

The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era
Exploring the Background of Early Christianity
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Chapter 1: Historical Background to the New Testament Era

Judea was a client Kingdom of Persian's when Alexander the Great and the Greeks arrived, conquering everything in sight.(15) One of Alexander's successors set up the Seleucids kingdom in the Near East, and another succession, Ptolemy, took control of Egypt. Ptolemy and his successors also ruled Judea for many year. Through Palestine the Hellenistic rulers built Hellenistic cities such as the cities of Decapolis. Anyone doing business with them had to learn ether language, Greek, and could not help bust be influenced by their culture. Hellenistic culture, had much to offer the educated Jew. (15)

Egypt lost Palestine to the Seleucids in 198 B.C, so in one way or another the detainees of the Jews were not theirs to control for nearly two centuries. The Jews successfully revolted from the Seleucids and set up and independent kingdom for the first time in centuries. For the next century, Judea would pursue its own course—not without difficulties or infighting, but its own course nonetheless. (15)

Then the Romans arrived and began to impose its own culture and values gradually diminishing the influence of Hellenistic culture. When General Pompey arrived in Judea the Romans were too strong to resist. Judea voluntarily allied itself with Rome, becoming a semi-independent client state of what was now an empire in all but name. This protected Judea from domination by more powerful states around it— the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires at first and later the Parthian Empire to the East. Judea remained a part of the Roman Empire, either as a client state or as a Roman province. (15)

Like a number of great civilizations of our past, Rome arose by gradually conquering the peoples around it. But unlike many other kingdoms, the Romans incorporated the conquered peoples into their society. Something else about the Romans was that they never give up. They can be gets in battle, even lose whole armies, but they are never beaten, for they refuse to admit defeat. (15)

By 143 B.C., Judea had voluntarily allied itself with Rome and thereby gained a number of important rights. To begin with, its religion was officially recognized by Rome. Later, when the odious cult of emperor worship was instituted, Jew were not required to participate, and Jews across Rome were allowed the unprecedented right to pay their annual tax to support the Jewish temple. (17)

Chapter 2 Life & Death in the First Century

Occupations: The ancients looked at labor and occupations very differently than the way we do today. For example, they gave the greater honor to those wealth persons whose income came from agriculture. They respected the work of the lawyer as honorable in itself and as a main route to higher public service. (19)

Food Production: In general, and much like the modern world, country, and finished goods were manufactured in the city. Perhaps 90 percent of the Empire's workers were engaged in farming and herding. The New Testament, especially the Gospels, depicts this more fully than does most of the other literature of the day. (20)

Farming: Independent farmers generally worked about 100 days a year. Often a wealthy landowner leased out five to ten-acre plots of his land to tenant farmers (Mt 21:33-41; Mk 12:1-9; Lk 20:9-16). These farms may seem very small to us, but vegetables and cereals could be grown profitably on such small farms. At busy seasons, peasants would help each other with chores or hire extra workers by the day. Wealthy landowners, of course, could afford to add day workers (Lk 15:17, 19). Such day laborers waited in a public place each morning to be hired and were paid at the The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era end of the day (Mt 20:1-16). James considers it sinful to withhold their wages(Jas 5:4). Major landowners, Major landowners, especially in

Italy, often farmed their lands with gangs of slaves under the supervision of a slave or freed stewards. (21)

Herding: meant caring for sheep, goats, pigs or cattle. Sometimes the owners cared for their own livestock, and sometimes they entrusted this work to their sons, slaves or hired hands (Jn 10:12-13). It was the custom in Palestine for shepherds to lead their flocks (Jn 10:4), but elsewhere it was more common to drive the flocks from behind. Shepherds protected the flock from predatory animals and thieves (Jn 10:1). At night they led the sheep to a place of shelter and protection, such as a field or a natural enclosure, where they counted them to see that none had strayed (Lk 15:3-7). In the New Testament, Christ declares himself the Good Shepherd who is known by his sheep and will one day be shepherd over all of God's redeemed (Jn 10:11-16; cf. Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4). The leaders of New Testament churches are compared to shepherds in that they should feed and protect their human flocks (Acts 20:28-31). The same commission is repeated by Peter (1 Pet 5:1-4), who suggests that elders are under shepherds of Christ as Chief Shepherd. This metaphor is used in the tradition of the Old Testament (1 Chro 11:2). (31)

Tent making and the Apostle Paul: Both men and women engaged in tent making, as the New Testament example of Aquila and Priscilla indicates (Acts 18:2-3). About his trade, Paul himself tells us only that he works with his hands (1 Cor 4:12). Acts tells us that Paul is a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). The meaning of

the word translated “tentmaker” (skenopoios) is obscure, leading translators and scholars over the centuries to interpret it differently. Since Paul came from Tarsus in Cilicia, he may have been trained to make tents from the wool or hair of Cilician goats. Tentmakers who worked with cloth first had to weave the tent cloth on their looms. In Palestine, camel hair and goat hair were used; these yielded a dark brown, almost black material. Then the long, narrow, loomed strips were sewn together. Cords attached to the cloth were tied to stakes when the tent was pitched. Paul may have been a leatherworker who specialized in tent making, since most tents in this era were made of leather. (27-28)

The Games of Greece and Rome: The New Testament, especially the Pauline letters, make a number of allusions to athletics and games. These allusions refer to both Greek and Roman styles. The games of Greek cities were very popular. Some were held purely for locals, but others, which offered large prizes or were connected to an important religious observance, brought prestige to the city and attracted competitors from far away. In fact, some amateur competitors from the upper classes traveled from town to town to compete in the various games. Often the prize was very simple: a crown of greenery, usually olive or laurel leaves, as Paul notes (1Cor. 9:25).

Chapter 3: The City in the Greco-Roman World

In the first century Greek and Roman societies were organized around their cities. All the amenities of culture and all the market facilities a region

offered were located in the city. The city represented all that civilization meant to the upper classes. Farmers and shepherds from the surrounding countryside came to town to sell their products and buy manufactured items and specialty goods at the city's daily markets, weekly fairs and annual holiday bazaars. City

The term city (polis), as used in the New Testament, can mislead the casual reader. This word is used of very different kinds of cities. Some cities were established by or heavily influenced by Hellenistic or Roman culture. These cities were the largest, wealthiest and most powerful, but they were not all alike. (49)

Physical Setting: The cities and larger towns of the Roman Empire were situated on highways, at river crossings and at natural harbors. Travelers on the road to a city passed farms, orchards and the homes of farm workers. They might see the arches of an aqueduct bringing water into the city. The first thing they would see of the city was its walls. If the city was located on high ground, as were many cities in Palestine, from a long distance they would see its walls by day and its lights by night. Jesus must have had this image in mind when he talked about the visibility of a city set on a hill (Mt5:14). The more important cities were enclosed by massive, buttressed walls with watch towers at the corners and on both sides of the city gates. The city gate (or gates) was large enough to accommodate carts pulled by animals. Travelers who arrived between sunrise and sunset would find the gate open. Otherwise, they would have to seek admittance at a smaller, side door. The doors of great houses were

similarly designed. Jesus may be alluding to this arrangement when he urges his followers to enter by the narrow gate rather than the broad one (Lk 13:24). Inside the walls of a city that predated the Greeks and Romans, travelers found a maze of narrow, winding streets. Ancient Near Eastern cities such as Antioch or Damascus tended to grow bit by bit instead of resulting from a plan. By contrast, a Greek or Roman City was built on a formal grid of streets crossing at right angles. (51)

A traveler knew that the street from the city gate bisected the city, extending straight to the agora or forum and typically crossing the city to a gate at the far side. The streets, at least the main boulevards, usually were wider than in ancient Near Eastern cities as well. The Greeks who took control of the eastern Mediterranean, following the death of Alexander the Great, founded or rebuilt 350 cities. More than 30 of them were in Palestine, including the cities of the Decapolis (Mt 4:25). These towns stood out from the native cities. Their principal streets and rectangular blocks, monumental arches, theaters, public baths, gymnasiums, arcades, temples, fountains, colonnade and agoras all marked them as Hellenistic. The main thoroughfares typically were paved, but most of the streets and alleys were dirt. Because of this, continual foot-washing was necessary, even in the city (Lk 7:38-46; Jn 12:3; 13:5-15). But the Greeks did not do all the Hellenistic construction in Palestine. King Herod the Great of Judea is responsible for a great deal of it, according to Josephus (Jewish War

1.422-25). In fact, Herod built much of his reconstructed temple in Jerusalem in the Greek style (Jewish War 5.184-227). (51)

Predominantly Jewish towns refused to Hellenize, even though prominent Jewish families took on Greco-Roman ways. The average Jewish houses remained small and crowded together, with flat roofs and rooms opening on a courtyard separated from the street by a wall with a gate door (Acts 12:13).

In a Roman colony, the central forum usually contained a temple to Jupiter (in honor of his great temple on the Capitoline Hill in Rome) and a 'curia' building where the town council met (in imitation of the senate 'curia' in the Forum in Rome; see the photograph of the forum in Pompeii. The typical central forum also had a basilica where law cases and business deals could be conducted out of the elements, a smaller temple or two, and statues of distinguished citizens and of the emperor and his family. Other temples were located throughout the city, scattered along the streets or set off in individual precincts. Roman towns typically also had public baths, a modified version of the Greek theater, and often a large amphitheater for gladiatorial games. (52)

Chapter 4: Influences on Christian Organization

The New Testament has little to say about the organization of the church. The Gospels record very few comments by Jesus on the subject, beyond acknowledging its existence, the need for leaders and its mission to spread the message. The Epistles give only the outlines of a model for how

Christians are to meet, organize and appoint leaders. How then did the churches develop forms of organization? It appears that the churches borrowed from the society models that they considered compatible with their identity as Christians. It makes sense that, in putting together an organization from scratch, the early Christians would use and modify forms with which they were familiar. Using forms of organization from the larger society, at least superficially, had another benefit: it made them less conspicuous in a society that did not recognize their right to meet. But we must consider whether and to what degree the use of these forms affected Christianity itself. This chapter looks at how Christians used and modified two societal structures: the voluntary association and the household. (72)

The first Christians were Jewish converts and Gentiles originally attracted to Judaism. So it should not be surprising that some forms from the synagogue show up in the early churches. Like the synagogues, the early churches were overseen by elders. Their meetings included the reading of Scripture, prayer and singing. Visiting teachers were invited to address the group. Like the synagogues, the Christian churches provided a place of belonging and a place for newcomers to a city to make contacts. In cities where multiple congregations existed, the churches, like the synagogues, cooperated with one another in a variety of ways. Of course, the churches added special practices such as Communion and baptism. (72)

The synagogue was not the only model that influenced early Christians. They also saw themselves as a household and met in homes. We should not be surprised if the organization of their churches was influenced by the home setting, as often is the case with modern house churches. Since the household in Roman times differed considerably from ours, it is useful to investigate its nature. (72)

But Christianity faced challenges that neither the synagogue nor the house-hold model could address. As long as local authorities saw the earliest churches as part of the Jewish religion, they left them alone since Judaism was a licensed religion of the Empire and its adherents were allowed to organize synagogues. But when, in the late first or early second century, Rome realized that Christianity was a separate religion, the churches had to find a different way to congregate legally. They found it in the Roman voluntary association. (72)

Chapter 5: Religion in the Greco-Roman World

While Americans for the most part prefer to keep religion separate from the state, the ancients saw the state as inseparable from religion. Throughout their history, Americans have seen religion as a very private act between the individual and his or her God. By contrast, most ancients saw religion more as an expression of identification with an ethnic or geographic community. However, we should not make the mistake of concluding that, because their religion was

more an external identification with a group than an individualized commitment, it was somehow less serious. (90)

The Romans on the whole took religion very seriously. Because they accepted the existence of many gods, Romans usually were tolerant of other religions, even when they considered them distasteful. But they became intolerant, even repressive, when they feared that a religion threatened their way of life.

The Nature of Ancient Religion: Ancient religion began as a religion of farmers. It grew out of sacrifices and ceremonies invented to bless the fields. The ancients believed that they were surrounded and protected, or threatened, by many invisible powers. Their ceremonies either called upon the gods for help or kept them at bay. The religions of the Greeks and Romans were contract religions based on mutual trust between gods and humankind. The original purpose of their religions apparently was to gain the cooperation of the gods. Thus, there arose a body of rules telling what had to be done or avoided in order to influence the gods for good. These rules were not a code of behavior, but governed the proper performance of rituals, such as how to say a blessing or sacrifice an animal. Greeks or Romans could believe whatever they liked, so long as they performed the rituals properly. In essence prayer was an attempt to coerce the forces of nature. The prayer began with an invocation, a reminder of past benefits or a reference to the god's power to confer benefits. It then

stated the request, almost always accompanied by a promise to do something for the god in return. Such promises ranged from a simple sacrifice or commemorative plaque to the building of a temple. (89)

Ritual dances and animal sacrifices often accompanied the traditional prayers. For example, the Roman who sought the gods' favor would for a time avoid taboo things such as strangers, corpses, newborns and places previously struck by lightning. In fact, the Romans were obsessed with performing the rituals in a certain, precise way. One wrong syllable or gesture could invalidate the prayer: The text for invoking a happy omen is different from that for averting an ill or that for making a request. The highest officials pray in fixed forms of words, and to make sure that not a word is omitted or spoken in the wrong place, a prompter reads the text before them, another person is appointed to watch over it, yet another to command silence, and the flute-player plays to mask all other sounds.(Pliny the Elder Natural History 23.10)

The contrast with early Christian worship, in which the leaders improvised prayers, avoided Roman repetition and focused more on instruction, would have been very clear to both Christians and pagans. However, we must be careful not to read modern forms of Christian worship back into the first century. The average early Christian certainly put more emphasis on identifying with the group, and less on individual preferences, than does the average American Christian. (90)

The characteristic form of worship, public and private, was the sacrifice. For example, among the Romans only the head of the family, the paterfamilias, performed the religious rituals of his family. Pietas, from which the English word piety comes, refers to the Romans' unqualified acceptance of their obligations to the gods, to the state and to their elders. Later authors celebrated Octavian's revenge on the murderers of Julius Caesar, his adoptive father, as an act of pietas to the glorified Caesar. Among the Greeks, the male head of the household similarly led the family's religious rituals. By the time of Jesus and Paul, philosophers had long questioned the existence of the official gods. Political leaders, even the priests of these gods, were often motivated more by social and political goals than by personal religious belief. The common people of the Empire often were more interested in the local or minor deities of their areas than in the gods of the official state religion. (91-92)

The Greek Gods: Many of the Greek gods were agricultural in origin. For example, Zeus was a sky god who sent the rain; Demeter brought forth the grain from the earth; Dionysus caused the grapes to grow and the sap to flow in trees; Aphrodite was concerned with reproduction and fertility; Artemis was associated with the monthly cycle of the moon; local demigods were thought to inhabit rivers, trees and woods and to protect those who lived nearby. Other gods presided over more urban activities: Athena was

connected with politics, war and industry; Hephaestus was god of the blacksmith and artisan; Hermes was the patron god of the merchant and messenger; and Ares was the sponsor of war.

The Gods of Rome: At first the Romans did not think of their gods as persons with histories and human passions, but Etruscan and Greek influence changed this. Once Rome came into contact with the Greek colonies of southern Italy, the Romans began fusing much of Greek religion with their own. But they never placed as much emphasis on the human aspects of the gods as the Greeks did. The Romans believed, as did most polytheists of the day, that there was always room for one more god. They were never sure that they had discovered all the gods that existed.

In Rome's early days, its principal deity was Numa. Gods specific to the household were popular in early Rome: the Genius, representing the life-blood of the family; the Penates, or embodiment of the storehouse; Vesta, the spirit of the hearth; and Lar, the luck of the family. The lares were good spirits associated with certain localities and worshiped at crossroads. Caesar Augustus would later try to find legitimacy for his cult of emperor worship by linking it with the lares. Reverence for ancestors was a powerful force in Roman life. This involved the subordination of the individual to the family and to the society. The most powerful deity among the peasants, and the first official Roman state god, was Jupiter, who threw thunderbolts from heaven. He later was

identified with the Greek Zeus. A triad of gods was formed when Jupiter was joined by Juno, the protectress of women, and Minerva, the goddess of craftsmen. Later came Mars, the god of war and of hard labor, who eventually was identified with Ares, the Greek god of war. Saturn was a god of agriculture. Diana, originally an Italian goddess of the woods, came to be identified with the Greek Artemis, and became a special goddess of women and slaves. Fortuna, originally a goddess of farming, became the goddess of good luck once she was identified with the Greek goddess Tyche. The goddess of love, Aphrodite, was renamed Venus by the Romans after they borrowed her cult from the Greeks. Julius Caesar claimed her as an ancestor. Dozens of other minor deities were patrons of various occupations, regions, or families.

Rome and New Religions In general, the Romans readily accepted foreign deities. From the third century B.C. on, many Romans began adopting new religions. This was in part because things had not been going well for Rome in its wars against the Carthaginians, and many felt the need to seek additional divine help. The first mystery religion to become popular among Romans was that of Cybele. It was brought from the East in 204 B.C., along with its ecstatic services and cultic orgies. Because this goddess was served by castrated priests, the Roman Republic did not allow its citizens to be initiated. Yet Rome allowed the Temple of Cybele to be erected at a prominent location and made

her annual festival an official holiday. The worship of Bacchus (god of wine and debauchery, Dionysus to the Greeks) became popular in Rome about the same time. The worship of Isis and Serapis came a bit later, but also became very popular among the Romans.

The expectations of the mystery religions were quite a change from the Roman state religion, whose gods made no demands on the individual and promised him or her no personal rewards. The new cults promised Romans an afterlife, a sense of belonging and an emotional excitement absent from the state religion. However, formal initiation into the cult was usually too expensive for most to afford. Numerous religious groups in American history have featured elements of mystery religions and offered similar promises of special knowledge, a sense of purpose and special access to the divine. They often feature ecstatic experiences, even orgiastic rituals. More extreme forms have included Jim Jones's cult in Jonestown, Guyana, the Heaven's Gate cult in San Diego, California, and David Koresh's Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas. Mystery religions differed from Christianity in important ways.

Roman Religion at the Onset of the New Testament Era.

The late Republic brought a change of attitude toward the Roman state religion. While Romans continued to build massive temples to the traditional gods, the educated and wealthy classes began to doubt the existence of the gods. The ruling elite did not give up the state religion; that would have been

impossible since it was so intertwined with the politics of Rome. But offices such as that of the high priest of the state religion became purely political offices, sought after by political climbers like Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus. Many of the elite turned privately to astrology for guidance, even while they maintained public worship of the Roman gods.

Some Romans attributed the civil wars at the end of the Republic to this loss of commitment to the traditional gods. The first emperor, Caesar Augustus, sought to validate his rule by presenting himself as leading Rome back to its long-lost roots. He stressed the ancient Roman belief that prosperity and peace depended on fulfilling one's duties to the gods. He began a systematic religious restoration. In Rome alone he restored eighty-two temples, reinstated many forgotten rites and festivals, and filled vacant priestly offices. He attempted to limit the intrusion of new cults into the city of Rome.

For Augustus this was not about restoring religious faith and practices; it was about using Roman tradition to mask his assumption of powers that no one person had held before. Because of this, he made a number of changes to Roman religion designed to weaken or eliminate the independent power of religious leaders. For example, he (and his successors) assumed the post of high priest (pontifex maximus). He deprived the priestly colleges of their influence over political decisions. Instead, the colleges were reoriented to serve the emperor.

Public divination, a religious practice common in the Republic, fell into disuse. The taking of the auspices, especially by generals, came to be treated as a privilege of the emperor. This is because both of these rituals could be used, for example, to assert that the gods were opposed to an emperor's actions. Roman religion, as practiced by many, if not most, during the Empire, was characterized by formal observance of the rituals with little conviction. Proper performance of the rites of Roman religion became a symbol of one's respect for the state and appreciation for tradition, not necessarily a sign of personal belief. (100)

Emperor Worship: While Augustus was primarily concerned with reestablishing traditional religious practices, he did contribute one important religious innovation: the cult of the emperor. Emperor worship was a way for Roman leaders to establish their power in the eastern Mediterranean. It also served to focus the loyalty of provincials on the person of the emperor. This cult was readily accepted by those peoples of the eastern Mediterranean who for centuries had been taught to venerate their rulers as gods. For example, the Egyptians considered their pharaoh the incarnation of the god Horus. Long before Augustus, Alexander the Great and his successors recognized that they could use these beliefs to cement their control over the Near East. The Greeks and Macedonians found this ruler cult hard to accept at first, even though they had myths about humans like Heracles who joined the gods of Mount Olympus.

During the first century A.D., the cult of the living emperor became an accepted feature of public life. Oaths were sworn by the genius of the emperor.

The Greek term *kyrios* (“lord”) was used to refer to the emperor Nero, as we see in the language of the governor of Judea, Festus (Acts 25:26). The emperor Vespasian and his son Titus were called “savior.” His other son, Domitian, expanded the concept of the divinity of the emperor and scandalized his fellow Romans by demanding that they address him as “lord and god” (*dominus et deus*). He was assassinated not long thereafter. After his death, the cult of the emperor reverted to a low-key pledge of allegiance to the emperor. (101)

The Romans did not require anyone to worship only the emperor; they allowed people to retain their own religious beliefs. This caused no problem for the vast majority of subjects, who believed in many gods.

Roman Attitudes Toward Other Religions: Whether in Italy or in the farthest province, the Empire’s cities hosted a variety of religions. This reality forced the Romans to deal with a variety of religious beliefs and practices. The relative peace of the early Empire allowed merchants, artisans, colonists, religious leaders and others to move freely from place to place. When people settled in a new region, they brought their native religion. (101-102)

Foreign settlers in a city often found people from the same country and joined together in worship. Depending on their beliefs, they might set up a shrine or a meeting place. As their numbers grew, they might demand some civic recognition. Over time, their religion became part of their city's religious establishment.

Acceptance: The Roman state normally had no trouble incorporating a new religion into its system. The Roman attitude toward Judaism exemplifies this policy of toleration. In 161 B.C. the Jewish leader, Judas Maccabee, requested Roman protection from the ravages of the Seleucid monarch, Antiochus IV. Wanting to weaken the Seleucids, Rome agreed to a declaration of friendship with Judea. In the following century, the Jews gave both Julius Caesar and Octavian valuable military assistance. This led to a series of official edicts and letters to Greek cities in the East, instructing them to permit resident Jews to observe their traditional religion. Jews were allowed to pay the Jewish temple tax rather than the normal Roman taxes and to worship and organize freely. Even more important, they would not be required to participate in emperor worship. These privileges were not altered until after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. (105)

Distaste: Many Romans found other religions personally distasteful, even potentially threatening. In fact, the emperor Claudius (41-54) came to see the Eastern mystery religions then popular in Rome as too powerful to be ignored.

He tried, with some success, to exert control over them. Juvenal, a first-century A.D. Roman aristocrat whose wealth had been confiscated by Emperor Domitian, believed that the flood of Eastern immigrants into Rome, with their outlandish languages and religions, was bringing the city to ruin (Juvenal Satire 3.62-64). (1050)

As time went on, Roman culture exerted a strong influence on the many religions of the eastern Empire, changing them and sometimes destroying them. Aspects of Roman religion often fused with local cults. For example, a local deity might be seen as a manifestation of some Roman god or goddess. This began in the Roman colonies and strategic cities of the East, where Roman presence was strong. But the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean rarely adopted Roman religion wholesale. Some did not see it as much different from Greek religion. Others held little regard for Roman culture in general, so they did not find its religion particularly attractive. Besides this, the Romans for the most part had no desire to uproot local religions, except for those associated with political independence. (105-106)

Rome was not always comfortable with the privileges and exemptions it had granted to the Jews. (106) As time went on, the memory of Jewish support for Rome dimmed and was replaced in many Romans' minds by a perception that the Jews both in Judea and abroad were more trouble than they were worth. Many Roman leaders long before the Jewish revolt in A.D. 66

concluded that the Jews were unwilling to cooperate with provincial authorities in Judea or to coexist peacefully with Gentiles in the cities of the Empire.

This passage shows a clear lack of appreciation for Judaism, but Juvenal's real problem is not with Jewish religion. Rather, he is concerned that Romans have forsaken their traditional religion and turned to Judaism. Many Romans shared his concern that Rome would suffer the disapproval of the gods if enough Romans turned their backs on them. While Judaism gained numerous casual followers among the Romans, it apparently made few full converts. The strict dietary regulations and the required circumcision for men, not to mention the need to avoid contact with Gentiles made full conversion a major sacrifice. Many of these partial converts would find it much easier to convert fully to Christianity once it came on the Scene. A number of Romans apparently experienced a similar distaste for Christianity. (106)

The Roman historian Tacitus called first-century Christianity a "deadly superstition" and "mischief" and asserted that Christians were "notoriously depraved." He believed that their guilt as Christians deserved "ruthless punishment" and that their presence in Rome proved that all "degraded and emperor's image. On investigation, Pliny found Christianity harmless enough, just "a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths." Trajan basically approved of Pliny's practice, but he told Pliny not to go hunting for Christians or to accept the word of anonymous informants. (108)

Thus, early Roman persecution of Christianity did not represent opposition to the theological beliefs of the church, or even overt opposition to Christianity itself. As far as we can tell, no edict was passed against Christianity in the first one and a half centuries of its existence. Rather, it was a religion that simply did not fit any of Rome's categories: its monotheism prevented Roman religion from absorbing it, and its followers were not from a single conquered or allied people. As a result, it could not be a legally recognized religion. In addition, its adherents stubbornly refused to respect the simple rituals of Roman religion, such as burning incense to the emperor's genius. Such people were considered likely to support political insurrection and even outright revolt. Ironically, the Roman leaders in the first century never in their wildest dreams could have imagined how Christians would one day close up the temples of the gods and make Christianity the new state religion. Once that happened, the church would inherit some of the trappings of the earlier religion. For example, the Pope is called pontifex maximus, or high priest of the Christian religion, borrowing the term from Roman state religion. In addition, the term "Queen of Heaven," which later would be applied to Mary the mother of Jesus, originated with Eastern mystery religions. (109)

Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63BCE - 66 C.E E.P. Sanders

In the preview (Chapter 1) of this colossal masterpiece E.P. Sanders begins telling us that in the period covered in this book, Judaism was dynamic and diverse. What's really amazing about this book is that it reads like a historical novel while providing an encyclopedic description of important events in Jewish, religious and political history.

One notable piece of information stated succinctly is that, the "Pharisees did not control Palestine as some have thought and written, and the Mishnah does not necessarily describe general practice in Judaism. (11) Sanders is very forthright about the focus of his writing. He continues, "We shall consider in general the time enclosed by great revolts: the Hasmonean (or Maccabean) revolts against the Seleucids and the first Jewish revolt against Rome (c. 167 BCE to 73 or 74 CE) We shall give close attention to the Roman period (63 BCE to 74 CE) than to the Hasmonean (167-63 BCE), and we shall not discuss the first revolt (66-74 CE). Thus the study concentrates on the period that begins with the conquest of Jerusalem by the Roman general Pompey (63 CE). Even within this span, we shall pay more attention to the situation in Judea and Galilee after the death of Herod the Great (4 BCE) than to events of the previous years. I shall use 'first-century Judaism' as a convenient term to

describe the period under investigation.” (4) There is no doubt about where he’s taking us and about what we will encounter as we navigate through this historical landscape.

Having described the scope of his coverage, Sanders then draws closer to his subject by telling us that the Jews of Palestine in the period covered faced the questions common to societies: foreign affairs and domestic policies. (5) Regarding foreign relations the question was how to relate to the great empire of their geographical area: when go to war, when to yield; when to acquiesce to partial independence, when to pursue more autonomy. (5) Regarding domestic affairs, “the primary issue was who would control the national institutions: the temple, the sacrifices, the tithes and other offerings. And the administration of the law.” (5) One thing stood out, there was no simple distinction between “church” and “state” or ‘religion’ and ‘politics.’ God, in the eyes of the Jews, cared about all aspects of life no part of life was outside ‘religion’. (5) “Thus in any case in which there was a choice—whether between would-be rulers, competing architectural plans for the t temple, or various prohibitions on the sabbath—Jews would attempt to discern and follow God’s will.” (5)

Sanders concludes this part of chapter one proclaiming, “This history that we consider is both tense and intense, and it would be important and interesting even were its outcome less momentous that it was. As things turned

out, however, first-century Jewish Palestine was the cradle of two of the West's three major religions: rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.” (6)

Chapter 2: Issues that Generated Parties: Sanders briefly defines the political parties of Josephus' time while also mentioning that Josephus is his source for much of the information in the book. We are told that Josephus mentions three main parties:

“Sadducees: aristocrats, including aristocratic priests, who followed the biblical law but not the relatively new Pharisaic ‘traditions’ and who denied the resurrection. Politically, most of them saw co-operation with Rome as Israel's best policy.

Pharisees: both priests and laity, apparently mostly the latter. Few Pharisees were socially and financially prominent. They were acute interpreters of the law and were daily rigorous in keeping it. They also had special traditions, some of which heightened, some of which relaxed the law. They believed in the resurrection.

Essenes: a party of priests and laity that had more than one branch. All Essenes kept separate from other Jews to some degree. They had their own views on many matters especially the temple and purity; and they attributed their views, in whole or in part, to Moses.” (20)

“In some respects party positions can be said to have originated during the biblical period, and especially during the exile, but the groups as we know

them from Josephus the New Testament, the Dead Sea Scroll and rabbinic literature— the principal bodies of primary evidence— were shaped by the events of the Hasmonean uprising against the Seleucid kingdom and the period of Hasmonean rule. During the course of the successful revolt, three things happened:

1. Israel re-established first religious and then political autonomy.
2. One option for Israelite life—merger into the common Hellenistic culture—was decisively rejected. Jewish life would be lived according to the law of Moses, which in some ways separated Jew from Gentile.
3. The old leadership of Israel—the Zadokite priesthood—was replaced by the Hasmonean family.” (20-21)

Chapter 3: Historical Outline of the Roman Period. Sanders begins the chapter saying, “We shall cover the remaining history with extreme economy offering just enough information to allow the reader to identify people and events when we return to them under topical heading, where several aspects of this period will be discussed in detail.

Chapter 4. The Context of Conflict. “Revolt 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 seems that every time an opportunity appeared there was an uprising of some sort. This at least is the standard view.” (53) But Sanders also tells us that there was also another side, there were periods of

strong and stable government that were marked by peace and tranquility.

According to Josephus, the majority of Jews were prepared to be obedient to Rome.

Sanders alleges that one of the common problems of describing Judaism is the way in which religion and politics intertwine. The simplest way of presenting their interrelationship is to narrate the historical events while simultaneously dealing with “religion” and “theology.”

Chapter 5. Common Judaism and the Temple. Common, Normal and Normative. “Within Palestine, ‘normal’ or ‘common’ Judaism was what the priests and the people agreed on. In general Jews of the Greek speaking Diaspora share in this normal Judaism, although their participation in temple worship, which was an important ingredient, was restricted.

‘Normal’ Judaism was, to a limited degree also ‘normative’: it established a standard by which loyalty to Israel and to the God of Israel was measured. Outside Judea the official guardians of the religion, the priests, had little actual power after the Roman conquest. Moreover, Jews in general believe that their sacred books were truly Holy Scripture. God gave them the law through Moses, and they were to obey it. Physically there were three foci of religion: the temple, the synagogue (or house of prayer) and the home.” (71)

Chapter 8: The Common People: Daily Life and Annual Festivals. Ordinary Life: “The occupations of Palestinian Jews were the same, on average as those

in other Mediterranean countries. The Mishnah enumerates the thirty-nine main classes of work. Most people made their living in agriculture.” (197) It is said that in Judea the zeal of the farmers was remarkable. (198) People and Festivals. In the first century, Jerusalem would hold a very large number of people. Herod tried to make the temple court, its porticoes and the streets around it adequate for large crowds. There is no doubt that the city of Jerusalem was populous in peacetime, that thousands of pilgrims came to the festivals, and that hundred of thousands died in the wars.

Chapter 11. Observing the Law of God I: General Characteristics, Worship and Sabbath. In this chapter we are moved outside the temple to consider religion in the routine lives of ordinary people. Sanders here intends to correct most portrayals of Judaism, which for most part, focus either on politics or on theology. “The temple service is today little understood, and some people shrink from it as something alien and unpalatable. The act of historical understanding requires that this alienation be overcome and that the ancient religion be seen as it really was. But, more important, this mode of description corresponds to how religion was viewed in the ancient world. ‘Religion’ (which went by such terms as ‘piety’, ‘worship’ or ‘service’) was defined primarily as cults worship.” (211-212)

Judaism by comparison to other religions, was simple and straightforward. “Most Jew probably did know their own laws better than did most pagans.

Judaism's most distinctive point, however, was the extension of divine law to all areas of life. It embraced what people did more than what they thought."

The Law: Basic Distinctions. Two distinctions help us understand the law as a whole:

1. Law govern either (a) relations between human and God or (b) relations among humans (with implications for the human-divine relationship).

2. Transgressions of the law are either (a) involuntary or (b) intentional
"The division of the law into two parts, sometimes called 'two tables' (one governing human relations with God and the other relationships among humans), was widely recognized in the first century, and it will enhance our understanding of Judaism if we consider the two tables more fully and note the terminology in the Greek-writing authors." (315-316)

Worship of the One God in Synagogue and Home: "Fundamental to Jewish life and worship was the Shema, the biblical passage that begins "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might: (Deut. 6.4-5). The passage continues by saying that the commandments are to be 'upon the heart', taught to children, spoken of at home and abroad, and remembered before sleep and upon waking. They are to be bound upon the hand, placed 'as frontlets' between the eyes, and put on the doorpost of the home and on the gate (vv. 6-9) Moreover, accompanying the saying of the Shema were daily prayer."

Chapter 12: Observing the Law of God II: Circumcision, Purity, Food, Charity and Love. Circumcision and Identity. “Jewish families circumcised their sons. It is a slightly curious fact that even though Jews were not the only circumcised males in the Mediterranean world, nevertheless both insiders and outsiders regarded circumcision as distinctively Jewish. Purity of Food. Food is different from the purity laws of Lev. 12, 15; Num. 19. Law regulates what Jews can eat, and some possible foods are completely prohibited, being labelled not only ‘impure’ but also ‘abominable’ (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). Intentional transgression of the prohibitions constitute a serious offense. The Bible makes two major restrictions: it allows Jews to eat only a few living creatures; it forbids them to consume the main fatty parts of an animal and its blood. These rules, together with a few others, constitute what are now called the laws of ‘kashrut’. Only certain food is ‘kosher’, suitable for Jews to eat.

Chapter 13 Common Theology: “The history of Israel in general, and our period in particular, shows that Jews believed that the one God of the universe had given them his law and that they were to obey it. This basic and fundamental doctrine also implies belief in the election: God chose Israel to do his will. Jews understood the election to lay upon them the obligation of obedience, but also to involve promises on God’s part: that he would save and protect them. One of the fundamental factors that contributed to their willingness to fight, and if need be die, was the conviction that God would save

those who were loyal to him. This confidence endured right to the end of the great revolt. Despite the crushing defeat that concluded the war, the same conviction revived and helped to fuel a second revolt.

Worship of the One God, “The most important theological point that is conveyed by the Shema and the Ten Commandments is that Israel should worship only the one true God. Originally, the commandment to worship only the God of Israel did not constitute a denial that there were other gods. By our period, however, Jews had come to the view that the other gods were not real gods. In technical terms, Judaism progressed from Henotheism (our God is God number one) and monolatry (we worship him alone) to monotheism (our God is the only real God; him alone we worship).

The first of the Ten Commandments forbids the worship of other gods, the second the making of ‘graven images’, or indeed, ‘any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth’ (ex. 20.3-4; Deut. 5.7-8). The Shema specifies that the Lord God is one, which in the first century implied strict monotheism: the one Lord is the only Lord. Jewish sensitivity to these commandments was high.

Creation, Providence and History: Jews believed that all life is governed by God’s will. God created and rules over the entire world. The doctrine of creation—that this world was made by God, is good, and is to be cared for as

his—is perhaps Judaism’s most important single contribution to civilization.

Most Jews also thought that God controlled history.” (408-9)

Chapter 14: Hopes for the Future: “Judaism was not primarily a religion of individual salvation. An abiding concern was the God should maintain his covenant with the Jewish people and that the nation be preserved. The Future of Israel: Most Jews in Palestine in the Roman period longed for ‘freedom’. It is doubtful what even the chief priests and the ‘powerful’, the principal beneficiaries of direct Roman rule in Judea, truly like having to answer to Rome. Herod enjoyed autonomy in internal affairs, but he must at times have wished that Rome did not look over his shoulder.

It is probable that most Jews expected death not to be the end, though they may have conceived the future quite vaguely.

Chapter 16 The Essenes and the Dead Sea Sect I: Origins, History, Membership and Organization: “The Essenes, once the object of fanciful speculation, are now the best-known Jewish group of our period. Thanks to the discovery of manuscripts and a settlement near the Dead Sea.” They were a Jewish sect that emerged in the Second Century BCE and established a community in Qumran. They emphasized ritual purity and copied books that were preserved and later found. They believed that history was predestined, and the apocalyptic theory realty in a worldview polarized between good and evil. Membership: One did not become a member overnight. According to Josephus

there was a two-stage novitiate. During the first year, the would-be Essene began to observe some of the rules, but in important ways he remained an outsider. After a year, if worthy, he could 'share the purer water that was used for purification' but could not attend meetings. After two years in this stage, he had to swear 'tremendous oaths', and only then could he touch the 'common food'". (548)

"The Qumran sectarians were full separate from the rest of Judaism." According to Josephus, the Essenes' daily routine consisted of work, a meal at the fifth hour (approximately noon), more work, and an evening meal. Before each meal, they 'girded their loins with linen cloths' and bathed in cold water. They entered a room that was forbidden to non-members. 'Pure now themselves, they repair to the refectory, as to some sacred shrine'. The priest said a blessing, and then they ate. After a closing prayer, they 'laid aside their raiment, as holy vestments' and went back to work. They followed the same routine in the evening." (553-554)

Chapter 17 The Essenes and the Dead Sea Sect II: Further Aspects of Practice and Belief. Sabbath: "The Essenes were stricter than other Jews 'in abstaining from work on the seventh day'; they would not light a fire, remove a vessel 'or even go to stool'. Speaking about work was forbidden, as well as conduct of business. Their limit of a sabbath day's journey was 1,000 cubits (c. 500 meters or yards)." According to Josephus, the Essenes, believed in

immortality of the soul and regarded the body as the prison of the soul and shared the belief of the Greeks, 'that for virtuous souls there is reserved an abode beyond the ocean.'" (581)

Chapter 18 The Pharisees I: History: Sanders concludes this chapter saying that the "Pharisees were a substantial group, the largest and most influential group that is identifiable in pre-70 Judaism, except for the priesthood, headed by the chief priests. Altogether the priesthood was larger than the Pharisaic party. Josephus' figures (20,000 priests, 6,000 Pharisees (at the time of Herod) and 4,000 Essenes) are of course round numbers, but they probably reflect relative size. There was only a small overlap: a few priests and Levites were Pharisees. During most of their history the Pharisees were out of power, though they desire it. They were thus a focal point for anti-establishment sentiment. When the time seemed right they, or at least some of them, were willing to take up arms against the government.

Some of the Pharisees were eminent in social and economic terms, but for the most part they were not an aristocratic group. Many people respected their piety, learning and scrupulousness with regard to the law, and many applauded them for their relative political independence and their hope for full independence. They did not however, control any aspect of Judaism before 70, except during the reign of Salome Alexandra. During the revolt they achieved a position of leadership, having been called in by the chief priests in order to

broaden their base of support. After the destruction of Jerusalem, they led the reconstruction of Judaism, giving up their party name, becoming more catholic, and taking the title 'rabbis', 'teachers'. (648-649)

Chapter 19 The Pharisees II: Theology and Practice: "The earliest rabbinic literature tells us too little about Pharisaic theology and piety, and it tells us too much about their legal interpretations. The talk of studying Pharisaic views, however require more than just stratifying and categorizing passage. Most of the early passages are debate, not rules, and one would hav not probe behind each debate to see what the Pharisees agreed on.

The problem in using the New Testament and Jesephus to expose Pharisaic theology is simply that we cannot derive enough information from them. The fact that Josephus was biased in favor of the Pharisees, and that the authors of the gospel were biased against them, would aid instigation rathe than hinder it, if they address the same points. From the New Testament we learn vey little specifically about Pharisaic theology. Josephus' reports on the Pharisee' beliefs very brief, and he mentions only two theological points: belief in the resurrection and in the "co-operation' of divine providence (fate) and human free will. Moreover, the Pharisees share the beliefs common to Jews. The Pharisees believed in both providence and free will, as did the sectarians, but we cannot describe what they specifically said and how they thought about these topics. We miss their passion, their depth, their insight. We are left with

propositions, theological opinions, which are quite important, but which are a long way from what we would like to have.

The theology they shared was this: The Pharisee believed that God was good, that he created the world, that he governed it, and that it would turn out as he wished. God chose Israel: he called Abraham, made with him a covenant and laid on him a few obligations. He redeemed Israel from Egypt; and, having saved his people, gave them the law and charged them to observe it. God is perfectly reliable and will keep all his promises. Among these are he will act in the future as he acted in the past: he will save his people, even though they are disobedient. He can be relied on to punish disobedience and reward obedience. He is just; therefore he never does the reverse. When it comes to punishment, however, his justice is moderated by mercy and by his promises. He does not punish as he might, or who could live? He does not retract his commitment to his people. He holds out his arms to the disobedient, urging them to repent and return. It is never too late for repentance and atonement, which wipe out all transgressions. When God punishes disobedience, or when the transgressor repents in the ways required by the law, all is forgiven. Transgressions against the human require compensation as well as repentance; people who owe sacrifices should spend time. Just as God maintains the people of Israel, so he supports individuals, and in the end he will give eternal felicity to every member of the covenant who has intended to live in accord with the divine will. This is

‘covenantal nomism’. How do I know that the Pharisees shared it? Partly because it was common to virtually all Jews and it to be found in all the main bodies of Jewish material.” (653-654)