

POLITICAL STRUCTURES OF SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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In an effort to better understand the Synoptic Gospels, it would be interesting and possibly even educational to “set the stage,” to place ourselves in that historic time; particularly, as we briefly discuss the political system of that time, where often religion and politics were related. We will briefly confer about the Roman Empire, “Friends and Allies,” the procurator, and the local government. It is imperative to comprehend this history to truly grasp the messages of the Synoptic Gospels (Britannica 1994-2011).



Jesus was born into the Roman era where a two-tiered system was already in place; one with Roman overseers and Jewish leaders. The supreme head of this system was Tiberius Casear who led the Roman Empire, listed in a hierarchal order followed by King Herod, Pontius Pilate the procurator and the Sanhedrin the local system. Britannica Encyclopedia (1994-2011) explains that, “Palestine in Jesus’ day was part of the Roman Empire, which controlled its various territories in a number of ways. In the East, territories were governed either by kings who were “friends and allies” of Rome or by governors supported by a Roman army. When Jesus was born, all of Jewish Palestine, as well as some of the neighboring Gentile areas, was ruled by Rome’s able “friend and ally” Herod the Great”. It is important at this time to mention, the Pharisees, the Saducees, the Scribes, the Essenes and the Zealots. The Pharisees were Jewish teachers; they were familiar with Scripture and the Law. The Saducees, were also familiar with Scripture however, those who belonged to this group were wealthy and did not believe in the resurrection as opposed from the Pharisees. The Scribes would copy the scrolls of the Old Testament and consequently also knew the Scriptures. The Essenes were a radical group who felt they needed to live away from society and adhere to strict way of life. The Zealots, as their name implies, were a lively bunch who wanted to defeat the Roman regime. Although none of these groups had any real influential powers they all contributed to the society at large and served as catalyst for the wrath that led to Jesus’ crucifixion.

First, let us take a quick look at Tiberius Caesar who was the emperor of Rome; he was the second Roman Emperor and was described as a cruel dictator, one who ruled for twenty-three years between the years of 14 and 37 A.D. At that time, Rome’s Empire was an enormous geographical region, approximately including the modern day countries of England, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Palestine, Israel, and Egypt, Northern part of Africa (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia), part of Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Albania, Greece, Turkey and Lebanon. Such an extensive region required Tiberius to have delegates. These delegates were assigned and approved by him to rule over certain areas of this vast domain. On the website of Bible- History.com (1995) it states that “it is not known whether Tiberius had heard of Jesus, or knew about the crucifixion of Jesus. Word about Jesus and his miracles spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire, even to the Imperial Palace on Palatine Hill, but Tiberius had retired to his palace on the Island of Capri in 26 A.D. while all sorts of corruption were happening in Rome.”

Second we have, Herod the Great, and King Herod Antipas his son. Herod the Great fearing that he would lose his throne ordered all the baby boys two years old and younger killed in Bethlehem and in the nearby areas, after hearing of the birth of a Jewish king. He was known to be an oppressor, who regularly imposed merciless brutalities on the people. He was of partly Jewish, however gravely disliked because of his and his family’s lack of respect towards others, specifically towards the people he lorded over. His son Archelaus, was replaced by a Roman governor after Tiberius received several messages - of complaint - regarding his exercise of power. His other son Herond Antipas, would be responsible for the beheading of John the Baptist and later mocked Jesus when brought before him by those who seeked Jesus’s death.

Herod the Great was succeeded by his son Herod Antipas, he and his brothers were educated in Rome so as to follow in their father’s footsteps. The web site entitled Former Things states, “in his father’s testament, he was appointed tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea (the east bank of the Jordan).” After this was proposed and approved by the Roman emperor Augustus in 4 BCE he could begin to rule. Herodias, his brother’s wife whom he married, had planned to give him more power by giving what belonged to her brother to her

husband, however her plan was never realized and he was sent into exile in the year 39 AD and Herodias followed him.

As previously stated Archelaus, was replaced by a Roman governor, namely Pontius Pilate who became the fifth procurator of Judaea, he held his position for ten years. Referring to the time of Jesus' crucifixion, Saint Luke tells us "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea" (Lk 3:1). Pilate, out of fear that the people might rebel or that word might get back to Caesar that he was allowing someone, namely Jesus, to call himself king, sentenced Jesus to death. His main tasks included military functions and as a representative of Rome was "responsible for the collection of imperial taxes, and also had limited judicial functions." Usually he lived in Caesarea, however fulfilling his duties meant he traveled throughout the region. Pilate as governor would have ordinarily stayed in Jerusalem during important festivals for the Jews in order to maintain the people under control. He would not be seen by those worshipping "because of the Jewish people's deep sensitivity to their status as a Roman province" (Wikipedia, 2012). Pilate was an Equestrian and as such he would have had to heed orders from his superior, regarding military matters and the like. He had "small auxiliary forces of locally recruited soldiers stationed regularly in Caesarea and Jerusalem, such as the Antonia Fortress, and temporarily anywhere else that might require a military presence" (Wikipedia, 2012). Almost always, the Romans did not meddle or concern themselves with local situations of the native provinces. They were interested in controlling the people for their personal benefit, so as not to have to be bothered with such pettiness; therefore they preferred and allowed the local leaders to deal with internal affairs.

Local leaders were the Sanhedrin, those who presided of the highest Jewish court, the High Priest. However, the power to appoint a High Priest, that is to say the president of the Sanhedrin, belonged to the Roman legate or the prefect of Judaea until about the year forty one. "For example, Caiaphas was appointed High Priest of Herod's Temple by Prefect Valerius Gratus and deposed by Syrian Legate Lucius Vitellius" (Sanhedrin, 2006-2010). Caiaphas was the High Priest at that time, he was Annas' son-in-law and ruled over the Sanhedrin, from 18-36 AD. Due to the system in place that made him "second in power only the Roman governor", in this case Pilate. Not much is known about Caiaphas, most likely he was from a wealthy family and he ruled the longest of the nineteen High Priests.

We have clearly seen how complex the political system was during Jesus' birth and later death. In my own opinion, I believe individuals belonging to these groups feared Jesus, I believe His mere presence moved them. However, because they did not know how to recognize the moments of their hearts, they assumed He was against them. They closed their hearts to Him and killed Him. They were comfortable with their way of life and were afraid to change. It was easier for them to follow countless rules and rituals than to truly experience the presence of the Son of God. Change meant for some a loss of power, a rethinking of all they had done - laws adapted to meet greedy desires of the human heart. To think about it necessarily would lead to recognition of all the wrong they had done, to repent and repair the afflictions imposed on the people in the name of the Law. It is never easy to give up power or to simply recognize that one is wrong.

In retrospective, as I review all I have read and researched regarding the political system during Jesus' time the thought occurs to me that not much has changed. Today's society is also a complex system of powers. Religion and politics are still interwoven and influence each other. The Church, as the body of Christ, continues to teach the truth and society continues to remain blind and comfortable. People remain oblivious to the truth for fear that it might upset their lives that they might have to change how they live to be in accordance with the truth. For example, young parents might send their children to Catholic school yet fail to go to Sunday Mass. On the one hand it is reassuring that they would want to give their children a Catholic education. One that would ensure that they would receive their sacraments and learn about the faith, however not attending Sunday Mass sends the kids a negative message, one that says we do not have to give God any more time than what is planned on our weekly schedule. This is but one example; there are many more and regarding many other issues and teachings of the faith. Society at large, simply does not want to be bothered by the truth. It is easier to remain in darkness than to see the light of the truth and live life accordingly.

Jesus today struggles, like He did when He walked on this earth, to bring His beloved creation - humanity - to the light of the truth, to the fulfillment of creation - union with God. He struggles to snap us out of our comfort zone, struggles to move us to open our hearts to Him, to His love, to all the He wishes to give us... Our consolation is in knowing that He will never stop trying. He will never abandon us; He will even bring about a greater good from our most difficult and trying moments. He gave and gives Himself totally to us and

it is our responsibility to respond in, with and for love.

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