



OVERVIEW

Survey of the New Testament: The Gospels & Acts Winter 2005

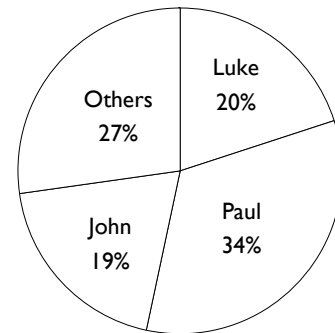
Introduction to the New Testament

Contents of the New Testament

The Old Testament contains 39 books which were written by dozens of authors over the course of over one thousand years. In contrast, the New Testament contains 27 which were written by only 9 different authors over maybe 50-60 years. Three of those authors wrote nearly 75% of the total content of the New Testament. Because it was written over a much shorter span, the New Testament is more consistent in its style and its content.

Whereas each Old Testament book can be very lengthy and consist of multiple literary genres all within one book, the New Testament books are much shorter and follow a consistent literary genre. The New Testament contains only three different literary genres 1) Historical Biography; 2) Epistle, and 3) Apocalyptic literature.

New Testament Authors



| Gospels & Acts | Pauline Epistles | General Epistles | Apocalyptic |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|-------------|
| Matthew | Romans | Hebrews | Revelation |
| Mark | 1 Corinthians | James | |
| Luke | 2 Corinthians | 1 Peter | |
| John | Galatians | 2 Peter | |
| Acts | Ephesians | 1 John | |
| | Philippians | 2 John | |
| | Colossians | 3 John | |
| | 1 Thessalonians | Jude | |
| | 2 Thessalonians | | |
| | 1 Timothy | | |
| | 2 Timothy | | |
| | Titus | | |
| | Philemon | | |

Historical Biographies

The first four books are called the gospels, and they tell of the words and deeds of Jesus. The word “gospel” means “good news,” for they proclaim the good news of Christ’s life and death and resurrection. The fifth book, Acts, recounts the history of the early church and especially the words and deeds of the apostle Paul as he spreads the gospel throughout his journeys. While often the gospel and Acts are considered separate literary genres, the style of the gospels and Acts is very similar.

These histories do not just recount their subject events, nor do they pretend to present a detailed history of the life of Christ or the early church. Instead events and sermons are carefully selected by the authors in order to communicate a specific message to the readership.

This is very different than a modern biography or historical book, which seeks to outline all the important happenings of persons life. Ancient biographies were not so concerned with documenting or journaling the details as much as presenting a static view of a persons character through their words and deeds.

Synoptic Gospels

Three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very similar in content and style. They often are word-for-word copies of one another. For this reason they are called “synoptic gospels” (synoptic from the Greek words meaning “same sight”). This has lead to a many debates regarding which book was written first. Some scholars believe Mark was the first, and Luke and Matthew copied him. Others believe Matthew was first. Still many others believe there was an earlier book (called “Q”) from which all three copied these stories. While certainly there are significant similarities in these books, attempts to determine the sources has led to an inordinate level of attention on the what the books have in common.

Many bible students have gone to great lengths attempting to harmonize all the gospels. However each book stands on its own and each author’s selection of events and discourses are carefully crafted to develop a slightly different (although complementary) view of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the best way to study the gospels is one book at a time rather than trying to either synthesize them in to a comprehensive “life of Christ” or a reductionist “historical Jesus” approach.

Gospel of John

The book of John is quite unique, and with 92% of its contents not found in the other three gospels. John is the most theologically developed of the gospels and contains beautiful philosophical language. For this reason, John was probably the final gospel to be written.

Acts of the Apostles

The book of Acts is the sequel to the gospel of Luke. It’s style is very consistent with Luke and carries the same themes forward. Acts begins with the ascension of Christ and then follows the development of the early church. For Luke, the ministry and message of Jesus did not end with the ascension, but continued on through the apostles.

It’s focus however is very narrow, tracing the spread of the gospel from the perspective of first the apostle Peter and then the apostle Paul. We know very little of the works of the other apostles, nor does Luke provide a global perspective on the spread of Christianity. Luke instead is focused on just one narrow viewpoint in order to communicate a specific message.

Content

| | Matthew | Mark | Luke | John |
|------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Date Written | AD 50-60 | AD 50-60 | AD 60 | AD 85-90 |
| Christ Viewed As | King | Servant | Man | God |
| Written To | Jews | Romans | Greeks | Church |
| Chapters | 28 | 16 | 24 | 21 |
| Unique Material | 42% | 7% | 51% | 92% |
| Words of Christ | 60% | 42% | 51% | 48% |
| The Passion Week | 29% | 38% | 25% | 48% |

Source: Ryrie Study Bible (Moody Press, 1995), 1505

The Words of Christ

The words of Christ comprise almost half the total content of the gospels. Jesus’ teaching is a major focus of the gospels and are presented in long discourses. In the synoptic gospels, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25) are the most note worthy messages of Christ. The synoptics also contain the parables of Christ and a series of

debates with the Jewish religious leaders. The book of John contains seven unique discourses along with the longest continuous sermon of Jesus, the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17).

Jesus primary message in the gospels, especially within the synoptics, is “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17). Most of his discourses then define the kingdom of God, explaining life within that kingdom, and nature of the future of that kingdom. Jesus unique relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit is the focus of the discourses in the book of John.

The Passion Week

All four of the gospels reach their climax in the last week of Jesus life. There is very little information given about Jesus childhood and his young adult years. The three years of his earthly ministry, likewise, are covered in broad strokes without much detail beyond the content of his sermons. But in all four of the gospels, when we reach the passion week, the pace slows down and the details of the words and deeds of Christ come into sharp focus. As the passion week moves closer to Good Friday and the crucifixion of Christ, the details become more and more important.

In total, the last seven days of the life of Christ comprises more than a third of the total content of the gospels. Clearly to each of the gospel writers, Christ’s death and resurrection are the central event in the life of Christ. Everything else in the gospels is pointing towards his death and resurrection, and provide the necessary context to understanding the crucifixion. The sermons, miracles, and ministry of Jesus can not be properly understood except as the back story to the central theme of Christ’s sacrificial death upon the cross and his subsequent resurrection.

The Epistles

The epistles are letters written by the early apostles to churches and individuals. Most of the epistles were written by the apostle Paul to churches he founded or was going to soon visit. For these “Pauline Epistles”, the name of the book tells us the recipient of the letter. For the rest of the epistles (known as the “General” epistles) the name of the book tells us the sender of the letter.

Most of these letters were written to address specific issues faced by the recipient. As such, the content of the epistles are fairly unique and narrow in focus and are not exhaustive treatises on theological topics. When studying the epistles, determining the occasion for which each letter was written becomes a key to understanding the book.

Nonetheless, there are a few themes which are repeated throughout the epistles. Paul is particularly concerned with the unity of the church and potential split between Jewish and Gentile Christians. His letters repeatedly speak to living in harmony and reminding his readers that the Gentile Christians are not required to obey the Old Testament law. The General epistles focus more on the problem of heresy and the need for the church to be on guard against false teaching.

The Apocalyptic Literature

The New Testament closes with a very unique book. The Revelation of Jesus Christ is an apocalyptic book, describing a vision seen by the apostle John. The vision is highly symbolic and focuses on the victorious return of Jesus Christ at the end of this age. While Revelation is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament, this was a popular genre in the first century. The Essenes wrote numerous apocalyptic books describing the coming of the Messiah in symbolic terms.

The Canonicity of the New Testament

The 27 books in our New Testament were by no means the only Christian writings available to the early church. There are numerous second and third century texts, including letters and

documents from Orthodox Church leaders that further the traditions found in the New Testament. There is also a large body of work surviving from this period known as the “Gnostic” gospels. How then did these 27 books become selected, and how can we be assured of the historical reliability of these texts?

For the first 300 years of the church, there was not really a need to formally name the books which were legitimate. However by the second and third century there rose a number of books supposing to be new gospels and new epistles from the apostles. Most of these books contained teachings which were contradictory to the rest of scripture. So the church needed to define for itself what books were to be included in the “canon.” The word canon means “rule” or “standard.”

There was a four-fold test given to determine whether a book should be included in “the canon,” or the group of books accepted as Scripture¹:

- Was it written by an apostle or with an apostle’s backing? (e.g. Luke had Paul’s sponsorship while Mark was sponsored by Peter)
- Does the book claim to be inspired?
- Does the book have universal acceptance by the all churches?
- Does the book have the feel of genuineness?

Today it is clear that the books which claimed apostolic origin but were left out of the canon were written much later than the rest of the scriptures. We can find manuscripts for nearly all the canonical texts dating from the second century AD. However, the earliest Gnostic gospels date from the third or fourth century AD. These texts must be discounted because of the span of time from when the events occurred and when they were written. To consider them historically accurate one must believe that there was a fabulous cover-up in orthodox Christianity that lasted for three centuries purposely suppressing the opposing teachings of Jesus, at a time when the church had no political influence and was under tremendous persecution.

Modern Texts

Often students wonder how reliable our current New Testament is. How do we know that the texts we read today are really the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?

First, while we do not have the actual original manuscripts, we have such an abundance of manuscript copies. Textual critics have been able to put together these texts by comparing and contrasting manuscripts to create a text today which is remarkably close to the original. As the British scholar, Sir Fredrick Kenyon states:

It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the NT, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers in the church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world²”.

Furthermore, while our modern New Testament are translations of the original Greek and Hebrew texts, the scholarship of modern translations, the abundance of translations and the

¹ John McRay. “Bible, Canon of the.” *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Walter A. Ewell, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House. 1996). Accessed on line at <http://www.biblestudytools.net/Dictionaries/BakersEvangelicalDictionary/> on January 4, 2005.

² Sir Fredrick Kenyon, “Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts,” as quoted in <http://www.abco.org/nh/bible.htm>

variety of study tools available make it possible for even students who do not read Greek and Hebrew to get an accurate understanding of what the original text says.

The Intertestamental Period

There are four centuries between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament. Often times this period, lasting from 420 BC to 4 BC, is known as the “silent” years, because there were no prophets in Israel at this time, and because none of the books of the bible in our Protestant bible were written during in this four century gap. However, that does not mean that this time was insignificant, nor does it mean that God was not at work in this period. On the contrary, the “intertestamental period” is a very crucial time in the history of Israel, the history of the Christianity, and the history of the world.

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

The arrival of Jesus Christ on the earth in the first century AD was not an accident. God had specifically chosen this time and place to enter into human history. But what was it about this time and place in history that made it “the fullness of time?” To answer that question, we must look at the political history, the socio-economic conditions and religious climate of the period known as the “intertestamental period.”

Political History of the Intertestamental Period

Persia (424-331 BC)

The Jewish people had been conquered and carried into exile by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Seventy years later, after the Persians conquered Babylon, the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. While very few of the Jews ever left Babylon to return, nonetheless under the Persians the Jews regained a limited amount of self-government and a significant amount of religious freedom. The temple was rebuilt and the daily sacrifices restarted.

Because most Jews remained scattered throughout the Babylonian and Persian empires, it was during this time that Judaism began to shift its focus away from temple worship to the synagogue and from the sacrifices to the practical application of the law. This practical application of the law developed from the Torah to a detailed expansion of the Torah to fit new times and places.³

Greece (331-167 BC)

Alexander the Great (331-323 BC)

King Philip of Macedonia had taken control of all of Greece by 338 BC, and began looking eastward to Persia. He died before being able to invade the great Persian empire leaving that task to his son Alexander the Great. Alexander defeated the Persian army by the River Granicus in 334 BC, and subsequently began occupying the whole of the Persian empire. Alexander took control of Palestine in 331 BC. In a few short years, Alexander had conquered an empire which spanned from Greece in the west to India in the west, and from the Caucasus mountains in the north to Egypt in the south.

³ Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*. (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman. 1997), 9.

Alexander's design for his empire was to unite all his conquered lands under Greek philosophy, culture and language. The result was a combining of the Greek culture with the local cultures. This combining took place in Judaism as well, as Greek philosophy began to intermix with classic Jewish beliefs. Likewise, it is from this period that the Greek language became the *lingua franca* or the common worldwide language for commerce and government.

The Ptolemies (323-198 BC)

Alexander died unexpectedly at the age of 33. He left no obvious heir to his empire, so after a great struggle, his four greatest generals entered an agreement to divide the empire into four domains. Cassander would rule Macedonia; Lysimachus would rule Thrace and Bithynia; Seleucus would rule Babylon and Syria; Ptolemy would rule Egypt and Palestine. These four kingdoms turned into long lasting dynasties.

Under the Ptolemies, the Jews were given significant freedom and lived in relative peace. It was during the Ptolemaic period that a significant number of Jews settled in the town of Alexandria (founded by Alexander the Great). Alexandria would become a very significant center for Jewish philosophy and religion, and was the location where the Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint) was created.

Seleucids (198-167 BC)

The Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings continually battled with each other, each trying to recover land they believed was owed to them. Because Palestine was the buffer between Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria, the control of Palestine switched hands several times. However, by 198 BC, the Seleucid king, Antiochus III, finally seized control of Palestine for good. He continued to policy of non interference with the Jews, allowing them to worship freely and maintain a local government.

Antiochus Epiphanies

In 175 BC, Antiochus IV (also known as Antiochus Epiphanies) came to power. During his reign, the relationship between the Seleucids and the Jews changed dramatically. When the Jewish high priest died, Jason, the brother to the rightful heir to the high priesthood, paid Antiochus to make him the high priest. However, when Menelaus, who was from the tribe of Benjamin and therefore not part of the Levitical priestly line, outbid Jason, Antiochus made him the High Priest, enraging the Jews.

Antiochus led two wars against the Ptolemys. After the first war, it was rumored that he had been killed, leading to a celebration in Jerusalem. However, he had not died, and so when traveling back from Egypt, he desecrated the temple, carrying off the sacred objects and massacring forty thousand Jews. After his second expedition to Egypt in 176 BC he again sacked Jerusalem, this time committing the "abomination of desecration" predicted in Daniel 11: he entered the Holy of Holies, sacrificed a pig on the altar and erected an altar to pagan gods. He, burned copies of the Torah and prohibited circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath.

Jewish Independence (167-63 BC)

The Maccabean Revolt (167-142 BC)

This abomination incited an aging priest named Matthias. He had refused to obey Antiochus' command for an unlawful sacrifice. When another Jew came forward to make the offering, Matthias killed both the Jew and the soldiers overseeing the sacrifice. Afterwards Matthias and his sons fled to the Judean wilderness from which they began an guerilla war against Antiochus' army.

After Matthias died, his son Judas, nicknamed Maccabeus, continued the revolt. By 164 BC Judas and his rebel troops regained control of the temple and purified the sanctuary. This

liberation and purification is celebrated today by the Jews as Hanukkah, or the feast of dedication. That same year, Antiochus IV died, and his successor returned limited autonomy to the Jews.

The Maccabean revolt became an important historical marker for the Jews, who came to believe that foreign domination could be defeated through such tactics. Future insurrection against the Romans would harken back to the success of Judas Maccabeus.

The Hasmonean Dynasty (142-63 BC)

By 142 BC the Seleucids had bigger troubles than the rebellious Jews. Internal conflict between people competing for the throne along with the growing threat of Rome on the western frontiers led the Seleucids to grant the Jews total independence.

Judas Maccabeus' brother Jonathan became the high priest, and after his death, his brother Simon ruled. This began a new hereditary succession of priest-kings who ruled the nation in what was to become known as the Hasmonean dynasty. Simon's son John Hyrcanus ruled from 134-104 BC, after which his son, Alexander Jannaeus became high priest. Upon Jannaeus's death, his wife, Alexandra (Salome) ruled the Jews from 76-67 BC. Alexandra was a popular leader and did much to restore the practice of the Torah.

The Hasidic Movement

Ironically, many of the same issues which led to the Maccabean revolt remained under the Hasmoneans. These high priests were not from the Aaronic line, and were therefore technically unlawful priests. Likewise, over time the Hasmoneans spent more time looking for territorial expansion, conquering Idumea (Edom) and forcing them to convert to Judaism. Furthermore, Greek philosophy and thought continued to grow in its influence over Judaism, for most Jews still lived outside of Palestine, mostly in Babylon or Alexandria, where Greek language and culture remained strong.

This led to the rise of the Hasidic Jews. The Hasidim originally had supported the Maccabean revolt, but now began protesting the Greek influence on Judaism and called the people back to a strict adherence to the Torah. Most scholars believe the Pharisees of Jesus day had their roots in the Hasidic movement of this time.

Rome (63BC through the entire NT era)

The Conquest of Pompey (63 BC)

Meanwhile, outside of Palestine, the power of Rome was growing. In 64 BC the Roman general Pompey the Great defeated the Seleucids and annexed the territory into the Roman Empire.

In Jerusalem, after the death of Alexandra, there arose a power struggle between her sons. Both her sons appealed to Rome for support. Pompey seized the opportunity to invade Jerusalem in 63 BC, putting an end to 80 years of Jewish independence. The Jews would not have political independence again until AD 1948.

Pompey allowed Alexandra's son Hyrcanus II to become the high priest. But the priestly role was stripped of all its political power. Instead, Pompey gave Antipater, a Idumean the title of King. Rome often ruled through vassal kings such as this, allowing Rome to control the territory without the expense of maintaining a full contingent of the army.

Herod the Great (37-4 BC)

After the death of Antipater, there was a brief return to rule by the Hasmoneans. But the Hasmonean ruler was supported by Mark Anthony and Cleopatra. Antipater's son, Herod, supported Octavian, and as a reward, after Octavian defeated Mark Anthony, Herod was made the King of the Jews.

King Herod tried to consolidate his power, first by marrying Mariamne, a daughter of the Hasmonean line. Secondly, he took on large public works projects, building amphitheaters, coliseums, and fortresses in Jerusalem and throughout Palestine. His most remarkable project was the rebuilding of the Jewish temple. This would be the temple of Jesus day.

Herod, however, was paranoid of losing his kingship. Herod was only a half-Jew, his father Antipater being an Idumean. As such he was never considered a legitimate king by the Jews. To ensure that no Jew could make a claim to the throne, he had most of the Hasmonean family executed so as to prevent any future attempts to take back power. He even killed his own wife Mariamne, believing her to be disloyal. Herod slaughtered all newborn boy babies in Bethlehem when he learned from eastern wise men that a new “king” had been born in that town.

Roman Procurators

After the death of Herod, his kingdom was divided among three of his sons. To Archelaus was given Judea and Samaria. Herod Antipas was given Galilee and Perea. Philip was given the provinces to the north and east of the sea of Galilee.

Archelaus rule was more tyrannical than his father, and by AD 6, he had to be removed from office by the Romans because of his incompetence. As a result, Rome took direct control of Judea and Samaria, ruling these regions through governors appointed directly by the Roman emperor. The most famous of these Roman governors was Pontius Pilate, who ordered the execution of Jesus.

Herod Antipas ruled Galilee from the time of his father’s death and is the Herod who executed John the Baptist and who presided over one of Jesus’ trials.

After his death, his nephew Herod Agrippa became king and was given rule over all of Palestine. Herod Agrippa is the king who killed the apostle James and who later presided over the apostle Paul’s trial in the book of Acts.

The Jewish War

Beginning in AD 66, the Jews revolted against Rome. Herod Agrippa remained loyal to Rome and requested assistance in putting down the insurrection. In AD 70 the Roman general Titus laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the city and the temple and to this day the Jews have been without their temple.

The Messiah as Ruler

At the beginning of the New Testament, the Jews had been under the rule of the tyrannical King Herod and the Romans for nearly 60 years. The Romans levied heavy taxes, both to support Herod’s building projects and to pay for the cost of keeping Roman troops in the region. The success of the Maccabees in throwing off the yoke of the Seleucids still lingered in the minds of the people.

Increasingly the common Jews were looking for political deliverance from the Romans, and many came to believe that deliverance would come through the long prophesied Messiah. The prophet Isaiah had foretold of one who would come and establish a righteous government and an everlasting kingdom:

*For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
There will be no end to the increase of His government or of
peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,*

*To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.*

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

That kingdom would be global in scope, as the Messiah would rule over not just Israel, but the whole world.

*"And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, That
all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve
Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not
pass away; And His kingdom is one which will not be
destroyed." (Daniel 7:13-14)*

The hope that the Messiah would soon come is recorded in numerous apocalyptic writing of the period which calls for the destruction of the unrighteous Gentiles who were ruling over Israel. This is illustrated in the book, the Psalms of Solomon, written around this time:

*Behold, O Lord, and raise up unto them their king, the son of
David,
At the time in the which Thou seest, O God,
That he may reign over Israel Thy servant
And gird him with strength, that he may shatter unrighteous
rulers,
And that he may purge Jerusalem from nations that trample
(her) down to destruction.
Wisely, righteously he shall thrust out sinners from (the)
inheritance,
He shall destroy the pride of the sinner as a potter's vessel.
With a rod of iron he shall break in pieces all their substance,
He shall destroy the godless nations with the word of his mouth⁴.*

To many, the Messiah was to be a conqueror who would defeat the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom ruling over the entire world. From these expectations arose a Jewish group known as the zealots. These zealots were not a formal group in the time of Jesus, but their philosophy was certainly in the minds of many of the people. It was not until the Jewish wars of the late 60s that the zealots became a formal party with numerous supposed messiahs rising up to lead the people in rebellion against Rome.

Socio-Economic Setting of the Intertestamental Period

The Social Classes⁵

The Jewish Aristocracy

Palestine and the rest of the Roman empire was primarily driven by agriculture. There was some craftsmen and merchants, but this was by far the minority. The land was owned by a relatively small number of wealthy land owners. In Palestine, these landowners were wealthy aristocratic Jews and Gentiles. These absentee landowners would hire managers to run the plantations. In Judea, the landowning class included many rabbis and priests who lived in Jerusalem.

⁴ Psalm of Solomon 17:21-24. Accessed on-line at <http://www.goodnewsinc.net/othbooks/psalmsol.html>.

⁵ Arthur A. Rupprecht. "The Cultural and Political Setting of the New Testament. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998. Electronic edition STEP file).

This agrarian socio-economic culture can be seen in many of Jesus parables, which deal with farming, sheep herding, and the dynamics of absentee landowners and day laborers. An understanding of this economic dynamic opens up a greater understanding of these parables.

The wealthy aristocracy in Palestine were able to hold onto their power through the abuse of strict purity laws. The ceremonial washings required for participation in the religious and political ceremonies that could not easily be observed by anyone who worked all day in the fields. As a result, the positions of authority were reserved for the aristocracy.

Slavery

There was very little technology involved in farming, and as such landowners required a great deal of human labor in order to work the fields and tend the flocks. In that day, labor came from two sources: slave labor, and free laborers. Slaves were usually the descendents of people conquered by the Romans. In cases of extreme poverty, people could also voluntarily become slaves as a means of economic support. These people could buy their way back out of slavery if they accumulated enough wealth.

Slavery, while a harsh way to live, did not carry the same social stigma as American slavery in the 19th century. Many great Roman scholars, teachers, musicians and craftsmen were slaves to the Roman aristocracy. For those slaves who found themselves with a benevolent master, slavery was a secure way of life. In Palestine most of the slaves were household slaves rather than farm hands.

Freeborn Poor

In fact, many slaves had higher standards of living than poverty stricken freemen. In Palestine most of the agricultural jobs would have actually been filled by hiring free laborers for a standard wage of one denarius per day. The abundance of slave labor depressed the wages for the working poor and a denarius would not go much beyond meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. A large number of these freeborn laborers in Palestine would have been able to trace their Jewish lineage. These Jewish freemen would have had the opportunity to rise socially. In fact, many Jewish rabbis were of this poor class.

Those who could not trace their Jewish heritage were of the lowest classes. Subject to societal bigotry, these “half-breeds” stood no chance of improving their lot and were locked out of any position of authority or respectability in the Jewish culture.

The Messiah as Reformer

Under the Torah, the poor and slaves were afforded certain rights and protections. However under Roman law these same protections were not in place. As such there was wide spread economic and social oppression in first century Palestine. Masters, land owners, and managers exploited the people. The average person was simply trying to survive and had no time to worry about the details of keeping the religious laws or becoming involved in the politics of the day.

For many of these working poor, the only way out was to look to a Messiah who would some day come and reform the corrupt economic system. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that the Messiah would bring this sort of social revolution:

*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners...
Strangers will stand and pasture your flocks,
And foreigners will be your farmers and your vinedressers.
But you will be called the priests of the LORD;*

*You will be spoken of as ministers of our God.
You will eat the wealth of nations,
And in their riches you will boast. (Isaiah 61:1,5-6)*

The Messiah would be one who would bring wealth and prosperity, free the slaves, and eliminate the injustice of the current economic system.

Religion of the Intertestamental Period

Greek and Roman Religion

The first century was a time of great change in the Greek and Roman religious practices and understanding. Old religions were passing out of favor and people were increasingly willing to hear new religious ideas.

Traditional Pantheism

Classical Greek and Roman pantheism believed in numerous gods and goddesses who each exercised dominion over an aspect of life. The chief of these gods was known as Zeus (Greek) or Jupiter (Romans). Devotion to the gods was at its apex in the fourth and fifth centuries BC. But by the first century few people truly believed in the pantheon, and the ceremonial worship of the gods was mostly just tradition.

Greek Philosophy

The Greeks are well known for their great philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Stoicism was probably the most influential of philosophy of the first century. Stoicism taught that there is a distinction between matter and spirit. Matter, of which the body was a part, was passive and something to be subdued by the spirit. The spirit, which was called the *logos* (Greek for “word”) was conceived of divine logic or reason, and that one could find fulfillment through conformity to the *logos*. Stoicism has four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, justice and temperance⁶.

Stoicism had such a wide spread influence that it even was incorporated in Judaic and Christian thought in the first and second century.

Mystery & Magic Religions

The mystery religions were secret societies where the few elite would be allowed to enter into secret knowledge and rituals. In combination with this was the belief in magic rites, incantations, spells, and rituals through which one could coerce the gods.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism was a belief that deeper knowledge was the key to personal fulfillment. It grew out of the Platonic dualistic philosophy which stated that the material world was evil while the spiritual world is good. This led to one of two extremes: either an ascetic lifestyle which tried to suppress the evils of the body, or hedonism which indulged the body since only the spirit survived.

Emperor Worship

As the Roman army systematically conquered other nations, belief in the national gods who were to protect them waned. If the Roman emperors could defeat those gods, then the emperor must be a god himself. The first emperor to be deified was Julius Caesar. Augustus was also declared a god, but only after his death. Nero was the first to try to enforce the worship of

⁶ "Stoicism," Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2004. <http://encarta.msn.com>. 1997-2004. Microsoft Corporation.

himself while he was alive. The emperor Domitian tried to enforce widespread worship of himself throughout the empire, leading to great persecution of Christians who refused to worship him.

First Century Judaism

Movement from Sacrificial Rituals to the Law

As a result of the Babylonian exile, a majority of the Jews lived outside of the Holy Land. Because of this, the worship of God through the temple sacrifices became less important. The focal point of worship moved to knowledge of and obedience to the law. The synagogue grew in importance as the center of Jewish communities and worship. This transition made prayer and good works as a replacement for the sacrifices.

The Scribes

With this renewed focus on the law, the profession of scribe became an respected position. Scribes were responsible to copy the text of the Law. But because of their familiarity with the law, soon they came to be regarded as experts on the law. When people had questions regarding an interpretation of the law, the scribes were regularly consulted. The office of scribe then was part photocopy machine, part seminary professor, and part arbitrator.

Gentile Proselytizing

As Judaism moved from the temple sacrifices to an ethical philosophy, it became more and more attractive to Gentiles. When combined with an environment where people were giving up on the traditional religions, Judaism found itself gaining converts throughout the Roman empire.

First Century Jewish Religious Groups

Sadducees

The Sadducees were heavily influenced by Greek culture. They believed that only the Torah could be used to determine proper doctrine and they rejected all oral traditions on the Law.

The Sadducees were a small group comprised mostly of the wealthy aristocracy. They had supported the Hasmonean combining of the priesthood and kingship. By the time of Jesus they controlled the Jewish Sanhedrin, the local governing body. They didn't protest the Roman occupation as they benefited from the status quo.

The Sadducees controlled the priesthood and therefore were more concerned with temple rituals and the animal sacrifices. Because of this the Sadducees died off after the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

In modern terms, the Sadducees would be the liberal Christians whose morality and doctrine are largely determined by secular culture.

Pharisees

The word Pharisee means "separatist." This group opposed the Greek cultural influences, and they were strongly opposed to the combining of the priesthood with political power. Under the Hasmoneans, there were frequent conflicts between the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were not part of the priesthood, but were laymen who had great influence in the synagogues. Most of the prominent rabbis came from the Pharisees, and they were very popular with the common folk.

The Pharisees believed in the inerrancy of all the Old Testament scriptures and in the direct application of the scriptures to every day life. These applications of the law developed into a rich oral tradition on how to keep the law. In the centuries following Jesus these oral traditions would be written into what is known today as the Mishnah and the Talmud. Because their domain was the synagogues and the oral law, they Pharisees not only survived the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, but this branch of Judaism defines much of what is Judaism today.

Doctrinally the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, heaven and hell, angels and demons and a combination of predestination and free will. While Jesus opposed the legalism of the Pharisees, his doctrine aligned more with the Pharisees than the Sadducees. The apostle Paul was a devout Pharisee prior to his conversion to Christianity.

In modern terms, the Pharisees are the conservative evangelical Christians who hold to an inerrant scripture and a devotion to biblical morality.

Essenes

The Essenes are not mentioned in the Bible, but have recently become well known due to the extensive Essene literature found in the Dead Sea scrolls this century. The Essenes were a radical separatist group opposing the Greek and Roman influences on Judaism. They formed isolated communities far from the urban centers, where they awaited the coming Messiah to bring reform and purification to Israel. They wrote a great deal of apocalyptic literature speaking of the coming of the Messiah in symbolic terms.

The Messiah as Redeemer

The Sadducees did not see a need for the Messiah. They were satisfied with the status quo and their hold on the priestly institutions. The Essenes, however, were obsessed with the coming Messiah and put all their hope in His coming purification of the nation and conquering of the world. The Pharisees would have leaned more to the Essene picture of a coming Messiah, but they also benefited from the status quo and would have seen the Messiah as more a reformer than a radical revolutionary.

None of these three Jewish groups saw the role of the Messiah as that of a redeemer who would come to take away the sins of the world. For the first century Jew, personal salvation was not as much a concern as political and economic freedom. The rise of Pharisaical traditions made it possible to keep the law through human effort, and therefore personal salvation was possible through obedience to the law. Therefore there was no need for a Messiah to bring salvation.

Because of this, much of Jesus teaching was a direct refutation of the Pharisees teaching on the law. Jesus' teaching instead showed how impossible it was to keep the law and reminded them that the law, while good, was never intended as a means to salvation. Jesus instead tried to reveal the role of the Messiah as a suffering servant who would come to take away the sins of the people. But the prophet Isaiah clearly foretold this:

*He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed...
The LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.
As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see it and be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:5, 10-11)*

Yet even after Jesus death his closet followers did not understand that the Messiah as a redeemer. It was only after his resurrection did the disciples see Jesus as the Messiah who came to bring personal salvation, not political or social salvation.

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