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A Summary of Judaism: Practice and Beliefs (63 BCE – 66 CE)

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What is Judaism, and what does it mean to be Jewish in the 1st Century? Most importantly, why is it important for readers of the Bible to have an understanding of Judaism? The obvious answer to this question is Christianity's foundation is Judaism, so the two are connected. To understand the rich heritage of the Christian religion, it is worthwhile to delve into the *historical context* that surrounded its birth and growth. For this purpose, the work of Sanders in *Judaism: Practice and Beliefs* becomes useful seeing that Christianity is significantly linked and influenced by Judaism. Unfortunately, many Christians have a narrow understanding of Judaism. As Christians we were thought to believe Pharisees and the Sadducees represented the thoughts and beliefs of everyone in the Jewish faith. However, what we have read in the New Testament is only a snapshot of Judaism, it is not the whole picture. One would have to read *more than* the New Testament to understand Judaism. Sanders asserts that being Jewish is not a doctrinal system of dos and don'ts, but it is a way of life (**pg. 3**). He also says that Judaism in the time period was dynamic and diverse(**pg. 3**). In other words, Judaism was not static, but there were always changes in regards to how to follow the law. There were many who were willing to compromise, but there were others who wanted to honor the law of Moses.

According to Sanders, first century Judaism has had many varying points and was constantly changing. This included the fact that being a Jew often encompasses working together with each other and in many instances fighting among themselves. It was a period of significant tumult. Sanders begins by telling the reader that this study will focus on a particular time period around the time of the revolts against the Seleucids and Rome(**pg. 4**). Much of the defining

events of this era were the revolts that were occurring one of which was the *Hasmonean or Maccabean revolt* against the Seleucids and the Jewish revolt against Rome.

Sanders introduces the reader to Josephus who was a Jewish historian that wrote *Jewish Wars*. He was biased at times in his accounts of the events that took place. An example, when Josephus controlled what the character Eleazar said. Josephus created a noble character, but history would prove that Eleazar was a rebel (pg. 9). However, Sanders states that everything he recorded is important because it is all we know about the time period (pg. 6). In addition, Josephus used reliable sources for his accounts (pg. 7).

The author noted that there were various powers fighting for dominance over Palestine, and therefore the Jews had to navigate the intricacies of not only domestic relations but foreign relations as well. The nature of the conflict was also compounded by the fact that there weren't any significant or tangible differences between religion and politics. Political conflicts often always carried significant religious repercussions. Thus, pledging allegiance to any political leadership was an indication of one's religious commitments.

It is important to note that the author of this work took his information from the work of Josephus when covering information about social, political and religious issues. Josephus works help any serious student to gain insight into the background information about Jewish history and Judaism. Also, the events, institutions, the temple, groups, customs and places he wrote about provide crucial information to enlightening understanding about the nature of those times.

Also, the author of this book highlighted the nature of the main parties or sects that existed at the time. During the time of Josephus, the three main parties were the Sadducees,

Pharisees and Essenes. According to the author, Josephus wrote significantly about these parties and often called them parties within the Jewish philosophy or separate philosophies.

The Sadducees were the well to do folks; more like the aristocrats and this even included aristocratic priests. They were keen on keeping the law but were in opposition to the Pharisaic traditions. They also especially deny the possibility of a resurrection from the dead. When it came to politics, they thought the best policy was to partner with Roman rule. *The Pharisees* on the other hand consisted of both priests and laity but fewer priests than laity. Unlike the Sadducees, they were not financially or socially prominent. They were very strict in their interpretations of the law and took great pride in keeping it rigorously. They also had unique traditions that they kept almost as rigorously as they kept the law. *The Pharisees* believed that resurrection was real. Politically, their affiliations to Herod of Rome were not clearly shown. It seemed like they accepted things as they were and with perhaps some degree of rebelliousness. *The third party-the Essenes* were a party of priests and laity with multiple branches. They lived exclusively from other Jews to some degree. They also had views unique to themselves about many issues surrounding the interpretation of the law.

With regards to how these parties emerged, the author noted the possibility of this being during the biblical period and more importantly during the time of the exile. However, in accordance to the works of Josephus, the New Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature, “*these groups were shaped by the events of the Hasmonean uprising against the Seleucid kingdom and the period of the Hasmonean rule*” (pg. 44). It was at this time that Israel re-instituted religious and political autonomy, beginning first with the former. Also was the merger into the Hellenistic culture as the one option for Israelite life. Finally, was the replacement of the Zadokite priesthood by the Hasmonean family.

In chapter four, Sanders begins by disputing the idea that the Jewish people were always on the brink of war. He acknowledges that there were revolts and uprisings in their history, but he believes Josephus's writings gives the impression that the Hasmonean revolt had been brewing for years. He states, "*The revolt seems to have taken everyone by surprise , and the evidence is against the view that Jewish Palestine was steadily working itself up for war*" (54). There were periods of peace throughout their history, but Sanders does not deny the major conflict during this time period(**pg. 55**).

Furthermore, the author gave a *historical outline of the Roman Period*. This was done in order to help readers identify the major people and events that would be history makers as the chapter progressed. There was the outline of persons and events from the Hasmoneans to Herod. This included people like Salome the Alexandra queen, high priest Hyrcanus, the conquest of Judea by Pompey, Herod the Great, and so forth.

Significantly, Pompey was the one who brought the Jewish territory into a smaller version of itself while bringing some of it under subjugation to direct Roman rule under the legate(clergy) of Syria. However, Hyrcanus II was reinstated as high priest and was also permitted to bear the title "ethnarch" which meant "ruler of the people." Eventually, civil war would break out between Pompey and Julius Caesar, who were also the leading Roman generals at the time. Caesar eventually emerged victorious generally, but much of his success can be attributed to him being secretly supported by Antipater; the latter making use of some Jewish troops.

Herod, who was a son of Antipater, was also a key figure in this period. He was ruler over Galilee while his elder brother was ruler over Judea. It was noted how Herod married

Mariamme-a Hasmonean princess. This move gave him some level of credibility and standing with many Jews who were still loyal to the Hasmonean family. He would also secure the support of Rome when he was chosen by Rome as the strong man to resist the Parthian challenge.

Furthermore, the author in this book sought to highlight the context of the conflicts that were taking place at the time. According to the author, “revolts and riots were part and parcel of life in Palestine during the Roman period, and to a considerable degree also during the Hasmonean period. It seemed that every time an opportunity appeared there was an uprising of some sort” (pg. 77).

Regardless, there were also times of relative stability. One of such times was during the forty-three years reign of Antipas as tetrarch over Galilee. Though there was a war which consisted of only one engagement during this period, there were no revolts. Similarly, during the reign of Herod, the only wars he fought in were for enlargement of domain or support of allies. These were conflicts engaged in for the reasons of state.

However, when it comes to the conflicts and revolts, these were the events that are often highlighted in history. According to the author, “history has generally been understood as the story of violence and change. Social history has flourished from time to time in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but for the most part history has been the story of war and changes of government” (pg. 77). Consequently, it is no wonder that Josephus focused on wars and changes of government as the major thrust of his historical accounts.

The author highlighted the instances of the major conflict in the period 63 BCE to 74 CE in order to show the continuance or internal conflict, armed uprising, peaceful protests and some seasons of relative stability. One of such highlights is the prolonged conflict between Hyrcanus

II and Aristobulus II which led to the Roman intervention in Palestine. Interestingly, both parties in the conflict looked for help from Pompey, the Roman general who was in Syria at the time. The end result was devastating because it resulted in a massacre after a prolonged siege of the temple mount. There were many other wars and uprisings, and some of them followed a change in the persons that reigned or a change in the ruling government.

In chapter five, the author *focused on common Judaism and the Temple*. He started out by asserting that what was normal or common in Judaism at the time was dependent on what the priests and people agreed on. Even the Greek-speaking Jewish living or raised in foreign regions participated in what was normal Judaism in spite of being restricted in from fully participating in temple worship. Regardless, “that there was a world-wide feeling of solidarity among the Jews is easily proved” (pg. 92).

Furthermore, the author showed that what was normal or normative in Judaism was what helped in the establishing of standards by which loyalty to God and the nation of Israel could be measured. This meant that people showed their commitment to God and their country by following these established normative behaviors. The author emphasized that their sacred books were taken to be Holy Scripture.

The temple, synagogue (or house of prayer) and the home were the three physical foci of religion. For the temple, animal sacrifice was a major normative behavior. Though today this might seem offensive and repugnant to many, yet was it perfectly ok in antiquity. The author showed how religion was sacrificed in other parts of the world like Rome, Egypt, Greece and Mesopotamia.

The temple was the center and pride of the Jewish people. It was ordained by God including its sacrifices and appointed hereditary priesthood. Consequently, most first century Jews who believed in the holy scriptures respected the temple and the priesthood. This led to their willingness to give the required gifts and offerings as were stated in the holy scriptures as necessary for the running of the temple and sustenance of the priesthood. This was however not without some Jewish opposition to the temple. Noted was the Jewish resistance to the temple that came from Alexandria after the temple destruction at the end of the first century.

But one may enquire into the nature of the ordinary priests and the Levites at work in the temple. The author highlighted how two orders of clergy served in the temple which were the priests and Levites. A key point of note is that both positions were hereditary, meaning no one can simply become a priest or a Levite except being born into the family line that had such privileges. The priests were to be descendants of Aaron the brother of Moses, and only people from the tribe of Levi could be Levites.

The priests and Levites were to be sustained partially or wholly for their work. This is important seeing that the descendants of Aaron were not allowed to own land as part of their inheritance. This meant that they had no primary economic means to wealth generation or growing food crops. They were to be mostly supported by the sacrifices and offerings made by the rest of the Israelites. In the same way, the Levites were to be supported by the tithes offered by the Israelites seeing that the former too were not to be sustained by farming their own land.

With regards to the kind of work the priests did, the author noted that their proper work was a combination of liturgical worship and expert butchery. Butchery was however the more prominent work. The priests had to not only hear confessions but also accept sacrifices and

offerings in the name of God. The animal offerings were slaughtered, and their blood sprinkled at the different places that included but inside and outside of the temple. Reciting of scriptures, making prayers, burning of incense, and so forth, were the many other functions of the priests. Another interesting aspect of the priesthood were the vestments that were exclusive to them. The details of such vestments were in accordance to the descriptions given to Moses by God.

One may want to inquire further into the nature of the sacrifices that very much characterized the work of the priests and Levites. The author noted that *“the bible does not offer a single, clearly presented lists of sacrifices. His legal books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), we know now, incorporate various sources from different periods.”* (pg. 202).

The author however highlighted Josephus, Philo and the Mishnah as the principal sources of information about sacrifices in the first century. Also the main outline of the sacrifices is not in dispute because on most points they agree with Leviticus and Numbers. The author however sees Josephus as the best source because of his knowledge about the common practices of the priesthood of his day. He not only had learned it in the school as a young kid, but had also observed and helped, before working as an adult in the temple.

There were community sacrifices which consisted of a daily offering of two male yearling lambs that had to be sacrificed to God as a burnt offering. This was to be done along with the offering of flour, wine and oil. The opening of the temple service in the morning was to be accompanied by the sacrifice of the first lamb, and the other was to be sacrificed in the evening just before the ending of the activities for the day.

There were also individual sacrifices, and these were done for a variety of reasons or occasions. There was the individual burnt offering which was for atonement. There were also the

sin and guilt offerings. The author noted that though these were similar, they were quite different-the guilt offering could be classified as a type of sin offering. Then there was the peace offering. It was shared between the altar, the priest and the offerer. The offerer would then further share with his family and friends.

Furthermore and in chapter eight, the author delved into the daily life and annual festivals of the common people. According to the author, “the occupations of the Palestinian Jews were the same, on average, as those in other Mediterranean countries” (pg 229). The Mishnah was very helpful in showing what these occupations looked like because it enumerated the thirty-nine main classes of work. Agricultural work was quite significant on the list as this made up the first seven of the thirty-nine. The preparation of food inside involving from grinding to baking made up the next four on the list. Others that made the list included producing textiles, hunting, slaughtering, writing, construction and so forth. Importantly noted was that most people made their living from agriculture.

With regards to the festivals, it was important to first establish that first century Jerusalem would contain a significantly large number of people. One evidence of this is how Herod made efforts to make the temple court, its porticoes and the streets around it adequate for mammoth crowds. During the Passover for example, Josephus gave some exceptionally large figures for the number present for two occasions of the same feast. Given the number of Passover lambs that were slain, *Josephus came to the conclusion that there were 2,700,000 people at one of the Passovers where there were about 255,600 Passover lambs counted by the priests*. The population amount was estimated by calculating that ten people would share each lamb.

Other festivals were the Feast of Weeks which was also called the Pentecost or Day of First-Fruits. It was an agricultural festival that came fifty days or seven weeks after the Passover. There was also the Feast of Booths that commemorated the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness and how they had to live in booths. Then was also the Day of Atonement which was characterized by fasting and offering sacrifices for the cleansing of sins.

In chapter nine, the author focuses on the nature of tithes and taxes. Importantly noted was the fact that the priests and Levites were to be supported by whatever the people gave for offerings and as sacrifices. But what was the tithe chiefly consisting of? According to the author and from biblical references, this consisted mostly of agricultural produce. The tithe was the one-tenth of whatever they had harvested from their lands.

It has however been observed that the paying of tithes was not something that was wholeheartedly received by everyone. Some were reluctant to pay the Levites their share of the tithes. The sect that was notorious in coming up with ways to avoid giving the tithes were the Pharisees. It has been said that, “even the Pharisees did not regard it as a transgression to eat the Levites’ portion” (pg. 283). Besides tithes, there were also various other taxes levied by the ruling government on the people.

In addition, the author also touched on the role of the priests and Levites outside the temple. Serving in the temple required one week in every twenty-four, and this is in addition to the pilgrimage festivals. The priests and Levites were scattered in the different parts of the country. The author further noted that in the towns and villages were teachers and magistrates. The priests however would have normally occupied their more traditional roles of providing leadership, and this meant teaching the law and serving as judges. On the other hand, the Levites

were “often scribes, a title that covers a range of activities: copying texts, drawing up legal documents and serving as experts of the law” (pg. 319).

Observing the law of God meant learning and reciting the Shema(Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The Shema is described as essential to the Jewish faith(pg. 320). The Israelites took the Shema and all of its commands seriously. Sanders states that the Shema was posted on the doors and bound between the hands(pg. 324). They carried small containers which held Biblical passages, and used a Tefillin to strap key portions of scripture to their arms(321). Observing the law also meant praying at least twice a day(pg. 322) and attending synagogue so one could hear the scriptures being taught(pg. 323).

The keeping of the Sabbath is another way of observing the law of God. Sabbath began on the last day of the week at sundown. “The general requirement to keep it as a day of rest is one of the Ten Commandments(pg. 340). The people of Israel did everything they could in order to keep the Sabbath. Unfortunately, there were people throughout their history who took advantage of the Jews observance of the sabbath day because they knew the Jews would not fight back(pg. 341). This is how we know that the people of Israel were serious about observing the sabbath. They will not stop to defend themselves while on Sabbath.

The circumcision of one's son was an important part of being Jewish. Sanders points out that circumcision was practiced by other religions, but for some reason, circumcision became a part of their identity(349).Because they lived in The Jewish people were often criticized for this practice because the Greeks believed it was destroying the body(pg. 349). However, the practice of circumcision is considered an essential part of their practice(pg. 350).

Purity laws were also an essential part of Jewish practice. Purity covered a number of areas including food, burial, bodily discharges, and childbirth(pg. 351). The rules governing food

laws were straightforward for the general populace. Kosher food is defined as food that is suitable to eat. That means the Jewish people could not consume pork, or the fatty parts or the blood of an animal (pg. 351). Sanders points out some of the challenges these food laws created for Jews who lived in the pagan world. Some of these challenges included not having kosher food available in their markets (pg. 352). There was always a risk involving accidentally eating an animal that was sacrificed to a pagan god. Another issue that was discussed is whether meat and dairy should come in contact with each other. The debate was centered around a command in Hulin, Deuteronomy and Exodus which prohibits seething a kid in its mother's milk. (pg. 356). These passages were interpreted to mean that dairy products and meat should not touch the same plate. Sanders discusses this debate and explains the different positions held by different Rabbis concerning the matter. In the end, Sanders concludes most people did not cook meat and cheese together (pg. 357). However, Sanders should have backed this statement up with evidence like some ancient artwork. Overall, these food laws were not always easy to follow.

Other areas of impurity included childbirth, menstruation, bodily discharges, and corpse impurity. People who had been around a dead body could not enter the Temple without going through an elaborate purification process. This process involved burning the body of a red heifer and mixing the ashes with water. "The mixture was sprinkled on impure people on the third day and the seventh day; they then washed their hair and clothes and the impurity was removed" (pg. 357). This practice ensured that everyone who approached the Temple.

The Diaspora Jews did not live near the temple, but the idea of purity was still respected by the Diaspora. They acknowledged that they would be impure all the time, but Philo came up with a solution; "People who had mourned the dead should go home and splash themselves from a basin of water" (pg. 358). Sanders points out writings by Josephus stated that someone who was

impure would need to sacrifice two lambs in order to remove corpse impurity(**pg. 358**). Again, no one could remove it if they were not going to enter the Temple due to distance. The whole idea of purity was a good idea, and Philo and Josephus came up with alternative ways for purification.

Bodily discharges had to be kept away from the Temple at all costs. Sanders explains that while there is nothing wrong with bodily discharges, these impurities had to be kept away from all things sacred (**pg. 357**). Anyone who was impure had to go through a specific cleansing ritual in order to be completely cleansed. The people were especially careful about following these rituals before entering the Temple, but these rules were not strictly followed when it came down to the handling of the priest's food.” There were two aspects of handling the priests' food in which there was a variation of practice: not everyone kept the same impurities away from the priesthood; not everyone started handling the priests' food in purity at the same point in the food chain”(pg. 363). In other words, it was a possibility that the priestly food was handled by an impure person at some point during the process. Thus, there had to be some leniency in regards to this. But the last person to handle the priestly food had to be pure.

In chapter seventeen, The Essenes were obsessed with purity rules, although they had no biblical solution for corpse impurity. Moreover, they envisioned a Jerusalem that was perfectly pure, but yet men might have nocturnal emissions in it. So what was the point of it all? Like other Jews, their views about the afterlife were so vague that we don't know whether it was immortality **or** resurrection. The simultaneous teaching of predestination and freewill is interesting, and related to grace and works, which they also held simultaneously.

When it came to matters of common theology, the author noted that the Jews in general believed in *one God of the universe and that he had given them his laws to learn and obey it*. The

election of Israel was fundamental to this theology. This means that God had chosen Israel as his special people to serve him and do his will. Moreover, being chosen by God to serve him came with the reward that they were to inherit his promises of blessings. One of such blessings was that God would save and protect them from all their enemies. This of course fueled their courage for wars and revolts because they thought they had the backing of God in all their fights against those they perceived to be against the wellbeing of their nation or against the will of God for their people.

The *Shema* or the ten commandments made up the most significant body of what the people believed God expected from them. From the ten commandments they also deduced that the worship of God alone was the most theological point of the body of their theological persuasions. The history as a nation had taught them the consequences that followed when they tried to break the first commandment by having other gods apart from their one true God. This experience had helped fortify their resolution to never compromise with other gods or forms of foreign worship.

Also, according to the author, “*the Jews believed that all life was governed by God’s will. God created and rules over the entire world*” (pg. 451). This history didn’t just happen by chance but rather God was in control of all the events of history. The author further affirmed that Judaism’s most important contribution to civilization was rooted in this doctrine of creation that implied that since the world was made by God, it was good and had to be cared for.

The keeping of the sabbath day was a practice tied to the creation account of the holy scriptures. God rested on the seventh day after creation and hence the people were to rest after six days of work. According to the author, “*thoughtful Jews saw that the sabbath rest was*

beneficial, and they pointed out that it applied to slaves, animals, and the land itself” (pg. 452).

Speaking of resting animals, it was noted that there were religious sentiments towards the kind treatment of animals. In other words, reasonable care was still given to prevent the abuse of animals. Consequently, even the animals were granted the rest of the sabbath day.

The author also touched on the theology of prayer as a vital aspect of the Jewish theological framework. According to the author, there was a widespread custom of praying morning and evening. Prayers were made in view of God as creator and that he had a providential concern for the world that he had created and more especially for the people of Israel. There were hence prayers in hope for the redemption of Israel. Other aspects of prayer included the offering of thanksgiving and adoration, the grace after meal, and so forth.

There was also the aspect of covenantal nomism. The Jewish view was that God’s grace precedes and expands further than the election of the Jewish people. The grace of God includes the entirety of the created order. But this does not in any way deny the peculiarity of the Jewish people. They believed that they were still set apart by the election of God. Being in covenant with God in this special way made it their duty to be obedient to his laws. So the getting into the covenant with God was by election but staying in was dependent on their obedience to his laws. This covenantal nomism was about how the Jews get into a covenant with God and how that covenant is sustained.

A key aspect of the reading focused on delving into what were the future hopes of the Jewish people. Fundamental to understanding the nature of the future hopes rooted in the Jewish belief system, is understanding that salvation was much more than just individual salvation-it was also much more the salvation of the entirety of their nation. Thus, a fundamental hope and

longing of the Jewish people was for complete independence and self-government where they could freely follow their laws. According to the author, "*most Jews in Palestine in the Roman period longed for 'freedom'. It is doubtful that even the chief priests and the powerful, the principal beneficiaries of direct Roman rule in Judea, truly liked having to answer to Rome*" (pg. 505).

However, it was noted that the hope for a great future wasn't always expressed in positive or peaceable ways. Other negative ways of expression came in the form of complaints, protests and insurrections. Many were willing to take up arms whenever the opportunity presented itself. Much of their courage and dedication was shown in their willingness to die passively rather than to go against their law or to have it transgressed. An instance was when some would ask to be killed rather than to have an atrocity continue.

There were also those who looked forward to a great war—a way when God would either directly fight or fight by proxy warfare, but in either way, the Jewish people too would bear arms, and the end result was the entrance of the Messiah into Jerusalem, the banishment of the Gentiles and the establishment of a new Israel with the tribes reassembled. This new arrangement becomes the ideal kingdom—a kingdom where the true son of David would reign on the throne. Anything less than this was a fallen state and something they would not stop hoping for.

Sanders speculates about why Judea was difficult to rule, and whether anyone could have done better. He ends by saying that he rather likes the high priests and the Pharisees, but not the other pietists. "Mostly, I like the ordinary people" (p.494). Overall, Sanders did a wonderful job highlighting the practices and beliefs of ancient Judaism. The only criticism I have is the fact that he inserts New

Testament theology in a book that is supposed to inform the reader of the practices of ancient Judaism.

References

Sanders, E. P. (1992). *Judaism : practice and belief, 63 BCE-66 CE*. SCM Press.