

What Life Looked like in Jesus' Time

Craig L. Blomberg, Ph.D.

Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies
at Denver Seminary in Littleton, Colorado



I. Introduction to Religious Developments

In this second lesson, we want to turn from historical and political developments that set the stage for the formation of the New Testament to more overtly religious developments, even while we recognize that the ancient world knew nothing of the separation of church and state, as is found in some modern countries, and so the division is always somewhat artificial. But it is an interesting and significant question to ask oneself, "If I were living some place in the Middle East, at approximately the time of Jesus' birth, what would have been the religious options available to me?" How did they appeal to certain segments of the populace and not to others? And how did Jesus' teaching and Christianity, as it grew following his life and death, relate to the various religious options and diversity of the first-century world?

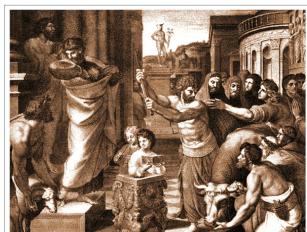
II. Greco-Roman Religion

We may divide our thoughts into two broad headings: first of all, the larger Greco-Roman Empire, into which Israel found itself, and then secondly, the more specifically Jewish options, particularly for someone living within Israel. The first century has been described by many historians as a time of a crisis of the conscience for many conventional Greco-Roman people and thinkers. The most well-known form of Greco-Roman religion, belief in the ancient myths, was increasingly being abandoned in favor of other alternatives.

A. Mythology

There no doubt were plenty of people who still believed in the mythology of centuries past to one degree or another. Originally, it had found its appeal as a kind of substitute for primitive science. Apollo was the sun-god who drove



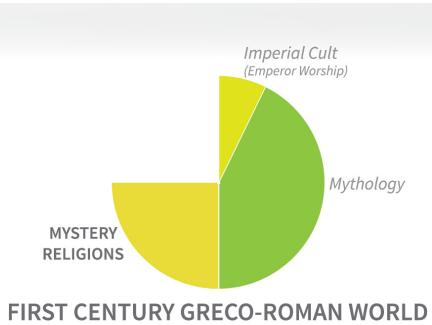
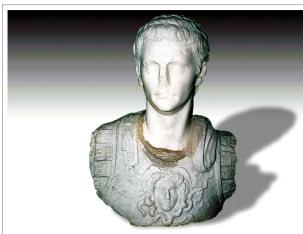


his fiery chariot across the sky every day, thus accounting for the movement of the sun as it appeared to people from the earth. Bacchus, or other gods of wine, Artemis, the goddess of love, Mercury, the messenger-god, and many others that are well-known to students of the ancient Greco-Roman mythologies, in turn each helped to explain some particular practice of nature or example of human behavior, delights of appetites and virtues and of vices. But the problem was that by the first century many of the exploits of the gods and ancient myths had already been surpassed by human emperors from the time of Alexander the Great onward. Human emperors had conquered larger territories than even the gods of Greece and Rome were said to be able to rule. And science, primitive though it was by modern standards, had already discovered the natural laws of cause and effect that account for much of the course of the events of the universe. Therefore, the myths were increasingly receding in significance.

It's not coincidental that one place in the New Testament where we see evidence of Greek mythology, the story in Acts 14 of Paul and Barnabas at the town of Lystra being mistaken for the Greek gods of Zeus and Hermes, was in a very backward and isolated place, where the old traditions often died the hardest. But if people were not as much following the ancient myths as they once had, then what other Greco-Roman options were there? Well, a quite new one with the rise of the Roman Empire, particularly in the lands in the eastern part of the empire, was that of emperor worship. This was a religious option that grew gradually.

B. Emperor Worship

Initially emperors were only deified by acclamation by the Roman senate after their deaths. Caligula, who reigned from 37 to 41 A.D. claimed to be a god while he was alive, and most people thought he was insane. It was not until the mid-60's A.D., with the emperor Nero, where such claims, partly under duress, began to be taken more seriously. By the first century, by the time we come to the time of the writing of the book of Revelation, the emperor Domitian was actually requiring all the people in the empire to offer a pinch of incense to him and to say the words, "Caesar is Lord." This early Christian religion, like Judaism before it, could not do. The persecution that Christianity eventually



Parallels between the mystery religions and Christianity:

1. Promise of eternal life
2. Elimination of class distinctions

had to face as a result of emperor worship is a significant part of the religious background to the first century and the rise of the New Testament. But in Jesus' day, at the very beginnings of this period, we must realize that offering a sacrifice on behalf of the emperor was seen by most people in the empire as little more than a patriotic act. It really did not define the depths of their religious identification.

C. Mystery Religions

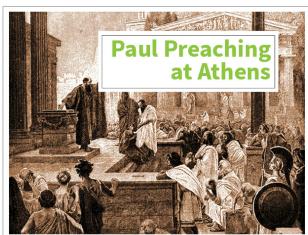
The third option, then, is what scholars have called the mystery religions. These were a collection of very diverse, often new, movements, many influenced from the East, including from Egypt, that define themselves in a variety of ways; but all claim to have some secret revelation, known only to the initiates into the rites, into the cults, of these particular fraternal organizations. All of them had defining ceremonies that characterized what the cult would do when it assembled. Sometimes these were very serene—various forms of meditation. The corn-god, Demeter, was the object of one such mystery religion in which one simply meditated and reflected on an ear of corn. Others could be very bizarre, such as the blood baptism of the Cybelene cult, in which a priest was put in a pit in the ground and a bull was slaughtered and sacrificed on wooden latticework above the priest so that the blood would drip down and baptize, as it were, the new priest of this cult.

There have been scholars who have examined apparent or alleged parallels between so-called baptismal rites in Christian baptism or between fellowship meals and the Christian celebration of Communion or the Eucharist. For the most part, however, the mystery religions were quite different than Christianity, with two important exceptions. More clearly than in many traditional forms of Greek religion, the mystery religions held out the clear promise of eternal life, as in fact Christianity did as well. And a second, very radical development of many of the mystery religions was to claim that all people, all genders, all walks of life, slave and senator alike, were equal in the eyes of the gods and goddesses. And whatever class distinctions may have dominated their lives by day, when the cult met secretly at night, these barriers were done away with. Christianity, too, would take on great prominence, as Paul would put it in Galatians 3:28 by saying that in Christ there is neither



Schools of Philosophy:

1. The Epicureans
2. The Stoics
3. The Cynics



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slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female.

D. Philosophical Schools

Still a fourth option, perhaps more limited in its influence because of the rigors it demanded, was the option of the philosophers, to become an itinerant follower of one of the famous philosophers, past or present, in the Greco-Roman world. The Epicureans, were well known for their slogan “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die,” although they were not as hedonistic as perhaps that slogan might suggest. More commonly, they simply sought to cultivate what today we would consider the arts— theater, fine company, fine meals, fine wine—to enjoy life, and to eliminate as much pain as possible.

The second option, dating from at least three centuries before Christ but still quite popular in the first century A.D., was the Stoics, who in some ways were the opposite or the counterpart of the Epicureans. They too wanted to maximize pleasure and diminish pain, but did so by removing the extremes of delight in which the Epicureans indulged—care for the body by disciplining it so that one felt neither the intense rigors of suffering that one could not control or indulge in those things that might prove destructive to a person.

Theologically, the Stoics were pantheists; that is, to say that God is everything and in everything—while the Epicureans thought that the gods, if indeed they existed at all, were too remote to be knowable. It is very fascinating to watch the apostle Paul in Acts 17, dialogue with both Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, and in a sense to play off each other, one against the other. Against the Stoics he says that God is the Creator of all the earth. But against the Epicureans he says that God is not far from us, and, quoting a Stoic poet, says, “In him we live and move and have our being.”

There were other less well-known philosophies. One of them, the Cynics, we still use the word today, were those hippies, you might call them, of the ancient world: the vagabonds, the beggars, the unkempt, those who believed that one took care of the body only so much as to sustain its most basic needs and to depend on others for sustenance



1 John 4:1

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

to free up the mental life, the spiritual life, for thinking about things above and beyond this material world. There are some parallels to the itinerant ministry of Jesus and the hardships and rigors that He and His disciples faced, but again the differences seem to outweigh the parallels.

E. Gnosticism

Yet another significant development in the Greco-Roman world was the rise of a religion known as Gnosticism, apparently coming out of roots going all the way back to the philosopher Plato, but imbibing in certain Jewish and more recent Greco-Roman elements. By the first century, there was a movement emerging that was very world-denying in nature. It's what scholars call dualistic. They believed that the material world was by nature evil because, in fact, in the myths of the Gnostics, Creation itself was a mistake, was an act of fallen emanation from the godhead—a sort of impersonal, abstract entity that decided to rebel against the otherwise remote and unknowable God of the Gnostics. And in creating matter, this emanation did something bad. Therefore, unlike Judaism and Christianity, one tries to deny oneself, even normal bodily appetites; although, ironically, occasionally, the Gnostics went to the other extreme and said in essence, "If matter doesn't matter, then let's just indulge the body without limits."

This Gnosticism, by at least the mid to late first century, began to combine itself with certain elements of early Christian teaching, so that the savior for the Gnostic, which traditionally had been seen as *sophia*, the Greek word for wisdom, a reference to the kind of self-knowledge that recognized the divine spark that lived within all human beings. That self-knowledge or self-salvation began to be translated to Jesus. Jesus could be equated with Sophia, as the savior. And at least by the very latest New Testament documents, particularly the epistles of John, we seem to see Christianity having to confront a rather developed form of Gnosticism, though we will point out in our lessons on our epistles of Paul that there are hints of at least Gnosticising tendencies that the early church has to confront even earlier.



III. Jewish Religion

But the Greco-Roman world is only one of the major worlds in which someone could have lived in the first century. Clearly all the first Christians were Jews. And while it's true that some Jews did commit apostasy and adopt Greco-Roman forms of religion, most were very faithful to the traditions of their ancestors. What then are the options that one could be, one could have been, if one was born and raised as a Jewish boy or girl? In the pages of the New Testament, we read of three major Jewish sects, and from the writings of the Jewish historian of the first century, Josephus, we read of a fourth.

A. Am-ha-Aretz (People of the Land)

Sometimes we may read the New Testament and think that Jewish people had to find themselves in one or the other of these four, and that all four together accounted for a majority of Judaism. This is simply not the case. The vast majority, at least 80 percent (some would say as high as 95 percent) of all first-century Jews, belonged to no particular sect at all. They were the ordinary working people—the fishermen, the farmers, the small-tradesmen or artisans, the craftsmen, the carpenters. They were disparagingly called the Am-ha-aretz, “the people of the land,” by the Jews who were in one of the sects of leadership—disparagingly because they did not have the zeal for the law or the concern to fulfill God’s commands down to every jot and tittle that some of these other sects had. And it is probably not surprising that the vast majority of all of Jesus’ first followers emerged from these “people of the land”: ordinary people who had kept a faithful hope for a Messiah—for a liberator, for a savior to come—even if they had neither the time nor the interest nor perhaps even the ability to study the law in such meticulous detail, or to follow some of the more extremist tendencies of the Jewish sects.

B. Pharisees

But what about the small minority of those who do fall into one of the other four identifiable categories? There is, on the one hand, the group known as the Pharisees, often linked together in the New Testament with scribes. A scribe was simply a profession, one who had learned to copy the



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FIRST CENTURY JEWISH WORLD

Hebrew Scriptures over and over again by hand, and in the process, became very familiar with them and frequently, therefore, an expert in the law. There were scribes in several of the different sects and those who were affiliated with no sect at all. The majority of those we encounter in the pages of the New Testament seem to have been Pharisaic scribes.

The Pharisees, who were a sect, were those who were intensely devoted to finding ways to apply the Torah, the Hebrew Law, to every aspect of contemporary Jewish life. Even though there are 613 commands in the Law, they certainly did not cover every situation in life and certainly not all the changes in situations in the centuries following the giving of the Jewish Law. We perhaps know the Pharisees best for some of Jesus' conflicts with them, some of His blistering invectives in which, in Mathew 23 particularly, over and over again He calls them, along with the scribes, hypocrites. But we must realize that the Pharisees themselves formed many different kinds of perspectives in ancient Judaism. Not all, perhaps not even a majority, were hypocritical, and even those who Jesus so labeled would not necessarily have been viewed so by the Jewish populace. The Pharisees, in fact, were the most popular sect among the ordinary people of the land.

Christian practices of synagogue worship, which transferred over into church worship, understandings of the law as fulfilled in love, even specific debates over ethical questions such as divorce or paying taxes reflect in many cases a Pharisaic background, even if Jesus almost always puts a little different spin or twist onto what the Pharisees were doing or saying. If one wanted to be brutally honest and reflect the dynamic of the first century, one would have to say that the conservative, evangelical Christian, the one who today has a very high view of Scripture and wants, in detail, to apply it to every aspect of life, is probably the closest parallel to the ancient Pharisee. How shocking, then, when such people at times fall into legalism and are accused of perverting what is intended to be a vibrant relationship with God into a religion of a long set of dos and don'ts. Christians, too, particularly the conservative ones, must be careful lest they wind up being more like the Pharisees than unlike them.

Acts 23:8

The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.



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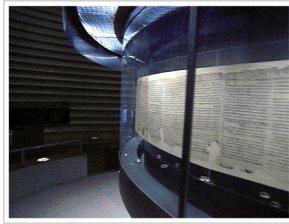
C. Sadducees

But there were other groups. There were the Sadducees, a slightly smaller group, who disagreed with the Pharisees on a number of major issues. Where the Pharisees had adopted new laws, what came to be known the oral law, written down only about two hundred years after the time of Christ in the Jewish document known as the Mishnah, where the Pharisees believed that God continued to inspire Moses, not only to write down certain laws, but to preserve other oral traditions; the Sadducees, by way of contrast, accepted only the canonical, written, Hebrew Scriptures. As a result, they also were more skeptical of such doctrines that were not clearly or frequently found in the Scriptures, and particularly in the Mosaic Law: doctrines such as belief in the resurrection, or belief in angels, belief in predestination or a full-orbed life to come.

Pharisees, on the other hand, had continued to develop in their thinking, and again were much closer to many of the early Christian beliefs. Paul, on trial for his life on several occasions towards the end of the book of Acts, appeals to the fact that he is a Pharisee rather than a Sadducee and, as a result, splits the council, splits the Jewish Sanhedrin. Some want to come to his defense, and others do not. The Sadducees' more literal application of the law, however, meant that they were unable to survive the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. They believed that the only way to have forgiveness of sins was to continue to offer literal sacrifices, whereas Pharisees, believed that a prayer of repentance, beseeching God earnestly for forgiveness and then acting upon that repentance by means of a changed life—could bring about forgiveness when a literal animal sacrifice was impossible to offer. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was primarily the Pharisaic branch of Judaism that survived the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, whereas the Sadducees quickly died out.

D. Essenes

A group that does not appear by name on the pages of the New Testament is nevertheless a very significant one. This is the group of Jews known as the Essenes. And in the last 50 years or so, their work has become particularly well-known and famous because of the discovery of a large



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library of scrolls on the shores of the Dead Sea in Israel, at a site known as Qumran. The Essenes were a monastic group, although we do know from other writers that at times they lived in enclaves in major cities as well. But more so than any other Jewish group, they believed that the only way to please God was to withdraw themselves from society, to a certain measure, and more scrupulously attempt to follow in detail the commands of the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures. They developed some distinctive doctrines, such as the belief in the coming of two Messiahs, one priestly and one kingly, since those roles in the Old Testament were assigned to different sons and tribes of Israel.

There are many parallels in the writings of the Qumran community that have been discovered to different teachings or concepts of the New Testament—the Beatitudes, for example, concern for the poor, or the use of the term “Son of God” as a Messianic title. Some have even suggested that John the Baptist might have had contact with the Essenes because of parallels in his style of ministry. Some have gone even further and seen Jesus as an Essene, although this is much less likely. So that, although they do not appear by name on the pages of the New Testament, what we have learned from the scrolls of Qumran about this one distinctive sect has illuminated significantly our understanding of the first-century Judaism into which Jesus was born.

E. Zealots

The final specific group we want to mention are the Zealots, the freedom fighters. Emerging sporadically with brief terrorist movements throughout the first century, they finally coalesced in the 60s A.D. and attempted to overthrow Rome. As we mentioned in the last lesson, they failed miserably. Undoubtedly, they hoped that the liberation of the temple, as happened under the Maccabees, celebrated at Hanukkah, would repeat itself; but, for whatever reasons, this time it failed. And their sect, too, was decisively obliterated. We see evidence that the Romans destroyed Qumran. And presumably the Essenes did not survive A.D. 70, leaving, therefore, only the Pharisees as that movement that would emerge and turn into what we call rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism that

Summary of Jewish Religion:

1. For males, circumcision
2. Keeping the Sabbath
3. Distinctive Scriptures, such as the Torah, with all its commands
4. Understanding themselves as God's chosen people

would grow up alongside of, though often in opposition and contention with, Christianity.

F. Summary of Jewish Religion

How can we sum up the Judaism of the first century? Irrespective of whether one fell into one of these specific sects or not, there are key badges, if you like, that defined the Jewish identity of almost everyone: for males, certainly circumcision set them off from their Greco-Roman neighbors, keeping the Sabbath one day out of seven as a day of rest and a day of worship, their distinctive Scriptures, the Torah with all of its commands, and their unique understanding of themselves as God's chosen people in a distinct piece of geography. The problem was that they were not living in freedom in that land, and therefore Messianic expectation was ripe, was high, for someone who would come and deliver them and be a liberator. Unfortunately, the longed-for messiahs were little more than generals or military rulers, so that when Jesus and Christianity emerged claiming that the Messiah has come, the job description does not always match that of conventional expectation. But with this brief overview, we are at least somewhat better equipped to turn to the New Testament and understand the various religious movements described or presupposed there.