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Background Information for Understanding the New Testament

The world of the New Testament is so different from our own that we may find its concepts, customs, and terminology confusing. Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and encyclopedias offer explanations for such matters. Here is a sampling of what one might learn about certain aspects of the New Testament world:

anointing: the application of ointment or oil to a body or object.

Kings were anointed with oil at their coronation (cf. Luke 4:18); the sick sometimes were anointed with oil to accompany prayers for their healing (Mark 6:13; James 5:14); a host might anoint a favored guest with some sort of fragrant ointment (Luke 7:38, 46; John 11:2; 12:3–6); mourners anointed corpses with scented oils to remove the stench of death (Mark 16:1; John 12:7–8); the term “messiah” means “Anointed One” (John 1:41), and Christians seized on the ambiguity of whether this meant “anointed to rule” or “anointed to die” (Mark 14:8).

betrothal: a marriage that had not yet been consummated. A couple who had been betrothed were legally married—the relationship could be ended only by divorce—but they did not yet live in a sexual relationship as a married couple. Reasons for such an intermediate state included: (1) the wife was underage; (2) the

dowry had not yet been paid (thus the man had essentially reserved a woman to be his wife but was not allowed to take her to his home until he had paid for her); (3) the bride and/or groom's family needed more time and money to prepare a proper wedding. See Matthew 1:18.

carpenter: construction worker or builder who worked with wood or stone. Jesus is identified as a carpenter (in Greek, *tektōn*) in Mark 6:3 and as the son of a carpenter in Matthew 13:55. It is possible that Jesus (and Joseph) had a carpenter shop in which they made wooden doors and furniture for the mud-brick houses in their village. However, many scholars think that the term “carpenter” was used for common laborers who worked on Roman construction projects. The village of Nazareth may have been a community for such persons, providing opportunity for them to work in the nearby city of Sepphoris.

centurion: a Roman army officer in charge of one hundred soldiers. See Matthew 8:5–13; 27:54; Mark 15:39, 44–45; Luke 7:2, 6; 23:47; Acts 10; 21:31–32; 22:25–26; 23:17, 23; 24:23; 27.

corban: literally, “given to God,” the practice of setting aside for religious purposes what typically was used in another way (cf. Lev. 1:2; Num. 7:13). Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for encouraging people to declare as “corban” money that they should use to care for their elderly parents. See Mark 7:11–13.

crucifixion: a Roman form of execution designed to terrorize subjugated populations. Men and women were nailed or tied naked to wooden stakes (sometimes with cross beams) and left to die of asphyxiation when the weight of their hanging body made breathing impossible (this took several hours). Sometimes the victim was seated on a small block to prevent asphyxiation, and death from exposure then took several days. The exact manner of crucifixion varied and may have been left to the discretion of soldiers, but the goal was to cause maximum torment and humiliation and to do so in public view as a warning to others. Crucifixion generally was reserved for lower classes or enemies of the state. Bodies normally were left on the crosses to be consumed by scavengers. See Matthew 27:33–60; Mark 15:22–46; Luke 23:33–53; John 19:16–42.

cubit: a common (though somewhat inconsistent) unit for measuring distance. A cubit (in Greek, *pēchys*) was equal to the span from a typical man's elbow to the tip of his middle finger (about 17.5 to 20 inches). See Revelation 21:17; see also the KJV of Matthew 6:27; Luke 12:25; John 21:8.

denarius: a silver coin that was the usual day's wage for a typical laborer. See Matthew 18:28; 20:2, 9–10, 13; 22:19; Mark 6:37; 12:15; 14:5; Luke 7:41; 10:35; 20:24; John 6:7; 12:5; Revelation 6:6.

first watch: roughly six to nine o'clock at night. Likewise, the second watch is nine o'clock to midnight, the third watch from midnight to three o'clock in the morning, and the fourth watch from three o'clock to dawn (i.e., 6 a.m.). The idea was to divide the time between sunset (around 6 p.m.) and sunrise (around 6 a.m.) into four equal segments. The NRSV often does not translate these literally; see the KJV or RSV of Mark 6:48; Luke 12:38.

hem/fringe of garment: the four tassels that devout Jewish men wore at the corners of their outer garment. These tassels had symbolic meaning, with different-colored threads standing for various thoughts, but they served generically to remind the wearer of an obligation to keep the Torah. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for wearing ostentatious tassels on their garments (Matt. 23:5), but apparently he wore less showy ones himself (Matt. 9:20; Mark 6:56).

lamp: the most common means of providing light at night (people did not have wax candles). A simple receptacle, usually made of pottery, was filled with oil, and a lit wick could be dropped in to float. Lamps were portable, but they also could be placed on a tall stand to emit maximum light in a particular area. See Matthew 5:15; 6:22; 25:1–8; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33–36; 12:35; 15:8; John 5:35; Acts 20:8; Hebrews 9:2; 2 Peter 1:19; Revelation 1:12–20; 2:1–5; 11:4; 18:23; 21:23; 22:5.

leprosy: not the illness that we know as Hansen's disease, but rather any disfigurement on the surface of a person or thing, including mildew on clothing, mold on a house, or rust on metal. With humans, it could include a range of disfiguring conditions, from birthmarks to acne to more severe and debilitating skin diseases. See Matthew 8:2–3; 10:8; 11:4–5; 26:6; Mark 1:40–45; 14:3; Luke 4:27; 5:12–13; 7:22; 17:12–19.

magi: Persian sages or religious leaders who practiced a mixture of sorcery and astrology. The Jewish people in New Testament times identified the sorcerers in Pharaoh's court as magi (Exod. 7–9) along with Balaam (Num. 22–24) and Nebuchadnezzar's ineffective dream interpreters (Dan. 2). In the New Testament, magi are found in Matthew 2; Acts 8:9–24; 13:6–12.

money changer: a person who exchanged one type of coin for another, extracting a small fee for the service. The motivation for such exchanges was religious: coins minted by the Romans usually bore images that made them unacceptable for use by pious Jews. Money changers functioned in the temple court (not inside the temple itself) so that temple-goers who wanted to make offerings or purchase animals for sacrifices could obtain untainted coins. See Mark 11:15.

oath: either a vow or an utterance of profanity. The first sense seems to predominate in biblical references: when people “swear,” they usually are swearing an oath or vow to do something (Jesus

forbids this in Matt. 5:33–37; see also Matt. 23:16–22; 26:63; Mark 6:23, 26; Acts 18:18; 23:12–14, 21–23; Heb. 6:13–18; 7:20–21, 28; James 5:12; Rev. 10:6). In a few instances, swearing might refer to the use of profanity (see Mark 14:71 KJV), which for Jewish people sometimes involved vulgar use of God’s name and was, by some reports, quite common.

phylacteries: a pair of small boxes containing passages of Scripture written on parchment, worn by devout Jewish men, one bound to the forehead and the other strapped to the wrist, so that the Torah might always be at their right hand and before their eyes (see Exod. 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18). Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for displaying their piety by wearing phylacteries that he considered to be excessively large (Matt. 23:5).

pinnacle of the temple: the summit of the Jerusalem temple, as reconstructed by Herod the Great in the years just prior to Jesus’s birth. The pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple is believed to have been the highest architectural point in the world at the time. It was destroyed (along with the rest of the temple) by Titus, son of the Roman emperor Vespasian, in 70 CE. See Matthew 4:5; 24:1.

prison: the purpose of imprisonment was not reform or punishment, but rather to confine a person awaiting trial. After trial, a guilty prisoner was punished or executed, not sentenced to further confinement. Prison conditions varied greatly, from dark dungeons to house arrest. See Matthew 11:2; 14:3; 25:36–44; Luke 21:12;

Acts 4:3; 5:17–25; 8:3; 12:4–19; 16:23–24; 21:33–26:32; Romans 16:7; 2 Corinthians 11:23; Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; Philippians 1:7, 13; Colossians 4:3, 10; 2 Timothy 1:8; Philemon 1, 9; Hebrews 13:3; Revelation 2:10.

prostitutes: female slaves forced to perform sexual services for the financial benefit of their masters. In Roman cities there may have been professional “high class” prostitutes, but in the areas of Palestine that serve as settings for New Testament stories all prostitutes appear to have been slaves; thus we hear of no ex-prostitutes (specifically, Mary Magdalene is never said to be a prostitute). See Matthew 21:31–32; Luke 7:36–50. New Testament passages that speak of prostitutes as immoral persons (rather than as marginalized outcasts) refer to persons outside Palestine, in a “far country” (Luke 15:13, 30) or in notorious Corinth (1 Cor. 6:9, 15–16).

Roman citizenship: was obtained by being born a Roman citizen, and otherwise was granted only by the emperor or his designated representatives. Benefits of citizenship included: one was accountable only to imperial law rather than to local statutes (which varied throughout the empire); one could not be subjected to torture or corporal punishment without a trial; if accused of a crime, one could appeal to Caesar to have the case heard in Rome. See Acts 16:37; 22:25–29; 23:27.

Sabbath day's journey: the distance that one was allowed to travel on the Sabbath without violating religious observation of that day as a time for rest. The actual distance prescribed is no longer known, and it may have varied with time and place. See Acts 1:12; cf. Matthew 24:20.

Sanhedrin: a council of Jewish leaders that met in Jerusalem. In the New Testament, both Pharisees and Sadducees are said to sit on the Sanhedrin, which is also described as being composed of “chief priests, scribes, and elders.” See Mark 14:55; 15:1, 43; John 11:47; Acts 4:5–21; 5:21–42; 6:12–15; 22:5, 30; 23:1–10, 12–22.

shepherd: usually an itinerant or migrant worker hired to care for sheep and goats. In New Testament times, the profession of shepherd was a low-class position, near the bottom of the social scale. It was a dirty, demanding, and dangerous job that most people would not pursue if they were capable of finding better work. Shepherds appear to have been particularly despised by the religious establishment, perhaps because they violated Sabbath and purity regulations. See Matthew 18:12–14; 25:32; Mark 6:34; 14:27; Luke 2:8–20; John 10:1–16; Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4; Revelation 7:17.

slavery: could result from a sentence of punishment for various offenses; slavery was not always permanent. Entire families were sold into slavery when someone defaulted on a debt. Between

one-fourth and one-third of the people in the Roman Empire were slaves. Conditions varied enormously from agreeable to appalling. Nevertheless, a slave was a person with no honor, a person who literally lived in disgrace.

sowing seed: the agricultural practice of planting. In ancient Palestine the process seems to have been the reverse of what we are familiar with: first, the seed was thrown on the ground; then the ground was plowed, allowing the plow to work the previously scattered seed into the soil. See Mark 4:3–20; cf. Matthew 6:26; 13:24–43; 25:24, 26; Mark 4:31–32; John 4:36–37; 1 Corinthians 9:11; 15:36–37, 42–44; 2 Corinthians 9:6, 10; Galatians 6:7–8; James 3:18.

stadion: a somewhat inconsistent unit of measurement equal to six hundred feet (a foot being, literally, the length of a man's foot). The NRSV avoids using the term, instead translating measurements given in stadia into equivalent feet or miles; the KJV uses "furlongs"; other versions use "stadia" in some cases. See Luke 24:13; John 6:19; 11:18; Revelation 14:20; 21:16.

swaddling clothes: linen wrapped tightly around a small child's body to restrict its movements. In certain cultures it is common to swaddle a baby by rolling it in cloth with its arms at its sides. See Luke 2:7.

talent: a unit of silver, measured by weight, approximately seventy-five pounds of silver by our reckoning. One talent was equal to six thousand denarii. See Matthew 18:23–35; 25:14–30.

tax collector: native citizen of a conquered territory hired by the Romans to collect taxes for the empire. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors and usually were suspected of skimming money by collecting more than was actually due and keeping the surplus for themselves. Some of the tax collectors in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew) appear to have been specifically assigned to collect tolls for the use of Roman roads. See Matthew 5:46; 9:9–12; 10:3; 11:19; 18:17; 21:31–32; Luke 3:12–14; 7:29; 15:1; 18:10–14; 19:1–10.

temple tax: an annual payment to support the temple in Jerusalem. It was completely voluntary, but devout Jews throughout the Roman Empire were expected to pay it as an act of piety. Roman law allowed Jews who opted to pay this tax to deduct the amount from whatever civic taxes they owed to the empire. See Matthew 17:24–27.

third hour: roughly nine o'clock in the morning. Likewise, the sixth hour is noon, the ninth hour is three o'clock in the afternoon, and the eleventh hour is about five o'clock. The basic thought seems to be that the workday begins at sunrise (around 6 a.m.) and ends at sunset (around 6 p.m.), but the hours are numbered according to when they conclude rather than when they start (the third hour

ends at 9 a.m.; the sixth hour ends at noon). The NRSV frequently does not translate these references literally but instead substitutes the appropriate modern reference. See the KJV, NIV, or RSV of Matthew 20:3, 5–6, 9; Mark 15:25, 33; John 1:39; 4:6, 52; 19:14; Acts 2:15; 3:1; 10:3, 9; cf. John 11:9.

winnowing grain: the practice of tossing grain into the air with a large fork or fan so that the wind will blow away dust and other lightweight impurities, the chaff. See Matthew 3:12.