

## Cities of the New Testament: Caesarea Maritima

This is the tenth in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the cities of the New Testament. Previous installments have been [Corinth](#) (ET&N 23), [Ephesus](#) (28), [Laodicea](#) (33), [Antioch](#) (40), [Rome](#) (53), [Alexandria](#) (60), [Lystra](#) (63), [Tarsus](#) (68), and [Puteoli](#) (74). The purpose of the series is to examine the history, geography, religion, culture, and people of each city and to consider how they relate to us today. Additional installments of this series will discuss Athens, Arimathea, Colossae, Thessalonica, Philippi, Perga, and Troas. Additional cities may be added.

### Then

In terms of the events that occurred there, Caesarea Maritima<sup>1</sup> trails only Jerusalem as the most significant city in the history of the early church. During the first few years of the church, it was exclusively a Jewish sect, but at Caesarea, Peter was summoned to meet with a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, and the first uncircumcised believers were baptized into Christ Jesus. Without the events at Caesarea, the outcome of the Jerusalem Council in 49 A.D., when the apostles and elders of the original church accepted Gentile believers without requiring circumcision, might have been quite different and the history of the church would have gone down another path.

In addition to the baptism of Cornelius and his household, Caesarea was also the missionary base of Philip the evangelist after his baptism of the Ethiopian court official. Paul was in Caesarea on at least four occasions. Caesarea was also the site of Herod Agrippa's death ([Acts 12:23](#)). We'll look at these events in more details later. Origen of [Alexandria](#) wrote most of his works during an exile in Caesarea, and the city saw many executions during the Diocletian persecutions beginning in 303.

### Herod the Great

The traditional list of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World - the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Temple of Artemis at [Ephesus](#), the Mausoleum of Halicarnasses in Persia, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse of [Alexandria](#) - originates from geographical accounts between six and second centuries B.C., but had it remained "open" through the first century A.D., numerous projects of Herod the Great, the most ambitious builder in Jewish history and a controversial figure both then and today, would certainly have been prime candidates. Among these, the two that almost certainly would have been included are the Jerusalem Temple and Sebastia harbor at Caesarea. In addition, the Temple of Caesar Augustus and Herod's Promontory Palace might rivaled the traditional sites.

Most of what we know about Herod the Great (73-4 B.C.) comes from two works - *The Jewish War* (ca 77 A.D.) and *The Antiquities of the Jews* (ca 94 A.D.) by Flavius Josephus, the first century Jewish historian. Both books were based on a history written by Nicolaus of Damascus, who had been Herod's personal secretary. Herod was born into a family with ties to the most powerful men in Rome. Herod himself,

for example, was a long-time friend of Mark Antony, but his ambitions for the Jewish throne were hampered by the inconvenient fact that he was not a Jew. His father was an Idumaeen, a desert tribe that had been forced in Judaism, and his mother Cyprus was an Arabian princess.

When Herod and his brother Phasael were appointed rulers by the Romans in 42 B.C., the population of Jerusalem, apparently preferring a foreign conqueror to a heathen pretender, opened the gates to the invading Parthians. Phasael was captured and committed suicide, but Herod fled south to Petra, seeking allies. When he was rebuffed by Petra, he continued to Alexandria, from which he made a daring winter Mediterranean passage to Rome. Appearing before the Roman Senate and supported by Mark Antony who "said that Herod should be king to help carry on the war with Parthia" (*The Jewish War*), Herod gained the unanimous support of Rome.



Following a lengthy, difficult war against his own people, Herod entered Jerusalem in 37 B.C. and established a reign that was to be constantly fraught with challenges to his authority. He routinely bollixed his attempts to legitimize his reign by ingratiating the Jewish people. He married Mariamme, a Hasmonaean (descendents of David and therefore legitimate royalty) princess (after banishing his first wife and their son), but he had to assassinate her grandfather to gain the throne. He installed Mariamme's brother Aristobulus as high priest, but when the people started to rally behind the Harmonaean prince, Herod had him drowned in a palace swimming pool in Jericho. He rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple in ostentatious spendor, but he installed a Roman eagle over the entrance, infuriating conservative Jews. He exacerbated theis hatred when he executed some fifty Torah students who attempted to tear the hated Roman symbol down.

Ten wives eventually bore him fifteen children, but he apparently trusted none of them. He killed several of his sons, including Alexander and Aristobulus who, borne by Mariamme, were the only ones with blue Jewish blood. The three sons that eventually ruled a divided Judea under Roman authority were Herod Antipas, Archelaus (both sons of his wife Malthace), and Philip, son of Cleopatra of Jerusalem. The Herodian Dynasty, such as it was, ended just one generation later.

The reign of Herod the Great was filled with paranoia, jealousy, intrigue and murder. Why then does he merit the historical sobriquet "the Great"? He certainly wasn't "great" to the Jews of his time. Considering his attempt to eliminate the infant Messiah by ordering the death of every male child under two years of age in Bethlehem, he has never been "great" to Christians. Despite his friendship with Mark Antony, Herod wasn't really "great" to Romans either. He was little more than the petty, uncivilized ruler of a backward outpost of the Empire, although he had brought a modicum of order to a troublesome province. Herod's only legitimate claim to greatness lies in his prodigious building programs.

### **Location and History**

The coast of Judea is relatively straight, offering few natural harbors. In fact, no harbors existed between Ptolemais and Joppa, so there was really no place that ships could find safe refuge from the frequent storms. Judea lay along the important trade route - land and sea - between Egypt and Rome. Both the wheat which fed the huge population of the imperial capitol (and was therefore vital to the maintenance of order) and the spices which flavored the salted meat of the wealthier classes passed through or by Judea. Furthermore, the Empire needed a friendly, reliable port in order to move the troops needed to maintain order in the troublesome province.



Caesarea Maritima and coastal Judea

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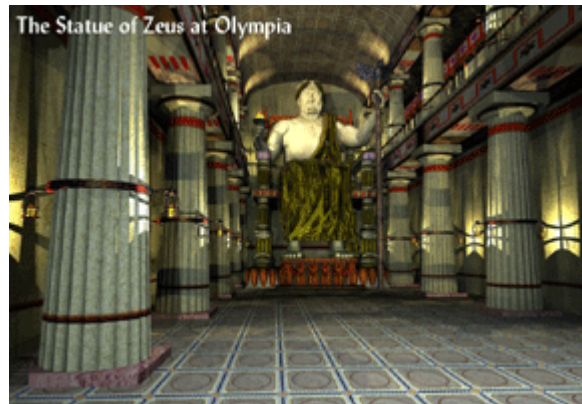
Recreation of Sebastos harbor from [www2.rqzm.de/](http://www2.rqzm.de/)

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Herod chose the marginal inlet at the site of the former Phoenecian town of Strato(n)'s Tower. Over a thirteen year period (23-10 B.C.), he constructed Sebastos (Greek for Augustus), a huge harbor said by Josephus to rival the Athenian port of Piraeus. Josephus provides a detailed description of the harbor:

"Herod endeavored to rectify the inconvenience (of merchants having to ride out storms at anchor in the sea)...and laid out such a compass towards the land as might be sufficient for a haven, wherein the great ships might lie in safety; and this he effected by letting down vast stones of above fifty feet in length, not less then eighteen in breadth, and nine in depth, into twenty fathom deep... This mole he built by the seaside was two hundred feet wide, the half of which was opposed to the current of the waves, so as to keep off those waves which were to break upon them...; but the other half had upon it a wall with several towers, the largest of which was named Drusus (the son-in-law of the emperor), and was a work of very great excellence. There were also a great number of arches where the mariners dwelt. There was also before them a quay, which ran around the entire haven...but the entrance or mouth of the port was made on the north quarter, on which side the stillest of the winds of all in this place" (*Antiquities of the Jews* XV.8.6).

Beginning in about 13 B.C., Herod constructed the city of Caesarea itself, complete with the obligatory Roman baths, theater, stadium, and, of course, a temple dedicated to Emperor Augustus. It faced the harbor entrance and contained a massive statue of the emperor which Josephus described as "not inferior to the Olympian Zeus" (*Jewish Wars* 1.21.7). For himself, he built a magnificent palace on a promontory adjacent to the harbor. He laid out the city on the typical Greek grid, built houses of white stone, and populated Caesarea with both Jews and pagans. From the beginning, the relationship between the segments of the population was cool at best.



Status of Zeus at Olympia, © 1999 Bill Munns at [www.billmunns-gallery.com/swgallery.html](http://www.billmunns-gallery.com/swgallery.html)  
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After Herod's death, Rome assumed administrative control of Judea from his ineffectual sons, although they were allowed to remain as powerless figureheads, and Caesarea served as the capital of the province for the remainder of imperial times. Roman governors took up residence there (although there is no certain evidence of this until Pontius Pilate). At the theater, a stone bearing an inscription with the name Pilate was unearthed. It comes from a temple dedicated to Emperor Tiberius and was apparently recycled some time later for theater repairs.

Caesarea scenes from [Bibleplaces.com](http://Bibleplaces.com) (used by permission)



Theater



Stadium



The "Pilate Stone"  
 TIBERIEVM  
 ...IVSPILATUS  
 ...ECTUS...



Were it not for his murderous tendencies, it might be argued that Herod was a progressive, pragmatic ruler who sought to protect his people by gaining respect for Judea in the imperial capital. To some degree, he succeeded in this. Later Roman emperors visited and admired Caesarea, adding to the city's impressive buildings. But Herod had badly underestimated the pious sensitivities of the populace. In cowing to their captors, particularly when he instituted five-year Greco-Roman style games, complete with naked athletes, he sowed the seeds of discontent that would lead to the later revolts that would destroy his country.

**Caesarea in the New Testament**

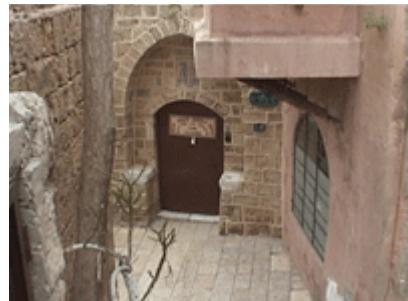
Philip in Caesarea

The first mention of Caesarea Maritima in the New Testament comes after Philip's mission to Samaria ([Acts 8:5-25](#)). Philip, one of the seven men appointed to assist the apostles (see [Acts 6:1-5](#)), had introduced the gospel into Samaria, and hearing of this, the Jerusalem church sends Peter and John to check things out. They chastise Simon the magician for seeking to buy miraculous gifts, but other than that, the mission is a resounding success. As they travel back toward Jerusalem, preaching in the towns along the way, an angel comes to Philip and sends him past Jerusalem toward Gaza. There, he encounters an Ethiopian<sup>2</sup> Jew who serves as court treasurer to the queen. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and is reading from the prophet Isaiah when Philip arrives.

In a powerful lesson on the simplicity of evangelism and conversion, Philip teaches the Ethiopian and baptizes him ([Acts 8:25-39](#)), after which Philip is miraculously whisked away and placed in Azotus, a small coastal city ten miles north of Ashkelon ([see map](#)). From there, he travels north along the coast, preaching the gospel, until he reaches Caesarea. About twenty years later, when Paul travels to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, he stops over in Caesarea and stays with Philip ([Acts 21:8](#)). At the time, Paul was anxious to get to Jerusalem, yet he remains in Caesarea "for many days" ([Acts 21:10](#)), suggesting that Philip's continuing mission in Caesarea had created a substantial church.

### Peter and Cornelius

When God decided to was time to show Jewish Christians that the gospel was for everyone, including despised Gentiles, he could hardly have chosen a person or place that would be more surprising and challenging to Jews (see [Acts 10](#)). Cornelius was a Roman centurion, a military commander of one hundred soldiers of the hated occupying army, and he was stationed in Caesarea, the Roman capital and the symbol of Herodian pagan capitulation to the Empire. We've already seen that Philip had relocated to Caesarea, so why then did God have Cornelius send for Peter, who was staying with Simon the tanner in Joppa, about thirty-five miles to the south? The answer lies in subsequent events.



The traditional home of Simon the tanner in Joppa, rebuilt in the 13th century.  
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After Paul and Barnabas returned from Asia Minor, they reported the conversion of many Gentiles to their sponsoring church in [Antioch](#) ([Acts 14:27-28](#)). But some Jewish Christians from Judea arrived there and insisted that all Christians must be circumcised in accordance with the Law. Debate ensued, but the Antioch church was unable to resolve the issue, so they appointed several brothers, including Paul and Barnabas, to go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and the elders ([Acts 15:1-3](#)). The "Jerusalem Council," conducted in the year 49, began with "much debate" ([Acts 15:7](#)), an innocuous reference to what was probably a very contentious meeting. It fell to Peter to resolve the conflict, and the events that had occurred eleven years earlier in Caesarea were certainly the basis of his pivotal comments to the Council.

After his encounter with Cornelius, Peter had returned to Jerusalem and related the events in details ([Acts 11:1-18](#)), and Luke reports that the outcome of his report was that "*(The Jewish Christians) glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life'*" ([Acts 11:18](#)). But to many Jewish Christians, being granted repentance did not exempt Gentiles from Mosaic Law and

specifically from circumcision. At the beginning of the Jerusalem Council, some Pharisaical Christians claim, "*It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses*" (Acts 15:5).

But Peter knew better. He understood that the vision God sent about clean and unclean foods extended to so-called clean (faithful Jews) and unclean people (Gentiles). He had seen the Holy Spirit poured out on uncircumcised Gentiles, and he had ordered water baptism immediately with no consideration of circumcision. So in response to the insistence of the Pharisaical Christians, he says, "*God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them [Gentiles], by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith*" (Acts 15:8-9). Based on this powerful testimony of arguably the principal apostle, James (Jesus' brother and then head of the Jerusalem church) issues the verdict: "*my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God*" (Acts 15:19).

On the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the Jewish Passover when Jesus was crucified, the Holy Spirit fell on the assembled disciples of Christ in Jerusalem ([Acts 2:1-41](#)), marking the beginning of the church. But it was a church composed exclusively of Jews. With Philip's evangelistic efforts, the gospel spread to Samaritans, who were generally considered second-class Jews at best. About eight years after the original Christian Pentecost (i.e., in about 38 A.D.), the events in Caesarea represent a second Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit again spontaneously fell on people - this time, Gentiles. How could the Jerusalem Council fail to conclude that circumcision - indeed, the Law itself - was required for conversion when God had unequivocally shown Peter, arguably Jesus' closest disciple, otherwise?

But it would be more than ten years before the significance of Cornelius' conversion became church orthodoxy, but God had carefully chosen the time (kairos), the place, and the people to establish His principle. Disagreements about the Law would continue to surface for the next few years - long-held beliefs die hard - but the course of church history was inexorably set in motion by the conversion of Cornelius.

### The Death of Herod Agrippa

In 44 A.D., Caesarea was also the site of an event chronicled in both Christian and Jewish history - the grizzly death of Herod Agrippa, son of Herod the Great, who imprisoned Peter and beheaded James, the brother of John ([Acts 12:1-3](#)). Both Luke ([Acts 12:17-24](#)) and Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* XIX.8.2) imply that Agrippa's demise was related to hubris, although, not surprisingly, Josephus' account is more charitable. Agrippa was holding games in Caesarea and on the second day, Josephus reports, he appeared in "a garment made wholly of silver...and came into the theater early in the morning." The reflection from the garment "was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him..." and "his flatterers cried out...that he was a god."

Luke's account attributes the praise not to a silver garment, but rather to Agrippa's speech to an group of people from Tyre and Sidon, who were asking for peace "*because their country depended on the king's country for food*" (Acts 12:20). Whether appearance or speech, Agrippa's mistake, according to Luke, was that "he did not give God the glory" (Acts 12:23). Josephus' states that "the king did neither rebuke (those who called him a god), nor reject their impious flattery." According to Josephus, that "a severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner." Agrippa's agony lasted for five days, at which time he died.

Luke specifically attributes Agrippa's death to divine intervention after the king allowed people to call him a god. "*Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down...and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last*" (Acts 12:23). The accounts of Luke and Josephus jibe inasmuch as both imply that Agrippa was struck immediately after the "impious flattery," and Luke's cryptic description does not preclude a brief period between the onset of the attack and his death. Modern interpretations of the incident suggest that Agrippa, like his father, died of kidney disease.

It is clear that Agrippa's death made an impression on both Jewish and Christian audiences, albeit for different reasons. Josephus reports that "all places were also full of mourning and lamentation." This may have been true of Gentiles and Romanized Jews like Josephus, but it certainly was not for orthodox Jews or Christians, who had no use for any of the Herodians. Luke's closing comment - that "the word of God increased and multiplied" (Acts 12:24) implies that many saw the hand of God in Agrippa's death.

### Paul in Caesarea

The New Testament tells of four times Paul was in Caesarea:

1. [ca 37 A.D.] When Paul first returns to Jerusalem after his Damascus Road conversion and time in Arabia, he receives a cool reception from the Jerusalem church, but when his bold preaching in the city leads to a Hellenist plot to kill him, "*the brothers...brought him down to Caesarea [probably very briefly] and sent him off to Tarsus*" (Acts 9:30).

2. [ca 53 A.D.] At the end of his second missionary journey, Paul lands at Caesarea and greets the church before returning to Antioch (Acts 18:22).

3. [ca 56 A.D.] After his third missionary journey, Paul sails for Judea with a collection from the Macedonian churches for their poorer brothers in Judea. He lands at Ptolemais and proceeds on to Caesarea, where he stays with Philip "*for many days*" (Acts 21:10). During his stay, the prophet Agabus warns Paul that he will be captured by Jews in Jerusalem and delivered to Gentiles (Acts 21:11). Paul's companions therefore try to dissuade him from continuing on, but he is unmoved, saying "*I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 21:13). Some Caesarean believers join his entourage and head for Jerusalem.

4. [ca 57-59 A.D.] True to Agabus' prediction, Paul is indeed delivered to Gentiles by Jews incensed over a perceived insult to Temple regulations. First held by the tribune Claudius Lysias, Paul is then taken to Caesarea when Paul's nephew uncovers a plot to kill him. Governor Felix holds a trial of sorts, listening to the accusations by the Jewish spokesman Tertullus and then to Paul's response ([Acts 24:1-21](#)), but he refuses to issue a verdict. Instead, he has him confined, probably in the Promontory Palace built by Herod the Great, which was now the official residence of the Roman governor. He allows Paul to "have some liberty" and orders "that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs" (Acts 24:23).



Site of Herod's Palace at Caesarea  
[Click for a larger image](#)

Felix was married to Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa (and granddaughter of Herod the Great). According to Josephus, Drusilla had been given by her brother Agrippa to the king of Emesa, but she was apparently a great beauty, and when Felix saw her, he fell in love and determined to have her for himself. What Roman governors wanted, they got. Accordingly, "He sent to her a person whose name was Simon one of his friends; a Jew he was, and by birth a Cypriot, and one who...endeavored to persuade her to forsake her present husband, and marry him; and promised, that if she would not refuse him, he would make her a happy woman." To avoid her sister Bernice's envy, Josephus continues, she "was prevailed upon to transgress the laws of her forefathers, and to marry Felix" (*Antiquities of the Jews* XX.8.2). She was, therefore, living in sin with Felix since her marriage to the king of Emesa had not been legally dissolved.

Luke implies that Felix had more than a passing interest in Christianity and sometime later, he brings Paul to speak with himself and Drusilla "about faith in Christ Jesus" (Acts 24:24). Paul was almost certainly aware of their adulterous relationship (it was common knowledge) and ever the one to meet sin head-on, Paul apparently offended Felix by talking about "righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment" (Acts 24:25). Perhaps fearing that Paul's words might tweak Drusilla's Jewish conscience (such as it was), Felix spirits Paul back to confinement for the next two years. He appears, however, to have retained some interest in (or perhaps just curiosity about) Paul because "he sent for him often and conversed with him," although Luke says this is only because he hoped to extract a bribe from Paul (Acts 24:26).

Felix is finally succeeded by Festus, who almost immediately conducts a second trial against Paul at the insistence the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Festus, new to Judea and unfamiliar with Jews and their conflict with Christians, was undoubtedly completely perplexed by the entire affair. Finding no crime but "*wishing to do the Jews a favor*" (Acts 25:9), he asks Paul if he wishes to be tried in Jerusalem. Paul objects and, calling upon his right as a Roman citizen, appeals to Caesar," a request the governor seems only too eager to fulfill (Acts 25:7-12). Before Paul is shipped off to Rome, however, Festus discusses the case with Agrippa II (the son of Herod Agrippa and the brother of both Drusilla and Bernice), who was visiting Caesarea with Bernice (with whom, according to Josephus, he had an incestuous relationship). Paul presents his testimony to Agrippa and Bernice ([Acts 25:23-26:23](#)).

Having heard Paul's complete story for the first time, "*Festus said with a loud voice, 'Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind'*" (Acts 26:24). Paul disagrees and challenges Agrippa, asking, "*Do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe*" (Acts 26:27). Agrippa responds with a dismissively sarcastic, "*In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?*" (Acts 26:28). After the meeting ends, Agrippa tells Festus, "*This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar*" (Acts 26:32). But it was Paul's goal to visit Rome (see [Romans 1:15](#)), and now he would be provided free transport to the capital, although he would nearly die en route.

### **The Execution of Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph**

Jewish history in Caesarea didn't end with the death of Herod Agrippa I, as the history of the city is connected with one of the great rabbis of Judaism. Akiba ben Joseph (c. 50 A.D.-135 A.D.), like all larger-than-life historical figures, is the subject of considerable legendary material. Sometimes considered the father of rabbinical Judaism, Akiba was an equal contemporary of Rabban Gamaliel II, the grandson of the biblical Gamaliel (see [Acts 5:34-40](#)) and the great great grandson of [Hillel the](#)

[Elder](#). According to tradition, at age 40 Akiba, who had previously been opposed to the rabbis, he became their pupil, studying under Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a student of Johanan ben Zakkai, the youngest student of Hillel.

By about 66 A.D., Jewish resentment toward the Roman occupation blossomed into all-out war after Hellenists desecrated a synagogue in Caesarea while the Roman garrison refused to intercede. The Roman puppet monarch Agrippa II and his sister Bernice fled when hostilities broke out in Jerusalem and put themselves under Roman protection. Ultimately, the Judean cause was hopeless, facing as they did, the most powerful military force in the world, but the rebels were encouraged by some early successes against the Jerusalem garrison and Roman reinforcements at Beit-Horon.

Emperor Nero appointed Vespasian to bring Judea into line, and he proceeded with deadly efficiency. Making Caesarea his headquarters, his army of sixty thousand quickly crushed resistance in the north, but Nero died and in 69 Vespasian was named emperor and returned to Rome. Vespasian's son Titus took over administration of the War and continued his father's ruthless approach. On one occasion, he condemned 2,500 Jews to fight wild beasts in the Caesarea stadium. The siege of Jerusalem had begun earlier in the war, but by 70, the city walls were breached and Herod's magnificent Temple was destroyed on August 29/30, 70. Titus returned to Rome in triumph, where his victory was memorialized in his famous arch. Jewish resistance lingered for nearly three years until the final defeat at the fortress of Masada, ironically a building project of Herod.

The defeat did not dampen the commitment of Zealots to rid their homeland of the pagan Romans. Hadrian (117-138) was one of the more enlightened Roman Emperors and in 130, he visited the ruins of Jerusalem. He promised to rebuild the city, but when Jews learned that a pagan metropolis named Aelia Capitolina would occupy the site of the Holy City and a temple dedicated to Jupiter would stand on the Temple Mount, tensions grew, particularly when Hadrian abolished circumcision as a mutilation. Akiva ben Joseph urged the re-established Sanhedrin at Jamnia to support a revolt under Simon bar Kokhba, whom he considered the Jewish Messiah. Some scholars believe it was this act that created a permanent schism between Judaism and Jewish Christians who recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah.



The Arch of Titus in Rome (above)  
Section depicting fall of Jerusalem (below)  
[Click for a larger image](#)



The revolt initially succeeded, and for two and a half years, a sovereign Israel again existed, led by the civil ruler Bar Kokhba (who dubbed himself *Nasi Israel*) and the religious leader, Akiva ben Joseph. State coins were even minted (left) with an image of the Temple on one side and the inscription "Year One of the redemption of Israel" on the other. Hadrian was not prepared for the strong reaction of the Jews, but he acted swiftly and decisively, transferring General Sextus Julius Severus from Britain and mounting an army of about seventy-five thousand.



Following a bloody three-year war, during which 580,000 Jews were killed, the revolt was crushed in 135. Finally deciding that the only solution to the "Jewish problem" was complete eradication, he outlawed Mosaic Law, Torah study, and the Jewish calendar. He built the city of Aelia Capitolina and banned Jews from it. Following the typical Roman belief that killing leaders killed a group, he also ordered the execution of Jewish scholars, including Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph, who defied Hadrian's ban on Torah study. According to legend he was tortured to death by tearing off his skin with red-hot instruments and died with the *shema* on his lips.

The Roman tactic of leader execution was as much a failure with Judaism as it was with Christianity. Roman emperors and generals could apparently never understand the distinction between religions based on personal convenience or superstition, which are readily abandoned under pressure, and those based on a genuine commitment to a living God. After 135, Jews had no home of their own until 1948, yet the faith sustained them through centuries of dispersion and persecution. It is hard to know, however, just what survived. While there are certainly faithful pious Jews, Israel itself is one of the more secular nations in the world.

## Origen and Christian Scholarship

Since Origen will be the subject of an upcoming *ET&N* in the [Early Fathers Series](#), I will save discussion of his period in Caesarean history until then except to say that the arrival of Origen from his native Alexandria (from which he had been expelled) in about 232 marked the beginning of a period of notable Christian scholarship in Caesarea. Together with Theoctistus, bishop of Caesarea, he established a new school there and completed many of his works. Pamphilus, who was to suffer martyrdom during the Diocletian Persecution, later collected and transcribed Origen's works, making them the basis of the Christian library in Caesarea. Pamphilus' most famous student, in turn, was Eusebius (c. 260-before 341), who served as bishop of Caesarea and whose substantial body of writings includes his indispensable *Church History*.

## The Diocletian Persecution

The persecution of Christians throughout the first hundred years of the church was generally sporadic and localized, but on the eve of the imperial recognition of Christianity by Constantine, the largest single period of persecution was conducted by Diocletian. When he came to power in 284, Diocletian recognized that the Empire was too large to be ruled by a single man, so he took the bold step of dividing it East-West and installing Maximian as western emperor, while he ruled the east. The so-called Diocletian Persecution is considered the most terrible of the ten traditional persecutions of the early church, but it probably shouldn't even be attributed to Diocletian.

In the early years of his reign, according to church historian Eusebius Pamphilius, bishop of Caesarea, Diocletian at least tolerated Christianity. Eusebius writes of the building of large new churches, the appointment of Christian governors, and the esteem of Roman rulers for their Christian family members. But in 292, Diocletian further divided administrative responsibilities, making his son-in-law Galerius deputy emperor of the east. Still, the church experienced such a period of peace that Eusebius lamented, "on account of the abundant freedom, we fell into laxity and sloth, and envied and reviled each other, and were almost, as it were, taking up arms against one another, rulers assailing rulers with words like spears, and people forming parties against people, and monstrous hypocrisy and dissimulation rising to the greatest height of wickedness" (*Church History* VIII.1).

That freedom ended after Galerius apparently convinced Diocletian at a meeting in Nicomedia in 302 that Christianity had to be suppressed as an enemy of the state. Beginning the next year, a series of imperial edicts under Diocletian's name brought a serious crisis to the church:

- 303 - "...churches should be razed to the ground, the Scriptures destroyed by fire, those who held positions of honor degraded, and the household servants, if they persisted in the Christian profession, be deprived of their liberty" (*Church History* VIII.2)
- 303 - "...those in prison should be set free, if they would sacrifice, but that those who refused should be tormented with countless tortures..." (*Church History* VIII.6)
- 304 - "...all the people throughout the city should sacrifice and pour out libations to the idols" (*On the Martyrs in Palestine* III)

Diocletian abdicated in 305, but the edicts continued under Maximian and Galerius:

- 305 - "...all the people should offer sacrifices and that the rulers of the city should see to this diligently and zealously" (*On the Martyrs in Palestine* IV)
- 307 - "...altars of idols should be rebuilt with all zeal and that all men, together with women and children, even infants at breast, should offer sacrifice and pour out libations...and that the meats in the market should be polluted by the libations of the sacrifices..." (*On the Martyrs in Palestine* IX)

In *On the Martyrs in Palestine*, Eusebius chronicled the names and acts of martyrs in Caesarea (how he avoided martyrdom is not entirely clear). Both men (Procopius, Agapius, Alexander, Dionysius, Timothy, Romulus, Paesis, Epiphanius, Domninus, Pamphilus, Paul, Antoninus, Zebinas, Germanus, Mannathus, Peter Absalom, Vales, Seleucus, Porphyrius, Theophilus, Julianus, Hadrianus, and Eubulus) and women (Theckla, Theodosia, Valentina, Hatha, and Maxys) joined the ranks of those who confessed their faith in Christ Jesus died for that faith. But even as they were going to the grave, others arose to take their places, and the church continued to grow. Yet again, the Roman strategy had failed.

## **Muslims and Crusaders**

When Constantine officially recognized Christianity, persecution subsided but the impact of his conversion is arguable. Regardless of that, Caesarea continued to be a prosperous seat of Christianity until the arrival of Arabs in 640, when the harbor was neglected and began to silt over. During the Crusades, the city bounced back and forth between Crusader and Moslem hands. In 1251-52, the French king Louis IX (Saint Louis) built the Crusader fortress, but in 1291, Caesarea was finally leveled by

an Egyptian sultan. Subsequently, the site was raided for its stone for centuries. In 1878, Ottoman Turks resettled Bosnian Moslem refugees there.

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<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, there were several cities named Caesarea. In Caesarea Philippi, northeast of Caesarea Maritima, for example, Peter made his confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. In this article, hereafter I refer to Caesarea Maritima simply as Caesarea.

<sup>2</sup> The Ethiopian in Acts 8 is said to be a "eunuch" (**eunouchou**), but this does not necessarily mean he was castrated. Men who served in female courts were often castrated as a measure of protection for the women, but because of this, the term "came to be applied to any high officer of court even though not emasculated" (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D. (ed), AMG International, Inc, 1993). It is also often assumed that this Ethiopian was the first negro convert, but this is unlikely since the context demonstrates that the man was a Jew. At the time, Ethiopia was not a negro nation as it is today.

## Now

The city of Caesarea Maritima is a monument both to the ingenuity of Man and his ignorance. It was built by a Judean king to placate his Roman conquerors and eventually became the military headquarters for the destruction of his country. Archaeological excavation of Caesar began in 1959, and many ruins and relics have been recovered. The magnificent harbor is now underwater, having been destroyed by neglect, earthquakes, and time. The remnants of Herod's Palace amount to piles of rocks surrounding a stagnant pool of water. Nothing remains of the great statue of Augustus, said to rival the Olympic Zeus. The stadium where Titan tortured 2,500 Jews to death is little more than a few rows of stone benches. Only the theater remains more-or-less intact. But it didn't take time to issue the verdict on Herod. God delivered that when Herod's own son was stricken in Herod's stadium, a victim of an arrogant human pride that was manifested in the city of Caesarea itself.

It is more than a little ironic that a British group of progressive Jews hosts a website called the "[King Herod Appreciation Society](#)," justifying its choice of Herod with "the received wisdom about King Herod is that he was jealous with a distinctly murderous streak. Less appreciated is that he had enlightened ideas about economics; was dedicated to good works; and kept the Kingdom of the Jews alive by adroit politics within an Empire far greater (and more cruel) than anything he could muster. It all depends on whose version of history you read." A curious rationale for a man who murdered his own children and failed to understand his own people, but then perhaps money and nice buildings are more important than people.

To claim, however, that he "kept the Kingdom of the Jews alive" is simple ignorance. His policies directly led to the events that brought a nation that had existed for centuries to total destruction a little more than a century after his death. If that is the price of progressivism, perhaps conservatism deserves their serious consideration.

## Discussion

### [\(Paul in the School of Hillel\)](#)

As this issue distributes on [InJesus](#), I am in Athens, Greece, attending a business conference. Taking a couple of days afterwards, I will be touring parts of the city and ancient Corinth. I will share those experiences in *ET&N* 86 (October 17) with the Athens installment in the [Cities of the New Testament series](#).

[Comments posted on the ET&N blog](#)

There were a number of nice notes concerning the "Paul in the School of Hillel" issue, including one from Latvia. It is both thrilling and humbling to know that the work God has given me has an audience in so many parts of our troubled world!



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

## **NEXT ISSUE: New Testament Apocrypha: Apocalypes (September 5)**

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