

What Life Was Like in Israel at the Time of Jesus

Introduction

To fully understand the Gospel of Matthew, it's important to know what life was like in Israel around the time of Jesus' birth. The Jewish people lived under Roman rule, religious tensions were high, and different groups had different expectations about the Messiah. This summary provides an overview of the key aspects of life during that time.

1. Political Landscape

- **Roman Rule:** By the time Jesus was born, Judea had been under Roman control for decades. Rome appointed rulers like **Herod the Great (37-4 BC)**, who kept order but was brutal.
- **Herod the Great:** Known for **massive building projects** (including the expansion of the Temple in Jerusalem) but also for extreme cruelty (e.g., ordering the killing of infants in Bethlehem).
- **Taxes:** Heavy taxation funded both Roman rule and local leaders like Herod, burdening the working class and farmers.
- **Governors & Kings:** After Herod's death, his sons ruled parts of his kingdom, but Rome eventually took direct control, appointing governors like **Pontius Pilate (26-36 AD)**.

2. Daily Life & Society

- **Class Structure:** Most people were poor farmers, fishermen, or craftsmen. A small elite (priests, Herodian officials) held power and wealth.
- **Urban vs. Rural:** Jerusalem was a major city with the Temple, while towns like Nazareth and Bethlehem were small villages.
- **Family Life:** Families were patriarchal. Men were the main providers, and women's roles were centered on home and family, though some worked in trades.
- **Trades & Economy:** Agriculture (wheat, olives, grapes) and fishing were the main sources of food and income. Many were heavily in debt due to taxes.

3. Religious Climate

- **The Temple:** The center of Jewish worship, where sacrifices were offered. Controlled by the **Sadducees**, a priestly group aligned with Rome.
- **Synagogues:** Local gathering places for worship and teaching, led by Pharisees and scribes.
- **Messianic Expectations:** Many Jews believed a **Messiah (anointed one)** would come to **free them from oppression**, but they had different ideas about what that meant.
- **Different Jewish Sects:**
 - **Pharisees:** Strict about the Law, believed in resurrection and angels.
 - **Sadducees:** Wealthy, controlled the Temple, did **not** believe in resurrection.
 - **Essenes:** Lived in isolated communities, awaiting God's kingdom.
 - **Zealots:** Wanted to overthrow Roman rule by force.

4. Cultural & Global Influences

- **Hellenization:** Greek culture and language spread under previous rulers. Many Jews spoke **Greek or Aramaic**, though Hebrew was used in religious settings.
- **Roman Roads & Trade:** Rome built roads that connected Judea to the wider empire, making travel and trade easier but also bringing foreign influences.
- **Diverse Population:** Jews, Romans, Greeks, and other ethnic groups lived in the region, leading to cultural mixing and tensions.

5. Events Leading Up to Jesus' Birth

- **Hasmonean Rule (167-63 BC):** Jewish leaders ruled independently until Rome took over.
- **Pompey's Conquest (63 BC):** Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem, making Judea a Roman province.
- **Herod the Great (37-4 BC):** A Roman-appointed king who kept control through brutality and alliances.
- **Roman Census:** The reason Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-5), part of Rome's effort to register people for taxation.

Conclusion

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Jewish people lived under **Roman oppression, economic hardship, and religious divisions**. Many longed for a Messiah to bring **freedom and justice**. Understanding this background helps us see why Jesus' message was both **powerful and controversial**.