



# Israel in New Testament Times To AD 70

Aspects of Jewish Social Life

# Religious Parties First Century Palestine

## <sup>1</sup>Pharisees

- Focus: *Oral* law (“your own tradition”; Mark 7.9)
- Doctrines: resurrection, last judgment, divine providence, angels & spirits, coming messiah

## <sup>2</sup>Sadducees

- Focus: Temple; aristocratic; upper class; merchants; chief priests
- Doctrines
  - free will & self-sufficiency
  - denied resurrection and immortality of the soul, angels & the supernatural sphere (heaven & hell), last judgment, life after death, divine providence, a coming messiah

## <sup>3</sup>Essenes (never mentioned in the New Testament)

- Withdrew from society; personal piety; alone represented the true remnant of Israel; focused on apocalyptic conclusion to history
- Doctrines: predestinarian; pre-existence and immortality of the soul; legalistic (*written* Law); messiahs; Dead Sea Scrolls (?)

# Religious parties: <sup>4</sup>Zealots

- Inviolable devotion to liberty, which they sought by any means, including violence, to achieve
- According to Josephus, who referred to them as the “fourth philosophy,” they “agreed in all other things with the Pharisaic notions”
- Guerilla tactics
  - Violence against Romans and their collaborators (e.g., **tax-collectors**)
    - imagine a Zealot (Simon the Zealot; Luke 6.15) and a tax-collector (Matthew/Levi; Mat 9.9; Lu 5.27) among the 12 disciples of Jesus!
  - Sicarii (“dagger-men”)
  - The two “thieves” with Jesus (lēistēs, *not* kleptēs)

# Other Groups

## Herodians

- Origin under Herod I
- Remained loyal to the Herodian dynasty especially under Herod Antipas
- Typically aligned with the Sadducees
- More political than religious (~syncretistic)

## The common people

- *Am ha-Aretz*: “people of the land”
- mostly aligned with Pharisees

# Aspects of Jewish Social Life

## Language

- Aramaic was primary language in Judea
- Greek was primary in some towns of Galilee
  - most with any education would have known Greek, especially if involved in trades, such as fishermen
- Hebrew only spoken by the educated, religious ‘professionals’ (priests, scribes, etc.)
- Latin might have been read by some of the better educated, but not spoken

# Aspects of Jewish Social Life: People

- Population
  - 4 million Jews in the Roman Empire (~10% of empire's population)
  - only ~700,000 in Palestine
  - more Jews lived in Alexandria, Egypt than in Jerusalem
  - more in Syria than Palestine
  - in Galilee (and the Decapolis) Gentiles outnumbered Jews
- Religiously sensitive pagans drawn to high ethical standards and monotheistic faith (God-fearers → proselytes)



# Societal structure

- Romans at the apex
    - Syrian legate controlled 4 legions of infantry (20,000 soldiers), 1 cavalry legion (5,000)
    - Prelate/procurator (e.g., Pilate) had ~3,000 soldiers in Caesarea
  - Chief Priests
    - supreme religious leaders
    - supreme *Jewish* political leaders
    - collaborated with Romans
  - Elders
    - Landowners; merchants (~Sadducees)
    - Publicans (tax collectors): worked for the Sadducees to collect and pay the Roman taxes
- “Upper Class”

# Societal structure: Low Class

(No “middle class”)

- Tenant farmers
  - leased land from elders/landowners; analogous to a feudal system, paying portion of harvest as rent
- Artisans
  - skilled workers (Jesus, as a carpenter or construction worker – probably not a furniture craftsman – would have been included in this class)
  - bakers, butchers, woodworkers, iron-workers/blacksmiths, leatherworkers like Paul, basket weavers, tanners (Simon the tanner, Acts 9-10)



# Lower Classes

- Day laborers
  - lower than tenant farmers and artisans
  - performed unskilled tasks
  - hired from the marketplace every morning and paid a day's wage (1 denarius)
  - Matthew 20.1-16

# Lower Classes

- Debt slaves
  - a creditor-debtor relationship rather than an owner-owned relationship (Judaism did not recognize slavery as such)
  - landowners and publicans would lend money at exorbitant rates of interest
  - compare: “forgive us our debts as we forgive those indebted to us”
    - this uses the metaphor of debt-slavery to describe our predicament toward God
  - never able to escape from the relationship without a third-party to pay it off (Mat 18.23-35)

# Lowest Class

- Outcasts/beggars: any who could not provide for themselves
  - congenitally disabled; injured; severely ill; crippled; paralyzed
  - neurological conditions (e.g., seizures)
  - psychiatric conditions and demon-possessed
  - lepers
  - prostitutes
  - widows/abandoned wives/orphans

# Aspects of Jewish Social Life

## Everyday Life

### Towns

- Entered through a gate in the wall
- Open square
  - trade; social & legal exchange

### Homes

- Low, flat **roofs** of mud-encased branches laid across rafters
- **Walls:** bricks of mud & straw
- **Floors** of hard earth (stone in better homes)
- Most in low class lived in an ‘apartment building’ containing several apartments, all on ground level

# Everyday Life: Diet

- Bread, vegetables, fruits (raisins, figs, dates – also served for sweeteners); honey
- Wine (water was often non-potable)
- Meat, roasted or boiled, or fish (~only on festival days)
- Two meals daily
- They sat at low tables for common meals; reclined on cushions for formal meals (including Passover)

# Everyday Life: Clothing & Styles

## Men

- Banded scarf on the head
- Tunic (shirt-like) from shoulders to knees
- Belt or sash around tunic
- Coarse shoes or sandals
- In cold weather: mantle or heavy cloak worn over tunic
- (“girdle” in some EV of the New TestAmēnt)
- Garments typically white
- Hair longer than Romans
- Trimmed beards

## Women

- Short tunic as undergarment
- Outer tunic to the feet, sometimes brightly colored
- Veils over heads but not faces
- Upper classes
  - used cosmetics lavishly
  - wore earrings, nose rings, ornAmēnts
  - dyed hair; some wore wigs

# Aspects of Everyday Life

## The Family

- Basic unit of society
- Large families were common
- Male – female issues
  - joy at birth of boy; disappointment at birth of girl
  - boys circumcised and named on 8<sup>th</sup> day
  - girls might not be named for a month
- No surnames; distinguished by:
  - mention of father (Simon bar-jona [son of Jonah])
  - occupation (Simon the Tanner)
  - public actions (Simon the Zealot)
  - place of residence (Simon of Cyrene)

# Aspects of Everyday Life: Economy

- Artisan shops were small and local
  - transportation was prohibitively expensive
  - trade guilds for artisans
- Agriculture fairly advanced
  - grain seeds treated with chemicals to protect from insects
  - fertilization used
  - crop rotation practiced
- Banking
  - lending/borrowing
  - foreign currency exchange
  - letters of credit
  - interest rates from 4% to 12% (recall debt slaves)



# Samaritans

A mixed people

- Remaining Jews of Northern Kingdom and peoples resettled there by the Assyrians (Ez 4.10)
- Syncretistic religion developed during Divided Kingdom
  - most within the Northern Kingdom worshipped Yahweh by worshipping at Golden Bulls; and also mixed in pagan religion (especially Baal worship under Ahaz and Jezebel)
  - the repopulated peoples brought their gods with them, but also tried to assimilate the ‘local deity’ (~Yahweh; 2 Ki 17.24ff)

# Samaritans

## Religion

- When they weren't allowed to help rebuild the Jerusalem temple, they built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim
  - the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment of Samaritan Scriptures was that God appointed the place of sacrifice to be Mt. Gerizim
- Worshipped on Mt. Gerizim, even after John Hyrcanus destroyed their temple (→ John 4)
- Worshipped "Yahweh"
- Kept the Pentateuchal festivals

# Samaritans

## Religion

- Practiced circumcision
- Samaritan Scripture was their own version of the Pentateuch (circa 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC)
- Messianic: prophet like Moses (some taught a return of Moses), who would also be king
- Did not believe in resurrection

# Aspects of Jewish Life

## The Synagogue



# The Synagogue: Origin

- Obscure history
- Some Jewish scholars date it to the reforms of King Josiah in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC
- Others place its origin in the time of the Hasmonean revolution
- Usually understood to come from the period of Babylonian exile, at least as a permanent institution
- However, there are no archeological ruins identified as a synagogue in the region of Babylon (Iraq)

# The Synagogue: Development

- Under Ezra and his successors, the synagogue as a place for congregational worship, prayer and reading the Torah developed alongside the revival of the Temple cult
- Spread within Palestine
- Jewish legends give the number of synagogues *in Jerusalem* at the time of destruction in AD 70 in one source as 394, in another as 480
- Foreign Jews in Jerusalem would organize their own synagogues ("the Synagogue of the Freedmen, both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia"; Acts 6.9)

# The Synagogue: Diaspora

- There were many synagogues in the various quarters of the city of Alexandria, including the “Great Synagogue,” the size and splendor of which was world-renown
- Similarly, there was a famous large synagogue in Antioch, Syria
- Preserved the essence of Judaism of the Diaspora and saved it from annihilation
- Synagogal worship was the most important visible expression of Judaism in the Diaspora
- Wherever 10 Jewish men came together → synagogue (cp. Acts 16.13 re Philippi)

# The Synagogue: Functions

- Reading and teaching Torah (stand to read; sit to teach)
- Prayers
- Communal meals
- Lodging for traveling Jews
- Schools
- Civil court: Sabbath infringement, settlements for divorce or widowhood, public defaming



# The Synagogue: Design

- Initially probably in private homes
- Architecture would be according to local customs on exterior
- In some, there was an obvious orientation of the building toward Jerusalem
- Purity concerns: fountain, basin, or location near body of water



# The Synagogue: Interior

- An apse along the Jerusalem-oriented wall to hold the Torah Shrine (ark or chest containing the scrolls, covered with a sacred cloth)



# Interior

- Focal point: the **Bimah**, an elevated platform for reading Torah, located in front of the apse, reached by 3 or more steps, along *Jerusalem-oriented wall*
  - Reminder of Jerusalem as central to the history of Jews
  - Reminder of the Temple in Jerusalem
- Benches lining walls (sometimes in tiers)



# Officers of the Synagogue

- *Keneseth* or chief ruler
  - directed the service, but usually had little to do during the service
  - it was his duty to select the various persons who would take the leading part in the ceremony for that service, to notify them what part they were to carry out, and to inform the *Chazzan*
  - Principal parts taken not by permanent officers, but by members chosen from the congregation after it assembled
- *Chazzan*, or "attendant"
  - had charge of the building
- *Zequenim*: "rulers of the synagogue" with religious and judicial functions

# The Service of the Synagogue

## 1. Instruction

- reading the law and prophets
- followed (sometimes) with a ‘sermon’ (though this was not essential)

## 2. Worship

- prayers, eulogies\* and benedictions\*
- some of these would have been chanted

# The Service

## Participants (ten to eleven)

- *Sheliack Tsibbur* or "messenger of the congregation," read the prayers & eulogies
- Readers of the law, seven in number
- A reader of the prophets
- A *Methurgeman* or "interpreter" (if Hebrew read)
- A preacher, selected from the congregation

Capernaum synagogue  
from time of Jesus



# The Service of the Synagogue

- Over time, all these duties became assigned more and more to one person, and *the rabbi of the synagogue* absorbed nearly all of the functions (however, not in the time of the New TestAmēnt)

# “Order of service” for a Sabbath Morning

1. Benediction: *Sheliach Tsibbur*;  
Congregation responding: “Amēn”
  2. Benediction: *Sheliach Tsibbur*;  
Congregation: “Amēn”
  3. Shema (the creed)
  4. Prayer
  5. Eulogy: *Sheliach*; Congregation:  
“Amēn”
  6. Eulogy: *Sheliach*; Congregation:  
“Amēn”
  7. Responses from congregants
  8. Eulogy: *Sheliach*; Congregation:  
“Amēn”
  9. Other prayers
  10. Eulogy: *Sheliach*;  
Congregation: “Amēn”
  11. Eulogy: *Sheliach*;  
Congregation: “Amēn”
  12. Priestly Benediction;  
Congregation: “Amēn”
  13. Eulogy: *Sheliach*;  
Congregation: “Amēn”
  14. Reading of the Law, by  
seven readers; the  
*Methurgeman* interpreting
  15. Reading of the Prophets,  
by a reader (*Methurgeman*)
  16. Sermon (member of the  
congregation)
- Jesus ←