



**CHRISTMAS
WITH THE FOUR
DISCIPLINES
(HISTORICAL)**




WARM UP

What is a Christmas tradition that you or your family observe or celebrate?

HISTORICAL DISCIPLINE

Today we are using the “historical” discipline to examine Christmas. This will include the history of the time of Scripture (something that sometimes shows up in the “Exegetical” discipline).

Each of the disciplines brings with it skills that need to be developed. The exegetical discipline requires the development of understanding language, being able to cross-reference other Scriptures, and refusing a desire to “fill in” perceived gaps with non-Scriptural information. The historical discipline likewise requires skills.




What do you feel are the skills that are necessary for the historical discipline?

HISTORY BEFORE THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

The period before the birth of Christ helps us to understand the world into which He is born. This history can be divided into a few different “realms”:

- ◆ Political history of the Jewish people
- ◆ Religious history of the Jewish people
- ◆ History of the Roman occupation of Israel




How do you see each of the disciplines working and informing the others?

HISTORICAL – THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE (1)

Just after the last prophetic book of the Old Testament (Malachi) is written, the political landscape of Israel changes significantly. The Persian empire, which has granted a large amount of autonomy to its people, has been toppled by the Greek (Seleucid) empire starting with Alexander the Great. Especially after Alexander's death, this Greek empire begins to seek homogenization in its colonies – meaning that the Israelite God is no longer given favor. One Greek ruler, Antiochus IV, goes as far as to erect a statue of Zeus in the temple and sacrifice a pig on the Temple altar.

This prompts a zealous Jewish priest and his family to rebel and start a 23 year guerrilla-style war against the Greeks, which the Israelites effectively “win,” not by kicking out the Greeks, but lessening their homogenization programs in Israel. Much of this history is found in the books of the Maccabees.




How does this history begin to inform some of your reading of the Christmas story?


POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE (2)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, after the period of the Maccabean rebellion, Israel begins to lose its zealotry. Instead of continuing to hold firm against Greek cultural influence, the Jewish people begin to fall apart. This happens especially in the priesthood, which at this time is as political a position as it is religious.

The leaders of the priesthood, named the Hasmoneans, at this time open up the priesthood to those beyond the tribe of Levi. As this happens, positions of priesthood are sought after and even purchased by some. The resulting corruption leads the people of Israel to begin to distrust the ruling “Temple” officials. By the time of Jesus, these temple priests are the Sadducees. These Sadducees are directly opposed politically and religiously by conservative sects like the Zealots and the powerful Pharisees.



When we think about the “fullness of time” that Paul says Jesus is born into, how does this figure in?



RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

(1)


It is a very Western notion to separate political and religious history. It is noteworthy to remember that politics and religion are intertwined and inseparable during this time and that no one sees this as a bad thing. However, there are some clearly “religious” notions that help us to understand the world into which Jesus is born.

The first of these is Synagogues. Under Greek rule, and the oppression of Jewish religion, Synagogues appear. It is not clear what the initial purpose of Synagogues were, but by the time of Jesus, they are a clear religious grouping. Unlike early Judaism, which was focused much more on the Temple, Synagogues gave Jewish worshippers a much more local (and sometimes fractured) flavor. This perhaps further exacerbated the divide between the Temple and groups such as the Pharisees.

Joseph and Mary (and eventually Jesus) would have attended Synagogue and temple. How do you imagine this dichotomy for them?

RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL (2)

Approximately 200 years before the birth of Jesus, another massive religious change happens in Israel with the composition of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Partially due to the Greek language becoming the language of commerce and learning, this translation becomes the dominant “text” in the minds of most people. We see this in Matthew’s Gospel as it is clear that his extensive Old Testament quotations come from the Septuagint, not from the Masoretic (Hebrew) text.




What “King James” language do you still hold on to, despite perhaps using other translations?

ROMAN RULE (I)

In 63 BC, the Roman general Pompeii defeats the last Greek ruler of Judea. Keep in mind that at this time, the Greeks had treated Israel with a very light touch for about 100 years (since the Maccabean revolt). Rome came in like an iron fist after this, although it handled the issue of religion much more diplomatically than the Greeks.

Initially the Jews attempt revolts that harken back to the days of the Maccabees, but these are turned down by the powerful Roman military machine. However, even Rome grows tired of fighting and chooses to back a leader - but not from one of the “two parties” of Israel. Instead, Rome makes a dubious choice for a “king” whose lineage is more Edomite than Israelite, Herod I.



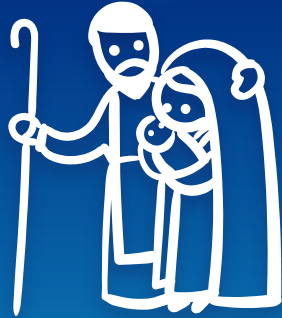
How does this background inform you as to what people would have been looking for in a “Messiah”?

ROMAN RULE (2)

Herod I is clearly unpopular and needs to climb in the opinion polls. In order to do this, he acquires some Roman money to rebuild the Jerusalem temple – money that was largely made and/or paid back to Rome through massive taxation of the Jewish people. This causes a bittersweet feeling in the Jewish people around the time that Jesus is born. On the one hand, they have a beautiful, new, temple (it was at most 25 years old when Jesus was born). On the other, Rome's taxes were more oppressive now than they ever had been. It is possible that the census that brought Joseph to Bethlehem might have been in part due to the temple construction.

During this time Jerusalem and the Judean countryside are massively divided between Jewish allegiances, i.e. Sadducee, Pharisee, Zealot, Herodian, etc. Rome approves as this means that there is no one group that will be able to rise up against them with much force.

Imagine Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to the temple to be circumcised. How might have they felt in this new building?



NEXT WEEK

Join us next week as we talk about Jesus' birth
through the SYSTEMATIC discipline