

# The 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman World

Jesus, a Jew, lived under Roman occupation in the land we now call Palestine. What was life like?

## The Political Scene

The Roman Empire ruled many hundreds of tribes, the Jews were one of the tribes. The Romans treated the Jews harshly, and they rebelled against them, finally being defeated after a colossal battle. The Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in 70 CE and expelled the Jews from Israel. They lived outside their homeland in a diverse area we now call Palestine. At the time of Jesus, Jews in the Palestinian diaspora were used to Roman rule, but deeply resented it. The Roman Republic (in Italy) was struggling to keep up with the financial and political demands of such a vast empire, and governors in outposts like Palestine demanded high taxes, employed their soldiers to keep order and increasingly ruled the local people with brutality.

## The Cultural Scene

The Greek general Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.E) had first invaded Turkey, Egypt, Jerusalem and created an empire for Greece. Into these diverse lands Greek culture, art, philosophy and literature was brought. After Alexander's death, his vast empire fell into the hands of the Romans, who adopted many Greek ideas themselves as well as introducing Roman customs and innovations. Many different tribal peoples had adopted Greek customs and language, and had developed a tolerance towards difference. Ideas and art forms from all over the world were shared in this new cosmopolitan environment. Jesus knew the ancient Judaism of his ancestors in Israel which was still alive in the sleepy villages of Galilee, but he was undeniably affected by new ideas when he left his home to become a wandering preacher.

Disease and hunger were ever-present realities. War was always rumbling on one border or other. People from lands which had recently come under Roman rule were brought to the cities as slaves, and slaves made up a significant proportion of the population. While slaves were often abused, loyal slaves were sometimes given their freedom and those who became secretaries, domestics, tutors, or financial overseers could occasionally accumulate enough money to purchase freedom. Slavery was common and there were no major objections. Below the slave on the social ladder were the free poor who could barely survive from day to day. The vast wealth of the empire was controlled by a few aristocrats.

All over this great area a shift was occurring, from older, established, local cultures to new, changing, international ways of seeing the world. The loss of a sense of belonging to a natural and continuing community must have been a common experience. The people longed for some form of physical or spiritual healing, a meaningful philosophy, a harmony within and consequently the varieties of religious behaviour at this time is startling.

## Ancient Celebrities: Gods and Saviours

As well as the many Roman and Greek gods, there were human figures known from history and legend who were believed to be able to perform superhuman feats. Some were the offspring of a god and a human, and all possessed wisdom and special powers, including an ability to work miracles. Majestic titles were often bestowed on these figures such as "Lord," "God," "Son of God," and "Saviour." Titles of this sort were also given to Jesus. The figure of the 'superman' was extremely common in the Greco-world of Jesus.

## Extension

### Religions and Religious Movements

- 1) **'Mystery religions':** so called because of a secret initiation. There were often public celebrations associated with these religions, usually involving the re-enactment of a myth to celebrate the death and resurrection of a hero. It is believed the death and resurrection of the hero coincided with the agricultural cycles of death and regrowth. There was also a sacred meal connected with the ritual. These religions promised the initiates immortality, mystical communion with their God, and membership of a close-knit community. There is no direct influence of the mysteries on early Christianity, but they shared a common environment and the early Christians were seen as members of a Jewish mystery cult.
- 2) **Gnosticism:** The term *Gnosticism* comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge. This refers to the knowledge that is given by God and needed for salvation. Gnostics saw the world as an evil place, and that the only possible means of liberation from it is secretly revealed knowledge about God, the world and the destiny of humankind. Gnostics believed in a Redeemer who descends from the world of light, disguises himself in human form, teaches *gnosis*, and returns to the world of light. Scholars do not know if this Christ-like figure was inspired by early Christian theology, or vice versa, but it is known that Gnosticism was a diverse set of beliefs that interacted with both early Christianity and Judaism.

### Popular Philosophy

- 1) **Plato** (d. 347 B.C.E.) presented the view that the material world we perceive through the senses is only a shadow of the true reality. There is an eternal world beyond this world. The physical body encloses a divine, spiritual soul which is immortal. These ideas of this earth being a lesser place, and the sense that human destiny lies beyond this world were influential to Jesus and his followers, especially St John and St Paul.
- 2) **Stoicism** was another popular philosophy of the time. The Stoics believed that the world was ordered by a divine reason, the *Logos*. A spark of the *Logos* dwelt within human beings, and a person could find a place in the world by obeying the spark within. Stoics believed that to be truly happy they must detach themselves from lusting after wealth. This led to a view of humanity as equals, including slaves and women. These ideas can also be clearly seen in Jesus' teachings. Jesus was not a Stoic, but his views developed in parallel with the movement, suggesting that they probably influenced each other.
- 3) **Cynicism:** this counter-cultural movement was spread by street preachers who attempted to convert people from the quest for fame, fortune, and pleasure to a life of austere virtue as the path to true freedom and happiness. As with Stoicism, there are common elements here with Jesus' teachings, which developed in parallel to Cynicism; rejecting physical pleasures for a purer life, seeking religious happiness over money and possessions.