66AD a war broke out between Jewish irregular forces and the Romans. The course of this war was recorded by the historian Flavius Josephus, a Jewish commander who was captured by the Romans and changed sides. Josephus called this "The Jewish War".

The war found its climax in the sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD; the destruction of Jerusalem at this time was so severe that, according to Josephus, those who passed by could not tell that there had been a city there at all. The temple was destroyed and most of the inhabitants were killed. The survivors, along with the population of more rural areas of Judea, Samaria and Galilee,



were taken out of the land as captives and sold as slaves throughout the Roman Empire. From then on the area was settled by a new population of Greek-speaking people from other places. The language changed and the cities were rebuilt to new designs.

Even so there was still friction between Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Romans. Two more wars followed. In the “Kitos” war (115-116 AD) the Jewish populations of cities all over the Eastern empire rose in support of the Parthians who lived in what is now Iraq and Iran. This was put down with great severity by the Romans. In 132 AD Hadrian started to rebuild Jerusalem as a pagan city with a temple to the pagan god Jupiter on the Temple mount. This caused another revolt, this time among Jews who had crept back into Judea since the Jewish War. The Jewish leader was known as “bar Kochba”, and so this is known as the “Bar Kochba rebellion”. The Romans again devastated Palestine, which became a paganised area of the Roman province of Syria.

This disaster for the Jews was matched by a similar crisis for Christians. In 64 AD, during the reign of Nero, Rome suffered a great fire which destroyed much of the city. To divert suspicion from himself, Nero blamed the Christians and ordered their persecution. This persecution spread throughout the empire and continued for two and a half centuries. The relationship between Christians and the Roman Empire was greatly changed.

## **The New Testament in Context**

The great changes in the circumstances of both Jews and Christians in the first and second centuries AD make it much easier to place the

Gospels and letters (called the “Epistles”) of the New Testament in context. If nothing had changed it would have been much more difficult to work out the time and place in which the events described in the Gospels took place. As matters stand it is relatively easy for archaeologists to date remains in that century and for linguists to show how the culture and speech of the locals underwent revolutionary change. All this will appear in this series, as we look at the way the Gospels were written and make a proper assessment of their reliability.

## **Other Accounts**

During this period a considerable number of documents were written which had a bearing on the origins of Christianity. Various Roman historians make mention of the new Christianity including Josephus, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus and Suetonius, and there are also Jewish sources. Some documents were written by Christians; these were after the completion of the New Testament and must be treated cautiously, but the earliest of them were written by people who had met Apostles and spoken with them; these are called the “Apostolic Fathers”. Later writers are known as the “Early Church Fathers”; these are still less reliable, but nevertheless they provide some evidence.

The historical background to the New Testament helps us to put the Gospels and Epistles in context and hence to see when they were written and what problems the writers might have had to deal with. The result is to improve our confidence in the reliability of the New Testament in general and especially the Gospels.

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