

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

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Romans, Greeks, and Jews

The World of Jesus and the Disciples

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Introduction

[1] All contemporary moviegoers are aware of the difficulties of adapting a book, the written word, to film, a medium that relies on visual and aural sensations to convey its meaning. How often do we hear the following comments about a film: “the book was different,” or “the book was better,” or, most damning of all, “they *changed* the book!” When the book is an ancient book, such as a gospel from the New Testament, the problem is compounded by the fact that the book is for us an alien document. It is alien because it is removed from us by time, by language, by geography, and by ensuing history. All four of the New Testament gospels were written by the end of the first century CE, over nineteen hundred years ago. They were written in Greek, in different parts of the eastern Mediterranean. And we tend to read them through the lens of history, a history in which Jews and Christians are separate religious groups, and Christians dominate the western world. So the problems involved in making an “authentic” film from the gospels should be immediately obvious.

[2] The problems are made worse by the fact that the gospels are not histories or biographies. They do not set the stage or give the background for the events they portray. Matthew does not, for example, tell us what the weather was like on the day Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). In Luke's gospel, when Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, learns that Jesus is from Galilee, he sends him to Herod, who is in Jerusalem at the time (Luke 23:6-7). This snippet of information raises a number of questions. Who is Herod? What is he doing in Jerusalem? Why is it unusual for him to be in Jerusalem? Why does it matter that Jesus is from Galilee? Luke does not spell these things out because he assumes his audience knows the answers. But we are not his

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original audience, so we need this background information to understand this little vignette. Finally, there is the fact that the gospels are four different books, giving four different narratives of Jesus' life, ministry, and death. Sometimes the gospels differ in details, but in some cases the differences are major. For example, the Gospel of John has a completely different timetable for Jesus' passion and death than the synoptic gospels. Which timetable is "authentic"?

[3] Given these difficulties, any filmmaker who wishes to make a film based on a gospel must necessarily rely on an historical reconstruction of the world in which Jesus and his disciples lived. Where can he or she go to obtain that information? Providing a reconstruction is the task of the historian and the archaeologist.

Sources

[4] We are fortunate that in the latter half of the twentieth century our knowledge base for a reconstruction of first century Palestine grew exponentially. First, there are the written sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The gospels are one source, which can be used with due caution, keeping in mind that they are not histories. Another major source is the late first century Jewish historian Josephus, who, in his two major works, *The Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*, gives us the most detailed history of this period. Josephus, a Jew writing in Greek to a Roman audience, is attempting to present a positive picture of Jewish history in terms his Gentile audience will understand. Thus he must be used with caution, but he remains our best source for the history of this period. Another major, and relatively new source of information for this period is the collection known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. This collection consists of primary, unedited Jewish manuscripts hidden in caves in various locations along the western shores of the Dead Sea. These manuscripts range in date from 250 BCE to 135 CE, and are written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Most of the texts are religious in nature, but there are some business and legal documents, most notably the Babatha archive. The Qumran scrolls, a subset of the Dead Sea Scrolls, is the collection of religious writings of one specific Jewish group in the Greco-Roman period, the Essenes. Another source of written data for Palestine in this period is the specifically Roman authors. These writers, such as Strabo the Geographer or Pliny the Elder, are usually not interested in the Jews or Jewish history *per se*, but help us paint a broader picture of Jesus' world. The rabbinic texts from a later period such as the Mishnah and the Talmud can be used with a certain degree of care, always remembering that their traditions first reached written form c. 200 CE.

[5] Archaeology has become an important source of historical information in the last hundred years. Written records are left behind by those with the training, the means, and the time to write, which means that the vast majority of people in the ancient world did not leave them behind. All people, however, leave behind material remains: buildings, tools, ceramics, textiles, coins, and organic materials such as foodstuffs. From these remains archaeologists are able to reconstruct a picture of daily life in an ancient society. These material remains "flesh out" or give life to, the words of our written sources. A good example of this is the famous "Galilee boat," an almost perfectly preserved two-thousand year old boat discovered approximately one mile north of Migdal, or Magdala, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (Wachsmann). From this artifact we get a much better idea of the type of vessel that Jesus' disciples Simon and Andrew, James and John, were using (Mark 1:16-20).

[6] Now, there is a caveat to attach to all these sources of information and the picture that they yield. All of our sources are partial; we do not have, and we never will have, all the information we would like about the world of Jesus and his disciples. Our sources are always changing, and so our picture changes; we get another little piece of information, and our picture shifts yet again. That is a

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limitation we must always bear in mind as we go about our task of reconstruction. What then is the picture we can reconstruct of the world of Jesus and his disciples?

Palestine Under Roman Rule

[7] It was a world dominated by the power of Rome. The history of the land on which biblical Israel had flourished was marked by foreign domination from the time of the rise of the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BCE. Palestine (the Roman name for the province) was successively dominated by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greek Empires of Alexander and his successors, and the Romans. Although all of these empires brought about changes to the land and its inhabitants, perhaps the most profound change came about with the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. The culture of the Ancient Near East, which had looked inward and eastward for millennia, now began to look outward and westward. The language of government, commerce, and culture became Greek, and would remain Greek throughout the Roman period. The government and the economy, which had been local and decentralized under the Persians, became centralized and tightly controlled by the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties. There developed a great gulf of wealth and status between the non-native ruling elite and those who cooperated with them and the bulk of the indigenous population. This basic division persisted into the Roman period.

[8] The land itself can be divided into three broad areas, and each area has a different history and population makeup. The province of Judah (Latin Judaea) was centered around the temple city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem had been sacked and its temple destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. Its upper classes had been exiled to other parts of the Babylonian Empire (2 Kings 25). The Persians allowed these exiled Judaeans, or Jews, to return to Jerusalem after 538 BCE, and by 515 BCE they had rebuilt the temple to their god Yahweh (Haggai; Zechariah 1-8). During this process, however, they excluded those they deemed of insufficient Judaeans descent (Ezra 4:1-3), and quarreled with the rulers of Samaria, the Persian province directly to the north (Ezra 5:3-5). The descendants of those returned exiles made up the bulk of the populace of Judaea in the first century CE, and they controlled the temple in Jerusalem. The Judaeans state enjoyed a brief period of independence under the Hasmonaean priest kings, from approximately 150 to 63 BCE, when the Roman general Pompey took over the country.

[9] Directly to the north of Judaea, the province of Samaria was the center of the old northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians conquered Israel in 722 BCE, exiled its upper classes, and resettled the area with colonists from other parts of the Assyrian empire. These colonists intermarried with the local Israelite peasantry, and became worshippers of their god Yahweh. These were the Samaritans encountered and rejected by the returning Judaeans exiles. The Samaritans continued to worship the god of Israel, and built a temple on Mt. Gerizim in their territory. This temple was destroyed by the Hasmonaean John Hyrcanus, who conquered Samaria in the last years of his reign (135/34-104 BCE). At the time of the Roman conquest Samaria was still an unwilling part of the Hasmonaean kingdom.

[10] The northernmost part of Palestine was Galilee, the area in which Jesus began his ministry. Galilee, as part of the old northern kingdom of Israel, had been conquered by the Assyrians before Samaria, but the population of Galilee had been left in place (Horsley: 23). Galilee then changed hands fairly frequently, always being administered separately from Judah, until it was conquered by the Hasmonaean Aristobulus I in 104 BCE (Horsley: 25). These descendants of the northern Israelites thus came within the orbit of the Jerusalem temple, and were part of the kingdom taken over by Pompey.

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[11] The point of the foregoing history is to demonstrate that even before the Roman conquest the history of the area was very fragmented, with Galileans and Samaritans having very different perceptions of the temple cult in Jerusalem and its ruling class than did the Judaeans.

[12] The Romans at first preferred to rule through local clients, and thus in 40 BCE Herod the Great was named king over the three provinces, as well as territory to the east and south. Herod ruled with an iron fist, ruthlessly suppressing any opposition and imposing heavy taxes to satisfy the Roman tribute demands and to support his building projects (e.g. the temple in Jerusalem, the city of Caesarea). Thus the gap between the ruling elites and the peasant class grew wider. When Herod died in 4 BCE, revolts sprang up in various parts of his realm, but the Romans put them down and honored Herod's final will, which divided his territory among three of his sons. Herod Archelaus became ruler of Judaea and Samaria, Herod Antipas was made tetrarch of Galilee (which he ruled until 39 CE), and Herod Philip was granted the territory of Trachonitis northeast of the Jordan. Archelaus failed as a ruler (both in Roman and Judaeans eyes), and in 6 CE Augustus deposed him and placed the territories of Judaea and Samaria under direct Roman rule, with a governor subordinate to the imperial legate in Syria (Schürer: I.356-57). We can now better understand the background of the incident in Luke we mentioned earlier. Galilee and Judaea had, during the ministry of Jesus, separate governments. Jesus, as a native of Galilee, fell under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, and only came under direct Roman jurisdiction by virtue of his presence in Jerusalem.

The World of Jesus

[13] As you can see, we can reconstruct the history of Palestine in the Greco-Roman period with some degree of precision. In order to reconstruct daily life and religious customs, we must rely more heavily on the results of archaeology. Fortunately, there has been a great deal of archaeological excavation in Galilee in the past twenty-five years, including the important New Testament period sites of Sepphoris, Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Caesarea Philippi. What do we learn from the results of these and other excavations?

[14] In the social and economic realm, there were two separate cultures, that of the city and that of the village. The majority of the population lived in villages, where subsistence agriculture was the norm. Families consumed what they grew; any surplus was collected as taxes in kind. Even if there was no surplus, taxes were still collected. In the time of Jesus, for example, Galilean peasants were taxed by the Romans, who demanded tribute from the titular ruler Herod Antipas, by Antipas himself, to fund his lifestyle and building projects, and by the temple authorities in Jerusalem, to support the temple cult. It is no wonder, then, that our sources tell of popular uprisings among the Galilean peasantry against the ruling class, for example in 4 BCE on the death of Herod the Great, and later in 66-67 CE, the first year of the great Jewish revolt against Rome.

[15] The population of these villages would have been homogenous, without much movement or change. Thus Galilean villages were populated by Galileans, Samaritan by Samaritans, and Judaeans by Judaeans. Their religious traditions would have been conservative as well, with heavy reliance on their ancestral customs. The everyday language would have been Hebrew/Aramaic. The Galileans and Judaeans would have looked toward the temple in Jerusalem as their central cult site; the Samaritans rejected the Jerusalem temple. The villages, therefore, can be characterized as conservative and not welcoming to the more sophisticated urban culture of the cities.

[16] The cities present a more heterogeneous picture. Cities like Sepphoris in the north, Sebaste in Samaria and Jerusalem itself, served first of all as power bases and administrative centers of the Roman occupation. In the time of Jesus Sepphoris was a fortress town, Jerusalem contained the

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Antonia fortress, and Sebaste, in Samaria, was a Roman city, complete with a temple to Augustus (Schürer: II.162-63). The populations of these cities was generally mixed, with those of Israelite descent cheek by jowl with Greeks, Syrians, and Romans. The general language would have been Greek; Latin would not have been a common language, especially between various groups. Here dwelt the upper classes; the rulers and their families, the administrators responsible for tax collection, the garrisons of soldiers (who were mostly non-Palestinian Syrians), and, in Jerusalem, the priestly families who controlled the temple. These groups all intermingled, intermarried, and formed shifting alliances that often depended on expediency. The cities, in fact, can be described as melting pots that were always threatening to boil over.

[17] The religious world of the villages and cities is inseparable from their social and economic life. There was no separation between civic and religious life in ancient Palestine. So one cannot assume, for example, that the word “synagogue” in the gospels refers only to a building housing a gathering for religious worship, as it did in the late Roman or Byzantine periods. A “synagogue” was most likely the public gathering of the inhabitants of the town or village; religious acts would make up part of the agenda, but it would also include civic functions such as collections for the poor (Horsley: 132). That is the first point to be made. However, the picture is even more complicated. It has become clearer and clearer in recent decades that to speak of Judaism in this period as a monolithic entity, with agreed upon norms of scripture and practice, is just plain wrong. Rather, there were a variety of religious groups and practices among the peoples descended from the citizens of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and these groups interacted with and reacted to each other with varying degrees of hostility or openness. So while it is correct to claim, as most today would agree, that Jesus was a “Jew,” the follow-up question must be, “what kind of Jew?”

[18] Within the villages, the majority of the inhabitants did not have the time or resources for rigorous religious practice. They were too busy scratching a living and paying their taxes to worry a lot about such things as purity regulations. There was a general adherence to the Mosaic covenant, and, among the Galileans and Judaeans, the temple in Jerusalem, but beyond that no strict practices. As one moves farther up the social scale and begins to encounter those with more leisure and resources, questions of religious practice become more prominent. It is among the higher social strata that various religious groups form, although some villagers may have participated in them. Josephus names three major groups among the Jews (he calls them “philosophies”): the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes (*Jewish War* 2.119-61). The Pharisees and the Sadducees appear in the gospels and the rabbinic literature, while the Essenes do not. The disagreements among these three groups are mainly concerned with matters of purity and impurity, and temple practice. In other words, the arguments center on questions of interpretation of the Law of Moses. An example of this type of disagreement is found in the Qumran document 4QMiqsat Ma’ase ha-Torah, or 4QMMT, with parallels in the rabbinic texts. 4QMMT (B 55-58) has a passage on the purity of liquid streams: “And concerning (unbroken) streams of a liquid (poured from a clean vessel into an unclean vessel): we are of the opinion that they are not pure, and that these streams do not act as a separative between impure and pure liquids, for the liquid of the streams and that of the vessel which receives them are alike, being a single liquid” (Qimron and Strugnell: 161). The controversial part of this ruling says that the stream of liquid forms a connection between two vessels, so that the impurity of the lower vessel contaminates the (pure) upper vessel, rendering it impure (Qimron and Strugnell: 162). This ruling also surfaces in the Mishnah: “The Sadducees say: We protest against you, O Pharisees, for you pronounce clean the unbroken stream (of liquid poured from a clean vessel to an unclean one)” (*m. Yad.* 4:7), and the rabbinic position, “An uninterrupted flow (of a liquid poured from vessel to vessel), a current on sloping ground and the dripping of moisture are not considered a connective (of the two liquids) either for communicating uncleanness or for producing

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uncleanness (*m. Tohar* 8:9; Qimron and Strugnell: 162). Here the Sadducee position found in the Mishnah and that of the Essenes in 4QMMT are identical, against the probable Pharisaic position as communicated by the rabbis.

[19] Although the disagreements among the groups were religio/legal, the groups also participated in the political life of Palestine, especially those based in Jerusalem. Thus we find Pharisees and Sadducees sitting together on the Sanhedrin, the governing body for the local population in Judaea. Josephus mentions a John the Essene as a general in the first Jewish revolt against Rome (*Jewish War* 2.566-68; 3.9-21). Again, we find shifting alliances and political regroupings even among those Judaeans who differed in religious practice; one looks for uniformity in vain.

[20] Messianism formed an important component of religious belief among all the groups in this period. The expectation of a messiah, an anointed scion of the Davidic royal house, took on strong eschatological overtones in the Greco-Roman period. This is in reaction to the political oppression suffered under the Greeks and the Romans, and in some cases to the takeover of the temple and the high priesthood by those deemed unworthy to control it. Messianic beliefs, like everything else in this period, were not uniform across groups; however, messianic expectations seem to be rampant. Josephus describes several messianic movements in this period; he mentions names such as Judas of Galilee, Simon bar Goriah, Theudas, and the Egyptian. In the second Jewish revolt in 132-135 CE, its leader, Simeon bar Kosiba (bar Kokhba) was hailed as messiah by no less a figure than Rabbi Akiba (Collins: 110-11). Therefore it is not surprising that according to the gospels some of Jesus' followers acclaimed him as messiah; such a belief would be neither unusual nor unique in the first century CE.

[21] I have attempted today to paint a picture of the world of Jesus and his disciples that reflects the variety of the multifaceted communities in which they lived and which they would have encountered. This picture constantly changes and expands as our knowledge base changes and expands; therefore no one source is adequate for portraying a realistic version of the life of Jesus.

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