

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE POWER DYNAMIC OF FIRST CENTURY JUDEA AND INTERUPTION OF  
KINGDOM AUTHORITY

NT504: THE GREEK BIBLE & THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN WORLD: OA

BY

TYLER P. SANT

APRIL 21, 2020

## INTRODUCTION

While Jesus usually enjoyed the favor of the people of Judea what was it about Jesus that earned him the ire of so many in positions of authority? The Herodians, the Temple complex, the Pharisee and Jewish ruling council, and even the local Roman representatives, recognized that Jesus possessed true authority and the things that he did and taught directly threatened the tenuous authority that they held. Understanding the motivation and source of empowerment of each of these groups can help us understand why Jesus so threatened them to the point where they conspired together to have him killed.

## THE HERODIANS

The Herodian Dynasty's most famous (or infamous) was Herod the Great however to understand the source of their power we have to understand their origins. Herod the Great's grandfather was an Idumaeen, who most likely converted to Judaism when the Hasmonean king, John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.E.), conquered Idumea; Alexander Jannaeus later appointed him governor of Idumea.<sup>1</sup> Herod the Great's father, Antipater, was a clever man and quickly acquired military and financial power through allying with the right people, marrying into Arab nobility, and assisting the Romans in Egypt. Julius Caesar appointed Antipater procurator of Judea and he in turn appointed his son Herod, governor of Galilee.<sup>2</sup>

Ferguson explains that Herod "exemplified the social diversity of his time: by birth an Idumean, by ancestry perhaps Phoenician, in citizenship Roman, in culture a Hellenist, and in religion officially Jewish."<sup>3</sup> During the ensuing chaos after the assassination of Julius Caesar, Herod traveled to Rome and after appealing to Mark Anthony was appointed king of the Jews.

---

<sup>1</sup> Everett Ferguson, "The Herodian Dynasty," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 54-55.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid: 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid: 56.

While a client king, such as Herod was, had freedom to pursue their own internal policy they were not able to enact their own foreign policy and were required to provide soldiers and funds to Rome.<sup>4</sup> After Herod's death the kingship was divided among his sons; Archelaus was appointed as Ethnarch (one who ruled as a governor under a king)<sup>5</sup>, while Herod Antipas and Philip were appointed Tetrarchs (one who rules over a quarter of a province)<sup>6</sup>. After them Emperor Tiberius appointed Herod the Great's grandson, Herod Agrippa I, king of the Jews. Finally, the Herodian dynasty came to the end with the death of Agrippa II in 100 AD.

Though the Herodians held the title the king of the Jews, and while at times they exercised substantial influence and power, their legitimacy was often questioned by their subjects. They were perhaps too Jewish from their pagan subjects, and not Jewish enough for their Jewish subjects.<sup>7</sup> Despite their fluctuating influence and favor they played a pivotal roll the in the power dynamics of first century Judea.

### THE TEMPLE AND THE SADDUCEES

While the Herodians held the throne in Judea there was another place of power that perhaps wielded even more authority, the Temple. The physical Temple itself, which was built after the Babylonian exile and renovated and expanded by Herod the Great, was the epicenter of religion, culture, and the economy in Jerusalem and influenced Jews spread throughout the Roman Empire. The priesthood belonged to the Levites according to the Torah, but in recent

---

<sup>4</sup> Everett Ferguson, "The Herodian Dynasty," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 58.

<sup>5</sup> Major Contributors and Editors, "Ethnarch," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Major Contributors and Editors, "Tetrarch," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Everett Ferguson, "The Herodian Dynasty," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 60.

history it had become a political position. For example, the high priesthood was bought by a non-Levite under Seleucid rule, combined with the secular kingship during the reign of the Maccabees, and later became a political appointment overseen by Rome.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the priesthood was not wealthy and served as religious functionaries and legal arbiters in the villages outside around Judea.<sup>9</sup> However, there were a group within the priesthood who held considerable wealth and wielded tremendous power, these were the chief priests, from whose ranks the high priest was chosen.<sup>10</sup> While the house of Herod was permitted to hold the title of king the chief priest held considerably more power. N.T. Wright explains that the Temple was “their power base, the economic and political centre of the country. It was because they controlled the Temple that they were who they were.”<sup>11</sup>

Closely associated with the priesthood and the Temple was a groups of Jews identified as the Sadducees. Many of the high priests were chosen from among their numbers and all of the Sadducees would have been members of the Jerusalemite aristocracy.<sup>12</sup> N.T. Wright describes the goal of the Sadducees as “keep the Temple going, offer sacrifices pleasing to God, maintain the peace, get along with your political bosses as well as you can, do as well out of it as you can, and hope that God will somehow validate it all.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> David Instone-Brewer, “Temple and Priesthood,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 201.

<sup>9</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *New Testament In Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature and Theology of the First Christians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK Publishing, 2019), 128.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 129.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid: 129.

<sup>12</sup> Lidija Novakovic, “Jews and Samaritans,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 222.

<sup>13</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *New Testament In Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature and Theology of the First Christians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK Publishing, 2019), 118.

Both the chief priest and the Sadducees held great power in Jerusalem and the rest of Judea, and that power was directly connected to the Temple. This meant protecting the position and prominence of the Temple in Jerusalem was their greatest concern and any threat against to the status quo seriously threatened their tenuous power.

#### THE SANHEDRIN AND THE PHARISEES

Another group who held power throughout Judea in the first century were the Pharisees who formed, with the Sadducees, the Jewish ruling council known as the Sanhedrin. This council ruled on various Jewish issues including capital punishment cases (although they could not carry out a death sentence under Roman rule).<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees held much more power during the Hasmonean period, and though they had been politically marginalized under Herodian rule, they maintained significant influence and power due to the support of the majority of the people.<sup>15</sup>

Philo describes the Pharisees as, “full of zeal for the laws, strictest guardians of the ancestral traditions.”<sup>16</sup> This was because they saw ritual purity, and the purity of Israel, as instrumental in ushering in the advent of the ‘Son of David’ and the restoration of the kingdom of Israel.<sup>17</sup> Many Pharisees wished to purge Israel of all pagan shrines and symbols and some even wished to see the gentiles expelled from the land completely. N.T. Wright describes the agenda of the Pharisees “was to purify Israel by summoning the people to return to the true

---

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth D. Litwak, “Synagogue and Sanhedrin,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 270.

<sup>15</sup> Lidija Novakovic, “Jews and Samaritans,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 219.

<sup>16</sup> Philo *Spec. Leg.* 2.253.

<sup>17</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *New Testament In Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature and Theology of the First Christians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK Publishing, 2019), 118.

ancestral traditions; to restore Israel to its independent theocratic status; and to be, as a pressure group, in the vanguard of such movements through the study and practice of Torah.”<sup>18</sup>

With there focus on maintaining the ‘Jewish identify’ and national liberation through Torah obedience gave the people hope in a seemingly hopeless time. According to the Pharisees, despite the oppressive Roman occupation there is still hope for the kingdom of Israel to be restored, and their was something they could do about it, obey the Torah and the tradition of the elders, which they strongly emphasized. Solmon Zeitlin explains why this would have caused tension within the Jewish community, “After the Pentateuch was canonized in the year 444 BCE this group maintained that the unwritten laws were as binding as the laws in the Pentateuch. The Zadokites and their followers were opposed to all these ideas.”<sup>19</sup>

#### ROMAN AUTHORITY

Looming over the every day lives of the inhabitants of Judea in the first century, sat the Emperor almost 1500 miles away in Rome. Despite the distance the evidence of their occupation was everywhere; the taxes they were required to pay, the prevalence of Greco-Roman art and architecture, and the legions of Roman soldiers quartered among them were all constant reminders of the foreign power they now must live in submission to.

Beginning with Octavian (Augustus) the Emperor began to be venerated as divine, being granted the title of *divi filius*, or the “son of god”. Caesar’s authority was seen by many in the Roman Empire as divine authority, thus what he decreed was a decree from a god, and who

---

<sup>18</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *New Testament In Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature and Theology of the First Christians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK Publishing, 2019), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Solomon, Zeitlin, "The Origin of the Pharisees Reaffirmed." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 59, no. 4 (1969): 255-67, (Accessed April 17, 2020. doi:10.2307/1453466), 267.

would dare defy a god? According to Perrin, “In due course, the imperial cult thrust itself to the forefront of public consciousness by occupying prominent public space.”<sup>20</sup>

Serving, as his local representatives were the governors or procurators. These men were strategically located (and relocated) to administer Roman rule by making general audits of cities, controlling the revenue-raising powers of cities, controlling public spending, intervening in local disputes and providing support to local leadership to do the same, and appointing individuals to oversee the financial administration of different cities.<sup>21</sup> The officials placed in charge of Judea had a difficult job on their hand for this province was plagued with revolts and uprisings. Pontius Pilate saw ten uprisings in his tenure, including the execution of Jesus. His inability to control the masses ultimately resulted in his removal.<sup>22</sup>

All Jewish authority in Judea existed at the pleasure of the Emperor. Should any one individual or faction become a threat to the peace and prosperity of the Empire they would be eliminated. Herod the Great was granted the throne by the Romans and his Dynasty retained their power only for as long as they retained the favor of their overlords. The chief priest and Sadducees received their power and authority through the Temple cult, which the Romans could shut down and would eventually do in 70 A.D. The Pharisees and the Sanhedrin had to walk a careful line of maintaining the national identity of Israel yet not presenting a serious threat to the Empire, should they cross that line they would surely be met with Roman steel and might. In power struggle of first century Judea Rome ruled supreme.

---

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Perrin, “The Imperial Cult,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 131.

<sup>21</sup> Graham P. Burton, “The Roman Imperial State, Provincial Governors and the Public Finances of Provincial Cities, 27 B.C.-A.D. 235.” *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 53, no. 3 (2004): 311-42. Accessed April 17, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/4436732](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436732), (312)

<sup>22</sup> N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *New Testament In Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature and Theology of the First Christians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK Publishing, 2019), 120.

## HEAVENLY AUTHORITY

Into this complex world, filled with different groups and persons vying to be the most authoritative and influential, a humble craftsman from Nazareth began to travel the countryside. His teaching gripped the hearts of many, reports of the miracles he was performing spread through the land, and quickly he developed a large following of disciples. It wasn't long before the Herodians, the chief priests, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and Rome itself would see the threat posed by Jesus and his followers to the power they had enjoyed for so long.

Whispers that Jesus might be the long awaited Messiah surely reach the ears of the Herodians and surely it would have evoked anxiety that their time as rulers in Judea may be coming to an abrupt end. This is reflected in Matthew's account of Herod the Great hunting for the child of prophecy (Matt. 2:16-18) and Herod Antipas' interest in who Jesus may be in Matthew 14:1-12 as well as his desire to murder Jesus according to the Pharisees in Luke 13:31.

The priest and Sadducees would have viewed Jesus as a threat as soon as he began to speak of the future destruction of the physical Temple in Jerusalem (Matt. 24:1-2). The power they enjoyed was due to their control of the Temple, and so when Jesus' delegitimized the Temple cult by saying, "the hour is coming when neither on this mountain [Mount Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."<sup>23</sup>

The Pharisees' power came from their ability to instruct the masses in the correct way to be ritually pure, to obey the Torah, as well as to observe the Sabbath and the festivals. Jesus undermined their teaching on these subjects and thus overrode their authority in the process. Jesus often criticized the Pharisees and when confronted over his neglect of traditional washing

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 4:21-24.

practices Jesus replied, “Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.”<sup>24</sup> The Pharisees were greatly offended because Jesus was dismantling the traditions that granted their sect the power that they had.

Finally, Jesus threatened the great Roman Empire itself because of his claim to be the link between heaven and earth. It hadn’t been long since the Emperor was granted divine status, but it had long been understood that the Emperor was the greatest authority in Rome. So, when the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, heard that Jesus had been claiming that he was the ‘Son of God’ we read in that Pilate was “even more afraid”.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus’ final words in the book of Matthew demonstrate his universal authority, and one can begin to understand why each of these groups felt that Jesus was a threat to their power. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Judea in the first century was filled with different groups and persons struggling to maintain the power they had and gain more of it. Into this simmering conflict enters Jesus, who with his teaching and miraculous acts completely threaten and undermines the authority of the ‘powers that be’. If Jesus had no authority he would have merely been an annoyance, but because

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 11:39–41.

<sup>25</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 19:8.

<sup>26</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 28:18–20.

Pilate and others saw that Jesus had true authority, and that his authority was not of this world, they eventually conspired to have him executed.<sup>27</sup> Understanding this balance of power in Judea and the threat that Jesus present to them can help us why so many people wanted to see Jesus removed from the picture.

## Bibliography

Ferguson, Everett. *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*.

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013.

Major Contributors and Editors, "Tetrarch," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible*

*Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

---

<sup>27</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 18:36.

Wright, N.T. and Bird, Michael. *New Testament In Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature and Theology of the First Christians*. Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK Publishing, 2019.

Zeitlin, Solomon. "The Origin of the Pharisees Reaffirmed." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 59, no. 4 (1969): 255-67. Accessed April 17, 2020. doi:10.2307/1453466.

*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016),