

The Mundane Settings of the New Testament

Demography

- 2 to 3 million people lived in Palestine (sizable number in Palestine(Galilee-where Jesus grew up)
- More Jews lived in Syria than in Palestine; more in Alexandria and Egypt, than in Jerusalem. (Even Rome had a Jewish quarter)
- Gentiles were found in vast majority predominantly found in major cities.
 - Gentiles outnumbered Jews in the Decapolis

Languages

- Latin: legal language in Roman Empire (used mainly in the West)
 - Yet Greek was widely used
- Greek used predominately in the East
- Jews living in Palestine, such as Jesus and his first disciples, spoke Greek, Aramiac (mostly), and some Hebrew. (*Aramaic = sister language to Hebrew, picked up while in exile*)
- 5 to 10% of people were literate. The ability to read exceeded the ability to write.
- Materials to write made it hard to learn (Papyrus, parchment, ostraca - broken bits of pottery)

Transportation, Commerce, and Communication

- Palestinian road systems were poor; throughout the Roman Empire roads were as straight as possible and durably constructed
- People traveled by foot, donkey/horse/mule, or carriage
- Roadside inns, Friends for lodging
 - Middle Eastern law (obligated custom) hospitality to strangers
- Water provided the primary means for commercial transport
 - Alexandria ships could transport several hundred people
 - Galley slaves labored at the oars.
 - Paul experienced shipwreck upon these types of ships.
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Public Conveniences

- Alexandria had a well developed school system
- Streets paved with marble, complete system of night-lighting
- Underground sewage disposal systems.
- Bathhouses had large pools for the general public
- Greeks invented shower baths long before New Testament

Housing

- Most housing was cramped
 - Men spent most of their waking hours outdoors, workshops, and public spaces
- Houses in the west were built of brick and concrete.
 - Poorer sections and rural areas had frame houses or huts.
- Houses in the east consisted of stucco and sun-dried brick
- Oil lamps provided light
- In cities people rented multi-storied flats
 - Cities did have quite a stench
- Palestine housing was quite poor; Roofs were flat and used for sleeping in hot weather, drying vegetables, ripening fruits, praying. (Mark 2:4-mud; Luke 5:19-tile)
- Beds were merely a mat or coverlet laid on the floor. (John 5:8)
 - People slept in their day garments

Family

- Extended families were the norm
 - Included husband, wife, unmarried children, married sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and slaves belonging to the household. (all living under one roof or nearby dwellings if possible)
- The most senior adult male acted as head of household
- **Endogamy:** marriage between relatives
 - Kinship was very strong; marriages to first cousins was not uncommon
 - It kept property and wealth within the clan/family
 - Arranged marriages concerned economic interest and security of the family legacy/honor (dyadic personality - approval addiction); romance seldom played a part
- Birth of a boy brought joy- 8 days named and circumcised;
girl-disappointment- naming could wait a month
- People with the same name were distinguished:
 - Mention of their father (ex: James the son of Zebedee - Mark 3:17)
 - Religious or political conviction (Simon the Zealot - Acts 1:13)
 - Occupation (Simon the tanner - Acts 9:43; 10:6,32)*
 - Place of residence (Simon of Cyrene - Mark 15:21)

Food

- Romans ate 4 meals a day
- Average diet was bread, porridge, lentil soup, goat's milk, cheese, vegetables, fruit, olives, bacon, sausage, fish, and diluted wine.

- Jews ate only 2 meals a day
 - One at noon and another at late afternoon or evening
- Diet consisted of bread, fruits, vegetables, roasted and boiled meat - reserved for festivals; sugar was unknown - raisins, figs, honey, and dates were sweetening; fish substituted for meat.
- Formal meals - people reclined on cushions; informal meals - they sat

Morals

- Sexual sins were prominent; Prostitution by men and women well organized
 - Men would even prostitute their own wives
- Homosexual behavior was widely acceptable
- Divorce was easy, frequent, and acceptable
 - Divorce documents are among the most numerous of papyrus remains
- Murder was common
- Gentile parents abandoned children
- Morality not wholly lacking in Greco-Roman world as there were those, but low