

THE WORLD THAT HEROD BUILT

As a result of this study, we hope the participants will

[Learning Objectives]

- transport themselves back to first century Israel under Roman rule
- become familiar with the reach of Roman rule into everyday life in the first century
- feel the seriousness of the pagan environment surrounding John's and Jesus' ministry
- admire Jesus' deft handling of conflicting claims for his loyalty and endorsement
- yearn, with first century Jewish citizens, for their promised Messiah (as relief from Roman oppression)
- distinguish between governmental authority and God's reign
- identify concrete steps toward faith as a way of life in their civic involvements
- become responsible citizens who work within the freedoms and limitations a "secular" government

[Process Objectives]

- discover the joy and fascination of the inductive method of Bible study, by gleaning information from Scripture, pondering its meaning and significance to first century hearers, and applying its lessons to their lives today
- get in the rhythm of advanced preparation for each lesson
- recognize the difference between the types of questions asked in the personal study (pages 1-5) and the discussion section (pages 6-7).
- desire to make the time commitment to prepare for the next lesson

[Relational Objectives]

- have a good first experience of this study and discussion
- get to know their fellow adventurers
- take the risk and pray a one-sentence prayer for a fellow participant at the end of the meeting.

NOTES RELATED TO THE PERSONAL STUDY QUESTIONS (PAGES 1-5)

The general point of this lesson is that Roman rule permeated first century Jewish experience, and most of its influence was negative if not oppressive. The leaders ranged from ruthless (Herod) to ambiguous (Pilate), while the Jewish leaders relied on these leaders to prosecute offenses within that community. Jesus' relationship with the Romans and their sympathizers was non-discriminatory (socializing with tax collectors [Luke 19:1-10] and healing centurions' staff [chapter 7]), shrewd (13:32, 20:20-26), and unlike his cousin John, uninvolved with Herod's exploits (3:19). Jesus was

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not a political threat to the Romans, even though the Pharisees for their own purposes tried to characterize him as such (23:7). Jesus kept his sights on another Kingdom, the Kingdom of God (4:43) and left earthly realms to their rulers. In application, the question of a Christian's involvement in, for instance, American politics is raised but not necessarily discounted. We leave it to you and your group to sort out how you can engage in governance and politics without selling your soul.

PAGE 2 NOTES:

The references to Roman rulers in Luke 1 and 2 established the time frame for Jesus' birth and early life. This is how we can date Jesus' birth to between 6 and 4 B.C., which defined Quirinius' term of office. Luke is the only gospel writer to attach secular dates to the gospel narrative.

The first two chapters of Luke present the Roman ruler as almost benign, though one might see the demand for a census and the hardship this placed on peasants as abusive. But as chapter three unfolds, we see the tetrarch take an interest in John the Baptist and Jesus, and antipathy develops. Thirty years later (Luke 9), Herod Antipas exhibits insecurity about criticism, evidenced by locking John the Baptist in jail. Jewish rulers try to intimidate Jesus with threats of Roman interference. When this doesn't work, they accuse Jesus of political offenses against Rome: being subversive, evading taxes, and claiming to be a "king."

PAGE 3 NOTES:

Matthew's gospel highlights the Flight into Egypt, made necessary by Herod's killing of Jewish male babies. This account shows Herod is ruthless, manipulative, deceptive and jealous of his power. His son, Herod Antipas, is easily led astray by seductive women and tries to avert political unrest by killing John the Baptist.

The reaction to Roman rulers by Jews is fear and appeasement. Joseph and Mary comply with the requirement to travel to Bethlehem for the census. After Jesus' birth, an angel warns the new parents to flee to Egypt to avoid persecution (Matthew 2:13) and their suspicion and fear of Herod and his offspring keep them from resettling anywhere near Jerusalem (Matthew 2:19-23) later. Nazareth is an insignificant "back-water" town where Jesus can grow up in obscurity.

Jesus' first reaction to Roman pressure appears in Luke 14:1-13. Upon hearing the news of John's execution, Jesus goes off by himself presumably to think and pray. He is sobered, but as the evidence unfolds, this illegal and ruthless action by Herod Antipas has no intimidating effect on Jesus.

PAGE 4 NOTES:

The passages cited demonstrate some of the civic intrusions of the Romans into everyday life: tax collection, corruption (cheating, bribes, and false testimony), financial coordination, and legal system.

PAGE 5 NOTES:

Jesus shows little concern for “the things of Caesar,” but is very concerned about his followers showing primary loyalty to God. The Jewish leaders, in contrast, have a vested interest in keeping Roman rulers happy because, for them at this time, life is fairly good and they are given power among their own people. Anything that rocked that boat (Jesus’ actions especially) is suppressed.

We see evidence that Jesus is a law-abiding citizen, but that he does not recognize the Romans to have moral authority or any say in how he conducts himself and his ministry. Jesus is very concerned that Zaccheus pay back the people he had cheated (Luke 19), suggesting that collecting taxes for the Romans is not in itself wrong, but bilking the people by charging too much is wrong.

NOTES RELATED TO THE GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (PAGES 6 & 7)

Each participant has come to group discussion, we hope, having read the assigned passages and given some thought to the questions above. If at any time you feel the discussion gets off track, that is, the learners settle into tangents or points of view that are contrary to the basic data presented in the Scriptures, you as group facilitator can help by referring back to the appropriate study question. Remember, we want to use facts from the Scripture itself as evidence to support an answer, if we can.

The year this study is published happens to be a presidential election year, and feelings may run hot or cold or evenly divided in your group about “religion and politics.” Help your participants listen well, speak judiciously, and show open-mindedness; our agenda is not to identify with a contemporary political party, but to discover how we can be Christ-centered even as we search out our civic responsibility and appropriate role in the Kingdom of God.

Open your meeting with a short prayer for Christ’s Spirit to guide you, and dedicate the time and discussion to the Lord’s glory.

PAGE 6 NOTES:

The answers to the first two questions can vary widely, depending on the diversity of your group. What may be “protective services” to one person may be “intimidating presence” to someone else. Foster sensitivity to the feelings presented at this point. . . there’s no “right” or “wrong” answer to these questions.

The “then” and “now” question is meant to deepen the learners’ appreciation for the seriousness of Roman oppression (with a possible side effect of appreciating constitutional freedoms now). However, the point may also come out that just because things are better for us here in America than they were for Jews under Roman rule, nevertheless, our relationship with civic government cannot constitute a primary loyalty, which is reserved for God alone.

PAGE 7 NOTES:

Regarding the choices for characterizing Jesus' relationship with Roman rule, there's an element of truth in almost all of them. As a group, go down the list of possibilities and discuss the merits of each. Give prime time to this discussion, with an eye to application (the last question of the discussion, bottom of page 7).

The "Stop and Think" question assumes the participants know a little about Roman history, like *Pax Romana* and first century commerce. Suffice it to say, the Roman occupation of Israel put the conquered people in touch with the rest of the Mediterranean world. Word could spread, powerful people could be impressed, because there were roads, commercial travel, leadership transfers, mail and other powerful communication tools (well, okay, limited to first century technology). On the other hand, the dominance of Rome made the Jews lowly, and their obscurity on the world stage would allow Jesus Christ to work without Roman interference for most of his adult ministry. The circumstances certainly proved that Jesus did not need earthly political power to further his agenda, nor could a hostile, dominating power stop him.

"What Jesus would want you to remember" is the application question of the study. In discussion help your learners get specific about how they would live out their discipleship in this area. Possible answers might include "treating people honestly" and "avoiding financial corruption," "without sacrificing your integrity as a Christian disciple, work with all kinds of people for the good of all," and many more.

CLOSING PRAYER TIME

Be sure to close your time in prayer for one another and for responsible engagement in civic affairs. This is your first meeting, and some might not be comfortable with praying out loud in a group. So ask your fellow learners to suggest areas where they might get involved or change the nature of their involvement in the community political process, and then encourage one-sentence prayers for God's leading, power, humility and character to fill them. Individuals in groups have found it helpful to focus on the prayer request of the person to his or her right, and you might suggest this as an easy way to get started.