



SCHOOL FOR MINISTRY
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New Testament I

Religion, Politics & Society in 1st Century C.E. Palestine

David Moseley, Ph.D.

Introduction

Jesus lived during a tumultuous period of Jewish History dominated by the Roman military occupation of Palestine; the aftermath of the momentous upheavals of the rule of Herod the Great; and the fragmenting of Jewish Politics and Religion into various competing sectarian factions, each with their own unique perspective on the practice of their faith and their understanding of contemporary circumstances. In many ways, one of the biggest factors that inhibits our understanding of Jesus' world is the fact that we live in the United States in the 21st Century: we live at a time of relative peace (Jesus didn't); we enjoy the benefits of democracy and human rights (Jesus didn't); we live in a society that enjoys reasonable economic prosperity and social mobility (Jesus didn't); and we live in a culture that values religious tolerance (Jesus didn't). The key to understanding the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth is to abandon our worldview and try to imagine what life must have been like for poor, lower class Jews in First Century C.E. Galilee in an obscure backwater of the Roman Empire...

Background: A History of Foreign Domination

- 722 / 721 B.C.E. - Assyrians conquer Israel
- 597-582 B.C.E. – Babylonians conquer Judah
- 559 B.C.E. – Persians conquer Babylonia
- 540 B.C.E. – End of Babylonian Exile
- 333 / 332 B.C.E. – Greeks conquer Persia
- 323 B.C.E. – Ptolemies take over Palestine – “Hellenization” & Septuagint
- 198 B.C.E. – Seleucids (Syrians) take Palestine

- 167 B.C.E. – Maccabean Revolt
- The Maccabean Revolt (167-142 B.C.E. and the Hasmonean Monarchy (142-63 B.C.E.)
- Hyrcanus vs. Aristobulus and the Roman Conquest by General Pompey (63 B.C.E.)
- The Hasmonean Client Kingship – Antipater and Herod (63-40 B.C.E.)
- The Parthian Interregnum and the Herodian Restoration (40-37 B.C.E.)
- King Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.E.) – “Athens of the East” and the Second Temple

The destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 / 721 B.C.E., and the destruction of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, including Jerusalem and Solomon’s Temple, around 588 / 589 B.C.E., demonstrates that the mission of the Prophets was ultimately unsuccessful. The loss of Jerusalem in general, and the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant in particular, were a catastrophe in Jewish history equivalent to the catastrophe of the Egyptian captivity almost a thousand years earlier. Israel would now languish under the control of foreign empires ruled by pagan idolaters for hundreds of years.

The Babylonian Empire would soon be succeeded by the Persian Empire, whose rulers at least allowed the elite Jewish exiles to return from captivity in Babylon and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. But Jerusalem and Israel were now part of a colony of the Persian Empire. The Persians would eventually be subdued by the great campaigns and conquests of Alexander the Great from Macedonia at the end of the 4th Century B.C.E. Israel then fell under the control of the Greek Egyptian quadrant of Alexander’s Empire, ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty based in Alexandria. This was a period of Hellenization where the benefits of Greek civilization – its education, arts, language, philosophy, technology and medicine, architecture, and athletic lifestyle – would be exported to all peoples under Greek rule. The Ptolemaic dynasty also probably requested the translation of the Jewish scriptures, particularly the Torah, into Greek, to be placed in the legendary Library of Alexandria. This translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek is known as the Septuagint. It is the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that is referenced by the New Testament authors who also write in Greek. It also provided access for many of the Jews living in the Diaspora, following the collapse of the Israeli and Judean kingdoms, to the sacred texts and the sacred traditions of their faith in the vernacular language of Greek that was now spoken throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world and the Near East.

Control of Israel changed hands between two different sections of the Greek empire at the beginning of the 2nd Century B.C.E., when the Seleucid Empire under the control of Antiochus Epiphanes IV took control of Israel from the Ptolemaic dynasty. Antiochus’ insistence that a statue of Zeus be put up in the temple provoked the rebellion led by a priestly clan called the Hasmoneans or Maccabees [commemorated at Hanukkah]. This revolt (167-142 B.C.E.) led to a brief relief from foreign imperial control when the Hasmoneans led the Jews in driving out the Greeks, and then declared themselves to be both chief priests and kings at the same time. The period of the Hasmonean theocracy was brief and tumultuous: the central religious parties and factions of Judaism that we are familiar with from the Gospels were established at this time, and Israel teetered on the brink of civil conflict throughout the Hasmoneans’ tempestuous rule. The Hasmonean monarchy came to an end abruptly in 63 B.C.E. when the two great regional powers of the day – the Parthian Empire based in Babylon to the east, and the expansionist Roman Republic in the

west – intervened in a dispute between two feuding Hasmonean brothers who both claimed the throne at the same time. The Roman intervention was decisive, and Roman control of Israel begins at this point. The Romans placed a military governor over the surviving puppet Hasmonean, an Idumean general called Antipater, who had married into a noble Nabataean family [the Nabataeans built the great city of Petra in Jordan], and had served under general Pompey. He would eventually be succeeded by one of his sons after an assassination and another conflict with the Parthian Empire. Antipater’s son was called Herod.

The rule of Herod the Great (37 - 4 B.C.E.) brings us to the threshold of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who appears to have been born at the end of Herod’s reign. Of course, Herod the Great is the person you love to hate in Jewish history. Nevertheless, nobody in Israelite history has left more of a physical and cultural imprint on the land of Israel than Herod did. He had the worldview of the Roman Empire, whom he served as a puppet / client king; but he wielded ruthless autonomy in Israel, and was determined to turn Israel into a modern Greco-Roman state - and in particular he wanted Jerusalem to be seen as the “Athens of the East.” He embarked on massive building projects which demanded huge reserves of slave labor and massive amounts of revenue acquired through punitive taxation. Both of these strategies made him hugely unpopular. However, the results of his building projects – the “modern” Romanized port city of Caesarea Maritima, connected by a huge aqueduct; the many fortresses he built across the land of Israel, including the great fortress of Masada down by the Dead Sea; modern Roman roads; his own glorious mausoleum at Herodium, in the style of the Egyptian pharaohs; and, of course, his masterpiece, the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the construction of the Second Temple – all of these monumental achievements stand as testimony to his “greatness” right through to the present.

Herod was undoubtedly a paranoid sociopathic ruler who killed many of his male relatives (Emperor Caesar Augustus once commented that he would “rather be Herod’s pig than his son”), and refused to choose an heir to succeed him for fear that they might rise up and kill him, just as he was rumored to have poisoned his own father, Antipater, in order to take power. From what we know of Herod the Great through secular Jewish history, it seems quite consistent with his character that he would feel threatened by the birth of a would-be “Messiah” in Bethlehem, and would then seek to murder all the babies under the age of two in order to assuage his anxiety.

1. Politics in Israel at the Time of Jesus

➤ The Division of Herod the Great’s Kingdom:

Following the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.E., Israel was in flux because the paranoid king had not trained any of his many sons to succeed him as king. Herod the Great himself may have poisoned or been implicated in the assassination of his own father, Antipater; therefore he was reluctant to select any of his many sons to succeed him for fear of what they might do to him.

1. “Ethnarch” – Herod Archelaus (Judaea)

It was necessary for the Romans to intervene in 4 B.C.E. and divide up Herod the Great’s legacy. They did so by dividing Israel into four parts, and then splitting it between three of Herod’s sons - all of whom, confusingly, are called Herod. The southern half of Israel - comprising Samaria, Judea and Idumea, including the strategically important and theologically vital city of Jerusalem -

was given to Herod's son, Herod Archelaus. The Romans called him an "Ethnarch", which means ethnic monarch, and he was responsible for the southern half of Israel.

2. The "Tetrarchs" – Herod Antipas (North-West) and Herod Philip (North-East)

In the north part of Israel the Romans divided up Herod the Great's territory between two more of his sons, who are half-brothers. One half-brother, Herod Antipas (the Herod who executed John the Baptist and was in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified), was given the north-western piece of territory, which included Galilee where Jesus grew up. The north-eastern part of Israel - the land on the slopes of Mount Herman known as Decapolis, and the area east of the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee - was given to Herod Philip. The Romans called these two regional kings "Tetrarchs", which means a quarter monarch in Greek.

1.1 Judaea

➤ Deposition of Archelaus after Rebellion (6 C.E.)

However, Archelaus proved an ineffective ruler having not been trained in statecraft by his father. He also inherited the most impacted area of Israel following the death of Herod the Great, due to the massive building projects and high taxation in and around Jerusalem. A revolt broke out in his territory in 6 C.E., ten years into his reign, and the Romans had to send in troops to intervene and quell the rebellion. The Romans then removed Archelaus from power and imposed direct military control on Judea, Samaria and Idumea.

➤ Direct Roman Military Occupation in Judaea under Prefect / Procurator

In order to take charge of the directly-controlled southern part of Israel, the Romans appointed a "Procurator" or "Prefect" or "Governor", a high-ranking official in the Roman military. The most famous of these Roman military Procurators was Pontius Pilatus (Pilate), who ruled from 26 to 36 C.E.

➤ Prefect Pontius Pilatus (26 - 36 C.E.)

Pilate ruled Judea with an iron fist, according to the Jewish historian Josephus. [Pilate's period of rule from 26 to 36 C.E. is the closest marker we have for dating the time of Jesus' crucifixion which took place under Pilate.]

➤ Roman Priorities:

- ❖ Peace - *Pax Romana*
- ❖ Tribute – *Tax Romana*

The Roman government of the time of Jesus had two priorities: firstly, to ensure the Peace of Rome, or what was known in Latin as the "*Pax Romana*"; and secondly, to ensure the steady flow of revenue into the Roman coffers, which was known as the "Tribute" or taxes (the "*Tax Romana*").

It was essential for Rome to maintain peace and order in the empire. Wars against the enemies of Rome and internal rebellions were very expensive. Therefore, although it sounds idealistically romantic, the *Pax Romana* amounted to brutal repression of all populations under Roman control. There was *Pax Romana* because all potential and real opposition or rebellion was suppressed or annihilated savagely by the Roman military. In the absence of war or rebellion against enemies, internal or external ... there was Roman peace.

The notoriety of Tax Collectors of the time of Jesus, as discussed in the Gospels, is indicative of the injustices of the Roman tax system – at least as practiced in Israel. It is no coincidence that the Italian mob are descendants of the Romans. The Roman tax system works very much in the same way that the Mafia traditionally raises revenue. For example, in Israel at the time of Jesus the collection of revenue was delegated to the Elders / Landowners who had local control. The Elders would be set an amount that they would be required to collect in revenue for the Romans every year. The Elders would then send out the Tax Collectors (or “Publicans”) to gouge as much money as possible from all of the peasants and workers in the region. For example, suppose an Elder was required to collect \$10,000 in revenue from his district; and suppose, then, that his tax collectors were able to collect \$50,000 in revenue from members of his district. The Romans would be paid their \$10,000 of revenue, and the additional profit would be shared amongst the Priests, the Elder and his tax collecting officials. Jesus’ audience were well aware that “to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Luke 19:26). The Roman tax system was an efficient way of redistributing wealth from the poor to the rich. It also effectively incentivized the elders and the members of the ruling class, including the priests, to maintain the status quo with regards to the Roman occupation. Priests and Elders and tax collectors knew that if there was a rebellion against Roman rule, they would be the first victims of mob justice.

From what we know from secular Jewish history, through the writings of Josephus, it appears that Pilate was an extremely successful ruler for the most part - that is to say, an extremely brutal and savage Roman ruler. In fact, Pilate was so brutal that Josephus reports that he was removed from power by the Romans in the year 36 C.E. because the savagery of his rule was such that his superiors in Rome feared that he might provoke a rebellion in Israel. This contrasts significantly with the portrayal of Pilate in the Gospels during the Passion narratives (especially Matthew), in which he is portrayed as being weak, a pushover, easily dominated by the priests and the elders who manipulate the mob.

- Jewish Collaboration – Priests and Aristocracy (“Elders”)
- Temple is Center of Collaboration – “Sanhedrin” (Council)

The other group who held supreme power and collaborated with the Romans in Judea were the Priests and Elders who ruled through the Temple. The Romans chose who would be Chief Priest at this time (Caiaphas was Chief Priest throughout the rule of Pilate). Think about that for a moment: the Romans would only choose a candidate who they knew would be flexible and willing to subjugate himself to the will of Rome. Although the priests wielded supreme religious power at that time, and were responsible for the atoning sacrifices essential to maintaining God’s relationship with his Chosen People, nevertheless most Jews must have viewed them with ferocious ambiguity: on the one hand, they were God’s representatives on earth; and on the other

hand, they were collaborators and traitors. [Just imagine if the United States government picked the Ayatollah in Iran! Or ISIS picked the Pope!] The priests and the elders met in a special council at the Temple called the “Sanhedrin.” There was no separation of powers – the Sanhedrin was responsible for executive, legislative and judicial functions. Their central obligations to the Romans were the maintenance of law and order at the national and local level, and ensuring the steady flow of tax revenue.

1.2 Galilee

- Client King Herod Antipas (Ruled 4 B.C.E. - 39 C.E.)

The situation up in Galilee, where Jesus spent virtually all of his life, was rather different. Herod Antipas was the Tetrarch in Galilee, and he ruled with a considerable degree of autonomy. It is very unlikely that Jesus would have witnessed many Roman soldiers patrolling in Galilee: the only soldiers he would see would be working directly for Herod Antipas. Herod initially chose as his capital the new Greco-Roman town of Sepphoris, just a few miles away from Nazareth. However due to water supply problems in Sepphoris, he decided to move his capital to a town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Like his father who buttered up the Romans by naming his port city Caesarea Maritima, after Emperor Augustus, Herod Antipas sycophantically named his regional capital after Emperor Tiberius (Tiberias).

- Kept Romans Happy

Antipas kept the Romans happy – which is to say he insured that there was peace and security in Galilee, and made sure the tax revenue kept flowing. However he was hated for the most part by his local population.

- Executed John the Baptist

The only biographical sketch we have of Antipas in the Gospel concerns a notorious birthday party he presided over (Mark 6:14-29). At this party, Antipas, who had taken his half-brother’s wife as a second wife for himself (a woman called Herodias, which made her also a blood relative of his), appeared to be lusting after his step-daughter, Salome, Herodias’ daughter from her first marriage to his half-brother. Antipas asked Salome to dance for him at his party. Reading between the lines, it’s quite clear he was not looking for her to show him some steps that she had learned at her ballet class. Scheming with her mother, Salome presumably performs an erotic dance to his satisfaction. At this point Salome asks on behalf of her mother for the head of John the Baptist; and Herod Antipas, having made this rash promise in front of all of his birthday guests, has no choice but to have John immediately beheaded, and his head brought up to Herodias at the feast. Of course this is *not* the sort of behavior you expect from Jews, in terms of etiquette or Torah obedience. But this is *exactly* the sort of perverted behavior the Jews would expect from polytheistic idolatrous Roman heathens at that time – and that’s probably the point of the story.

- Deposed by Romans for Conspiracy

According to Josephus, Herod Antipas became increasingly paranoid towards the end of his reign, like his father - fearful of rebellion by his own people. He began to stockpile weapons at his many

palaces, which were decorated in the Roman style with idolatrous mosaics and statuary and murals. When the Romans heard that he was stockpiling weapons, they misinterpreted this as a threat to their power, and had him deposed in 39 C.E. But because he had been a loyal ruler for over forty years, they allowed him to retire in exile, and incorporated Galilee into the territory of direct Roman along with Judea in the south.

1.3 Jewish Social Structure

The class structure at the time of Jesus was very hierarchical and extremely stratified. It is vital to understand the role that each of these groups plays in the Gospel stories, and Jesus' relationships to each of these classes.

❖ Romans

At the apex of the social structure were the Romans. The presence of the Romans in Israel at the time of Jesus was rather minimal, with just a small garrison of perhaps 3,000 soldiers under Pilate in Caesarea Maritima, and spread out in different places in Judea. [The Syrian Legate, in the province to the north, controlled four legions of Infantry (about 20,000 soldiers) and one legion of Cavalry (5,000 horses), and could be relied upon for immediate muscular crowd control in an emergency.)] The Romans were an occupying force, and controlled all matters political, economic, social...and *religious*.

❖ Priests

The Romans collaborated first and foremost with the Priests at the temple in Jerusalem at that time. The Romans chose who the Chief Priest was to ensure loyalty as the Romans needed someone who would keep peace and security, and guarantee the steady flow of revenue to the Roman treasury to pay for the cost of the occupation. There was no separation of religion and state at the time of Jesus: the priests were both supreme theological arbiters, and also supreme political rulers as well. This was a theocracy.

❖ Local “Elders” [and Tax Collectors]

The Romans also collaborated with the local Elders / Landowners (members of the Sadducee class) which included the approximately seventy richest families in Israel who owned virtually the land in the territory at that time. The Tax Collectors [Publicans] worked for the Sadducees.

There was no “Middle Class” to speak of at the time of Jesus. The gap between the Priests and the Elders at that time and the rest of the population of Israel – approximately 99.9% of the people – was an abyss. Simply put, there were the “Haves” and the “Have Nots”.

❖ Tenant Farmers & Artisans

At the top of the lower classes were the Tenant Farmers and Artisans. Jesus was *not* a peasant - a peasant farmer leased land from the Elders without actually owning the land, and farmed the land in a system analogous to feudal serfdom. The peasant farmers were responsible for farming the land on behalf of the Elders. and paying a portion of their harvest in rent. Jesus, on the other hand,

was a skilled worker or an “Artisan.” He belonged to trade which is described in the Gospels in Greek as “Tekton” - which is better translated as “construction worker” rather than “carpenter.” It is likely that Jesus earned his living in the building trade (probably in nearby Sepphoris), and may well have specialized in woodworking as his father had done before him. He may have performed tasks like framing houses, and making and installing doors and window shutters. (It would be a mistake to think of Jesus making bespoke furniture.) Examples of other skilled workers and artisans at the time of Jesus included bakers, butchers, iron-workers and blacksmiths, basket weavers, tanners and leather-goods workers (such as Paul), and weavers / textile workers.

❖ Day Laborers

Below the level of the artisans and tenant farmers were the unskilled laborers. These were people who have nothing to offer their employers except their strength and their ability to perform unskilled tasks. The unskilled day workers would work for one denarius, which is the daily wage. They would gather early every morning in the marketplace and hope to be hired by the tenant farmers or well-off artisans, or even the stewards / managers of the Elders and Landlords in order to earn a fair day’s wage. The denarius they were paid - the daily wage - was enough to pay the bills for one day: rent and food for the family. When Jesus says in the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread”, he means: “*Please ensure that we earn enough money to pay our bills for that day*” ... which would be a denarius. If an unskilled laborer was not hired for that particular day, for whatever reason – because they were old or sick or infirmed, etc. – they would fall into debt, which is the worst fear of any member of the lower classes at the time of Jesus.

❖ Debt Slaves

The next class down below the day laborers were known as the Debt Slaves. Although Judaism does not officially recognized slavery as an institution in the Torah, nevertheless in a practical sense slavery existed at the time of Jesus. But slavery was not practiced by the buying and selling of people, but rather through the assignment of creditor-debtor relationships to individuals. If someone fell behind with the rent or got behind with their bills, or could not work and did not have sufficient funds to pay their expenses, they would have to take out a loan from those who had spare capital. This would be the landowners / elders, and their agents, the Tax Collectors. The landowners would loan money out through their agents (called “stewards” or “managers”, as they are referred to in the parables). They would charge exorbitant, punitive rates of interest, and debt slavery was an institution from which it was extremely hard for any unlucky debtor to ever escape. When Jesus is looking for an apt metaphor for sin in the Lord’s Prayer, he obviously turns to the institution of Debt Slavery. Everyone at the time of Jesus would understand how debt slavery is comparable to sin. This is why Jesus says (in Greek in the Gospels): “Forgive us our *debts* as we forgive those who are *indebted* to us.” He does not use language of “sin” or “trespass”: Jesus instead uses the metaphor of debt slavery. Everyone in Jesus’ audience would know that once you’re in debt it’s almost impossible to escape from that situation without the redemptive intervention of a third-party who would pay off or forgive your debt. Otherwise, your life is no longer your own but forfeit to the whims of your creditor.

❖ Outcasts & Beggars

Finally, below the level of the debt slaves are the outcasts and disabled, the beggars, the marginalized, and the poorest of the poor. These are people who through no fault of their own end up in abject circumstances where they cannot provide for themselves. If you were born with a disability or if you are injured in the course of your life such that you're crippled or paralyzed in some way and cannot work, then you are no longer economically viable, and you would have to beg for survival ... because the chances are that your family are not wealthy enough to take care of you. If you have some sort of neurological or psychiatric condition—such as a form of mental illness or depression or mania, or some other form of mental pathology—you would be regarded at the time of Jesus as being “possessed by demons” and would also be outcast, and seen as spiritually and physically unclean. Those with infectious skin diseases (lepers) were also ostracized and segregated. If you were a woman who was deserted by her husband, or widowed, you may not have the ability to remarry or to work in order to take care of your children. Therefore, such women may end up in prostitution as the only means by which they could earn sufficient funds to take care of their children. No woman would choose prostitution as a lifestyle choice: women who end up in prostitution do so because of the force of circumstances, and the brutal standards of a patriarchal society in which male opinion-formers stigmatize prostitutes ... but also, of course, constitute their clientele.

No self-respecting Jew from any class at the time of Jesus would associate with outcasts or beggars. The social circumstances of outcasts and beggars were regarded equally as much due to physical, economic and social causes, as well as to theological causes - because of sin or unrighteousness of some sort or another. Therefore, Jesus' association with outcasts, beggars, prostitutes - and tax collectors (who were also regarded as outcasts, even though they were economically prosperous) - was one of the most extraordinary, astounding, shocking and radical aspects of his public ministry.

2. Religion in the Greco-Roman World

There are some parallels and affinities between the religious world that Jesus occupied in ancient Israel and the religious world dominated by the Greco-Roman empire. However there are also significant contrasts between the religious world of the Jews and the religious world of the Greco-Romans, as well as several significant contrasts between our assumptions about religion in the West today compared to the way in which contemporaries of Jesus understood the nature and role of religion in their world.

2.1 Official Roman Religion

I. Anthropomorphism – Not Transcendence

The God of ancient Israel is a transcendent God - spiritual, non-material, metaphysical, apart from the created order. But the gods of the ancient Greco-Roman world are physical: they are what we would call “Anthropomorphic gods” in that they share the physical and psychological characteristics and traits of human beings. However these are exaggerated qualities and characteristics that are possessed by the Greco-Roman gods: while they are capable of almost

superhuman feats of strength and virtue, they are also capable of being duplicitous, greedy, selfish and hateful.

II. Polytheism – Not Monotheism

In contrast to the Monotheistic religion of the Jews, the religion of the Greco-Romans was Polytheistic. The gods of the Roman Empire are plagiarized from the gods of the Greek pantheon: the Romans simply substituted Latin names for the Greek names of the Greek gods. The Romans also figured out a convenient way of organizing their gods and goddesses in a hierarchical, pyramid structure that gave them flexibility as the masters of an empire that included many different religions and ethnicities. At the apex of the pyramid of Roman gods and goddesses is Jupiter (or Zeus), the supreme god. Beneath Jupiter are the supreme gods of Mount Olympus - mostly blood relatives of Jupiter who perform various functions and are assigned portfolios of responsibility (such as War, the Sea, the Underworld, Love, etc.), much as a Cabinet reports to the President. The next level down from the supreme gods of Rome and Greece are all the local gods worshipped by subjugated peoples within the Roman empire. For example, the Egyptians have their own gods – Isis, Ra, Osiris, etc. Therefore, to the Romans, “Yahweh”, who is worshiped by the Jews, is simply the local Jewish God. Intuitively, the Roman gods are superior to these local gods – otherwise, Rome would be part of the Egyptian empire or the Jewish empire. Because the Roman gods are anthropomorphic they are capable of interacting, and if they desire (and they often do), having sexual intercourse with mortals. This creates a hybrid class of beings that are the products of the sexual congress of divine beings with human beings. This fourth layer of the Roman pyramid is populated by “demigods”, “semi-divine beings” or “immortals.” The Romans place in this category people like Hercules, Odysseus and Perseus – human beings who possess divine blood through their parentage. This would also be the most obvious place for the Romans to categorize someone like Jesus of Nazareth, who is claimed by his followers to be the Son of (a) God but also the child of an earthly mother. [At the time of Jesus, the Roman Emperor was also considered to be the “Son of a god” (*divi filius*).] Finally, at the bottom of the pyramid are all other mere mortal human beings.

III. This Present Life - Not the After-Life

Roman religion contrasts with many of our contemporary assumptions about the nature of religion in the modern West. For example, we tend to think of religious people as being focused on the afterlife: the majority of members of monotheistic faiths (especially Christianity and Islam) believe that all that ultimately matters is the afterlife, and that this life is merely an apprenticeship or extended job interview that seals your destiny in the next life. However the Romans, like most ancient Jews, do not really have a strong conception of the afterlife. (In Greco-Roman myths, although the afterlife can sometimes be a place of torment and punishment, for the most part it seems to be a place of extended cryogenic suspension and tedious boredom.) Instead, the focus of Roman religion is on the Present Life: the reason to be religious is to bring prosperity, health and success to your life and endeavors in the here and now through the blessings and favors of the gods.

IV. Cultic Acts – Not Doctrine

If you get a two or three members of different religions in a room together today, sooner or later arguments will break out about the nature of their different beliefs. This is because most

contemporary religions are “Doctrinal” – that is, they are defined by *beliefs* about God and the afterlife (creeds). However, ancient Greco-Roman religion is not Doctrinal in that sense, but instead is better classified as “Cultic.” Taken from the Latin word “cultus” (which means “to take care of” or “to cultivate”), “Cultic” religion is one where you perform rituals in order to *take care of* the gods, such as having a shrine at your house or visiting a temple and making offerings, etc. You take care of the gods so that the gods will take care of you. In this sense, Greco-Roman religion is reciprocal and extremely transactional – a sort of vending machine that provides all necessary blessings and benefits to the devoted follower. (The way that the Covenant functions in Judaism is somewhat similar.)

V. Religion & State Together – Not Separation of Religious & Civic Affairs

Of course, it is a presupposition of modern liberal democracy that the functions of the State should be separated from the patrimony of Religion. But there is no such separation of Religion and State in the ancient Greco-Roman world – on the contrary, Religion and State are inseparable in Rome. For example the Roman Emperor is also “Pontifex Maximus”, the chief priest; the temples of ancient Rome were paid for by the state, and the priestly personnel that operated the temples were chosen and paid by the state; before a war or a battle, the Romans would offer sacrifices and consult the oracles to insure auspicious circumstances. And of course, ultimately, the Roman Imperial Cult regarded the emperor as a manifestation of a divine being, as much to encourage political subjugation as to raise up a sense of religious devotion to the supreme leader. Rome was great as an Empire because it had the support and backing of the Roman gods. But Judaism had the functions of Religion and State just as entangled, but in different ways: for example, the chief priests wielded supreme power in ancient Israel in the form of a theocracy; and the law of the land of ancient Israel was the Torah, taken from the Scriptural books of Moses.

VI. Tolerance – Not Intolerance

Finally we tend to assume that religions are somewhat intolerant today because of the conflicted nature of doctrinal beliefs. Surprisingly, though, Greco-Roman religion was relatively tolerant. It *had* to be in order to survive as an empire. With so many different ethnicities practicing so many different types of religion within the empire, the Romans could not afford to be intransigent and intolerant when it came to religious freedom. There was no better way of provoking rebellion than to crack down on the religious beliefs of your subject peoples. But there was one exception to Roman tolerance in the realm of religion, and that concerned the Roman Imperial Cults that encouraged worship of the emperor as a semi-divine being. To not worship the emperor was to engage in an act of political subversion. And this would prove disastrous for both Jews and Christians alike.

2.2 *Unofficial Roman Religion*

What would Greco-Romans make of something like early Christianity? Because Christianity looks nothing like official Roman religions, it is likely that the Romans perceived Christianity as comparable to one of the more esoteric forms of religious practice that could be found throughout the empire.

1. Magic & Mystery Cults

- Unofficial Roman Religion
- Secretive – Initiation
- Bizarre Rituals
- Parallels with Early Christianity

For example, in most of the provinces in the empire there were entities known as “Magic and Mystery Cults” which were one of the forms of unofficial Roman religion. In such Magic and Mystery Cults you would find all sorts of secret practices, bizarre rituals, initiation, and strange cultic belief systems. It is probable that most of these groups were closely analogous to different urban trade guild bodies; and the purpose of such organizations – like the purpose of organizations such as the Freemasons, Shriners and Elks Lodges today – was primarily for business networking. It is easy to see how Greco-Romans could mistake early Christianity for one of these exclusive Magic and Mystery Cult membership organizations. For example, early Christians met in secret for fear of persecution; they practiced strange rituals such as Baptism (a bizarre bathing ritual to outsiders), and the Eucharist (which might appear to be a form of cannibalism to the uninitiated). Early Christians also used strange secretive passwords and symbols, such as the Jesus Fish (which is an acronym in Greek for the creedal statement: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”); and nothing was more bizarre and strange to the Romans than the use of the crucifix as a sacred symbol, because the Romans used it as a form of dehumanizing execution for the worst of the worst.

2. Ancient Philosophy

- The Search for the Meaning of Life
- Missionary-Oriented
- Competitive
- Parallels with Early Christianity

Another form of social organization that may have some affinity with early Christianity, in the eyes of the Romans, were the various Schools of Philosophy that proliferated throughout the empire. Official Greco-Roman Religion was not a place where you went to resolve the great questions of human existence. If you wanted to argue about the meaning and purpose of life you would join a School of Philosophy. There were many such schools full of devoted followers throughout the empire, in which the teacher would instruct his disciples in his methods of his thought and practice. These groups tended to be *very intolerant* (in contrast with official Greco-Roman religion), and they also aggressively recruited followers, and sought out opportunities to argue about their beliefs (“doctrines”). The public perception of Jesus as a Rabbi (Teacher), with a set of 12 students (Disciples), who he is training up in order to send them out to spread his message (Apostles), would make Jesus and his followers look very much like an ancient School of Jewish Philosophy. The activity and mission journeys of the Apostle Paul, schooled in Greco-Roman rhetoric and philosophy, also fits conveniently into this categorization.

3. *Judaism as Religion*

Before looking at the different sectarian Jewish religious factions of the time of Jesus, it is worth remembering what they all held in common.

I. Monotheism - One God

Firstly Judaism is defined by its monotheism – the existence of only one supreme transcendent God. All of the other gods are man-made and idolatrous (“created”), and therefore in no way comparable to the one true God of Israel (“Creator”). God makes Humankind. Humankind makes idols.

II. Covenant – Israel’s Contract with God

Secondly the Jews believe that they were in a special relationship with God established by the Covenant made with their ancestor Abraham. On the one hand this may give them a sense of privileged status; but at other times it gave them what can seem like a sense of entitled elitism and xenophobia that was profoundly alienating to their neighbors.

III. Law – Israel’s Covenantal Obligations

Thirdly the Jews believe that they had been blessed by God with the Torah, the Law, a set of 613 specific commandments / instructions (*mitzvah*) about how they were to exist in relationship with God and in relationship with their fellow human beings.

IV. Temple & Synagogue – Israel’s Places of Worship

Fourthly, the Jews only had one Temple for the one true God, in comparison to the many temples throughout the polytheistic Greco-Roman world. However, by the time of Jesus a parallel set of religious institutions had developed in Judaism which dated back to the time of the Diaspora following the Assyrian and the Babylonian conquests, when Jews were pushed out of their homeland and isolated from the temple in Jerusalem. Groups of Diaspora Jews living in refugee communities throughout the Middle East would meet together on the Sabbath to worship and read Torah. The name of such gatherings in the Greco-Roman world were “Synagogos” (Greek), which means “gathering together.” But as Jewish communities thrived in the Diaspora, they would eventually be able to acquire land and construct a purpose-built worship space – and so the community known as “Synagogos” is transformed into the building called a synagogue. [A similar metamorphosis took place in the meaning of “Church”, which was known as “Ekklesia” (assembly of people, in Greek) from earliest times when Christians met in secret on the first day of the week (the day of the Resurrection). But over time, as Christianity was legalized and institutionalized after Constantine, the name of the gathered community was transferred to the building where they gathered – and church changed from a verb (something that you do, that you are / are part of) to a noun (a place that you go to).] The synagogue would be the focal point of life for Jewish existence in the Diaspora: it was a place of worship and celebration on the Sabbath and on festival days; it was a place where rites of passage in human existence were commemorated, such as birth, marriage and death; and it was a place of teaching and instruction where the Hebrew language and the study of Torah took place. The person who presided in a synagogue was known as a Teacher or “Rabbi.” They were experts on the reading and interpretation of Torah. However unlike priests at the temple, they were unable to perform sacrifices, because God was not “present” (*Shekinah*) in a synagogue – it wasn’t the “House of God” with a Holy of Holies. Therefore, the temple retained its supremacy when it came to the central rituals of atonement.

4. Ancient & Modern “Worldviews”

➤ Danger of “Anachronism”

One of the great dangers of studying ancient religious texts like the Christian Scriptures is our inability or reluctance to hear the words written by those who produced them in their contemporary setting. Nowhere is this more crucial than when it comes to matters of religion and spirituality. This tone-deafness to the world of the texts can lead to the cardinal sin of historical inquiry which is called “Anachronism” – the act of mistakenly attributing a custom or a concept, an event or an object, to a period in which it does not belong. (Think of elves in *Lord of the Rings* using cell phones!) More misinterpretations or misunderstandings arise from anachronism than from almost any other source.

4.1 Modern Worldview

- ❖ Dark Ages
- ❖ Enlightenment
- ❖ Humanism
- ❖ Science
- ❖ Secularism

Our assumptions about the world today are defined by that momentous period of history known as the “Enlightenment” that took place roughly between the mid-17th Century through the beginning of the 19th Century. This is the period of history that defines modernity. The Enlightenment, in contrast to the preceding Dark Ages, was characterized by a new spirit of inquiry and discovery. It was a philosophical revolution initiated by René Descartes (1596-1650), who transformed the nature of epistemology (the branch of philosophy that deals with what we know and how we know it), which led to a new method of inquiry using human experience that we understand today as the “Scientific Method.” In contrast to the realm of faith, revelation, fear and superstition that demarcated the Dark Ages, when ancient religious texts and religious institutions dictated what you could and could not believe, the Scientific Method liberated human beings to pursue their lines of inquiry according to rational autonomy, and the freedom to follow wherever the evidence takes you. This led to a much more secular understanding of the world - that is to say, a view of the world that is liberated from religious doctrine and precepts. Tremendous leaps forward in science led to great technical innovation and progress that transformed human experience. Faith gave way to science; autocracy was replaced by democracy, a much more rational system of government; rural agricultural economies were transformed into urban industrial economies. The Enlightenment propelled us forward into the forms of modern life that we recognize and experience today. These are the ideas and features that constitute the modern “Worldview” - a worldview that tends to have a much less sympathetic understanding of religion and faith than the period preceding the Enlightenment.

4.2 Ancient Worldview

- ❖ Explaining the Inexplicable
- ❖ The World of Spirits
- ❖ “Charismatics”
- ❖ Battle of Light vs. Darkness

The worldview of the time in which Jesus lived could not be more different for our modern worldview. Human beings, at the time of Jesus, who were confronted with facets of life and experience that they did not understand immediately, appealed to the spiritual and the transcendent in order to provide an explanation. Phenomena that we would explain today by science —such as thunderstorms, earthquakes, rainbows, etc. — were explained back then as the activity of intervening supernatural gods intruding into the natural world. The physical world was suffused with the activity and expression of spiritual, supernatural realities. The physical, material world was simply a shadow of the much more real spiritual and supernatural world that lay behind it (think of Plato’s Cave). Greco-Romans and Jews alike saw the world as a battlefield where opposing spiritual forces fight for supremacy. In such a world, those who could tap into, connect with and manipulate spiritual forces were prized above all individuals. These might be people who could see the future and predict what was to happen; or who had the power to perform miracles; or the ability to heal those suffering from physical and mental elements ... such as shaman, clairvoyants, oracles, witch doctors, and all such leaders in different types of primitive cultures.

We might call such individuals “Charismatics”, from the Greek word *charisma* which means “spirits.” Charismatics could be either good or evil, fighting for light or fighting for darkness. We understand the word “charismatic” today to mean someone who has a magnetic, compulsive effect on others. Everyone would agree that Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was a charismatic of the good kind. But likewise, anyone who has seen one of the Hitler’s speeches at Nuremberg to a mass rally filled with fervent Nazis would also recognize him as a charismatic as well – albeit one of the evil kind.

The same arguments about categorization took place at the time of Jesus regarding the source and allegiance of those wielding such spiritual power. In Mark 3, Jesus is accused of acting by the power of “Beelzebul” - a presiding demon who has authority over a notorious trash heap outside the city walls of Jerusalem, the so-called “Lord of the Flies.” Jesus takes up this claim and turns it on his accusers, pointing out that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” The reasoning he uses is that if he is casting demons *out* of people, then he can hardly be in league with Satan himself. (If he was working *with* and *for* Satan, he ought to be stuffing demons inside of people!) The interesting point of the interchange, however, is that Jesus’ opponents *at least* concede that he has power. The only point being disputed is what the *source* of that power is – and Jesus seems to have an inarguable case on that score.

5. *Flavius Josephus*

- Rebel Captain in Jewish War (66-70 C.E.)
- Became Client of Emperor Titus
- Devoted to History:
 - ❖ *The Jewish War*
 - ❖ *The Antiquities of the Jews*

After the Gospels in the Christian Scriptures, one of the greatest sources of information we have about this period in which Jesus lived are the writings of the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (37 - c.100 C.E.). His somewhat odd name betrays his conflicted identity: Joseph was originally a rebel captain in the Jewish revolt that broke out in 66 C.E.; but he was captured by the Romans and turned into a propagandist for the Flavian dynasty (hence, the Romanized “Flavius Josephus”) who produced biased accounts of history in favor of Emperors Vespasian and Titus, both of whom were father and son generals in the war. Josephus, a highly educated individual who could read and write in many of the Mediterranean languages of the day, was commissioned after the Jewish Revolt to write the official Roman history of the suppression of the rebellion in order to burnish the reputation of the Flavian dynasty that had just assumed imperial office. This work is known as *The Jewish War*. Having completed this work, Josephus then turned to the entirety of Jewish history for his next subject, which he wished to compose in the style of a Greco-Roman historian. Instead of focusing on the relationship between God and his people through the Covenant, which is the approach of the Jewish historians in the Scriptures (the Deuteronomists), Josephus wanted to focus on secular matters – politics, battles, dynasties, speeches – that which is the subject-matter of secular academic history today. His book on Jewish history is known as *The Antiquities of the Jews*. Because of the time period in which he lived, Josephus’ *Antiquities* focuses particularly on the Hasmonean period through the reign of Herod the Great and the lead up to the Jewish Revolt in 66 C.E.

Many Christians are over-excited by this text because it includes references to Jesus of Nazareth, including an infamous paragraph in which Josephus seems to affirm that Jesus is the resurrected Son of God (*Antiquities* XVIII.iii.3)! However it is much more likely, given the tone and nature of Josephus’ entire text, that this notorious passage was a later insertion by Christian copyists who were interested in preserving Josephus’ writings because of the additional information contained therein about the world that Jesus lived in.

Josephus describes four primary religious factions and sectarian groups at the time of Jesus: we know of three of them from the Gospels, but one of them remained a mystery to us until recent archaeological discoveries in the 20th Century.

6. Sectarian Religion & Politics of First Century CE Palestine

6.1 Groups & Sects

1. Sadducees (Herodians) & Priests

- Ruling Class
- Landowners – “Elders”
- Party of “Zadok”
- Strong Supporters of the Temple and the Priests
- Sadducees and Jesus

The first group that Josephus discusses is called the Sadducees. This is the group of Jews that constituted the ruling class at the time of Jesus. They were the nobility, the landowners, the tax-

collectors and money-lenders. They were rich and entitled, they were strong supporters of the priests and the Temple, and they collaborated with the Romans, profiting handsomely from the occupation through the tax system. These alliances were intended to protect their vested interests. The name “Sadducee” probably originated from the “Party of Zadok” (the original Chief Priest of the Temple during the reign of Solomon), which evolved into “Zadokees” (Anglicized “Saducees”) from the Greek. Strong supporters of the priests who collaborated with the Romans, the Sadducees tended to focus on the ritual and atoning aspects of Judaism. They were not really interested in the Torah – which is just as well because their lifestyle and behavior repeatedly broke basic Torah ethical rules. Conveniently for them, the Temple offered unlimited atonement through sacrificial rituals. Jesus’ favorite Hebrew text, which he quotes repeatedly in Matthew’s Gospel is probably intended to be aimed at this group: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6).

There was very little affinity between Jesus and the Sadducees. As a relentless critic of the corruption of the Temple and the corruption of the priests, and as bruising opponent of the abuses of the ruling class (particularly in the social and economic spheres), Jesus would have been very unpopular among the Sadducees. As a group who, along with the priests, were ultimately responsible for law and order, a populist rabble-rouser like Jesus would have greatly perturbed the peace of mind of the Sadducees. We only have one example throughout the Gospels of a Sadducee who sympathized with Jesus — Joseph of Arimathea, who is described as a member of the council (“Sanhedrin”) in Mark 15, and petitions Pilate to receive Jesus’ dead body so he can give it a proper burial. But any Sadducee would have to be a secret follower of Jesus - because to openly follow Jesus as a Sadducee would be to renounce your class affiliation.

2. Scribes & Pharisees (Rabbis)

- “Separated Ones”
- Rabbis = Teachers
- Torah & “Oral Law”
- *Mishnah & Talmud*
- Leaders of Synagogues
- Influential but not All-Powerful
- Pharisees and Jesus

The group everyone loves to hate in early Christianity, the villains of the Gospels, is the Pharisees. The problem for us is that the opponents of the Pharisees, the early Christians, are the ones who have defined them through their Christian writings. However, in reality, it is likely that the nature of Pharisee practices was more nuanced and complex than is portrayed in the rather two-dimensional, villainous, hypocritical caricature that we find in the Gospels. “Pharisee” comes from a word which means “separated ones,” and they are basically the class of religious Jews who constituted the Rabbis (teachers and scribes) who were learned in Hebrew and could read and write. Their specialization was in speaking and reading and writing Hebrew, and interpreting the most important text in Hebrew – the Torah. They were the lawyers in Judaism. The rules of the Torah, the 613 commandments (*mitzvah*) contained in the books of Moses, was the supreme law of Israel. However, written law also needs to be interpreted in order to be understood and applied

in practice. This is the role that the judiciary plays in modern legal systems, as compared to the legislature that writes the law, and the executive that enforces the law. The rabbis were both the attorneys and the judges in legal disputes. As such they built up a complex, voluminous body of interpretation of the law. Building on real cases that were argued in front of them, and hypothetical situations they thought up in their imaginations, they develop what is known as the “Oral Law” – interpretations of the written Torah law that emerged through deliberation of cases, both real and hypothetical. (Classical Roman Law and English Civil Law developed in exactly the same way – if you go to Law School, you spend a fraction of your time studying legislation, and the overwhelming majority reading and studying “case law” – actual cases with complicated facts that were argued before judges, requiring rulings on the interpretation of the law by judges.) It is these interpretations of the Law — which are characterized in the Gospels as lacking compassion and full of legal sophistry and hypocrisy — that forms the heart of the arguments between Jesus and the Pharisees. They allowed the Pharisees to see the world through a divisive, alienating “Them & Us” perspective of “Righteous” and “Sinner”, “Clean” and Unclean.” It would be a few hundred years before these grand oral law systems were eventually written down as texts. The first written collection of the oral law is known as the *Mishnah*, and dates to about 200 C.E. Then a series of commentaries on the *Mishnah* were written and compiled into what is known as the *Talmud* (4th – 6th Centuries C.E.). Pharisaic Judaism is argument without end. The only thing worse thing than arguing about the Torah, to a Pharisee ... is *not* arguing about the Torah ... which would suggest a kind of indifference towards and apathy concerning God’s relationship with his Chosen People.

No doubt the Pharisees were powerful and influential as leaders of the synagogue at the time of Jesus, which would make them the principal leaders of Judaism at the local level. However it is unlikely that they were as all-powerful as they are portrayed in the Gospels. The Gospels more likely reflect the changing status of the Pharisees after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., when power shifted away from atonement rituals in the Temple (which no longer existed) to the interpretation of Torah in the synagogues, which were controlled by the Rabbis (Pharisees). Judaism today is Rabbinical Judaism, and has been for the last two millennia. This is the enduring legacy of the Pharisees. And peculiarly enough, when people meet Jesus for the first time, they look at him and listen to him, and see how he operates ... and they assume that he is a Rabbi because of the way he personally argues about the Law, and the fact that he has Twelve Disciples who are studying under him so that they can pass on his interpretation of the Law.

6.2 “Apocalypticism” as Faith and an Ideology of Resistance

- “Metanarrative” – Interpretation of History
- Limitations of “Covenant” Metanarrative of History

Historians are not only interested in studying the names, dates, times, and places that form the basic narratives of history. Historians also wish to uncover the “Big Picture” which is constructed out of these names, dates, times, and places. These “Big Pictures” are called “Metanarratives.” A metanarrative soars above the micro-narratives out of which history is constructed, and attempts to offer a broad interpretation of history — to find meaning or discover purpose or direction or destiny in history itself. For example we all learned the basic narratives of United States History at school: from the pre-Columbus period of Native American settlement and culture, through the

time of the arrival of the European settlers after 1492; from Colonial times through the War of Independence; the Civil War and the rise of the United States as a world economic and political power; World Wars, Cold Wars, Wars on Terrorism...right up until the present day. Thus, if we were looking for a metanarrative of U.S. History — that is to say, asking what all the micro-narratives of U.S. History amount to in terms of thematic unity — we might say, for example, that U.S. History is about “Liberty”, or about the “American Dream”, or about “Social and Economic Mobility” or about “Capitalism”, or about the “Projection of Power”, or about an uneasy and reluctant relationship with the concept of “Empire”, etc.

As one looks at the Jewish concept of history, it appears quite clearly in the early texts of Judaism that the central metanarrative for Jewish History is the Covenant. The relationship between God and his Chosen People is mediated through their obedience and adherence to, or their disobedience and neglect of, the Covenant and the accompanying Torah. The meaning of history can thus be stated: *If you follow the Law and keep God’s Covenant, you will prosper. But if you disobey and ignore God’s will, you will not.* And for the most part, certainly for the early period of Jewish history, that seemed to work out just fine.

However, any theory works as long as it makes sense of the data. But when a theory is no longer able to make sense of the data, then you need a new theory. This is what happened during the long period of foreign occupation and subjugation that began with the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests in the 8th and 6th Centuries B.C.E. respectively. The sages of Judaism looked at their experience of oppression and injustice at the hands of foreign idolatrous rulers, and measured that against the crimes that they were purported to have committed - and reasoned that the punishment did not fit the crime. The Covenant theory did not seem to be working; but the idea that God might have lost control of history, or that God was apathetic to history and the fate of the Jews, was not one that could be countenanced. What should we conclude, then, *when bad things are happening to good people – and good things are happening to bad people?* This is an eternal dilemma in faith and philosophy, and one of the ultimate questions of human existence. Therefore, slowly but surely, an alternative metanarrative of Jewish History emerges during the latter half of the 1st Millennium B.C.E. That new metanarrative is known as the “Apocalyptic” Theory of History.

- “Apocalypticism” as New Metanarrative of History (200 B.C.E. – 200 C.E.)
- “Apocalypticism” = Unveiling what is Hidden - Revelation
- Afterlife - Judgment – Resurrection – Reward & Punishment - “Messiah”

“Apocalypticism” does not necessarily simply mean the end of the world as we know it. Apocalypticism comes from the Greek word “*Apokalypsis*”, which means “unveiling” of something hidden, a disclosure or a revelation. At the heart of Apocalyptic Theory as a metanarrative of Jewish History is the basic assumption that the true meaning of history has been *hidden* from us by God; but God is slowly *revealing* more and more, unveiling to us the meaning of history, piece by piece. For example, if there is no guarantee of justice in this life — if good people suffer and wicked people prosper — then cosmic justice, perhaps, will be satisfied by extended existence in an Afterlife. Jewish Apocalypticists, however, did not believe in the transmigration of souls, which is a Greek idea; instead, they believed in the resurrection of the body – after death, somehow, your body will be reconstituted at the end of time and raised to

eternal life in a new form. (This is what Ezekiel saw in his vision of the Valley of Dry Bones – Ezekiel 37.) When you arrive in the Afterlife, there will be a judgment carried out by God based on your obedience and faithfulness to the Torah and the principles of the 613 Commandments contained therein. To the extent that you have been obedient and faithful to the Law, you will be rewarded with an Afterlife in Heaven; but to the extent that you have been unfaithful and disobedient, you will be punished eternally in Hell.

These are new, inchoate ideas that emerge slowly sometime during the latter half of the 1st Millennium B.C.E., right up until the time of Jesus. These were revelations or “Apokalypses” that were revealed to the wise men of ancient Judaism. They were not satisfied with the idea that God could allow evil to have the upper hand in history. Therefore, the notion of Satan was deepened and broadened as an “Adversary” or “Accuser,” a spiritual counter-weight pitched against the will of God. The reason for current injustice in the world, which was experienced by the Jews in the form of foreign occupation, was an example of Satan wielding power in the present historical era. But Apocalypticists believed that God would not ultimately allow Satan to have the upper hand in history for ever. Therefore, the idea of a returning “Messiah” emerges, a “Messiah” like David who will defeat the forces of Satan and evil once and for all — and then (re-)establish the “Golden Age” of Judaism for ever and ever in a state of perpetual peace.

Apocalyptic ideas reach their zenith somewhere between approximately 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., which covers the time of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and Saul/Paul of Tarsus, and the writing of the Christian Scriptures. Of course, not everyone was in favor of Apocalyptic theory: it has little attraction for Sadducees, Priests and Pharisees, who believe that they were *already* blessed and prospering in this life. However, for those who felt the brunt of oppression and injustice, particularly the lower classes, Apocalypticism offered a dynamic theology and philosophy of history that gave them hope for the future, allowing them to escape from despair and depression.

➤ Characteristics of Apocalyptic Writings:

- ❖ Dualism
- ❖ Pessimism
- ❖ Vindication
- ❖ Imminence

The writing style of Apocalypticism is very distinctive, and can be identified by four dominant features. *Firstly*, Apocalypticism has a very Dualistic view of reality: that means they separate experience into radical opposites. For example: light and darkness, good and evil, God and Satan, angels and demons, heaven and hell, this life and the next life, etc. *Secondly*, and rather counter-intuitively, Apocalyptic writing is rather Pessimistic. It is not pessimistic about the ultimate goal of history, but pessimistic about the present reality. The present reality is one dominated by the forces of evil where righteous people are suffering and being oppressed. But these are not mere human problems; instead, they are problems caused by supernatural, spiritual activity in the world. Therefore Apocalypticism is very pessimistic about the notion that human beings will be able to resolve their own problems. Rather, it will take a Messianic intervention in history by God in order to resolve the problems of oppression and injustice. *Thirdly*, Apocalypticists very much believe in Vindication. They feel deeply the injustice of the situation they’re in, and they look for

deliverance and vindication at the hands of an ultimately just and righteous God. The flipside of vindication, though, is “Vengeance”: Apocalypticists get almost as worked up about the idea of their enemies being punished as they do about their own righteous Vindication. *Fourthly*, Apocalypticists believe all these things will take place Imminently. They do not believe that these are events that will happen in the far distant future, but rather they believe that they are living in the end times, that this will all happen soon, that the means of their vindication are at hand. Apocalypticists do not purchase green bananas.

The result of this sense of Apocalyptic imminence is twofold and contradictory. On the one hand, Apocalypticists who believe that they are living in the end times may often lack motivation to address secular problems in the world today. Why deal with issues of war and conflict, global warming and climate change, health and education, when the Messiah will return imminently, and history will be brought to an end? However, the more comforting result of Apocalyptic imminence is the fact that, so far, in all history, every Apocalypticist that has ever lived ... in any period of time ... has been ... *Wrong!* There were Apocalypticists who believed the world was coming to an end the time of Jesus; there were Apocalypticists who believed the world was coming to an end during the time of the Roman empire; there were Apocalypticists who believed the world was coming to an end at the end of the 1st Millennium C.E.; there were Apocalypticists who believed that the Crusades or the Black Death, or the Inquisition were signs of the end times. Some people believed that the Protestant Reformation presaged the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Others have identified Napoleon Bonaparte, Kaiser Wilhelm, Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, or Saddam Hussein, or Osama bin Laden as the “Antichrist.” And they have all been ... *wrong!*

Somebody once asked Martin Luther what he would do if he knew the world was going to end tomorrow. “I would plant a tree,” said the great Reformer, seemingly unfazed. What he meant by this apparently flippant comment is that people ought not to want to live with a bloodthirsty and pessimistic expectation of the end times, but should rather live in hopeful anticipation of the working out of God’s purposes in *our* world, as well as in the next. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...”

You can find some examples of Apocalyptic writing in the Jewish scriptures, such as in the prophetic writings of Ezekiel, or in the second half of the book of Daniel. And you can also find examples of Apocalyptic writing throughout the Christian Scriptures, such as Jesus’ Apocalyptic sermons during the Passion narratives; the Letters of Paul; and most famously in the much-studied and much misunderstood book of Revelation (which is called “Apokalypsis” in Greek). The literature that was written during the Apocalyptic period of Judaism (approximately 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E.) is often referred to as the “Apocrypha” (or “Inter-Testamental Literature”) in Christianity, written between the last writings of the Hebrew Scriptures and the first texts in the Christian Scriptures. The Apocryphal texts are full of pseudonymous (written under fake names) texts that reflect all the characteristics of Apocalyptic writing described above. However, it should be noted that the “Apocrypha” found in some Bibles are *Jewish* Apocalyptic texts, not Christian Apocalyptic texts.

6.3 Groups & Sects (Cont.)

3. Essenes (Dead Sea Scrolls Community)

- The “Holy Ones”
- Qumran 1947
- Dead Sea Scrolls:
 1. Hebrew Scriptures
 2. Apocrypha
 3. Commentaries
 4. Rule Books
- Inner & Outer Purity
- Essenes and Jesus

This brings us then to the two Apocalyptic groups that are discussed by Josephus in his *Antiquities*. The first group that he mentions, a group shrouded in mystery us for many centuries, are the “Essenes.” This group languished in historical obscurity until a young, bored Bedouin shepherd threw some stones into the entrance of a cliff-side cave on the northern shores of the Dead Sea in 1947. He heard the sound of breaking pottery; and when he shinned up the cliff and looked inside the cave, he discovered fragments of what we now recognize as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Scholars believe the Dead Sea Scrolls are the archives and library of the Essene community who left Jerusalem at the time of the Hasmonean monarchy, and formed a monastic community down by the Dead Sea at a place called Qumran. These were mostly former priests who were highly educated but disenchanted with the corruption of the Hasmoneans in both Religious and State affairs. They dedicated themselves to an ascetic lifestyle of simplicity and deprivation which was disciplined and rigorous. As well as spending much time in prayer and contemplation, it seems clear from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the Qumran community also spent much of their time making numerous copies of religious texts.

It took a number of decades for scholars to fully piece together all of the fragments that make up the Dead Sea Scrolls, and for archeologists to fully excavate the site at Qumran; and this led to much rumor and misinformation about the contents of the scrolls. Basically, the scrolls contain many, many different copies of the texts found in the Hebrew Scriptures. They were produced some time between 150 B.C.E. (at the time of the Maccabean Revolt) through to approximately 70 C.E. Written mostly in Hebrew (but also some in Greek and Aramaic), the Dead Sea Scrolls shows us that the final form of the Hebrew Scriptures had been reached by this time period. (This gives an almost complete copy of the Hebrew Scriptures about 1,000 years earlier than the previously oldest copy, which dates from the early 11th Century C.E.) The Dead Sea Scrolls also include copies of the “Apocrypha,” which have a second-tier significance in the version of the Bible used by the oldest denominations of Christianity. Nearly all of the Apocryphal texts are pseudonymous (written under fake names) and Apocalyptic in their style, but they are written from a Jewish Apocalyptic viewpoint, and not a Christian Apocalyptic perspective. A third set of texts in the Dead Sea Scrolls are composed of commentaries written by members of the community as they seek to explain and interpret the prophetic and legal texts of Judaism in line with their Apocalyptic worldview. Finally, the last set of documents in the Dead Sea Scrolls are perhaps the most

interesting, and these are the internal documents and rule-books produced by the Qumran community. In these texts we get a clear glimpse of what the internal communal life of the Essenes was like. They were obviously obsessed with inner purity, in terms of the cultivation of their spiritual life; but they were also clearly interested in external purity as well, because there are many provisions in the rule-books about ritual washing, and excavations at Qumran have revealed a series of baths and cisterns apparently designed specifically for that purpose.

As was mentioned earlier, the Essenes are not mentioned anywhere in the Gospels or the New Testament – and it is an urban legend that Christianity and Jesus of Nazareth are mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, there does seem to be a point of intersection between the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the Essene community — and that can be found in the figure of John the Baptist. We know that John the Baptist came from a priestly family, through his father Zechariah; we know that John was dissatisfied with the Temple cult because he withdrew from the Jerusalem area and went down to the wilderness by the river Jordan, east of Jericho. We know from the descriptions in the Gospels that John lived a simple, ascetic lifestyle with a simple diet and simple clothing. We know that John preached an Apocalyptic message of impending Judgment and the need for Repentance, warning of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. We know that in addition to the demand for a radical transformation of one’s spiritual and ethical life, John the Baptist also required his followers to submit to a ritual cleansing called “Baptism.” The traditional site of Jesus’ baptism is approximately 6-7 miles away from the Qumran community. It is inconceivable to imagine that John the Baptist did not have personal contact, or at least theological contact, with the Essenes at Qumran. He may well himself have been a former Essene, and perhaps counted other (ex-)Essenes among his disciples. If he looks like an Essene, if he talks like an Essene, if he dresses like an Essene, if he eats like an Essene, if he performs rituals like an Essene...*he’s probably an Essene!*

The fact that Jesus is baptized by John is one of the aspects of Jesus’ life that is shared by all four Gospels. Therefore, if John the Baptist is closely connected with the Essene outlook, Jesus’ baptism by John acts as a sort of endorsement of their point of view. Following his baptism, Jesus also goes on a sort of spiritual retreat in the wilderness where he engages in spiritual warfare with Satan through the temptations ... while fasting, like an ascetic. Again, this is all very Essene-like behavior. Maybe Jesus was on retreat with the Essenes? However, Jesus is distinct from the Essenes in one vital respect: whereas the Essenes advocate a life of withdrawal and simplicity and asceticism, Jesus is frequently criticized by his enemies for eating and drinking, and living a very gregarious, sociable lifestyle.

4. ‘The Fourth Philosophy’ – Zealots

- Violent Insurgency
- Terrorists of Martyrs?
- Asymmetric Guerilla Warfare Tactics
- Zealots and Jesus

The last group discussed by Josephus are called the “Zealots”, although he refers to them as the “Fourth Philosophy.” Unlike the Essenes, who expressed their Apocalyptic beliefs through

withdrawal and waiting, the Zealots, on the other hand, took their Apocalyptic beliefs to an extreme in the form of violent conflict with their perceived enemies. They were Jewish *jihadis*; they launched a violent insurgency against the Roman military occupation, who they perceived to be the incarnate forces of evil in league with Satan. They believed it was the patriotic and religious duty of all good Jews to resist and fight the evil occupying forces. Rather than fight the Romans on their own terms, which would have led to crushing ignominious defeat, the Zealots fought asymmetric guerrilla warfare: they used the advantages available to them – their knowledge of the land, lack of uniform, their ability to blend into the general population, being flexible and mobile – in order to fight against the more traditional, conventional Roman legionaries. Their specialty was assassination, using ferocious serrated daggers. They targeted members of the Roman military and members of the Roman occupying administration whenever they had the chance. But they also targeted anyone they regarded as a collaborator with the occupation, which included priests, elders, and tax collectors. Although they may have appeared to be freedom fighters and martyrs to the Jews, the Romans saw them as terrorists and seditious traitors. The principal weapon used by the Romans against the Zealots was mass crucifixion of anyone suspected to have any dealings with Zealots. This itself was a form of state-sponsored terrorism: crucifixions took place at major intersections and the entrance to urban areas, as a warning to anyone who would dare to challenge the authority and supremacy of Rome and the *Pax Romana*.

We do know that Jesus had certain connections with the Zealots because counted amongst his Twelve Disciples is one called “Simon the Zealot” - although it might be more accurate to describe him as an ex-Zealot or former Zealot ... if it would no longer be possible to pursue Zealot ideals and practices while being a devoted follower of Jesus of Nazareth. Although the rhetoric and message of Jesus may have aligned with many Zealot grievances, the practices and behavior advocated by Jesus were unambiguously non-violent and antithetical to the Zealots’ methods. [It’s interesting to note that also amongst Jesus’ disciples is “Matthew the Tax Collector” — or more accurately, Matthew the ex- or former Tax Collector. This just goes to show how inclusive the Jesus Movement really was. Imagine if Simon the ex-Zealot and Matthew the ex-Tax Collector what roommates: Zealot business is killing Romans, but killing Tax Collectors is what Zealots do *for fun* on the weekends!] There is also speculation about whether Judas Iscariot was a Zealot himself, in terms of trying to understand his motivation for betraying Jesus (disappointment that Jesus was not more political / revolutionary in his approach?); but also in terms of arguments about the meaning of his name, “Iscariot” - which could mean “Man of Kerioth” (a village in Judea, making him an outsider compared to all the Galilean disciples); but it could also mean a member of the “Sicarii” [transliterated phonetically into Greek as “Iscariot”] which is the Roman nickname for Zealots (the *Sicarii*, from the Latin “sicare” = to cut ... a reminder of their gruesome modes of assassination).

Such fine distinctions were apparently lost on the Romans. The fact that Jesus is crucified between two other condemned men (the Greek could mean “freedom fighter”, “rebel”, “insurgent” or “terrorist” just as much as “bandit” or “thief” – and the Romans would be unlikely to go to the expense of crucifying common criminals); and the fact that he’s crucified at the entrance to Jerusalem during Passover (when Jews are thinking of Moses and their deliverance from the Egyptians, which has strong parallels with the Roman occupation); and the fact that the charge of “King of the Jews” is nailed to the cross – all these factors together suggest that the Romans clearly categorized Jesus as a Zealot.

6.4 Popular Modes of Resistance

- ❖ Silent Protests & Non-Violent Uprising
- ❖ Prophetic Proclamation
- ❖ Violent Insurrection
- ❖ The Jewish Revolt (66-70 C.E.)
- ❖ Tragedy at Masada (73 C.E.)

During the first half of the 1st Century C.E., the period in which Jesus was active in his public ministry, we see many examples in Josephus of potential and actual flashpoints between the Roman occupying force and the Jews they were oppressing. Josephus tells us of occasions where Jews would engage in massive silent protests to show their distaste for Roman policy; at other times they would threaten to stop farming and/or threaten to commit mass suicide as a way of throwing the territory into chaos and denying Romans essential revenue. Josephus tells stories of would-be messiahs like Theudas or “The Egyptian” who in the 50s and 60s C.E. attempted to rally their followers towards an Apocalyptic consummation, and perhaps trigger an uprising. But in each case, Josephus tells us (perhaps in an exaggerated form) that the Romans react with muscular brutality and massacre thousands and thousands of the followers of these putative messiahs. However, matters finally come to a head just three years after Herod’s Temple was finally completed in 63 C.E., when Roman corruption and abuses finally pushed Israel over the edge (the trigger was a Roman raid on the Temple treasury). A Zealot rebellion in Galilee (of which Josephus was one of the leaders) soon spreads into a full-scale war of Jews against Romans. The Romans send in huge numbers of legionaries under the command of General Vespasian in order to suppress the revolt with ruthless efficiency. Vespasian was so successful that he is chosen by Rome to become emperor following a succession crisis in the aftermath of Nero’s death; he leaves behind his son, General Titus, who will eventually succeed his father as emperor. Titus besieges Jerusalem and finally brings the rebels to heel. The destruction unleashed by Titus’ troops in 70 C.E. when the siege ends was appalling and horrifying. The Romans sacked Jerusalem, massacred the population, and totally destroyed Herod the Great’s Temple, leaving the Temple Mount a desolate wasteland. The Romans banished the Jews from Jerusalem for many generations, and renamed the city Aelia Capitolina in honor of Jupiter. The few Zealot rebels who escaped from Jerusalem thought they would find sanctuary at Masada, Herod’s fortified palace by the Dead Sea; but they underestimated the determination of Rome to suppress all rebellion. The Romans surrounded the fortress of Masada that contained the 1,000 rebels, and laid siege to it for three years. Tens of thousands of Roman soldiers, and tens of thousands of support staff, were maintained out in the desert for three years, many miles away from a fresh water supply and food. The Romans even spent the time building a huge siege ramp up the side of the 1,300 ft. Masada mesa. When the Romans eventually breached the walls of Masada in 73 C.E., they found all the Jewish Zealots had committed mass suicide, under the leadership of Eleazar, rather than be taken alive by the Romans.

To this day, officers in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) still swear their final oaths of loyalty at the top of Masada, with these words: “*Masada shall not fall again!*”