

Anno Domini: The First Century and the Context(s) of the New Testament

As we start today, let me open up with the very opening of the Gospel of Matthew since we have been in Matthew a bit already. Turn to Matthew chapter 1. In the first lesson I started with Matthew 2 and talked about the importance of worship in the book of Matthew. Worship is important just because it is repeated three different times in the narrative where the magi visit Jesus, but also because it shows up at the very end of the book in the Great Commission. How an author starts his book is usually very important, but Matthew starts it in a way that is dry and boring. I have my Greek students read Matthew after they have had their first series of beginning Greek. It is an interesting narrative, it is good Greek, and it is not too hard. I always suggest that they start in chapter 2 because the beginning of Matthew sounds like this

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac,
 Isaac the father of Jacob,
 Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,
 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,
 Perez the father of Hezron,
 Hezron the father of Ram,
 Ram the father of Amminadab,
 Amminadab the father of Nahshon,
 Nahshon the father of Salmon,
 Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
 Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
 Obed the father of Jesse,
 and Jesse the father of King David.

If you think that is exciting, it is even better in Greek! We are just a third of the way there through the genealogy. Matthew starts with a genealogy. This is probably very important in the overall theological thrust and emphases that you have going on in Matthew. Those of you who are aware of the Gospels know that Luke also has a genealogy. He puts it later in his Gospel, he traces it in a different direction, and also he goes backward. Matthew, in good Jewish Semitic fashion, starts with the father Abraham and then traces the genealogy through subsequent sons and generations after that. Let me make a few quick comments about this as a way of getting us into the theological thrust of Matthew. It is hard to know for sure all the different emphases that are coming out. Matthew does not stop and say, "Look! This is what I am trying to do here, and this is why it matters to me theologically." There are a couple of places where he kind of does that. We should note a few things along the way.

First, if you have looked at this passage before, you will know that there are several ladies who show up in the passage. We just met one of them, "Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth." You have Rahab, the harlot, and Ruth, the Moabitess, in the list. In verse 6 it says, "David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife." He does not even mention Bathsheba's name, but he at least mentions her as the wife of Uriah. It has been striking to many that these ladies are not pure-blood Jewish ladies. It is even possible that the wife of Uriah was a Hittite along with her husband. In some respect, these women would be embarrassing to you if they were in your genealogy. Undoubtedly there are wonderful sets of mothers throughout the genealogy, but Matthew does not mention any of them. He mentions the ones that stick out in the narrative of the history of Genesis and then later in the historical books of the Old Testament. There is one reason that I

think it might be worthwhile pointing that out. We might be making too much of the text, because Matthew does not make an aside to point out that these are questionable women. He says in verse 6, “And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah.” He could have easily said “Bathsheba” there. Undoubtedly the word was known. By labeling her as “the wife of Uriah,” it is a strong reminder, not just of her name, but of the whole narrative of David and the way he had Uriah put to death so he himself could marry Bathsheba. And we remember their adulterous relationship that preceded all of that. It is a reminder of some of the failings of David in the process and of her connection to that. I am inclined to think that there is something to Matthew’s mentioning of it.

There are a couple of places where he steps back in the genealogy and tells us some things that he really does want us to notice. The first one is at the very opening, which says, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Let me point out a couple of things. First, it is a genealogy. Having read the Old Testament, you will know the number of genealogies that are there. These are very important in a Semitic mindset. They give a sense of the descendency of the person and therefore of their rightful claim to a few key positions. If you look at the genealogies in the Old Testament, they usually have at least three purposes and perhaps more. If they are generically about Israel and the people of Israel as a whole, it is substantiating their Jewishness. This was very important in marriage. Those of you who are aware of the book of Ezra and some of Ezra’s reforms, one of his big concerns is that Jewish men were marrying women who were from other countries. Thus the Jewish race was being diluted and was also tempted to go after other deities. The very Jewishness of the person was of some significance.

More often than not, there are two other areas in which the genealogies are important. They establish kingly line, or they establish priestly line. A descendent of David is to stay on the throne of Judah. It was also very important that you had a track of the priests so that you would go back to the right group. You knew who the Levites were, and you also knew who the priests were. You especially knew the priests who qualified as being of Aaron or Zadok. That was who the line of the high priest was supposed to come from. The genealogies are not just there for fun and show. They are there to establish a number of criteria. We expect the same when we come to Matthew. We also realize that this is a very Jewish way to open a Gospel. That is one of many reasons that I would say that this is likely written by a Jewish person to Jewish Christians.

Next Matthew says, “...the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.” We are familiar with the guy’s name. His first name is Jesus; his second name is Christ. But Christ is a messianic title, “*Christos*.” It is probably better to say, “the book of the genealogy of Jesus the Christ (or Jesus the Messiah).” From the very beginning of the book of Matthew he wants to tell his Jewish Christian audience, “This is the Messiah.” Then he says, “The son of David, the son of Abraham.” Notice that they are in reverse direction. You would expect “the son of Abraham, the son of David.” In the Greek it is proper because David ultimately is the son of Abraham. That is why it is ordered that way. But it is strange because David’s direct fatherly descendant is not Abraham. Matthew is skipping whole generations. He will acknowledge much later that he is skipping at least 14 generations. He is emphasizing who the Messiah is. He is the Son of David. The messianic promises came through David. David’s heir was going to be on the throne all of his days. He was going to be the possession of an everlasting kingdom. That is crucial. Then he highlights Abraham. We will talk about that in a minute.

First let us talk about the structure of the genealogy. My translation of Matthew 1 is set off in paragraphs, which is very helpful. Verses 2-6 are from Abraham to David. Verses 6-11 are from David to the deportation to Babylon. Verses 12-16 are from the exile to Jesus. Verse 17 is there in case you missed the point: “Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from

David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.” He wishes to highlight three major events in the history of Israel. First, Abraham is the father of all of Israel. Second, David is the king of all of Israel. Then the exile happened to Israel, and it was a significant blow to who Israel was.

The most difficult part to know what to do with is the exile. This is a theme that is not as overt in the rest of the book of Matthew. Some people have made quite a lot of Israel still feeling like it was in exile. N. T. Wright has argued that they never really returned. But if I read most of the Jewish first-century and intertestamental sources correctly, they felt like they returned from exile. They may have felt that the current glory was not quite as good as the former glory. I would not go as far as N. T. Wright. There is something about the exile that you find in Jesus. Last time we read about Rachel weeping for her children and the nature of exile and return. This is applicable to the life of Jesus. I do not know how much more to make of that, except to note that there is a little hint of a theme there.

The roles of David and even Abraham are very clear. David began being the sire of the messianic era. Jesus is great David’s greater Son. This is the true Messiah in the Davidic lineage. That much we know. If we go back to Abraham, it is interesting to contemplate what Abraham’s role in this whole genealogy is. You will know that Abraham did not just have one son, Isaac. Isaac did not just have one son, Jacob, whom we call Israel. Abraham was the father of more than just Israel and therefore of more than just the promises to Israel. To substantiate that briefly, I would like to turn to Genesis 12. This is where we first really meet Abraham. Aside from the genealogy that precedes, the very introduction to Abraham in any significant way is in Genesis 12:1-3. These are very famous verses in terms of the covenant, and they are verses that we will come back to in a couple of sessions. It says,

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.
“I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

Those of you who have been around a church for a while may know this passage fairly well. Abraham receives blessing and ultimately is a blessing to the nations and all the families of the earth. This seems to be one of the most significant roles for Abraham. I think this role may also be hinted at throughout the book of Matthew. In Matthew you have Jesus in contact with the Gentiles, but most importantly is the Great Commission in Matthew 28. It says, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” This is the universal scope of the Gospel. Yet it is signaled at the very beginning of the book of Matthew in the notion that this is the book of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, and the Son of Abraham. Abraham is the father of the nation of Israel, but he is also by extension the one who will bring blessing to all the nations.

We see again the importance of reading the opening of a book and the closing of a book. We can see how they might bring themes that come together. For us it is no big deal to talk about Abraham as a blessing to the nations and the Gospel going to all nations. Let us remember the possibility and the likelihood that this is a Jewish person in the first century writing to a number of Jewish Christians. This is a time and place where the Jewish people were likely ones who would feel that the promises were to

them. It was all right if the Gentiles were there, but in Jewish eyes they were extra members of the group. They were not given all the promises. They were not given the Mosaic legislation. One of the things that you see repeatedly in a lot of the New Testament is the issue of the relationship between the Jews and Gentiles in the early church. You see it in the books of Acts, Romans, Ephesians, and many other places. You see it here in a muted fashion. Matthew is reminding his Jewish Christian audience that Jesus is not merely the Son of David, but He is also the Son of Abraham. Thus the Gospel goes to all nations. That is a way in which our twenty-first century context can make it so that we do not understand the full impact of this first-century narrative.

Those are some comments as we open. Let me lead us in a word of prayer, and then we will talk more about first-century context.

Father, as we come before You, many of us, perhaps most of us, are of Gentile heritage. We truly should be amazed that not only did You choose Your people Israel and give them great blessings, privileges, and responsibilities, but in Your divine plan You chose to bless all of the nations. We are undeserving, perhaps in some ways even more undeserving than Israel herself. We who are Gentile in this room give You praise for that. We also give You praise that in Your great, divine, sovereign plan, You chose before all time to found a lineage that would come through David. You gave him promises about a kingdom that would have no end. We are privileged at this age to know that that true King, the King who is King over all the ages, is our Lord Jesus who is the Messiah. Father, make us Your people who will live in the strength and the power of knowing that we know the true King and who will live in the awareness of the privilege of blessing that has come upon us as all nations. It is a blessing we do not deserve. Also use this time in this lesson to Your glory. In His name we pray. Amen.

The main objective of today is to talk about backgrounds. I should review where we are up to now in this course. We have talked about the very nature of interpretation, establishing its very possibility. In the process I discussed a diagram about author, audience, and the background of communication from author to audience. In this instance Matthew is speaking to his audience of Jewish Christians. We need to know the context of Judaism as it was expressed in the Greco-Roman world. The author explicitly drew on the Old Testament and on the life and teaching of Jesus. All of this is under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We as the reader are on the side of the diagram with our own cultural backdrop. We have to understand transculturally how this applies to us. That is the diagram we drew fairly early on.

After that we talked about the possibility of doing New Testament theology and what that meant. We looked at the particular theological emphases of different New Testament authors like we just did with Matthew. Ultimately we can expect a synthesis and unity to Christian expression that comes out of that. The last couple of sessions have been focused on determining what our canon is. What is Scripture for us? In a horizontal sense, we attempted to establish a level historical progression that we can have some confidence in. We wanted to make sure that we have the correctly recognized canon. On a vertical level, in God's plan of redemption, revelation closed at the cessation of a prophetic lineage at the end of the Old Testament (Haggai and Malachi). It was reopened with revelation coming from Jesus Himself. He is the Word incarnate and is the true revelation. The apostles bear witness to that, and in the history of redemption we get our canon from them. That is where we are so far in the course. There are a lot of details along the way I would hope you could articulate. For instance, is it possible to have some idea of what the author intended to convey? Are there gaps in the text? How would you defend the canon to somebody who might doubt whether or not it is just one of many expressions of Christianity? How would you articulate this and the relevance of it for us today?

Instead of launching into a study of the canon itself, I want to take a little bit more time with some of the

elements of the diagram we have been talking about. Then we will get into studying the theological themes and the history that we find in the canon. In particular, I want to help us locate something about the context in which the author and the audience are communicating with one another. I want us to look at the background. Eventually we need to talk about the Old Testament and its role in the early Christian community. Then we need to talk about Jesus and what He taught in His life. After all that, we will be ready to start talking about the emphases that we see in the particular New Testament authors. Today is background, then we will talk about Old Testament, and then we will talk about the historical Jesus and who Jesus was. In a climate of the twenty-first century, many will tell us that we cannot assume that the Gospels provide accurate accountings of who Jesus is. What can we say about the historical Jesus? I think the Gospels do provide us an accurate accounting, but along the way we need to talk about some of the complexities of that issue.

I want to highlight some of the things that you might have read about as we begin to look at New Testament backgrounds. This is a general introduction to New Testament backgrounds, and it is the baseline information that I think everybody should know when they interpret the New Testament.

In the first 150 pages of Bruce's *New Testament History*, he recounts a lot of the history and background that is good to know. There are also a lot of details there. There are some maps that are good to look at regarding New Testament background. One is *Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*, which is a fine atlas with some excellent maps. If you are interested in the classical world, then the *Oxford History of the Classical World* is very helpful. It is a thick volume on Judaism, but a thinner introduction to Judaism could probably be found. If you are interested in following up on some of the things that I say here, a good book to read is one by Everett Ferguson called *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. Finally, Mary Beard's volume on *The Religions of Rome* is extremely helpful. Volume 2 is entirely a source book, which has very interesting texts and pictures about what religion looked like in the pagan world.

As we get started, I want to talk about the geography of Palestine. Geography is not the most exciting topic for people, yet it is often extremely significant. We here in Saint Louis live at the junction of two major rivers, the Mississippi and the Missouri. If you know anything about the history of America, you will know that those were very important rivers that had a lot to do with the Anglo expansion throughout the Americas. It is especially the case when you live in a society that is not as technologically savvy as we are today. Even today geography is important. For instance, we would not try to raise a watermelon patch out in the middle of the desert. You would have to do a lot of irrigation, and there are a lot of things you would need to overcome. Geography is extremely important, especially so in the ancient world where technology was less of an issue.

If you look at an elevation map of Palestine, you will see Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, and the Sea of Galilee. Coming down from the Sea of Galilee is the Jordan River. This is known as the Jordan Valley. Jerusalem is almost toward the height of what is known as the Judean Hills. To the west of the Judean Hills is the coastal plain and the Mediterranean Sea. On the other side is the modern land of Jordan, and it has the eastern plateau. Elevation is actually very important at times. For one, it makes for good defenses. It is good if you are located up high. It also means that there are certain areas that you will most need to defend. For instance, the Jezreel Valley is a smooth area, and it is hard to defend. There is a fortress in it known as Megiddo. The valley is sometimes known as the Valley of Armageddon because it is the valley of Megiddo. The whole area, including the Dead Sea and the Jordan River, is still part of the African Rift Valley. It is a major geographic fault line that runs through Africa all the way up into the Middle East. Earthquakes are extremely significant in this area. In fact, a lot of current archaeological excavation is done in cities that have been devastated by earthquakes. Often the city will be so destroyed that they simply rebuild on top of that older city.

If you are interested in building a city, you are looking for a few things having to do with geography. One, you need a defensible area, a hill if you can get one. Two, you need a decent water source, especially in a very dry land. Three, you need decent land for agricultural purposes. Four, you want to be on a major trade route so that you can have some economic trade. Major cities in the ancient world had those four characteristics: they were defensible and they had access to water, decent land, and major trade routes. Some of those things do not change. The trade routes do not move very often; the water sources do not tend to move. Aside from right off the Jordan River, anything east of the coastal plains at the top of the mountains has very little water. So you look for a spring, a river, or a wadi. A wadi is an occasional river that comes down in the wet time of the year. Those things do not move. If your city is destroyed, you most likely want to build right on top of it again. It is actually a little taller that way and even more defensible! Most excavations in the ancient world show layer upon layer upon layer of cities.

I have been involved in an excavation in the Decapolis, which is right off the Sea of Galilee. That city has continuous habitation from the Early Bronze Period, which predates the time of Abraham, through the Iron Age periods, which is the time of David and Solomon, into the Hellenistic and Roman period, which is the time of Jesus, and well into the early and middle Islamic periods. They just kept building city upon city upon city. That is how it was done. If you go into archaeological excavation, you tear down through layers. It is called a destructive science because you have to take off the Roman layer to get down to the Greek layer; you have to take off the Greek layer to get down to the Iron Age layer. That is part of the reality of excavation.

The other crucial bit about the geography of Palestine is that you get winds that blow off of the Mediterranean Sea. That brings with it precipitation. It is tough for those winds to make it over the Judean Hills. If you look at a map of the rainfall in Palestine, the northern area known today as Lebanon can be very wet. The east side of the Judean Hills coming down from Jerusalem is known as the wilderness area because it is basically a desert. This is especially true as you move down toward the Dead Sea. This had a lot to do with habitation patterns that you find in and around Palestine. The major exception to that is if you are right on the Jordan River, which curves a lot. It is pleasant off of the Sea of Galilee.

The Dead Sea is aptly named because it is a saltwater lake, and it is difficult for much to grow there. Another aspect of rainfall in the ancient world has to do with rainfall in the whole of the ancient Near East. This includes Mesopotamia, on through Israel, and into Egypt. There are a number of rivers in this area, the Euphrates and the Tigris. You could live well if you were right on the rivers or north of them. There was still decent land over the rivers down through Israel. This is known as the Fertile Crescent because people could live in the crescent. Elsewhere is the Syrian Desert and the Arabian Desert. It is possible to traverse the Syrian or Arabian Deserts with camels, very attuned guides, and people who are willing to take a major risk. Basically if you want to conduct any major economic trade you were best staying in the Fertile Crescent. The great powers of the Old Testament, which were also the great powers right before the time of the New Testament, were the Mesopotamian area and Egypt.

To go from one to the other you have to traverse right through the land of Palestine and Israel. That made it a very strategic location, which explains a lot of the history you find in the Old Testament. I like to think of Israel as the Poland of the ancient world. Poland is a plain between Germany and Russia. That is almost all of Polish history. Only in this century for the last millennia has Poland been an autonomous country. Usually it is Germany's or Russia's; they try and take over the plain that is in between them. The same is true in antiquity, except it is Mesopotamia and Egypt fighting for what lies in between, Israel.

That is your Old Testament in many respects. It is also very relevant to the time immediately before the New Testament. We will talk about that in a moment. There are a number of roads through Palestine, both well-traveled international roads and regional roads. A lot of roads go north-south and into Egypt, taking people up into the rest of the Fertile Crescent. It is a major area of commerce.

There are a variety of dates that you need to know in the history of Palestine. While no one enjoys memorizing dates in history, there are some dates that are so important you have to know them. They allow you to put other events in a relative chronology to one another. For instance, when we eventually get to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD, it is so huge that suddenly the nature of Jewish religious worship changed radically. That meant some major changes for early Christianity as well. It is a very important date. Therefore in almost every book of the New Testament, the big question that everybody debates is whether the book is written before or after the fall of Jerusalem. It is that important of a date. We are going through the intertestamental period. Remember that Josephus indicated that there was a history that occurred throughout Israel after the time of Artaxerxes. It was not recorded in Scripture because there was not an exact succession of prophets, but there was a lot of significant history taking place. Let me give an example of that.

Israel's history can often be traced through some of their most important regular celebrations. Passover recalls the exodus; the Feast of Purim recalls Esther. Israel was saved from Haman's designs in trying to destroy all of Israel. Hanukkah represents the time of the Maccabees. It has to do with a time when a Greek Hellenistic leader from the Seleucid Empire took over Jerusalem and established the worship of Zeus in the temple in Jerusalem. The Maccabean revolt recovered the temple for true worship of God. That is something that is not in your Bible. It is such a significant event in the history of Israel that it is recorded in festivals that are practiced to this day. There is really important stuff that happened, so we need to talk about it.

Let me recall some of your Old Testament history. In 721 BC Israel was taken into exile into Assyria. That is the end of the Northern Kingdom. The Babylonian exile of Judah took place roughly in 587 BC. There were three exiles into Babylon, but the most important one is that of 587 because it was the most devastating to Judah and especially Jerusalem. In 539, Cyrus of Persia overtook Babylon. He established the Persian Empire. The Persians were a lot kinder to their captive colonies than the Babylonians. The Babylonians tended to take leaders away from their main cities and destroy the walls and temples of the main cities. They did this to devastate the cities and bring them into abject submission to the Babylonian Empire.

The Persians were a lot kinder. They were happy to have the indigenous leadership in place, to allow them to do their own worship, and even to build walls again so that people had protected cities. The walls did not protect them from the Persians but from thieves, robbers, and bandits. Therefore within a year or so after Cyrus took Babylon, he permitted the initial return of some exiles into Judah. It is shortly after that time that you have the rebuilding of the temple and the walls around Jerusalem. That is narrated for you in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah. These are some of the events coming out of the Babylonian exile. Persia had a much bigger empire than that. Their empire reached not merely to Israel but all the way through Asia Minor. And they were trying to take over Greece and had some arms into Egypt. That is how big the Persian Empire was. They were the big power of their day. In 449 or 448 BC, the Ionian Greeks regained the autonomy of some of their territory. This marks the steady march backward of the Persian Empire. It moved from the territory that it had before back to new territory. The Persian Empire extended into what we call Libya today and Egypt. It encompassed the whole of the Fertile Crescent down to the Persian Gulf. It included all of Asia Minor and Macedonia, and they were trying to take over parts of Greece. That is how big it was.

After that empire, the Greeks and Macedonians grew more and more powerful. The Macedonians, especially Philip of Macedon, were able in some very key battles to make sure that Macedonia was the rising empire. It went up to the west of the Persian Empire. Philip had a son named Alexander, who was an amazing man. In the course of the 30 some years of his life, he captured almost all of the Persian Empire for the Greeks. He completely reversed history. The Persians had taken over that empire, and now the Macedonians marched back and retook the whole of the Persian Empire.

Let me go over some key dates. In 336 BC Alexander became king of Macedon and general of the Greeks. It is at that point that he was able to launch his expedition to the east. Within six years he had taken the whole Persian Empire to the extent that he was named the great king of the Persian Empire. Just seven years later he died. Alexander had some children when he died, but being only 30 something years old, his children were pretty young. So there was not a clear lineage of succession that he left. Instead, the succession was left to his generals. The successors are known as the Diadochi, and they roughly divided the kingdom into three important areas. The Ptolemies had Egypt, the Seleucids had Persia (known as the Mesopotamian area and Asia Minor), and the Antigonids maintained Macedon. This is roughly the same extent of the Persian Empire, and it goes a little farther east. All of this was under Alexander's control, and he conquered all these lands in less than 20 years. He was a busy guy! On his death the empire was divided into three different areas, and it was not a nice division. They were not happy with each other, and they each wanted each other's territory. The Antigonids ruled in Macedon. The Ptolemies had Egypt, and at the beginning of the Ptolemaic period they also had all of Palestine. That meant that Jerusalem and Judah were under the rule of the Ptolemies in Egypt. The Seleucid Empire was made up of Persia into Parthia, and they also had Asia Minor.

Note again that Israel and Palestine were still in between Egypt and Mesopotamia and their major trade route. Therefore people ultimately wanted control of that area. The Seleucids were constantly battling with one another, and Israel was in between in the battles. That explains some of the history that we have subsequent to that. That is Palestine in the Hellenistic Period. At the beginning of the second century BC, in 198, Judea moved from Ptolemaic to Seleucid control. The Hellenistic successors of Alexander in Egypt lost control, and Israel went to the Seleucids instead.

Before we go on, let me step back and tell you a little bit about what Alexander brought with him. It was not just that he was a great conqueror. Alexander brought with him all of Hellenistic culture. Technically it was the culture of the Greeks, which the Macedonians themselves had adopted. The culture brought the Greek language and cultural practices having to do with education. They had an established gymnasium for the education of young boys. It brought with it art and architecture. Most of the art and architecture from the New Testament period is very Greek or Roman in flavor, even in Palestine. It also brought with it Hellenistic worship practices in most of the lands. You had temples to "gods" like Zeus, Poseidon, and other more minor deities as well. That is what Alexander brought with him, and it is what the Seleucids and the Ptolemies wanted to establish as well.

We do not know a lot about the Ptolemaic period in Palestine, but as far as we can tell, they were a little bit more willing to not engage in a forced program of Hellenization in Judah. The Seleucid emperors were very interested in uniting their empire in part in culture. They were willing to engage in a forced engagement in Hellenistic culture. One of the great events in the second century BC is when Judah, through a variety of permutations with its high priest, did not provide adequate support to the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV, while he was trying to battle the Ptolemies in Egypt. He got really upset with them. Antiochus IV decided it was time to bring Hellenization about. That is when he overtook Judah, the temple, and established worship to Zeus in the temple in Jerusalem. It is when he insisted that Jewish

people no longer circumcise their children, and, according to 1 Maccabees, he sought to also do away with all the copies of the books of the Law. He tried to completely undermine Jewish religion. That is known as the Defiling of the Jerusalem Temple in 167 BC. That is a date you should know because it was so important. This could have been the end of Jewish religion as we know it, except for a band of people known as the Hasmoneans.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes ordered the defiling of the Jerusalem temple, and as far as we can tell a lot of Jewish people felt like there was nothing they could do about it. There was a family that had some priestly lineage who was asked to sacrifice to an altar in their hometown. They refused to do it, and the father actually put to death the official who was going to ask him to do the sacrificing. In the process he launched a revolt. We have to acknowledge God's good providence here for the Jewish people. At the same time this revolt was going on, the Seleucids were having problems holding on to their Asia Minor territories. There were also issues with the rulership back in Seleucia. There were different people claiming the throne. They were weak in this particular period, and it allowed the Hasmonean Revolt to basically succeed. This was a blessing for Israel because suddenly they had their autonomy again. They never really had it under the Seleucid control, and they only had autonomy under some qualified fashion under the Ptolemies.

It also became a bane for them in a certain way because the Hasmoneans got a little cocky. Jonathan Hasmonean proclaimed himself high priest in Jerusalem. The significance of this is that the high priestly line had been historically reserved for the Zadokites, a branch of people who came out of Aaron. The Hasmonean family did not belong to that lineage. Suddenly you have a high priest who is no longer a Zadokite. Ultimately the Hasmoneans took on not just the role of the high priest but also of the king. So there was a king priest ruling in Jerusalem who had only dubious claim to either of those titles.

Let us quickly go through the Hasmonean genealogical chart, which may help you with the chapter in Bruce where he goes through all the Hasmoneans. Mattathias is the father who launched the Hasmonean revolt. Under him he had five sons, one named Judas. Judas took the name Maccabeus, which meant "the hammer." Judas Maccabeus continued on in his father's stead as leader of the revolt. Judas was put to death, but after that Jonathan, his brother, continued leading the revolt and claimed the title of priest and king. As far as we can tell from ancient documents, there was some opposition to him being a non-Zadokite who took the title. That somehow dissipated because by the time he died and his brother, Simon, took over, the historical records indicate a lot of excitement that there was still a high priest and a king in the form of the Hasmoneans. When Simon died his son, John Hyrcanus, took over, and Hyrcanus was interested in expanding the Hasmonean kingdom, the kingdom of Judah. There were a number of wars that he engaged in. On his death there was a dispute between his two sons over who should be the king. Aristobulus I only ruled for a year, and his brother Alexander Jannaeus ruled for a long period of time.

Alexander Jannaeus continued in his father's policy of attempting to expand the Hasmonean rule of Judah. In doing so he exhausted a lot of resources and made a lot of his own Jewish colleagues very disappointed with him. As a result they launched a revolt against him in the name of Aristobulus. They entered into a civil war in Judea itself. Alexander Jannaeus was the victor. Historical records indicate that when he reconquered Jerusalem he crucified a number of his opponents. It is hard to know the makeup of his opponents, but the Pharisees were considered to be some of his opponents. Josephus, our main historical source, is not clear there. On his deathbed Alexander turned to his wife, Salome Alexandra, and told her that he should have made peace with the Pharisees a lot earlier than he did. Salome Alexandra ultimately became queen, which was something fairly unheard of in Judah. Alexander told his wife to make sure that whatever she did the Pharisees stayed on her side. He said she

could give them his body, and they could do anything they wanted with his corpse after he was dead. The Pharisees very wisely took Salome up on her offer, and instead of doing something very heinous to the body of Alexander Jannaeus, their long-held opponent, they honored him. Thus they became the power behind the throne of Salome Alexandra. There was a golden period that lasted almost 10 years. After Salome died, the real troubles began. There were disputes between her two sons, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II.

That brings us up to another very important point in history, the rise of the Romans. When you recount the history of Israel, you are not just dealing with the history of a little land. There are all these countries around it that impinge on the history of Israel. It is important that we study those.

Let us go over Roman history. There was a rising power in the West, and it was coming out of Italy. After the second Punic war with Carthage, which involved Hannibal and the elephants coming out of Carthage, Rome was almost conquered. They fought back very tenaciously and conquered Carthage, which is in the northern tip of Africa. The great power that was holding Rome in check was conquered. That allowed them to move further and further east. They engaged in war with Macedonia, which is just to the northern part of what we call Greece today. They won that in 196 BC. They engaged in one last war with Carthage, and by 146 BC they conquered Carthage and also put down a Greek war against the Romans. By 146 BC, the Romans controlled all of northern Africa, Italy, Macedonia, and Greece. They were ready to march further and further east into Asia Minor. That march took them into Israel.

Pompey is the one who made Syria north of Israel into a Roman province in 64 BC. By 63 BC, Pompey actually entered Jerusalem. That is a date you should know because it is another significant date in the history of Israel. Though he did not establish worship practices in the Jerusalem Temple, yet again a pagan walked straight into the temple. He went right into the holy of holies, checked it out, and was fairly disappointed because there was no image of an idol in there to worship. But the more significant of the two pagans who entered Jerusalem is Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC. The Jewish people called Antiochus Epiphanes “the abomination of desolation” in the book of Daniel, and it is repeated in 1 Maccabees. The abomination of desolation is when Antiochus Epiphanes established worship practices in Jerusalem. When those words occur in the New Testament, there is probably an intended payoff of “the abomination of desolation” found in Antiochus Epiphanes. In any case, in 63 BC Pompey entered Jerusalem.

There are other parts of Roman history that are significant to us, and this is deep background. A few years after Pompey launched into Jerusalem, Julius, who was the other great Roman general at the time, disobeyed the Roman senate and marched against the forces of Pompey himself. He did it by crossing the Rubicon, which is a river in northern Italy. This was the beginning of the rise of Julius to his status of Caesar. He conquered Pompey and became the one person over all of the Roman Republic. In 44 BC he was assassinated, and afterward the two major people, Antony and Octavian, rose up against the people who assassinated Caesar. Caesar was assassinated because the people were afraid that the senate was going to lose its power, which it did. Senators rose up against Caesar. Antony and Octavian overcame those people in the Battle of Philippi. Philippi was established as a Roman colony and given a variety of honors from Octavian because of this event. Things soured between Octavian and Antony because Antony really got excited about Cleopatra in Egypt. He possibly made a plan for the Egyptian territories, which was very significant. Egypt was the origin of the grain supply for Rome. Rome did not have enough agricultural territory; they had to import grain. Egypt was a very important player for that. In the process, Antony had spurned a member of Octavian’s family. Octavian got mad and attacked Antony. In the Battle of Actium, Octavian conquered and became Caesar. From that point on there was a Roman Empire. There was an emperor and no longer a senate.

Pompey took Jerusalem in 63 BC, and Herod the Great was established as the ruler of Judea. Herod was not of Hasmonean lineage. Hyrcanus II ruled for one year in 67 BC. Then his brother Aristobulus II took over. He launched a coup d'état, in a sense. This was not too much of a problem because Hyrcanus did not have a lot of grand designs. Aristobulus really wanted power. But Hyrcanus aligned himself with a guy named Antipater, who came from Idumea, which is east of the Jordan River. He was not truly Jewish but was from Idumea. Antipater knew how to play things, so he enabled Hyrcanus II to get in the good graces of the Romans. The date of the change in power from Aristobulus II to Hyrcanus II was in 63 BC. This is the same year that Pompey marched into Jerusalem.

The Romans began to establish the power from that point on. It was out of Roman power that Hyrcanus II began to rule in Judea. There was a short time afterward when there was another revolt against the Romans, and the Romans established a kingly line via Hyrcanus II. This was when Antigonus, Aristobulus' son, tried to take over. Herod, who was Antipater's son, went to Rome, got back in the good graces of Rome, and marched back into Judah. His only claim to the Hasmonean line is that he married the daughter of Hyrcanus II. He was not in the correct lineage. More than that, he was not fully Jewish. That is to say that on the throne of Judah was a man who was not Jewish. This had huge ramifications going into the New Testament period. When Herod died in 4 BC, he had put to death a lot of his own offspring. He was afraid that they were going to make a play for his throne. The result was that he broke up his territory into three different districts and established over them two people who were fairly good at governing and one who was awful at it. The one who was awful at it was in charge of Judah and Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, the Romans came in 6 AD and cleaned house. Herod's governors were not working. From then on, except for a short period of about three years, there was no longer a Jewish king in Jerusalem. That was part of whole background that everybody in the first century knew when Jesus showed up and people called Him the Messiah of the David line. Therefore it looked like He was going to be their king. You can imagine what they were expecting out of Jesus.