The Socioeconomic Background of the New Testament

Until recently, historians focused primarily, if not exclusively, on the deeds of the political or military leaders of a society. Historians of Christianity also scrutinized church leaders, but such scholars paid little attention to the everyday lives of ordinary people. Today there has been a renaissance of interest in such ordinary living. An overview of the social world of early first-century Palestine under Roman domination will help us read the Gospels better. We can visualize the events described and avoid importing anachronistic ideas of living conditions from our world back into a quite different time and place.

Geography

Israel was (and is) made up of four quite different kinds of terrain.

1. The fertile coastal plain contained port cities for seafaring and trade with the rest of the empire. Fruits and vegetables grew in abundance there.
2. The central hill country, which included farmable foothills as well as more rugged, rocky terrain primarily producing timber, divided the country in two from north to south. The less rugged parts were homes to shepherds and their flocks; vineyards (especially for grapes and olives); orchards (especially for fig trees); small, terraced plots for other crops; and numerous small villages (Jerusalem being the much larger exception).
3. The valley of Jezreel in southern Galilee and the entire Jordan River valley formed the country's breadbasket, where many grains, especially wheat, were grown, along with the other crops already noted.
4. In southern Judea and into Idumea the great desert or wilderness area was used for little more than nomads and their various herds of sheep, goats, and camels.

Most of the central-ridge mountains varied in altitude from roughly 1,500 to 3,500 feet above sea level, although Mount Hermon in the far northeast topped out at over 9,200 feet. In striking contrast the Dead Sea is the lowest place above ground on earth, at 1,296 feet below sea level. With roughly one hundred miles separating the two, it is still possible to go from below-freezing, snow-covered terrain to hot, dry, desert land with 90- to 100-degree F (or 32- to 38-degree C) temperatures in a short span of time. Winter was the rainy season and summer the dry season, so different crops were rotated through two harvests a year.

In New Testament times Jerusalem was the largest city in Israel. It was a city dominated by the temple and its precincts, occupying roughly one quarter of the walled-in portion of the city, itself little more than one-half mile long on any given side. Other major edifices included Herod's Antonia Fortress and an amphitheater and a horse-racing stadium he had constructed for Hellenistic entertainment. Caesarea Maritimis was the next most important city because of its role in the shipping trade and as the home to the Roman prefect's headquarters. Sebaste (the Old Testament city of Samaria) was the center of population and administration in the province of Samaria, with Shechem being the next most important city. Sepphoris and

Tiberias, the past and present capitals of Galilee, from the perspective of Jesus' adult ministry, were the two largest cities in Galilee.

Population

Although many ancient censuses were taken, most of the records have been lost. Very rough estimates can be made based on the data that remain, plus archaeologists' computations of the number of people that could have fit into various living spaces. We know cities were extremely crowded, with many people living in small homes right on top of one another. Even the countryside was often filled with many people working small plots of land. It has been estimated that the entire Roman Empire contained 50 million inhabitants, of which 4 million were Jews. Perhaps about 700,000 Jews lived in Israel, with more than 3 million scattered throughout the diaspora. Alexandria and Antioch were Gentile cities with large Jewish populations.

Rome itself may have topped one million residents, with people constantly leaving the countryside and moving to the urban center of the empire in hopes of a better life. As many as one third of the inhabitants were slaves, including numerous runaways. Alexandria may have had 750,000 people and Antioch, 500,000. Athens and Tarsus were somewhat smaller but were important university towns. Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth were four other major cities, whose inhabitants possibly numbered more than 100,000. Jerusalem was somewhat smaller, with perhaps as few as 25,000 individuals within its walled-in portion, no more than 100,000 in the entire metropolitan area of three to four square miles, and perhaps considerably less. The larger vicinity may have swelled to 200,000 or more, however, at festival times, particularly Passover, because Jews who could do so made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem from throughout the empire. Most of them probably stayed in tents on the hilly country surrounding the city.

Although it is disputed, some argue that Galilee had as many or more Gentiles living in it as Jews—hence the name "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt. 4:15). Many lived in the two cities Herod Antipas rebuilt, Sepphoris and Tiberias. Yet the majority of Galilee was made up of as many as two hundred small villages, few as large as Capernaum, which had possibly one thousand inhabitants.[1] We must therefore avoid stereotyping Jesus and His disciples as roaming through largely uninhabited regions with large farms. Galilee was much more populated than we imagine it. Jew-Gentile tension, coupled with the fact that Jerusalem housed a large pro-Herodian priestly bureaucracy, could have led to strong rural-urban animosities. Yet interestingly, except for the annual festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem, we have no record of Jesus ministering in any of the larger or pro-Roman cities. Sean Freyne plausibly suggests that this avoidance is "best explained as principled, based on Jesus' views of the values represented by these cities and his own call to minister to those who had become the victims of their elitist lifestyle."[2]

Transportation and Communication

Rome had by far the best system of travel and communication in the ancient world, never again replicated until the 17th century or later. Main roads linked all major towns. Roman highways, paved with cobblestone, were wide enough for a pair of two-horse chariots to pass each other. Many people traveled in simpler ox-drawn carts, by donkey, or on foot. Most roads were simply dirt. A soldier or courier on horseback could average 25 to 50 miles a day and double that in an emergency if fresh horses were periodically available. A wagon averaged 7 to 8 miles a day; on foot people often traveled 20. Nazareth to Jerusalem was thus about a three-day walk for someone in good health. The main roads were relatively safe, but the less well-traveled ones in desolate regions were favorite hideouts for thieves (see Luke 10:29-37).

Inns dotted the landscape, providing lodging for travelers, but many were notorious as hangouts for pirates and prostitutes. More reputable people preferred to stay in private homes with relatives, friends, or others who were recommended to them. Hospitality for traveling disciples, therefore, was highly prized in the early Christian world (see Matt. 10:11-13; 3 John 5–8). Sea travel was popular, especially for trade, although it was always potentially dangerous. In winter the high seas were generally impassable. Cargo boats measured up to 180 feet in length and could carry up to 1,200 tons of goods or 600 passengers and their provisions.[3] (Paul's prison boat carried 276 people, Acts 27:37.) A trip between Rome and Alexandria took as little as 10 days going east or as long as three months traveling west, depending, of course, on wind and weather conditions.[4]

Boats also carried mail, as did overland couriers, but the most reliable form of delivery was by personal acquaintance. Public news was often posted on notice boards in town squares or announced aloud by heralds at the marketplace or another public center of activity. The Greek word for herald (*keryx*) is related to the word that was frequently used for the early Christian proclamation (*kerygma*). Merchants traveling overland usually formed caravans with numerous carts and beasts of burden, both because of the quantity of merchandise and the safety that numbers afforded.

Municipal Facilities

Privacy was almost impossible in ancient cities, as crowded as they were. People deliberately spent most of their waking hours outside or away from their houses. The Roman baths were a cross between a modern country club and a community recreation center. They included hot tubs, exercise areas, libraries, and chapels. Similarly multifaceted were the Greek gymnasiums—the homes to physical exercise for members and schooling for young boys. The town marketplace was the center for trade and conversation. Excavations have revealed the rough ancient equivalent to our strip malls—*stoa*—laid out in a square with pillars supporting roofs that extended out over various stores. Extensive night lighting has been uncovered in places too. Syrian Antioch, for example, had more than 2½ miles of oil-lit lamp poles. The library at Alexandria housed more than five hundred thousand volumes, but for the most part only the wealthy owned books privately.

Homes
The well-to-do, particularly in and around Rome, might own large, multistory, freestanding brick villas with inner atria where up to 50 people might gather. A large, dozen-room house with three courts has been excavated in Capernaum, which some think may have been Peter's. The upper room where the disciples met in Jerusalem would have formed part of one of the larger homes in that city. For the lucky few (the rich), Rome had constructed piping to provide hot and cold running water and sewage removal. In most parts of the empire, including Israel, among the vast majority who were not wealthy, houses were much smaller and amenities much plainer. Adobe and hewn stone were more common building materials. Most ordinary people lived in one-room, two-level dwellings with living quarters separated from and raised above the animal stalls. They were usually built with plain exteriors, one adjoining the next to form three sides of a rectangle with a shared inner courtyard. Tenement buildings in the larger cities were laid out like small, multistoried apartment complexes. Roofs of buildings were made of tile, thatch, or mud. In Palestine roofs were flat, and people socialized there and slept on them to cool off during hot weather.

For all but the handful of rich, furniture was minimal: some kind of bedding, perhaps no more than mats on the ground; outdoor ovens for cooking; and a few chairs or benches. Indoors a depressed area in the middle of a dirt floor could house a small, covered charcoal fire, which also heated the house during cool weather. Archaeologists have unearthed a wide variety of pottery, kitchen utensils, glassware among the wealthier homes, and other household tools. Lighting was by olive-oil lamps and torches. Ordinary folk availed themselves of chamber pots dumped outdoors into designated areas for refuse and runoff gutters placed in the middle of streets for sewage, leaving a generally foul-smelling and unsanitary environment. Local wells, cisterns for storing rainwater, and intercity aqueducts provided most of the water supply. Every house, however modest, was usually equipped with a bolt and lock and was shut up for the night. Windows were small, both for security and insulation purposes. The typical solitary aperture would have made searching for a lost coin (see Luke 15:8-10) difficult with a small candle or oil lamp.

Meals and Daily Schedules
Farmers worked from sunup until sundown; craftsmen and artisans, almost as long. The well-to-do merchants worked much shorter hours, largely from early morning until just before noon and then perhaps for a short time again after a midday nap. Wealthier Romans enjoyed four meals a day and regularly ate meat and dairy products. Less well-to-do Jews were often limited to two meals. Bread formed the staple of their diet, supplemented by fruits, nuts, and vegetables. Fish, especially near Galilee, were plentiful; most people could afford to eat meat only on festivals and other special occasions. An invitation to a banquet thus gave ordinary folk a rare opportunity to eat food they might otherwise sample only at religious ceremonies (see Luke 14:12-14; 1 Cor. 10:27-30). Wine was the basic drink and generally healthier than water or milk but as much as three times as diluted as it is today. Olive oil was a primary ingredient in cooking; honey, the main sweetener. Salt, sprinkled plentifully on meat, helped preserve it in a world without refrigeration.

For most the evening meal culminated a hard day's work, ended daylight hours, and offered a regular opportunity for more intimate socialization. People normally invited only good friends to join them in table fellowship. With little else to do after dark, they ate leisurely over as long as a two- to three-hour span of time and engaged in extensive conversation. For formal gatherings people reclined at the table (see John 13:23). Cushions were provided alongside the benches on which the food was served, sometimes arranged into a square-cornered, U-shaped configuration, on which one placed one's elbow and lay on one side, eating with the free hand. One's legs thus extended out perpendicular to the table. This explains, for example, how the disreputable woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee, coming in from the outside, had access to Jesus' feet for anointing (see Luke 7:38). It was also important to assume one's place at the table according to status (see Luke 14:7-11). Some recent scholars have argued that the model of a Greco-Roman symposium—a lavish banquet followed by a time of wine bibbing and other entertainment, ranging from philosophical discourse to sexual orgies—significantly influenced the Jewish world even in Israel. But a careful analysis shows this to be unlikely; the differences between Jewish banquets and Greco-Roman feasting noticeably outweigh the similarities.[5]

Clothing and Styles

The main garment for an average Jewish man was a linen or cotton tunic, a loose-fitting, knee-length shirt with a girdle or sash that could be tied around the waist while working or walking. In cooler weather a cloak, sometimes of wool, was worn over the tunic (see Matt 5:40). Sandals or shoes, some form of head covering, and underwear rounded out a man's attire. For prayer a Jewish man donned distinctive shawls with fringes that were fingered, much like later Catholic rosary beads, along with phylacteries—leather head and arm bands containing key Scriptures written. Roman men wore longer, distinctive togas—a form of dress forbidden to foreigners.

Women wore simpler but often more colorful, robelike garments. Many women probably draped a shawl over their hair in public but not the full-face veil we often think of. When they could afford it, Middle Eastern women also adorned themselves with large quantities of jewelry, perfume, and cosmetics. Jewish men were usually bearded, with longer hair than an average Roman. Women in both cultures usually had long hair, often worn in a bun, especially after getting married.

Social Classes

The ancient Roman Empire, like most traditional aristocratic empires in largely agrarian societies, concentrated more than half of the total wealth of all its subjects in the top 1 or 2 percent of its populace. This included the emperor and his court, other key political and military leaders, the landed aristocracy, and at times the most influential religious leaders. The bureaucracy necessary to serve these people, nationally and locally, swelled the ranks of the rich to perhaps 5 to 7 percent. A small middle class—people who earned enough to have modest savings and not live a merely day-to-day existence—comprised at most another 15 percent. It included many priests and Pharisees, in addition to the more fortunate merchants and traders, artisans and craftsmen, bankers and toll collectors.

Up to 70 percent of the population consisted of struggling farmers and fishermen or subsistence laborers working for others in fields or "factories." A denarius was a standard day's wage (see Matt 20:2) and enabled a laborer to buy food for himself and his family for the day with a little left over. Hired hands resembled modern migrant workers; their employment was seasonal. Any surplus they received had to be carefully saved. By any modern standards these 70 percent lived in poverty. A bottom 10 percent and sometimes more made up the class of outcasts and expendables. They were often below even the subsistence level, with starvation a real threat.

Most of Jesus' disciples and other followers seem to have come from the poor majority. Still, if Joseph's carpentry shop benefited from the boom in the construction industry near Nazareth in Sepphoris, Jesus and his family might have moved up the ladder from the poor people they clearly were at his birth (see Lev. 12:8; Luke 2:24) into the lower end of the middle class. Even relatively poor people often had at least one servant (see Luke 17:7-10), but the fact that Zebedee and sons had more than one (see Mark 1:20) may single them out as slightly more prosperous. Whatever wealth their business gave the disciples, however, they left it behind for itinerant ministry with Christ. Jesus and His traveling troupe relied on the support others offered, including considerable help from a strategic group of well-to-do women (see Luke 8:1-3).

A social class that cut across all economic distinctions was the class of slaves. Most ancient slaves were not the victims of racism but of conquest—prisoners of war, so to speak. Others were born slaves or sold themselves into slavery, to pay debts, for example. Unlike pre-Civil War America, the Roman world allowed slaves to own property, earn money, and often save enough to buy their own freedom. A slave in a wealthy household was sometimes more prosperous than most freedmen and exercised important responsibilities, including managing his master's estate and teaching his children. At the opposite end of the socioeconomic spectrum were large numbers of slaves who worked in appalling conditions in various mines throughout the empire.

Economic Indebtedness and Its Relief

The first half of the first century offered increasing financial challenges to most Israelites, although Galilee remained relatively prosperous until the decade before the Jewish revolt. For many, however, taxation placed a heavy burden on all earnings. The Jewish triple tithe—10 percent to priests and Levites, 10 percent for temple festivals, and $3\frac{1}{3}$ percent for the poor—came on top of the sales taxes, customs, and annual tribute paid to the Roman government, much of which went to fund its vast military machine. Tax to Rome varied from about three weeks' earnings a year to 30 percent of all income. The annual temple tax for Jerusalem amounted to a half shekel, or two denarii (see Matt. 17:24-27). No doubt, some Jews paid half or more of all their wages in tax of some form. The burden of unpayable taxes led to a lucrative business for loan sharks. Foreclosing on property followed inability to repay loans and led to people being sold into slavery or, worse, languishing in debtors' prisons. Little wonder that the tax collectors, whether the chief Roman publicans or the more common Jewish middlemen (the toll collectors), were disliked.

In the more Hellenistic parts of the empire, the institution of patronage alleviated the needs of many seasonal laborers or other poor. Well-to-do aristocrats were expected to give generously to the needy through patron-client relationships, and the poor were expected to support their benefactors politically, give them public honor and acclaim, and perform various odd jobs for them. No developed system of welfare existed in first-century Rome, except for the corn dole and some disaster relief after earthquakes or famines. The Jewish world had more developed systems for distributing food or money to the poor on a daily or weekly basis, but many people still fell through the cracks.

Kinds of Work

Engaging in honest work was a high priority for Jewish men. Even rabbis had to be bivocational, earning their keep from a trade rather than from their religious activity. We have already spoken of the work of farming. Tilling the fields was done with ox-drawn plows; harvesting, by sickle; and sifting wheat from chaff with a winnowing fork. Donkeys pulled huge millstones around and around in a circle to grind grain, winepresses turned grapes into pulp, and olive presses squeezed out precious oil. Fishermen used dugoutlike canoes with large dragnets. All of these details crop up in the imagery used in the teachings of John the Baptist and Jesus throughout the Gospels.

Those engaged in more urban work, or industry, included cloth makers, potters, metal workers, members of the building trades, basket weavers, and dyers. Villages and cities alike required bakers, butchers, and water sellers. A suspect industry among Jews was leather working since it involved the handling of pigskin. Luxury trades, often to help the rich in Rome grow richer, included goldsmithing and silversmithing, ivory carving, and dealing in ointments, spices, costly jewelry, silks, and expensive dyes. Bankers increasingly practiced what today would be considered a very limited form of capitalism—using savings to give out loans, make modest investments, and grant interest to their customers. Moneychanging produced a profit as well, at times at extortionary levels. Quite commonly, inflation was nonexistent; people stored their metals in strongboxes at home so that exchanging products and services instead of hard currency sufficed for the purchase of goods.

Teaching was "a humble, even despised occupation in classical antiquity because it meant running after customers asking for money and working long hours."[6] Not surprisingly, schoolteachers were often former slaves with no other trade to which to turn, and respect from both pupils and the public at large was low. University-level education involved study with master philosophers; a rough Jewish equivalent involved would-be rabbis learning from older, established sages. Here, at least, the circumstances were not usually so desperate.

Family

The family was the basic social unit in Israel in New Testament times. Children were a blessing from God and barrenness a curse, but children had no voice in the larger social world. Crucial to godly living was to know one's place within the household and to function honorably in it. Men were the breadwinners; women worked hard in the domestic realm. It was expected that men would marry, and it was assumed something was wrong if they didn't. Throughout the empire, arranged marriages were still practiced; but particularly under Roman influence,

young men increasingly chose their own brides. Change in Israel took place much more slowly. Polygamy was extremely rare; few men could afford it!

Jewish men regularly married by 18, Romans by 25, but Greeks often not until 30. Girls of all three cultures, however, were usually wed soon after puberty, in their early to midteens. There is no reason to doubt, for example, that Mary was just such a teenage bride. The Jewish groom took his bride back to his father's house to live with the extended family, often in an additional room built on. Extended families might include other relatives as well, along with any slaves the household might have. Divorces were common though somewhat less so in the Jewish world than in Greece or Rome, but it was almost always only the man who had the right to initiate proceedings.

Jewish boys were sent to school (usually in a synagogue), if one was available, from ages 5 to 12 or 13. Greek boys usually began school at age 7. Jews studied the Bible exclusively; Greeks concentrated on Homer and rhetoric. Rote memorization predominated in both cultures. At the beginning of adolescence, education usually ended, and boys learned a trade, often their father's, though sometimes they worked as an apprentice to another man. Few girls had access to formal education; the one primary exception was among the well-to-do in Greco-Roman circles. Role relationships and differentiation remained very traditional throughout adulthood, with one important exception. In many cases wealthier Roman women were given (or took) greater liberties to appear in public with or without their husbands, to participate in civic organizations and symposia, and at times to wear provocative dress and to indulge in the promiscuity that often accompanied mixed-gender public parties.

Entertainment and Leisure

For Jews religious holidays provided a prominent opportunity for celebration. The Sabbath was a joyous occasion as well as a day of rest. Festival worship was raucous by modern standards though filled with times of reflection as well. For Greeks and Romans, who had no weekly days off, numerous annual holidays, temple rituals, and patriotic celebrations provided relief from daily routines. Throughout the ancient world weddings and funerals often lasted up to a week, during which time whole villages rejoiced or mourned. In the Hellenistic world and among more Hellenized Jews, sporting events were popular, including the Olympic games, chariot races, and gladiatorial shows—initially limited to men killing wild beasts. Most major cities had large theaters where comedies and tragedies were frequently performed. These were off-limits to more traditional Jews because of the pagan religious themes and allusions, but all Jews enjoyed music, especially singing and dancing; storytelling; and various forms of recreational board games.

Science and Medicine

Again, the Roman world was remarkably advanced for its day. Eratosthenes, the librarian at Alexandria during this period, calculated relatively accurately the distance of the earth from the sun and conjectured the existence of the American continents. Botanists created detailed taxonomies of plants, geographers mapped the known world with considerable accuracy, and mathematicians such as Pythagoras and Archimedes had already developed many of the principles of modern geometry several centuries before Christ. Architects and engineers planned

and erected state-of-the-art buildings. Physicians and dentists had all manner of sophisticated surgical instruments, but there was no anesthesia apart from strong drink or mild drugs. (Ancient sources describe a good physician as more or less immune to the screams of his patients!) Doctors were paid very poorly but were generally held in good repute. Druggists were far more suspect. All in all, there were still many chronically ill and disabled, for whom the medicine of the day could do nothing and who often had to resort to begging.

Adapted from Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels,* 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 58–70.

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