

Episode: Three Gospels Series No. 01

Narrator: Luke

Primary Scriptures: Mark 1-5

Story Summary: Culture, political, and geographical background of the Gospels

Location: Kingdom of Judea (Israel)

Time: Circa 30 AD

Suggested Memory Scriptures: Mark 1:11, 1:15, 3:29, 3:25, 4:18-19, 4:40, 5:19

The writers of the New Testament didn't spend much time writing about the economics, cultural, political, and geographical facts of their time. Their original readers knew these things.

However, modern readers often get lost while reading the Gospels, since they are not familiar with the geography of Israel, the culture of New Testament times, or the politics surrounding different time periods of the New Testament. Its events are not always placed in chronological order, making it even more difficult for modern readers to understand.

Back then, just as we see today, business dominated much of daily life. The most important trade route across Israel was the Via Maris. This was a main route with many spurs branching from it—travel across this route and its spurs critically impacted many Gospel narratives. The Via Maris explains many things, like why Jesus located his headquarters in Capernaum, how Herod the Great got so rich and influential, and how the Christians would quickly fulfill Jesus' command to make disciples in other nations. (see Reference 5 for a map of trade routes)

The Gospels are set in a time of economic prosperity in the Roman Empire, a prosperity brought about by the policies of the first Roman emperor, Augustus. He ruled from 27 BC until his death in 14 AD, making him emperor when Jesus was born in about 5-3 BC. Under his effective leadership, the Roman Empire expanded and there was internal peace throughout the Empire. This period was known as the Pax Romana, which lasted almost two centuries.

During the time of the Gospels, Israel was occupied by the Roman Empire. The vast majority of the citizens of Israel were Jews, and they greatly resented paying taxes to the Romans and obeying their laws. The Romans controlled Israel through their representatives who lived at Caesarea, their soldiers, and various "kings" who ruled under the largesse of Rome. The Jews were led by the Sanhedrin, made up primarily of the two powerful parties, the Pharisees and Sadducees. There was always political tension during the time of the Gospels.

When you read the Bible, you get the sense that Israel is an important country around which all important things revolve. During the time of the Gospels, Israel was a tiny country in a vast empire. Israel and its inhabitants were insignificant. Except for one of them. He would change everything.

Discussion Questions:

1. Who was Rome's emperor when Jesus was born? Who was emperor during Jesus' three-year ministry?
 2. During the ministry of Jesus, which Herod ruled most of Israel? What interactions did John and Jesus have with Herod?
 3. What was the name of the main trade route across Israel? What would have been Israel's fate if it had not had this route?
 4. Mark 1:22 says Jesus taught with authority, not as the teachers of the law. What does that mean to you?
 5. In Mark 2:20, how did Jesus demonstrate he had authority to forgive sins?
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1. Augustus was the emperor when Jesus was born. Augustus caused an economic boom for Rome that was enjoyed by all of its citizens. His son, Tiberius was emperor when Jesus preached and was executed. 2. Herod Antipas. 3. Via Maris 4. The teachers often quoted each other, and argued about what was right. Jesus' words seemed true to them, and were backed up with miracles and healings. 5. By healing a paralytic.

Application Questions:

1. Do you think of Herod Antipas, Augustus, and the other character in the Bible to be real people, or more like mythical heroes? What would it mean if the opposite was true?
2. Mark 1:35 says Jesus prayed before dark in a solitary place. Do you set yourself up to pray in a special way? Why or why not?
3. Mark 2:13-14 tells of the time Matthew (Levi) started following Jesus. Would you be willing to give up what he did to follow Jesus? How did Matthew change the way he thought about money and its importance to his life?

Application Questions for Teens:

1. Can you think of a five-minute time frame during most days in which you could pray? Are you willing to put away your phone and other electronic devices during that short period? What might happen if you experimented with praying for a month?
2. Matthew gave up his good job to follow Jesus. What are you willing to give up to follow Jesus?
3. Does learning about the real history of Israel and the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus change anything about the way you feel about the Gospel stories? If so, what changed and why? If not, why do you suppose that is?