

## CHAPTER 1

# The World of the New Testament



**Image 6:** This scene from the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum celebrates the Emperor Titus's capture of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The victorious Romans triumphantly bear the sacred objects of the Jerusalem temple, including the menorah, or seven-branched lampstand, symbolizing the presence of God. (Image by users Tetraktys, Steerpikie, and Yonidebest, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

---

*One cannot understand the New Testament without a working knowledge of the culture from which it arose. Students who ignore this chapter do so at their peril.*

---

## THE JEWISH WORLD

A History of Tragedy and Renewal

A Persistent Obedience

*The Pharisees*

*The Sadducees*

*The Essenes*

An Abiding Hope

## THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

Language and Culture

*Alexander the Great*

*The Greek Language*

Life under the Roman Empire

*Roman Peace*

*Communication*

*Civic Life*

*Domestic Life*

Religion

*Traditional and Official Religion*

*Popular Religion*

*MYSTERY RELIGIONS*

*GNOSTICISM*

*FROM PHILOSOPHY TO ASTROLOGY*

*Diaspora Judaism*

## The Jewish World

Jesus was a Jew. So were his first disciples. To call Jesus **Christ** is to identify him with Israel's **Messiah**, the anointed king of Davidic lineage (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12-15 and Ps. 89:3-4). The earliest Christians did not consider themselves members of a new religion separate from Judaism. Yet Jesus and his disciples represented something new within Judaism. This novelty consisted not in original or unique ideas but in the

aspects of ancient traditions and hopes that were taken up, reinterpreted, and emphasized.

No new movement can be understood apart from its historical antecedents and the factors that helped to produce it. The historical setting of Jesus, early Christianity, and the New Testament was first-century Judaism. A remarkable continuity or similarity exists between the Judaism of today and that of the first century, despite the changes that succeeding centuries have wrought. This continuity is in itself a clue to the character of that ancient faith.

Both Judaism and Christianity are historical religions, and it belongs to the nature of both to emphasize continuity. They share a faith in a God who deals with human beings, individually and collectively, in such a way that God's will can be discerned in history. Crucial to both religions is the idea that God *reveals* or has been *revealed* in historical events. The holy scriptures of both religions are largely narratives of the past: legends, sagas, and historical accounts. Broadly speaking, they are testimonies to God's historical revelations. The Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) is a vast collection of legal, cultic, devotional, and narrative material set in a historical framework. It is the literary product of nearly a thousand years of Israel's history. Although the New Testament is much briefer and covers a much shorter period of time, it too tells of people and events in the conviction that God has wrought wondrous deeds in history that are of utmost importance for the future of humanity. Consciously and deliberately, the New Testament writers take up the story of the Old Testament and bring it to a culmination. That culmination, naturally, is distinctly Christian, rather than generally Jewish.

The limits of the Hebrew Bible had not been officially defined in the time of Jesus and

earliest Christianity. Yet, according to the New Testament, Jesus himself speaks of “the law and the prophets” (Matt. 5:17) and quotes from the Psalms (Mark 15:34; cf. Ps. 22:1). Thus he seems to have known the threefold division of sacred scripture—**law, prophets**, and writings (cf. Luke 24:44)—that is reflected generally in the New Testament. According to tradition, the **rabbis** fixed the **canon** of the Hebrew Bible at the **Council of Jamnia** around A.D. 90, although the main lines had been established much earlier. Most Protestant churches accept this Hebrew canon. Other, mostly Catholic, churches accept as canonical the **apocryphal** or deuterocanonical books contained in the **Septuagint**.

Judaism was a religion of **revelation**, history, and a book. As such, it was a religion steeped in tradition: a tradition by which Israel identified and understood itself as a distinct and chosen people, the people of the Lord. Moreover, much of the literature of the Old Testament and the written and **oral traditions** that developed from it were understood as divine directions intended to regulate Israel’s response to the Lord’s goodness. The most influential law code the Western world has known, the Ten Commandments, begins: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2-3; Deut. 5:6-7). The statement of what God has done leads to a statement of what the people ought to do in response: the basic structure of Old Testament law. A principal activity of many Jewish religious leaders in Jesus’ day was the interpretation and fulfillment of that law.

Revelation and history, tradition and law, although immensely important, were not the whole of Judaism. A part of obedience to the law was the performance of worship worthy of

God. The center of this worship in the time of Jesus was the temple in Jerusalem. The heart of the temple was the **sacrificial** altar, where priests offered sacrifice to God. Until its destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70, the temple served as the focal point of Jewish worship. Its importance to the life of first-century Judaism can scarcely be overestimated. Not only was the temple regarded as the center of the universe and the place where the last days were to be consummated; it also served as a means for structuring time, both through daily sacrifices and seasonal festivals. Any violation of the temple by the Roman authorities or others was sufficient to cause a major Jewish revolt. Further, the Jewish sect of **Qumran** originated in reaction to what its members considered the corruption of temple worship. Later, Jesus was accused of trying to destroy this sacred institution of Jewish piety (Mark 14:58 par.).

The other major Jewish religious institution was the **synagogue**. There was but one Jerusalem temple, but there were many synagogues. Even in Palestine, but especially in the **Diaspora**, the synagogue became for most Jews the practical center of their religious life. Although the synagogue’s origin is hidden in obscurity, by the first century it had become a central Jewish institution: a kind of community center for study of the Jewish law and regular weekly worship, including reading and commentary on the **Torah** and prayers for the congregation. Unlike the temple, over which priests presided, the synagogue was a lay organization that allowed broader participation, such as Jesus’ reading from the Torah in the synagogue (Luke 4:16) and Paul’s extensive use of synagogues in his missionary work (Acts 18:4).

Another factor played a large role in first-century Judaism: the land. The small piece of territory at the eastern end of the Mediterranean



**Image 7:** Altar in Ephesus with a scene of sacrifice. (From *Cities of Paul* by Helmut Koester, copyright © 2005 the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. Used here by permission of Fortress Press [www.fortresspress.com].)

Sea—variously called the Holy Land, Palestine, or Israel—has been the occasion and cause of Jewish hope and frustration for three thousand years. At least from the days of the Davidic monarchy, the land was regarded as God’s promise and gift to his people. The promise reached back into the days of the **patriarchs** Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who dwelt in and around the land but did not possess it (see Gen. 12:1-3). Yet Israel believed that God had promised the land to her, and in this faith she occupied and defended it. Israel, however, could never rest easy in the land: subject to frequent threat and attack, she was secure only when more powerful, surrounding nations were momentarily weak or looking in other directions. In the late eighth century B.C., the territories of all the Israelite tribes except Judah were overrun by the Assyrians; less than a century and a half later, the

Babylonians invaded Judea, laid siege to Jerusalem, and overthrew it. The Davidic kingship came to an end, and many of the people were deported into Babylonian captivity.

The subsequent history of the land has been a troubled one. The modern state of Israel (created in 1948) represents the first instance of Jewish control of the land since shortly before the time of Jesus. Since the Babylonian **exile**, the land of Israel has been ruled by other peoples, whether Persians, Romans, or British. The question of the land’s possession and governance was quite as important in Jesus’ day as it is today, for the land was then occupied by the Romans and ruled by puppet-kings and imperial **procurators**. The hope for the restoration of Jewish dominion under Davidic kingship was an important aspect of the background of Jesus’ ministry.

## A History of Tragedy and Renewal

How would early Christianity have been affected if the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds had never collided?

From the Babylonian conquest of Judea in 587 B.C. to the time of Jesus' death, the Jews in Palestine lived mostly under foreign domination, relieved only by a century or so of relative independence under the **Hasmonean** dynasty just prior to the Romans' advent in 63 B.C. During the Babylonian conquest, many Jews were taken east by their captors to Mesopotamia. Others fled south to Egypt. The so-called Diaspora, or dispersion, of the Jews had begun. From this time onward, Jews in increasing numbers were to be found living outside their Palestinian homeland.

Shortly after the middle of the sixth century B.C., Persians replaced the Babylonians as the Jews' overlords. Jews were allowed to return to their homeland and to begin the restoration of the Jerusalem temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed. Though our picture of Jewish life under Persian rule is incomplete, conditions were certainly much improved. More than two centuries of Persian domination came to an end late in the fourth century before Jesus, when Alexander of Macedon (northern Greece) and his armies moved east, sweeping everything before them. Alexander overran the Jewish homeland; over the years he and his successors attempted to introduce Greek culture and customs, as was their practice in all conquered territories. Alexander was as much a missionary of Greek culture as a conquering general. After his death in 323 B.C., his empire disintegrated as quickly as it had coalesced. Although his successors could not preserve political unity, they were able to continue the process of **Hellenization**: the spreading of Greek culture.

### 1.1 BEHIND THE NEW TESTAMENT: SOURCES FOR RECONSTRUCTING JEWISH HISTORY

The concerns of postexilic Israel are reflected in the later Old Testament books and treated directly in Ezra and Nehemiah. First and 2 Maccabees deal with the Maccabean period. Doubtless the most valuable single nonbiblical source is Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, a continuous history of the Jews to the Roman War. Josephus (A.D. 37–100[?]) was a Jewish soldier, politician, and historian. An erstwhile general of Jewish forces in Galilee, he was captured by the Romans, became a Roman citizen, and attached himself to the retinue of the emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian.

After the division of Alexander's empire, the Jews found themselves caught between two rival centers of power: the Seleucids, who controlled Mesopotamia and Syria, and the Ptolemies, who ruled Egypt. The geographical situation of Israel between these two great powers of the Fertile Crescent made struggle over Palestine inevitable. By and large, the Ptolemies controlled Jewish Palestine during the third century with minimal interference in Jewish internal affairs. After defeating the Ptolemies in 198 B.C., the Seleucids maintained a similar policy at first. After a period of changing rulers, however, Antiochus IV (called "Epiphanes" because he proclaimed himself as "God manifest") ascended to the Syrian throne in 175 B.C., and circumstances changed. Already there were Hellenizing Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere

who were all too eager to adopt Greek customs and dress, in part because of the economic and other advantages they believed assimilation would bring (1 Macc. 1:11-15). In due course, however, more pious Jews (*Hasidim*) strongly objected to such accommodation; quickly, the seeds were sown from which conflict would sprout as positions hardened on both sides. Because Antiochus probably saw in such Jewish resistance dangerous opposition to his own rule, he decided to suppress the Jewish religion. Heathen altars were erected in Jewish towns and the Jerusalem temple became the scene of disgraceful conduct and sacrifices (2 Macc. 6:1-6). Resistance meant flirting with death.

In the face of such depredations and threats, Mattathias, patriarch of the Hasmonean family, rose to the occasion in 167 B.C., when emissaries of Antiochus came to his town of Modein to enforce the command to perform pagan sacrifice (1 Macc. 2:15-28). Proclaiming that “even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments . . . yet I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors,” he killed a Jew who had come forward to offer sacrifice, as well as one of the king’s officers. Then he and his sons took to the hills in open rebellion. Said Mattathias: “Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!” (1 Macc. 2:27).

Soon thereafter, Mattathias died. His son Judas, called Maccabeus (“the hammer”), assumed command of the rebel force. (The family is often called **Maccabean**, after him.) Victorious in combat, in 165 B.C. Judas Maccabeus and his men seized the temple and reclaimed it for Judaism. This victory has ever since been celebrated in the feast of Hanukkah (“dedication”), even though it was not until 142 B.C. that

the last remnants of Syrian Hellenizers were driven from Jerusalem.

Although the Maccabean or Hasmonean dynasty was generally welcomed as a blessed relief and the fulfillment of long-frustrated expectations, its promise far outstripped its actuality. The propensity of the later Hasmoneans to style themselves as kings and high **priests**, as well as deadly struggles among them, led to disillusionment. As kings, they were not sons of David; as priests, they were not descended from the priestly family of Zadok; and so they could be viewed as interlopers. When the Romans arrived on the scene about a century after the Maccabean Revolt, their general, Pompey, supported one Hasmonean claimant, Hyrcanus II, against the other, Aristobulus II. Although some of Aristobulus’s supporters offered fierce resistance, particularly at the temple, many Jews would scarcely have regarded Roman occupation of Palestine and the Holy City as a disaster. For while Roman domination may have been inevitable, the conduct of the later Hasmoneans made it seem initially less distasteful to Jews than it might otherwise have been. The Romans allowed the weak Hasmonean Hyrcanus II to hold the office of high priest and ethnarch. But Palestine was now in fact Roman territory, and the power behind the throne was Antipater of Idumea, a master of political intrigue who had helped engineer the Roman coup in the first place.

Antipater brought his remarkable career to a culmination by having the Romans declare his son Herod king of the Jews. This Herod ruled effectively, if brutally, from 37 to 4 B.C., and figures prominently in Matthew’s story of Jesus’ infancy. He is commonly known as Herod the Great, in distinction from the lesser Herods who followed him. During his long and successful rule, Herod accepted the necessity of

appealing to Jewish religious sensibilities, at the same time devoting himself to the task of Hellenizing the culture and life of Palestine. He built cities according to the Hellenistic patterns, and he constructed stadiums, gymnasiums, and theaters. In non-Jewish areas (e.g., Sebaste, ancient Samaria) he built pagan temples. Yet he also rebuilt the Jerusalem temple in a more magnificent style. Despite his efforts, the Jews neither loved nor trusted Herod; nor did he trust them. He executed his Hasmonean wife Mariamne and eventually two of her sons, along with his ambitious and able son Antipater (named for his grandfather), who had married a Hasmonean princess. Obviously Herod feared that the memory of the Hasmoneans would inspire the Jews against him.

After the death of Herod, the kingdom was split into three parts, apportioned among three surviving sons. (See this book's frontispiece: "Palestine at the time of the New Testament.") Philip became tetrarch of the region northeast of the Sea of Galilee, including Iturea and Trachonitis, and reigned over that largely Gentile area from 4 B.C. until A.D. 34. Herod Antipas became ruler of Galilee and Perea (4 B.C.–A.D. 39). Archelaus became ruler of Samaria, Judea, and Idumea, but was deposed after a short reign. Following his deposition in A.D. 6, a Roman procurator, or prefect, was installed as ruler of Judea. The procuratorship remained in continuous effect until the brief reign of Agrippa (37–44) and was resumed thereafter. Pontius Pilate (26–36) was the fifth of these procurators,



**Image 8:** These massive walls around the tombs of the patriarchs of Israel (see Gen. 23:9) in Hebron, a few miles south of Bethlehem, were originally constructed by Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1-23), who also rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem (John 2:20). (Image by user Ooman, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

surely one of the worst from the Jewish point of view. He took money from the temple treasury, brought military insignia with the emperor's image into Jerusalem, and ruthlessly destroyed a group of Samaritans who were watching a prophet perform a miracle. To say that he was not overly sensitive to Jewish religious sensibilities would be an understatement.

Yet Roman rule was not unremittingly brutal or oppressive. The procurator of Judea lived not in Jerusalem but in Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast. Although he had final responsibility, much authority was granted the **Sanhedrin**, a group of about seventy distinguished Jewish elders—priests, **scribes**, and laymen. The high priest was the official head of this group and was, as he had been since the Babylonian exile, the most important Jewish governmental figure: a middleman between Israel and Rome. In the villages, synagogues may have served as law-courts, where scribes were the authorities for interpreting and applying the law, or Torah.

Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, lived in Galilee under Herod Antipas, and died in Jerusalem during the procuratorship of Pilate and the high priesthood of Caiaphas. Although Jesus was doubtless influenced by the political conditions of the times, there is little evidence that he made an impact upon them. On the one hand, Jesus and his followers would not have encouraged any who advocated armed resistance against Roman rule. Although Jesus spoke frequently of the **kingdom of God** and may have aroused hopes that he himself would become king, he evidently did not intend to lead a rebellion (see Luke 4:5-8; Matt. 4:7-10; John 6:15; 18:36). For example, he did not explicitly forbid payment of taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17 parr.; but cf. Luke 23:2). On the other hand, Jesus was executed as

a messianic pretender, a claimant to the throne of Israel, and thus a political rebel.

Gradually during the first century, the tension between Roman and Jew became heightened. What the Romans regarded as Jewish provocations led to retaliation, which in turn aggravated a polarization of sentiment. More and more Jews became willing to fight and die, convinced that God would vindicate them in their righteous cause. Jewish Christians, among others, did not share this widespread enthusiasm for war, and when its outbreak seemed imminent those in Jerusalem fled for safety, to Pella across the Jordan River (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5.23). At about this time, James the brother of Jesus was martyred by other Jews (an event recorded by Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200). In A.D. 66, war broke out. Although the Jews fought bravely and enjoyed some initial success, they had little chance against Roman power. In A.D. 70 the Romans took Jerusalem after a long, grueling siege and laid it waste, destroying the temple. A few years

## 1.2 BEHIND THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE ZEALOTS

Although Jewish revolutionaries have been facetly referred to as **Zealots**, recent scholarship demonstrates that a specifically “Zealot” party did not emerge before A.D. 66. From Josephus it is usually inferred that Judas the Galilean founded the sect in A.D. 6. Nevertheless, while isolated Jewish uprisings can be documented, it is unclear that there was any organized party advocating armed revolution during the period with which we are concerned.



later, the last Jewish resistance at the fortress of Masada was overwhelmed. Even then the Jewish will to resist was not broken. Later, word circulated that Emperor Hadrian intended to rebuild Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina and to erect a temple to Jupiter on the ruins of the Jewish temple. (“Aelius” was Hadrian’s middle name, and “Capitoline” recalled Rome’s Capitoline Hill, where pagan gods were worshiped.) The Jews then rallied around a leader called Bar Kochba (“Son of the Star”), whom the renowned Rabbi Akiba hailed as the Messiah of Israel. Once more (A.D. 132–135), the Jews fought fiercely, but after a time were subdued. The Romans went ahead with their building plans; after the new city was complete, they forbade any Jew to enter it on pain of death. The trend of many centuries reached its logical end. Judaism had become a nation without a homeland over which the Jews themselves ruled.

The character of Judaism during the time of Jesus and the early church was much affected by conditions in the Jewish homeland. Because the Jews believed that their land had been given them by the same God who had called them to be his chosen people, those who lived in Palestine chafed under foreign domination. Even though Jews generally looked for relief from foreign oppression and the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, many were content to wait upon God for the fulfillment of this hope. Some Jews thought it was near at hand. Others had made their peace with Hellenistic culture and Roman rule and probably did not really yearn for their overthrow. There were also large numbers of Jews living outside Palestine for whom political independence was not a burning issue. Indeed, rebellion in the homeland presented the grim and unwelcome possibility of retaliation against Jews elsewhere.



**Image 9:** Masada, the Jewish fortress. The road from the bottom left to the top right is the ramp the Romans built for their assault is barely visible. (Image by user Gugganij, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

Moreover, it would be a mistake to view the Judaism of Jesus' time solely in terms of its reaction to an international, and domestic, political situation with unfortunate consequences for Jews. Many Jews continued to be primarily concerned with the right understanding of the law and the proper worship of God. The development of various schools of thought continued under Roman rule, and the Romans were willing to tolerate this so long as there was not overt dissension or violence. Postexilic developments had already led to the formation of several schools of religious opinion among the Jews, making for a complex situation in the time of Jesus. One must examine that situation more closely to understand why differing positions and parties existed, and how their presence shaped the setting in which Christianity appeared.

### A Persistent Obedience

If anything is central to Judaism, it is the law (Hebrew *torah*, which connotes "instruction"). Notwithstanding its human mediation through Moses, the Jews regarded the law as divine revelation. "The stability of the World rests on three things, on the Law, on worship, and on deeds of personal kindness" (*Pirke Aboth* 1.2). Of course, the law defined proper worship and deeds of kindness. Strictly speaking, the law consists of the five books of Moses—the Pentateuch—that stand at the beginning of the Bible. Obedience to the Torah is, and has been, the paramount obligation of the Jew; it is the way to true **righteousness**, or integrity. Interpretation of the law was historically the province of priests and scribes. Ezra, the great fifth-century B.C.E. scribe and "scholar of the text of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel" (Ezra 7:11), was the descendant of

an important priestly family (7:1-5). Although most law-observant Jews were members of no sect or special group, the law was so central to Judaism that such groups can be categorized according to their attitude toward it.

### THE PHARISEES

"The Pharisees . . . are considered the most accurate interpreters of the laws, and hold the position of the leading sect." (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.162)

"The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do; for they do not practice what they teach." (Matt. 23:2-3)

"When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, 'Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.'" (Acts 23:6)

Probably the single most influential and significant religious group within the Jewish community of New Testament times was the **Pharisees**. The Gospels make clear that they were important during the time of Jesus, and they became even more influential after the disastrous climax of the Jewish War (A.D. 70). After that war, a rabbinic council assembled near the Mediterranean coast at Jamnia. The Council of Jamnia became a center for the study and interpretation of the law. Although its influence has sometimes been exaggerated, the council played an important role in the dissemination of the Pharisaic point of view throughout Judaism. The Gospels' portrayal of the Pharisees is doubtless colored by the fact that they usually appear as opponents of Jesus.

Yet the representation of them as defenders and interpreters of the law is accurate (cf. Mark 2:24; 10:2).

The history of the Pharisees and even the origin of their name is obscure. Very likely they descended from the Hasidim, or “pious ones,” whose ferocious allegiance to the nation and the law gave impetus to the Maccabean revolt. The word *Pharisee* seems to be derived from a Hebrew verb meaning “to separate.” If so, it would appropriately designate the Pharisees as those separated or chosen by God for full obedience to the law. Yet Pharisees did not withdraw from society. Pharisaism was fundamentally a lay movement, and Pharisees emphasized the necessity of obeying the law in all areas or aspects of life. The Pharisees seem to have been the original custodians of the oral law, that is, the law revealed to Moses on Sinai but not committed to writing (unlike the scriptural Torah). In the Gospels, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of not following the traditions of the elders (Mark 7:5), and Jesus in turn accuses them of preferring such human tradition to the commandment of God (7:8, 13). Paul, himself a former Pharisee (Phil. 3:5), speaks of how far advanced he had become in the traditions of his forefathers (Gal. 1:14). These traditions of the oral law were eventually committed to writing in the **Mishnah**, though not until more than a century after the period of Christian and New Testament origins. Because they had already begun to understand Judaism primarily as interpretation of and obedience to the law, the Pharisees were well situated to reconstitute and redefine Judaism in the aftermath of the temple’s destruction during the Roman War. Although earlier Pharisees may well have shared traditional Jewish hopes for the reestablishment of God’s rule over the land of Israel, the Mishnah does not discuss them,

concentrating instead on specific commands to which obedience is expected.

Two famous and important Pharisaic leaders were Hillel and Shammai, contemporaries and rivals who flourished in the latter part of the first century B.C. and the first decade of the following century, later than Jesus. Around them gathered rival houses of legal interpretation. Shammai’s school was known for its stricter, harsher interpretation of the law, whereas the interpretations of the house of Hillel were more liberal. In time Hillelites came to dominate. Some of the sayings attributed to Hillel closely parallel sayings ascribed to Jesus. Among these is the negative form of the Golden Rule (cf. Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31): “What is hateful to yourself do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah. All the rest is commentary. Now go forth and learn” (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a). Versions of the Golden Rule are found also in various Jewish and other writings (e.g., the apocryphal Tobit 4:15 and Sirach 31:15).

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are frequently spoken of together with the scribes, and the impression is created that they are closely allied if not identical groups. The impression is not false, but the scribes were authoritative custodians and interpreters of the law before the appearance of a distinct group called Pharisees. Moreover, not all Pharisees were scribes. The historic task of the scribes was, however, largely taken up by the Pharisees, whose consuming interest was to interpret and apply the law to every sphere of life. They continued and expanded the traditional interpretations of the law. Its fruition is found in the rabbinic literature, a large body of interpretative material from the earlier centuries of our era dealing with every phase of the law and with almost every aspect of religious and secular life.

## THE SADDUCEES

“The Sadducees hold that the soul perishes along with the body. They own no observance of any sort apart from the laws. . . . There are but few men to whom this doctrine has been made known, but these are men of the highest standing.” (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.16-17)

“Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.” (Acts 5:17-18)

A second major group within Judaism, also mentioned in the Gospels, is the **Sadducees**. As in the case of the Pharisees, their history and the derivation of their name are not entirely clear. Presumably the term is related to the proper name of Zadok, a high priest during the

time of David (1 Sam. 8:17; 15:24) and Solomon (1 Kgs. 1:34; 1 Chron. 12:29). Whatever the history of the name and of the group, by New Testament times the Sadducees were the priestly aristocracy. In Acts 5:17, the high priest and the Sadducees are linked; in 4:1, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees appear together. Pharisees and Sadducees were thus religious brotherhoods centering, respectively, upon authoritative interpretation of the law and temple worship. As such, they represented the principal foci of Jewish faith as it existed prior to A.D. 70. Although the temple and its service of worship had declined in practical importance as the majority of Jews came to live outside the land of Israel, it was nevertheless the symbolic center of Judaism. On the altar, sacrifices had been offered so that the people might commune with God. **Sins** were dealt with, thus restoring and maintaining a right relationship between God and the people. Probably the most graphic example of this priestly function was the yearly ritual of the Day of Atonement, when the high priest alone entered the unapproachable Holy of Holies in the temple and there, as the representative of the people, came into the very presence of the Holy One. On this day, his action signified divine favor in that he entered, met, and was not destroyed by the God of Israel.

As custodians of religious tradition and cultic ceremony, the Sadducees were rather more conservative than the Pharisees. The priests themselves held office by hereditary right. Moreover, the Sadducees represented established wealth and position. With regard to obedience to the law, they rejected the oral tradition and the Pharisaic effort to extend the law's application to every situation in life in a binding way. They accepted only the word of scripture as authoritative. Politically, they were

### 1.3 BEYOND THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE RABBINIC TRADITION

The basic document of rabbinic literature, dating from the early third century, is the Mishnah. The Talmud includes the Mishnah but is largely a kind of learned commentary on it. There are two Talmuds, the Babylonian and the Palestinian. The Palestinian is shorter than the Babylonian and dates from the early fifth century, whereas the latter dates from the late fifth century. In addition, the rabbinic period produced a wealth of midrash: biblical interpretation either legal (halakic) or illustrative and narrative (haggadaic) in character.



**Image 10:** Jerusalem, facing the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall, of the temple area. In the center is the Dome of the Rock, erected in the late seventh century as an Islamic shrine. Probably it stands on the site of the Second Temple of Judaism, which Herod the Great extensively renovated (see John 2:20). (Image by user Berthold Werner, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

quietists who generally cooperated with the Romans. As members of the establishment it was in their interest to do so. They would have nothing to do with the relatively late doctrine of the **resurrection** of the dead, but adhered instead to the older and more typically biblical (Old Testament) view that death is simply the end of significant conscious life. In this they differed from the Pharisees, as well as from Jesus and the early Christians.

## THE ESSENES

The Essenes have a reputation for cultivating peculiar sanctity. Of Jewish birth, they show a greater attachment to each other than do the other sects. They shun pleasures

as a vice and regard temperance and the control of the passions as a special virtue. (Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.119-20)

In addition to the Pharisees and Sadducees there existed, at the time of Jesus, a group called **Essenes**, whose exact identity and extent are not entirely clear. Two important Jewish writers of the first century, the philosopher Philo (20 B.C.–A.D. 50) and the historian Josephus, speak of them; they are not mentioned by name in the New Testament. In recent decades, however, our knowledge of Essene or Essene-type groups has been immensely enlarged by the discovery of a monastery and an immense cache of documents at Qumran, on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. While current scholarship is not unanimous in its judgment, it seems likely

that an offshoot of the Essenes lived in community at Qumran during Jesus' day.

The Qumran movement, which began sometime during the second or early first century B.C., was characterized by revulsion at the impropriety of temple worship based on an erroneous festival calendar and supervised by an illegitimate high priesthood of Hasmonean rather than Zadokite lineage. A figure called only the “teacher of righteousness” or the “righteous teacher” was apparently the founder of this group. Unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, they withdrew from the mainstream of Jewish life, which they regarded as corrupt, and often formed monastic communities. Yet this withdrawal had a positive as well as a negative side. It was a separation not only for the sake of the preservation of holiness but for a positive task and goal. The community's members sought to carry out punctiliously the ritual and ethical requirements of the law, thus rendering a more acceptable obedience to God. This obedience was enforced under a strict discipline,

and severe punishment was meted out for even minor infractions:

Whoever has gone naked before his companion, without having been obliged to do so, he shall do penance for six months.

Whoever has spat in an Assembly of the Congregation shall do penance for thirty days.

Whoever has been so poorly dressed that when drawing his hand from beneath his garment his nakedness has been seen, he shall do penance for thirty days.

Whoever has guffawed foolishly shall do penance for thirty days.

Whoever has drawn out his left hand to gesticulate with it shall do penance for ten days. (*Community Rule* 8.14-17)

In addition, they looked toward the future vindication of Israel, or at least of their own community as Israel's true remnant. This vindication was expected in the form of an **apocalyptic** drama, a conflict in which the forces of light



**Image 11:** The Scriptorium at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. Though no scrolls have been discovered in the ruins of this site itself, archaeologists conjecture that this room may have been used for copying documents. (Image by user XKV8R at en.wikipedia [Robert Cargill], courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

would overwhelm those of darkness (*War Rule* 10-19). The victory was never in doubt, because God would fight on the side of his elect. Such terms as *light*, *darkness*, and *elect* highlight the basic character of Qumran thought. Almost everything was seen as a choice between good and evil, with no compromise allowed:

He has created man to govern the world, and has appointed for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of his visitation: the spirits of truth and falsehood. Those born of truth spring from a fountain of light, but those born of falsehood spring from a source of darkness. All the children of righteousness are ruled by the Prince of Light and walk in the ways of light, but all the children of falsehood are ruled by the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness. (*Community Rule* 3.17-21)

This **dualistic** way of perceiving the world was reflected in the group's extremely rigid attitude toward the law, in its implacable hostility toward those regarded as enemies, and in its view of history's coming culmination. The triumph of the good people over the bad would result in the elimination of evil from the world.

To understand Jesus, his disciples, and early Christianity historically, the Qumran documents are quite important. They reveal another Jewish sect of the same period that was engaged in alternately searching the scriptures and the heavens for signs of God's approaching kingdom. For Christians, these hopes and expectations found fulfillment, although not in the way anticipated. For the Qumran community and other Essenes, there may have been little but disappointment in this world. During the war the Romans destroyed the monastery, whose inhabitants had hidden their sacred scrolls in

nearby caves. They were accidentally discovered about two thousand years later.

Because the history of this sect has to be reconstructed on the basis of references and allusions in its own writings and in those of ancient Jewish authors such as Philo and Josephus, its origins and relationships remain somewhat obscure. Now and then, some scholars propose that the Dead Sea Scrolls are actually Christian documents and that this and similar facts about them have been intentionally suppressed. Such proposals are baseless. No specifically Christian documents have been found at Qumran, and the writings of the sect do not explicitly mention Jesus or other early Christian figures.

The Qumraners were not purely passive in their hopes and expectations. Rather, they saw themselves, and particularly their separatist existence in the desert, as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isa. 40:3 (see *Community Rule* 8). They were in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. In this respect there is a striking similarity between the Qumran community and the New Testament church. In the New Testament, the same Old Testament passage is found on the lips of John the Baptist (John 1:23), who views his task in a similar way. Both the desert community and Jesus and his disciples lived in an atmosphere of apocalyptic or **eschatological** expectation. They looked forward to the coming of God. Other similarities exist between the two groups. Both stood apart from prevailing forms of Jewish piety. Both looked to a central leader or founder, whether Jesus or the unnamed "righteous teacher"; in different ways both maintained a distinctive view of the law; both formed a community or sect of believers within Judaism. Of course, the Qumraners withdrew from society generally, while Jesus' disciples and the church did not. Nevertheless, the Qumran discoveries have



### Image

**12:** Fragments of the *Community Rule* from Qumran. (Image by user Berthold Werner, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

not only enlarged our view of ancient Judaism, but in several significant ways have brought us closer to the origins of Christianity.

### An Abiding Hope

To recapitulate: Judaism in New Testament times was characterized not only by a memorable past and earnest efforts to obey the law of God in the present but also by its attitude toward the future. At one end of the spectrum stood those like the Qumraners, who looked for God’s dramatic intervention in history to destroy the wicked and establish forever the righteous Israelites. At the other stood the Sadducees, whose position of security and comfort in relation to the Roman authorities scarcely disposed them either to sedition or to an apocalyptic outlook. The Sadducees looked for no cataclysmic end of history and no resurrection of the dead. From

time to time, some, like the Zealots, sought to realize their hope for the recovery of national autonomy through armed resistance, perhaps aided by divine intervention. (Such an expectation seems to be reflected in the Qumran community’s *War Scroll*.) Shunning such extremes were the Pharisees, who may have hoped for “the redemption of Israel” (cf. Luke 24:21) but who did not expect to initiate it by violent revolution. Although the Pharisees may have abjured the active cooperation with Roman authority in which the Sadducees engaged, they served alongside priests and Sadducees on the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court of appeal under Roman rule. Moreover, they had a history of political involvement during the Maccabean period. According to Josephus (*Jewish War* 2.17.3), Pharisees were prominent among those who attempted to dissuade revolutionaries in the process of launching rebellion against



Rome. Unlike the Essenes, the Pharisees were not monastically inclined.

It is difficult to say with certainty how the Pharisees expected Israel's national destiny to be fulfilled. The rabbinic documents, which generally express a Pharisaic point of view, do not anticipate an *imminent* apocalyptic drama whereby God would bring ordinary history to an end and restore Israel's fortunes. But rabbinic literature is not necessarily an accurate guide to Pharisaic expectations during the period of Jesus and the writing of the New Testament's books. It reflects the attitude of Judaism after the Roman War and the uprising of Bar Kochba, when disappointed Zealot and revolutionary hopes made apocalyptic and messianic speculations about such matters unattractive. Like the Essenes, however, the Pharisees at an earlier time may have cherished such apocalyptic and messianic hopes:

See, Lord, and raise up for them their king,  
the son of David, to rule over your servant  
Israel in the time known to you, O  
God.

Undergird him with the strength to destroy  
the unrighteous rulers, to purge Jerusalem  
from Gentiles who trample her to  
destruction. . . .

At his warning the nations will flee from  
his presence; and he will condemn sinners  
by the thoughts of their hearts.  
(*Psalms of Solomon* 17:23, 24, 27)

In intertestamental apocalyptic literature, we find the expectation of a decisive culmination of history. That hope was widely shared. This world or this age was to conclude with the restoration of Israel's fortunes and the resurrection of her righteous dead, marking the inauguration of the messianic age. After a period of several hundred to a thousand years, the general

resurrection (that is, of all the dead) would take place as a prelude to God's final judgment. Then God would usher in the "age to come," the consummation toward which all history was moving. It is too much to speak of a single plan or scheme, but the existence of similar ideas and expectations, if not in systematized form, in the New Testament suggests that they were common currency in the Judaism of Jesus' day.

Apocalyptic and similar ideas were not the result only of patriotic interests and hopes. The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead provided a lively individual hope and a means of justifying God's ways. If, as experience dictated, the righteous servants of God's law suffer in this life, they may expect better things when the dead are raised. The doctrine of the resurrection became the hallmark of the Pharisees (see Acts 23:6), so that in time a virtual anathema could be pronounced against those who disbelieved it. Belief in the resurrection appears rarely in the Old Testament: notably, Isa. 26:19 and Dan. 12:2. It is not surprising that the Sadducees did not feel obliged to share it. Nevertheless, the New Testament reports that Jesus (Mark 12:26-27) as well as Paul (Acts 23:6) believed in the resurrection. In doing so they were following a Pharisaic Jewish tradition.

The entire complex of apocalyptic ideas—the resurrection of the dead, the dualism of good and evil, the distinction between this age and the age to come, and the destruction of evil and the triumph of good in a cataclysmic cosmic upheaval and judgment—cannot be fully explained on the basis of Israel's earlier, Old Testament tradition, whether historical, prophetic, or cultic. The apocalyptic frame of mind has marked affinities with Persian, particularly Zoroastrian, thought. This is especially true of its dualism, cosmic eschatology, and the last judgment. To what extent they may reflect

direct borrowing or more subtle influences is debatable; still, such outside influences cannot simply be discounted, especially in view of many Jews' exposure to foreign influences in the exile and the Diaspora after the sixth century B.C. The oppression and frustration of the Jews in their homeland doubtless provided the necessary seedbed and impetus for such ideas to develop. In due course, the same kind of thinking provided fertile ground out of which Christianity emerged. For John the Baptist came proclaiming the imminent judgment; Jesus announced the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in power; and the early Christians proclaimed that Jesus had risen from the dead and would come again in glory to render judgment (cf. Daniel 7). Although Jesus surely believed himself to be a son of Abraham, as did the early Christians generally (Gal. 3:29), and consciously stood in the tradition of the law and the prophets, he was the heir of ideas that were unknown to the patriarchs, Moses, or Amos. Some of these views were perhaps "foreign" in the sense of being non-Israelite. Yet the substance and framework of Jesus' message had deep roots in his people's history and faith. Apart from the glory and the agony of that history, Jesus can scarcely be understood. In his insistence on obedience to God's will in the present as the key to the future, Jesus exemplifies Israelite faith. Jesus proposed a reinterpretation of both obedience and hope, but in the indissoluble linking of the two he was a true son of Abraham.

Judaism is history, law, tradition, worship, and the land. But perhaps more than anything else, Judaism is and always has been a people of the **covenant**: a people with a unique sense of identity and purpose, a chosen people, with all the distinctiveness and dangers that such a concept implies. Our discussion of Judaism has

naturally, perhaps inevitably, focused on the major religious groupings of the first century. Yet, as we have noted, most Jews were probably members of no definable religious group. To the majority of these people, or at least to the less conscientiously pious among them, the term *people of the land* (Hebrew: *am ha-aretz*) was applied. They were often looked down upon by those who were more scrupulous observers. Quite possibly Jesus himself was numbered among these humble folk (see John 7:15); certainly many of his followers were. In the Gospel of John, they are described as ignorant of the law and accursed (7:49). Though frequently disparaged and even ridiculed, such folk were not necessarily unaware of their heritage and identity. This sense of belonging, together with resistance toward the claims of the religious establishment, is reflected in Jesus' own attitude. Clearly aware of his identity as an Israelite, a Jew, he reacted sharply against claims of religious superiority. Like Jesus, the earliest Christians were Jews, and only gradually began to think of themselves in any other way.

Jesus lived and died a Jew. In a real sense his death was the consequence of his unswerving allegiance to the God of Israel at a time when his people lived under foreign, and sometimes oppressive, dominion. His disciples were, of course, Jews; as far as we can tell, they continued to regard themselves as such. His own brother James became an important figure in the early church (Acts 15; 21:17-26; Galatians 2) and apparently represented and led that wing of the new community that strongly affirmed its Jewishness. But the early Christian movement spread across the Mediterranean world, making most of its converts among people who never had been and would not become Jews. The story of Jesus and of his first followers is,

however, inextricably tied, to and rooted in, the Judaism of the people of Israel.

## The Greco-Roman World

Judaism provided the ingredients from which a new faith took shape. The pilgrimage and travail of Israel, its scriptures and its expectations, furnished the essential frame of reference for Jesus and his earliest followers. Yet Christianity soon broke away from Judaism and spread rapidly among **Gentiles** throughout the Mediterranean world. In a sense, it became a universal form of Judaism. But how and why did this happen to the sect of Jesus' followers in particular? The answer to this question remains in part a mystery. Nevertheless, some valid reasons can be discerned and illuminated by observing the conditions of the world into which Christianity spread.

### Language and Culture

Several hundred years before the beginning of the Christian era, in about the third century B.C., the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek. This important version is known as the Septuagint (abbreviated **LXX**). Most New Testament writers used this translation when quoting the Old Testament. According to an ancient legend found in the Epistle of Aristeas (second century B.C.), the translation was made by seventy-two Jewish elders, working in Egypt for the royal library, because of scholarly appreciation for the importance of the books. In all probability, however, the translation was made on the initiative and for the benefit of the Jews themselves, many of whom could by then read and understand Greek better than their ancestral Hebrew tongue.

### ALEXANDER THE GREAT

The Jews had become widely scattered in Egypt and other places as a result of the exile in the sixth century B.C. They spoke Greek largely because of the remarkable influence of one man, Alexander of Macedon. Few individuals have had a greater impact upon the history, culture, and religion of the world than Alexander. Born in 356 B.C., he succeeded to the throne of his father, Philip of Macedon, in 334. Two years later he set out from his home in Macedonia to begin the conquest of the Persian Empire, which for years had menaced and invaded Greece. In eight years, he and his army swept as far south as Egypt and as far east as the Indus River at the westernmost reaches of India,



**Image 13:** Head of Alexander the Great, by the sculptor Leochares (c. 330 B.C.), housed at the Acropolis Museum in Athens. (Image by user Marsyas, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

where only logistics and his soldiers' homesickness halted his advance. Although the Persian Empire and army proved ineffective against the more homogeneous, better-disciplined army of Alexander, his military accomplishment should not be minimized. Courageous, capable of brutality but at times humanely sensitive, he ranks as one of the great military leaders of all time.

Of greater importance than military feats, however, was the cultural revolution that he accomplished. Alexander was not only a soldier but also a man of letters and a student of the great philosopher Aristotle. He intended to establish Greek culture and language in the areas he conquered, and his success in this respect was remarkable. Alexander's conquests created genuine cultural mixtures throughout the ancient world, with the Hellenic (Greek) element as the common factor everywhere. This achievement was exemplified in the fact that he and his soldiers took women of the East as wives. Following his conquest he seemed content to remain there, and apparently regarded Babylon as his capital. But after a short stay, quite unexpectedly, he died of a fever in 323 B.C. at the age of thirty-three, leaving no legal heir capable of succeeding him. His lieutenants struggled for control of his empire and soon managed to pull it apart. Thus the fruit of his military conquest, although immense, proved ephemeral, for his empire dissolved almost as quickly as it had emerged.

Although Alexander did not succeed in establishing a Macedonian empire that would survive his death, his efforts to spread Greek language and culture and to embed them in the life of the East proved highly successful, especially in the cities. As his heritage he left a string of Greek cities across the area of his conquest, outposts of Greek civilization. Probably the largest and most successful of these

was the great Egyptian center of Alexandria, which appropriately bore his name. Here a large colony of Jews settled, and the first and most important translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek was made. Alexandria is still a great city, the second city of Egypt after Cairo, which did not then exist.

Alexander created, for the first time, one far-flung cultural world and, for a moment, a political world as well. His conquests made it possible to conceive of humanity as a unity, and perhaps Alexander himself viewed the world and its people in that way. His view of himself and his mission can only be inferred from his deeds. He sought out divine oracles in that connection and gladly received divine honors. Such honors were reserved only for gods in Greece, but in the East were often accorded to powerful rulers. It is tempting to see in Alexander one who thought of himself as a **son of God** destined to unify humanity. Possibly he did, although we cannot safely draw such a conclusion from the evidence. In any event, Alexander's role as well as his accomplishments sowed seeds that later made possible the worldwide Christian movement.

### THE GREEK LANGUAGE

Alexander gave a particular form and character to the world into which Christianity was born. Nothing is more important for history and culture than language, and nothing promotes communication and understanding like a common language. Among other things, Alexander bequeathed to the Mediterranean world a common language, Greek. It was not the Greek of Plato or Sophocles, but another, newer, and somewhat simpler dialect known as **koinē**, or common, Greek. This Greek became the *lingua franca* of the ancient world three hundred years

before the time of Christ, much as English is today the language most widely spoken and understood.

People from widely separated areas, with vastly different backgrounds, could talk to each other in Greek. This gift of common speech was of considerable importance in encouraging commerce and various sorts of interchange throughout the Alexandrian world. Indeed, in the centers of Greek culture established by Alexander, conscious attempts were made to promote and spread the manners and customs of Hellenic civilization, especially the athletic games. The world that Alexander left was one world in a sense that it had never been before. Previously there had been great overarching empires such as the Assyrian, the Persian, and the Egyptian, and certainly different peoples and cultures had interacted. Yet never before had there been such an attempt to create a common world civilization as Alexander and his successors actually and purposefully brought about. This mixture of Hellenic (Greek) and Eastern elements is called Hellenistic civilization.

The importance of this universal Mediterranean civilization for Judaism and its offspring Christianity can scarcely be overestimated. For Judaism it was at once a challenge and a benefit: a challenge, because it threatened just those distinguishing features of life that characterized the Jewish community as such; a benefit, for it made possible greater extension of the scope and influence of Judaism, especially Greek-speaking Judaism. For Christianity it was an immense boon. Without Alexander, the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Greco-Roman world might never have taken place. Certainly the Christian message had a power of its own, and its impact cannot be attributed to favorable cultural factors alone. Nevertheless, it is a striking fact that the spread of Christianity

in the first centuries occurred principally in those areas that fell under the sway of Alexander's, or at least of Greek, influence.

The New Testament itself was composed entirely in Hellenistic Greek, although the Gospels may in part be based on earlier **Aramaic** sources, either written or oral. Except in Palestine and Syria, and perhaps to some extent even there, the preaching of the **gospel** was in Greek. In most places of any importance, Greek was the language that would have been spoken and understood by both preacher and hearer. Even in Rome, to which Christianity spread at a very early time and which we generally associate with the Latin language, Greek was generally spoken and understood by cultured people. Paul wrote to the Romans in Greek.

Despite the important role that Greek language and culture played in its spread, it would be incorrect to call Christianity simply a Greek religion. Viewed from the standpoint of its origin and original constituents, it is also Eastern and especially Jewish. It is not, therefore, the purely Greek element, but precisely this combination of Greek and Jewish, West and East, that was characteristic of Christianity in the Hellenistic world.

## Life Under The Roman Empire

Alexander created a world but did not live to govern it. Ultimately the Romans performed that task. It is true, of course, that the limits of Alexander's conquests and those of the Roman Empire at its height were not the same. Alexander's conquests extended farther to the east; the Roman Empire's orbit stretched far beyond Italy to the north and west. In a sense, however, the worlds of Alexandrian Hellenism and of Rome were one world. Through conquest of Greece and wholesale appropriation of Greek

culture in the second century B.C., Rome fell heir to the legacy of Greece just when the empire was emerging as the dominant military force and political power of the Western world. For a half century before Christ and nearly half a millennium after, the Roman Empire gave to the Mediterranean world a political unity and stability. That unity, though not unbroken, was as continuous and dependable as any so large and varied a segment of the Western world has known before or since. The marvel is not that the Roman Empire fell—“crumbled” is the better word—but that it stood so long. At the time of its greatest extent and vitality—that is, during the New Testament period—the Roman Empire stretched from Syria and Palestine to the British Isles. Of western Europe, only Germany and the Scandinavian countries remained outside the Roman orbit, and only Scandinavia completely outside. The southern- and westernmost parts of Germany came under Roman domination, as did Austria as far north as the Danube.

### ROMAN PEACE

The birth and development of Christianity as a world religion came about during the two centuries when Rome was at the zenith of its power (i.e., from 27 B.C., the accession date of Augustus Caesar, to A.D. 180, the year of the death of Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-emperor). This period, often referred to as the *pax romana* (Roman peace), was a favorable time for the origin of a movement like Christianity. There was enforced peace and internal order. Our present Western systems of law owe more directly to the Romans than to the Hebrews, and the *pax romana* was a time of lawfulness as well as peace. The Romans administered their empire with firmness, occasionally

with brutality, but with a certain sensitivity for the varieties of people and customs within their bounds. Local law enforcement and administration were left in the hands of local officials. Where local administration or law enforcement broke down, as in the case of Judea at the time of Jesus, the Romans intervened to make sure that anarchy did not erupt. As we have already noted, Roman officials were not universally good. Pontius Pilate, for example, left much to be desired. Yet the Romans themselves removed Pilate from power. Although it is true that Jesus died on a Roman cross and that Christians were persecuted by Romans, it is equally true, and probably just as important, that early Christianity benefited considerably from the relatively peaceful and lawful conditions of Roman rule that accompanied its beginnings.

### COMMUNICATION

Early Christianity also profited from the network of roads and sea transportation that the Romans had developed and maintained, largely for military purposes. Again, policing of the roads was left to the various provinces and localities as long as they could do the job; but when and where conditions demanded, the Roman military intervened to keep roads open for travel and free of bandits and other potential harassments. It would certainly be wrong to imagine that travel in ancient times was as easy as it is today. Yet travel between virtually all parts of the empire was possible, and it was easier to go from Jerusalem to Rome in Paul's day than it was to travel from New York to California two centuries ago.

Thus favorable conditions of language and culture as well as an orderly government and a workable transportation system favored the

spread of the Christian gospel in the Greco-Roman world. They help to explain the rapid growth of the church and the ways in which the gospel found expression—not the least of which is the New Testament itself, a collection of books written in Greek, and in many cases written from one Christian or group of Christians to or for another. These documents attest not only a lively faith but also a sense of tangible relationship between one Christian church and another, which was made possible by the conditions of the time. Moreover, they display a concrete sense of mission to the inhabited world (Greek, *oikoumenē*), a concept not previously unknown but given particular point and form by the vision and work of Alexander the Great and the political reality of the Roman Empire.

### CIVIC LIFE

Although the classical age of the Greek city-state preceded the time of Alexander and the establishment of his empire, the form of the Hellenistic city persisted under Rome and, accordingly, into the time of the rise of Christianity and beyond. This urban atmosphere, which featured local political control, temples to the various gods, citizens' assemblies for discussion and debate, the gymnasium for instruction of young men, and stadiums for athletic games, provided the matrix for the rise of the Christian faith. The missionary endeavors of Paul and others within this religious, social, and political synthesis were made possible by common language, political stability, and the accessibility of these cities—some of which had been newly created. At the same time, the spiritual ferment of this era provided an openness to religious messages from a variety of sources, including the early Christians. Consequently, early

Christians declared their message in an urban setting, even though the origins of Jesus and the first disciples were much less cosmopolitan.

### DOMESTIC LIFE

Within the Hellenistic city of Roman times, the house or household played a central role. It was much larger than the modern nuclear family—perhaps more like the extended family of several generations ago, consisting of more than one or two generations of kinspeople. Moreover, it also included household employees and slaves. The head of the household was of necessity a relatively affluent and influential person. The household provided not only a residence but also an important mode of social identity, and even a livelihood for a number of persons who would have otherwise lacked essentials of everyday life.

The conversion of the head of a household was a major coup for the early Christians. For one thing, it enormously increased the likelihood of conversion of other members of the household. Religion was less a matter of individual, personal choice in the ancient world than it is in modern society. Nevertheless, Christianity by its very nature introduced an element of individual decision. One had to confess faith (Rom. 10:10; 1 Cor. 12:3) and be **baptized** (Acts 8:36). Even if one's householder or master were converted, one might remain an unbeliever. This seems to have been the case with Onesimus, whom Paul later converted and sent back a Christian to his master Philemon (Philem. 15-17).

Moreover, the conversion of the head of a household meant that the church acquired a place of worship. Paul speaks of several such householders who were hosts to the churches he founded or knew (Rom. 16:3-5, 23). We



**Image 14:** The House of the Vettii in Pompeii, near modern Naples, was excavated and restored at the turn of the twentieth century. As always, the wealthy lived well, much better than the vast majority. (Image by users Jan Arkesteijn, Finavon, and Crux, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

tend to think of a church primarily as a building. But there were no such buildings available for the earliest Christians. Upon reaching a new city, Paul may have preached initially in synagogues, as Acts portrays him, and perhaps he occasionally even hired a public hall (see Acts 19:9); but the principal meeting place of Christian cells or churches was the private home. Thus the householder, who could provide such a place of meeting, was a most important convert for the Christian community. (See also Chapter 12.6, *Behind the New Testament: House Churches*.)

## Religion

With which form of Greco-Roman religion was early Christianity most similar? Which was it least like?

According to the Book of Acts, Paul began his famous speech on the Areopagus by saying, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way” (17:22). Indeed, the world of New Testament times was a religious world, and Christianity did not originate in a time of religious decline. Whatever may have been the general state of culture in the first century, religion did not lack vitality and vigorous



manifestations. Religions were often integral to ethnic and political identity, and this was true even of Judaism, but not of early Christianity.

A striking characteristic of the religious situation was its variety. This too is represented in Paul's speech, for he mentions the objects of their worship, among which is an altar inscribed to an unknown god, as if the Athenians were taking no chances on omitting, and therefore offending, any deity. People participated in various rites and ceremonies according to law, taste, or desire. The period was also marked by syncretism: various religious traditions merged

together or were interpreted in terms of one another.

Such toleration did not mean that people by and large did not take religion seriously. If anything, just the opposite was the case. Only from the Christian or Jewish point of view would this toleration of, and participation in, a multiplicity of religious cults be taken as idolatry. The exclusivism of Judaism and Christianity was itself regarded as odd and even impious in ancient times, and the refusal of Christians and Jews to worship any god other than their own led their neighbors to brand them as atheists.



**Image 15:** The Parthenon, certainly the most famous site of Greek antiquity, stands atop the acropolis of the city of Athens. During the fifth century B.C. it was the temple of Athena. Paul's sermon recorded in Acts 17:22-31 was delivered at the foot of the acropolis and under the shadow of this great building—which he never mentions!

(Image by user Harrieta171, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

This persistence in worshiping only one God was perhaps the factor that most clearly distinguished Christians and Jews in the ancient world, and it may have had something to do with the fact that of the religions of that civilization, only Christianity and Judaism survive today.

The specific manifestations of piety in the Greco-Roman world are far too numerous to discuss fully here. Nevertheless, one may notice several basic types of religion that were popular and important. These include the traditional and official religions of the Greco-Roman pantheon (a Greek word meaning a temple

dedicated to “all the gods”), the state-inspired worship of the ruler, the more individualistic mystery religions, as well as **Gnosticism**, and Hellenistic Judaism. Within and against this background, early Christianity emerged. To this day a building called the Pantheon, dating from earliest Christian times, stands in the city of Rome.

### TRADITIONAL AND OFFICIAL RELIGION

At the time of Christianity’s emergence and the writing of the New Testament books, the traditional religion of the Roman Empire was a complex, somewhat amorphous combination of both Greek and Roman elements. Prior to the Christian era there had been a distinctly Roman religious cult involving especially the gods of the hearth and the family, of which the public religion was an extension and enlargement. This state or city cult was presided over first by the king, and later by a pontifical college made up of several prominent men of the realm. Ancient Greek religion of the pre-Christian period seems to have consisted originally of a variety of local deities, each with a **holy** place. These were later submerged under, or incorporated into, the pantheon of very human gods known to us from Homer, the fountainhead of classical mythology. By the beginning of the Christian period an amalgamation of Greek and Roman deities had taken place. It was taken for granted that the Greek and Roman gods were for the most part actually the same gods, even if they had different names, and an equation of the various gods of the Homeric pantheon with Roman gods had been worked out. For example, the three prominent Greek gods, Zeus, Hera, and Athena, were identified, respectively, with the Roman Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. Moreover, the purely Greek god

#### 1.4 BEYOND THE NEW TESTAMENT: FESTIVALS WITH COMPLICATED ORIGINS

Elements of pagan religions have survived in Judaism and particularly in Christianity. For instance, the date of Jesus’ birth is unknown; Christmas is the Christianized version of an ancient Roman rite (*Dies Natalis*) celebrating the winter solstice and return of the sun. Easter is a distinctly Christian holiday, whose date is determined by the death of Jesus at the Jewish **Passover**. Even so, the Venerable Bede (A.D. 672–735), a Christian scholar, suggested that the name “Easter” was derived from *Oestre*, the goddess of fertility among Saxon tribes in Northern Europe. Perhaps for that reason the Christian celebration of Jesus’ resurrection came to be incongruously associated with eggs and rabbits.

Apollo was worshiped on the Palatine Hill in Rome.

By the beginning of the Christian era, the traditional piety of Greece and Rome was facing competition from newer religions, especially those of Eastern origin, which were gaining enthusiastic adherents. Moreover, people of some education and intelligence had difficulty taking the **myths** and stories that were told about the gods seriously, at least insofar as they were understood as literal accounts of what actually took place or of the nature of divine reality. Folk of a philosophical bent, especially the Stoics, had been interpreting the myths in an **allegorical** fashion for some time. That is, they took them to be narrative representations of philosophical truths, which really had nothing to do with the stories per se and could stand independently of them. Thus the old gods got a new lease on life. For example, Zeus, the head of the Homeric pantheon, could be identified with “the general law, which is right reason, pervading everything . . . the Supreme Head of the universe” (Zeno, *Fragments*, 162, 152). Stoic monism, according to which God or the *logos* (Greek for “word” or “reason”) pervades the universe much as the **soul** or animation pervades the body and gives it unity and purpose, was thereby reconciled with a mythology that had quite a different origin and meaning. Especially those stories of the gods consorting and cavorting with one another in ways that sober people came to regard as shameful were allegorized away, making room for the Stoic ethic, which centered in willing conformity with that reason or *logos* that governs the universe and the individual. The Stoics themselves, however, were not coldly rationalistic. Philosophy was for them a vital piety, as it was for many literate Greeks. Although such piety might be grounded in a philosophical pantheism, its

expression often took the form of hymns and prayers to a personal God, as can be seen from a portion of Cleanthes’s famous *Hymn to Zeus*:

Thou, O Zeus, art praised above all gods;  
many are thy names and thine is all  
power for ever.

The beginning of the world was from thee;  
and with law thou rulest over all things.  
Unto thee may all flesh speak; for we are  
thy offspring.

Therefore will I raise a hymn unto thee: and  
will ever sing of thy power.

The whole order of the heavens obeyeth thy  
word: as it moveth around the earth:

With little and great lights mixed together:  
how great art thou, King above all for  
ever! (Cleanthes, *Fragment* 537.1-10)

The ancient Greco-Roman religion survived not merely in Stoic reinterpretation but also in more naïve popular worship. As such, it remained the traditional public religion of the Roman Empire, just as its predecessors had been the official cults of old Rome and of the Greek city-states. We find some indication of its survival in the New Testament. According to Acts, the people of Lystra (in what is now Asia Minor) hailed Paul and Barnabas as Hermes and Zeus, respectively, upon their performance of a **miracle**. Moreover, a temple of Zeus was located near that city (Acts 14:12-13). There was in the city of Ephesus a great temple of Artemis (Acts 19:23-27), the ruins of which have been unearthed in modern times by **archaeologists**, as have many other temples to the Greco-Roman deities. In addition, the Roman emperor Augustus, who was ruling at the time Jesus was born, made a serious effort to promote the traditional public cult, especially the ancient Roman practices and ceremonies. Upon the death of the high priest,

Augustus went so far as to assume that office himself, reviving a custom long fallen into disuse, according to which the kingship and high priesthood were united in one man.

There was an increasing tendency to regard the emperor as a divine figure and to place him among the pantheon of gods to whom worship was due. Although Augustus coyly spurned divine honors during his lifetime, they were accorded him upon his death. By the end of the first century, it was no longer a question of ascribing divine honors and worship to deceased emperors. Now such veneration was required for the living emperor as well. Not surprisingly, this led in due course to a confrontation between the young Christian church and Rome, for Rome insisted upon emperor worship as a pledge of allegiance—or devotion—to the emperor and thus to the empire. As Pliny, governor of Bithynia in the early second century, writes to the emperor Trajan, “All who denied that they were or had been Christians I considered should be discharged, because they called upon the gods at my dictation and did reverence, with incense and wine, to your image which I had ordered to be brought forward for this purpose” (Pliny, *Letters* 10.96). It was, in fact, a sort of loyalty oath, one that many Christians could not conscientiously take. When emperor worship is seen against the background of the many gods and many lords of the ancient world (cf. 1 Cor. 8:5), however, and when the benefits accruing to humankind from the emperor’s rule are recalled, we can understand why the authorities did not regard divine homage as too much to ask of any subject. Moreover, worship of the supreme ruler was not unknown in earlier times.

Even though Hebrew religious tradition clearly separated the king from the divine, the amalgam of Mediterranean culture and religion included an Egyptian religious tradition

in which the Pharaoh appeared as divine and immortal. Alexander’s unification of the Mediterranean world opened the way to a synthesis in which the king could be titled savior, lord, god. Roman emperors were actually slow to press claims of divinity, until under Domitian (A.D. 81–96) emperor worship was made a test of loyalty to Rome. At that point Christians who understood Jesus as the true bearer of such divine titles began to be persecuted for their failure to honor the emperor and the empire. The Romans were perplexed to find peoples who stubbornly refused to participate in emperor worship: the people of Israel who declared their allegiance to the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the people of the new covenant who declared themselves a messianic community. Within that context, Jews were ordinarily exempted from participation in the emperor cult—but Christians as such were not.

### POPULAR RELIGION

Although the official religious rites of Greece and Rome were by no means dead at the beginning of the Christian era, they did not represent the principal form of personal piety. Their continued existence, and whatever vitality they had, was probably due in large measure to the role they played in expressing the political and cultural solidarity of the Roman Empire and the Greco-Roman world. No sustained and systematic attempt was made to establish public religion to the exclusion of private practices and societies, and it is in the latter that the burgeoning variety and strength of religion in later antiquity can be most clearly seen.

### *Mystery Religions*

Unfortunately, our knowledge of these practices and societies is limited, owing in no small

measure to the aura of secrecy that surrounded many of them. This is especially true of the mystery religions, which were gaining in prominence and popularity at the beginning of the Christian era. The vows of secrecy taken by the followers of these religions were meticulously observed; much of the ancient material on the mysteries comes to us secondhand through Christian and Jewish sources.

The most closely guarded secrets of the mystery religions were their rites of initiation, through which the novitiate first received the benefits that the cult deity bestowed. Apparently the candidate somehow reenacted or saw reenacted the cult myth: the story about the god or gods on which the cult was based. Through participation in the cult ritual, the candidate received the **salvation** that was the very reason for the cult's being.

Perhaps the best account of the mystery ritual is found in Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (11.22-26), from which the following, deliberately vague description of an Isis initiation is taken:

Then behold the day approached when as the sacrifice of dedication should be done; and when the sun declined and evening came, there arrived on every coast a great multitude of priests, who according to their ancient order offered me many presents and gifts. Then was all the laity and profane people commanded to depart, and when they had put on my back a new linen robe, the priest took my hand and brought me to the most secret and sacred place of the temple. . . . Thou shalt understand that I approached near unto hell, even to the gates of Proserpine, and after that I was ravished throughout all the elements, I returned to my proper place: about midnight I saw the sun brightly shine, I saw likewise the

gods celestial and the gods infernal, before whom I presented myself and worshipped them. Behold now have I told thee, which although thou hast heard, yet it is necessary that thou conceal it; wherefore this only will I tell, which may be declared without offence for the understanding of the profane.

The myth of the cult varied with the different mystery religions. Among others, there were the Eleusinian mysteries of Greece; the cult of Attis and Cybele, originating in Asia Minor; the cult of Isis and Osiris, which had its origin in Egypt. Most cults were originally based on fertility rites celebrating the return of the growing season. In time, however, the meaning of the cult myth was seen against the background of human life and death, so that through initiation into the mysteries one could be assured of a happy destiny beyond death. Scholars once confidently asserted that the common factor in the cult myths was a deity's death and resurrection, in which the initiate participated vicariously through the rites and thus rose from the dead with the god (cf. Rom. 6:1-11). Though subject to dispute, this interpretation is probably not altogether misleading. Even though early Christian belief in Jesus' death and resurrection was not based on the cult myths of the mystery religions, it found a kind of parallel there. Thus people could recognize in Christianity, as in the mysteries, an important dimension of personal salvation.

The traditional religions of Greece and Rome, like the religion of Israel, focused primarily upon the ordering of life in this world and did not promise the adherent a glorious life after death. The mysteries, however, appealed to human hopes and fears in the face of death and offered to those who became initiates the



**Image 16:** Among the Roman mystery religions, the cult of Mithras was known for its frequent use of the image of the god Mithras slaying a bull. This Roman relief, now displayed in the Louvre, is one depiction of this scene. (Image © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.)

promise of eternal life. Membership in them presumed a belief in their efficacy and required a conscious act of the will, a decision. Thus the mystery religions had a character decidedly different from that of traditional official religions and were in some respects not unlike Christianity. That is, they were private, they were oriented around hope and assurance for the future, and they were voluntary. To some outsiders, early Christianity may have seemed to be a mystery cult. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, however, the mysteries did not claim the exclusive loyalty of their adherents. A person might worship Zeus and the emperor and at the same time be an initiate of one or more mysteries. In fact, the official religions and the mysteries were complementary; they applied to different spheres of life, the one to public order and morality, the

other to the need for emotional satisfaction and the assurance of present and ultimate security of one's personal being and destiny. Thus several Roman emperors, including Augustus, were initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries.

### *Gnosticism*

After the mystery religions moved into center stage, there appeared another important spiritual phenomenon that was in some ways like them. We say "phenomenon," for it is not certain that Gnosticism should be called a religion. It was found in various places and in various forms. Until fairly recently most of our knowledge of Gnosticism came from Christian writers of the late second, third, and later centuries, all of whom portray Gnosticism as a Christian heresy in which a special knowledge (Greek: *gnōsis*) is

made the key to salvation. Such a description is not entirely inaccurate. The process of salvation in Gnosticism involves, first of all, a knowledge or sense of one's profound alienation from the world. Thus one must find a way out of imprisonment in this world and into the world above. This release can be accomplished only by a special dispensation of knowledge by which the secrets of the way back to one's heavenly home are divulged. In Christian Gnostic systems, Jesus is the heavenly revealer who awakens the adherents from their stupor in this world, reminds them of their heavenly home, reveals the secrets of the way, and also leads them back. The way back was often conceived as a rather long road, a tortuous climb back through the seven or more heavens, in each of which the Gnostics shed another part of the veil of flesh until the divine essence—the very quintessence of their being—arrived safely home.

Gnosticism was once regarded as the acute Hellenization of Christianity, a distorted translation of the Christian message into Greek ways of thinking and speaking. Yet recent research and discoveries have shown that Gnosticism is not simply derived from Christianity; it owes more to the East, to Syria, Persia, and Babylonia, and perhaps even to Judaism, than to classical Greek culture. In this respect it is not unlike the mystery religions, many of which came from the East. Gnosticism's exact nature and origins remain obscure, however, and matters of controversy among historians of religion.

Nevertheless, we can get a fairly clear grasp of the thrust and meaning of Gnosticism. Wherever it appears, in whatever form, it is characterized by an extreme dualism of God and the world. In contrast to the Stoic monism, in which God and the world are essentially related and, indeed, indwell one another, Gnosticism takes God and the world to be separate

and incompatible. Far from being the creation of the one God, as in orthodox Jewish and Christian thought, this world is at best an excrescence from the divine world, at worst the creation of an antigod. Its very existence is the antithesis of God's salvation. The primary motive of the mystery religions was a desire to secure human existence in the face of death. Gnosticism also had this goal in view but combined with it an abhorrence of evil, which was in general identified with this world and its history.

According to Gnosticism, people live in the world, but at least some of them are not of it. For while human bodies are made of the same substance as the world, there is, or may be, hidden within each one a spark of the divine life. Salvation is the rescuing of the divine spark from its imprisonment in the material world, and specifically in the flesh. The first and essential step is the recognition that one is not at home in this world, that one's essential being is related to the divine world and can find its way home.

Therefore if one has knowledge he is from above. If he is called, he hears, he answers, and he turns to him who is calling him, and ascends to him. And he knows in what manner he is called. Having knowledge, he does the will of the one who called him, he wishes to be pleasing to him, he receives rest. Each one's name comes to him. He who is to have knowledge in this manner knows where he comes from and where he is going. He knows as one who having become drunk has turned away from his drunkenness, [and] having returned to himself, has set right what are his own. (*Gospel of Truth* 22.3-20)

There is nothing specifically Christian about this passage, yet early Christianity was

deeply engaged with the Gnostic problem throughout the second century, and probably even earlier. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (12:25; cf. Mark 8:35)—certainly a gnosticizing statement about the nature and sphere of salvation. Compared with Jewish hopes of the restoration of Davidic kingship, important aspects of early Christian hope seem closer to Gnosticism. Thus we see traces of the contact and conflict with Gnosticism not only in the Gospel of John but in the Johannine letters, Colossians, and the Pastoral Epistles, as well as the extensive anti-Gnostic literature that appears from the time of Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century. A large collection of Gnostic literature dating to the second century (although the actual manuscripts are a couple of centuries later) was in the twentieth century uncovered in Nag Hammadi, near the Nile River in southern Egypt. It was obviously used by people who considered themselves Christians. Some of the books, such as the *Gospel of Truth* (quoted above), are apparently Gnostic interpretations of Christianity. Others have little explicit connection with anything we can identify with Christianity, except that they were apparently used by this Gnostic Christian church. *The Gospel of Truth* represents an attractive, if not specifically Christian, piety. It mentions Jesus, and may reflect knowledge of the Gospel of John. In reading it, one can appreciate the attractiveness of such Gnosticism, quite in contrast to the form represented in the accounts of orthodox Christians, who wrote about it in order to refute it. Gnosticism is different from the religion and theology of the orthodox church as they developed in the second through the fifth centuries. Evidence of a pre-Christian Gnosticism with a redeemer

who descends and ascends (as Jesus does in the Gospel of John) is lacking. Yet the world-deny-ing character of Gnosticism, with the sharp division (or dualism) between God (the divine) above and the world (the carnal or physical) below, certainly existed prior to Jesus and the rise of Christianity, and contributed in diverse ways to the development and theology of that religion. (See also Chapter 6.1, *Beyond the New Testament: What Do We Know about Jesus from Sources Outside the New Testament?*)

### *From Philosophy to Astrology*

Among other major religious forces of the first-century Mediterranean world were the philosophical sects: among others, Pythagoreans, Epicureans, Cynics, and the aforementioned Stoics. The latter two, in addition to advocating reorientation of the moral and spiritual life according to special philosophical-religious tenets, were noted for their itinerant preachers who sought disciples and converts as they traveled from city to city, discussing and debating the nature of the good life. Such teachers, often accompanied by disciples, sought to convince listeners of this world’s evil and to persuade potential converts of the truth of the contemplative, ascetic life. They shared something of the Gnostic spirit. These wandering moralists also established a precedent and provided a pattern for early Christian preachers, though the literature of the New Testament attests to the special care with which Christian missionaries sought to distinguish themselves from abuses attributed to such peripatetic philosophers (1 Thess. 2:9; 1 Cor. 9:4-12; 3 John 6-8). If, to some, Christianity seemed to be another mystery religion, to others it may have appeared to be another school of popular philosophy (Acts 17:16-21).



Other manifestations of belief might be characterized as superstition and magic. These we can only note in passing. Many people in the ancient world were fascinated or oppressed by Fate (Greek: *hē eimarmenē*) or Fortune (Greek: *tychē*). Fortune came to be personalized and venerated as a goddess. The stars were thought



**Image 17:** A relief, in marble (c. A.D. 150), of a votive offering in an asclepium at Milos, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, now housed in the British Museum. Patrons of asclepia customarily presented replicas, like this of a cured leg. The inscriptions reads: “Tyche, to Asclepius and Hygieia as a thank-you gift.” (Image © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.)

to determine the course of people’s lives. As a result, astrology, the “science” dealing with the influence of the stars on life, gained considerable popularity as the key to the secrets of human existence. At the same time, some people relied on magic, occasionally invoking even the names of Yahweh and Jesus. There were also hero cults dedicated to those who had been elevated to the status of gods or demigods. Among these were the healing cult of Asclepius, which claimed many shrines and spas and thousands of devotees who attributed to him miraculous cures no less amazing than those attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Although early Christians rejected magic (Acts 8:9-24; 19:19), some educated people dismissed the new faith as exactly that—magic and superstition.

### DIASPORA JUDAISM

In the complex religious picture of the broader Greco-Roman world, Judaism was a significant factor. Most Jews did not live in Palestine, but in other parts of that world. This Diaspora or dispersion of Jews to the far corners of the world began as early as 587 B.C. with the Babylonians’ conquest of Judah and destruction of Jerusalem. As conditions within the homeland became more difficult during the later postexilic period and the number of Jews increased worldwide, the prospects of living outside Palestine became increasingly attractive.

It is customary and useful to distinguish between the Judaism of the land of Israel and that of the diaspora. Both shared in most of the basic elements of Judaism mentioned at the beginning of this chapter; yet outside Palestine significant change had taken place, much of which resulted from accommodation to Greek culture. Such Hellenization also took place within Palestine. Outside Palestine, however,

Judaism of necessity began to take on some of the characteristics of a religion as distinguished from a nation. Nevertheless, the Jewish people succeeded in maintaining their ethnic identity and a certain separateness in their ways and places of living. Yet Jews mingled to some extent with Gentiles, were inevitably influenced by them, and vice versa. Adjustments to life in a predominantly Gentile world became necessary.

As we have seen, one of the most important adjustments was in language. Judaism in the Greco-Roman world was largely Greek-speaking. The fact that the Hebrew scriptures had been translated into Greek and were read and interpreted in that language doubtless influenced the way in which they were understood. Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, affords a notable, if perhaps extreme, example of the kinds of changes that could take place. A Jew who never once thought of surrendering that hallmark of Judaism, the law, Philo nevertheless interpreted the Hebrew scriptures in terms of Hellenistic philosophy and piety by using the well-established Greek method of allegorizing. Thus he could wring meanings from biblical texts of which the original authors would never have dreamed. Hellenistic Judaism had already produced religious books containing some ideas that were more Greek than biblical. For example, one reads in Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 of the immortality of the souls of the righteous dead, a fundamentally Greek idea. Yet it is set in a biblical context: they are in the hand of God (3:1).

Another adjustment forced on the Jews by the dispersion involved their public worship. Up until the destruction of Solomon's temple at Jerusalem, the principal form of worship was sacrificial, officially performed at the Jerusalem temple though sometimes carried out elsewhere, much to the disgust of some prophets and other

purists. (In John 4:21-24, Jesus' announcement of the end of sacrificial worship in Jerusalem may be an important marker, suggesting that with Jesus such worship comes to an end.) After the fall of Jerusalem, the temple's destruction, deportations, and the flight of refugees, another form of worship began to gain preeminence: that of the synagogue, or individual congregation. As we have already noted, synagogues, sprinkled in Palestine and around the Mediterranean world, were places of prayer, scripture reading, and preaching.

The synagogues of the dispersion thus provided a ready-made platform for the early Christians, who, without necessarily ceasing to regard themselves as Jews, brought the good news of God's new salvation in Jesus the Messiah to their fellow Jews and any others who might by chance listen. Inasmuch as new ideas and terms had already crept into the Hellenistic synagogue from the surrounding pagan culture, it need not surprise us to see these also in the New Testament. The New Testament writings, at least in their present form, were addressed to a church that had grown up in the midst of the Hellenistic culture of the Roman Empire. The importance of the Greek-speaking Judaism of the dispersion for early Christianity is epitomized in the fact that the New Testament is written in Greek. Moreover, the Old Testament, so frequently cited in the New, is usually quoted from the Greek version.

Diaspora Judaism also prepared the way for the universal emphasis and success of the Christian gospel. The Hellenistic synagogue did not disdain the missionary enterprise. There is some evidence of a sustained and serious effort to convert Gentiles to Judaism (Matt. 23:15), although Judaism was not as focused upon mission and conversion as was early Christianity. And not a few Gentiles were attracted by the

antiquity and moral seriousness of the Jewish religion. The technical term for the conversion of Gentiles was *proselytism*, and converts were called *proselytes*. Even where proselytism was not actively pursued, the situation of the Jews in the midst of an alien and potentially hostile culture required that they look outward and have a decent respect for public opinion. One finds such an outward-looking perspective in Philo and even more noticeably in the great first-century Jewish historian Josephus, whose

extensive *Jewish Antiquities* is a monumental effort to render Jewish history and faith intelligible to a literate Gentile audience.

First-century diaspora Judaism was an important movement in and of itself, but it is of extraordinary significance for the Christianity of New Testament times. For the modern student, it illuminates the path that Christianity traversed from its beginnings as a sect of Palestinian Judaism to the status of a world religion.

## Testing Your Comprehension and Analysis

### ◆ HAVE YOU LEARNED IT?

1. Identify three prominent groups within first-century Judaism and briefly describe their characteristics.
2. In what year did the Romans destroy the temple in Jerusalem? What was its impact on Judaism?
3. How did Hellenization affect the practice of Judaism in Palestine and the Diaspora?
4. Describe some of Gnosticism's typical features. How was it like and unlike expressions of popular Roman religion? Of Christian faith?

### ◆ KEY TERMS

Also consult the Glossary:

Allegory  
Apocalypse  
Apocrypha  
Aramaic  
Archaeology  
Baptism  
Canon

Christ  
Council of Jamnia  
Covenant  
Dead Sea Scrolls  
Diaspora  
Dualism  
Eschatology  
Essenes  
Exile  
Gentiles  
Gnosticism  
Gospel  
Hasmonean  
Hellenization  
Holy  
Kingdom of God  
Koin  
Law  
LXX  
Maccabean  
Messiah  
Miracle  
Myth  
Oral Tradition  
Passover  
Patriarch

Pharisees  
 Priest  
 Procurator  
 Prophet  
 Qumran  
 Rabbi  
 Resurrection  
 Revelation  
 Righteousness  
 Sacrifice  
 Sadducees  
 Salvation  
 Sanhedrin  
 Scribes  
 Septuagint  
 Sin  
 Son of God  
 Soul  
 Synagogue  
 Torah  
 Zealot

#### ◆ SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Throughout this and subsequent bibliographies, series titles have been omitted to conserve space.

#### Primary Sources

The Old and New Testaments, as well as the Old Testament Apocrypha, are usually (though not always) cited according to the New Revised Standard Version. Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* and *Jewish War* are available in original Greek with English translations in the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), as are the works of Philo, the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, and Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.

Two succinct, reliable translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls are recommended: G. Vermes,

*The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 4th ed. (London: Penguin, 1995), and F. Garcia-Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, trans. W. G. E. Watson, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994–96). J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek Texts with English Translations*. 5 vols. (Tübingen and Louisville: Mohr-Siebeck/Westminster John Knox, 1994–2002), is a comprehensive collection of Qumran materials, with concordances.

J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–85), provides standard translations and commentaries of the Jewish Pseudepigrapha (see the Glossary). G. W. E. Nickelsburg and M. E. Stone, *Faith and Piety in Early Judaism: Texts and Documents* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), is a brief selection and discussion of representative intertestamental texts.

Two English versions of rabbinic sources are now standard: H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), and J. Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). C. G. Montefiore and H. Loew, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken, 1974), is a helpful introduction and anthology, as is the more recent H. Maccoby, *Early Rabbinic Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

For Greek writings F. C. Grant (ed.), *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), is still serviceable. For Gnostic sources, consult B. Layton (ed.), *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), and J. M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

A superior anthology, now in its fourth revised edition, is C. K. Barrett (ed.), *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

### Modern Studies

G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–30), remains worth consulting, as does the updated E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*, rev. and ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black, and M. Goodman, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973–87). More recent, standard treatments include S. Safrai and M. Stern (eds.), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974–76), E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE – 66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), L. L. Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh* (London: Routledge, 2000), J. C. VanderKam, *An Introduction to Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), S. J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), and R. Bieringer, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Important studies of Jewish eschatology include J. J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), J. J. Collins (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Volume One: *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Continuum, 1998), and A. Y. Collins, and J. J. Collins, *King and Messiah*

*as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). See also G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), and M. E. Stone (ed.), *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

Among the standard works on Hellenistic Judaism are V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, trans. S. Appelbaum (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959), M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Hellenistic Period*, trans. J. Bowden, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), and J. J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). More recent, important investigations include J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE – 117 CE)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), E. S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), L. Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), and W. O. McCready and A. Reinhartz, *Common Judaism: Explorations in Second-Temple Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

A definitive handbook on the Greco-Roman World is H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Volume One: *History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). The broader historical landscape is surveyed by F. F. Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31 B.C. – A.D. 337* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), F. W. Walbank,

*The Hellenistic World*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), L. T. Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), J. M. Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem: An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), and M. V. Hubbard, *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World: A Narrative Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010). Ordinary folk—such as slaves, soldiers, and prostitutes—receive their due in R. Knapp, *Invisible Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Traditional and popular religious expressions are considered by W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), M. Beard, J. North, and S. Price (eds.), *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and H.-J. Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, trans. B. McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). A.

A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), is a standard work in its area. The complex dynamics of women and gender in Greco-Roman religion are explored by R. S. Kraemer in *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1963), and K. Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. R. McL. Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), are important studies. Very useful for general reference is S. Hornblower and A. Spaforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).