

People and Places in the Life of Jesus

People are usually shaped by the places where they grow up and by the persons who surround them. Jesus was no exception. He was a Jew who grew up in Palestine, an eastern Mediterranean area that was subject to Roman domination. Jesus was from a largely rural area in the northern province of Galilee, and worked for many years in and around a tiny village called Nazareth. Jesus' little village was a stone's throw from the bustling city of Sepphoris and was also near the main trade route.

Throughout his life, Jesus was surrounded by the political and religious figures of his time, ranging from the reclusive Essenes, zealous revolutionaries, elite Sadducees, scholarly Scribes, hard-working Pharisees, and many other figures of his time. Tyrannical leaders like Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate, and Caiaphas held sway during Jesus' life, and ultimately ordered his death. Much can be learned about Jesus by comparing and contrasting him with these figures.

In this chapter we are going to examine Jesus' social and political environment, as well as some of the kinds of persons who surrounded him. We do this in order to come to a better understanding of the elusive historical person, Jesus of Nazareth.

Sources

Our sources for reconstructing the historical Jesus are limited. There are a few outside sources, such as the Roman historians Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius, as well as the Jewish historians Josephus and Philo. Rabbinic materials after the destruction of Jerusalem are also useful, although we are not sure how much of this applies to the time of Jesus. All we can gather from these non-Christian sources are some statements acknowledging that Jesus existed and had followers.

Our primary sources are the four canonical gospels. These, as we know, were written by Jesus' followers decades after his birth, and are constructed in light of their faith in Jesus as the Christ. In 1948 and the years following, the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Essene community in Qumran were discovered. These scrolls contain documents from this religious community, as well as many other Jewish documents. These resources provide invaluable insights into the wide diversity of Jewish beliefs and lifestyles at the time of Jesus. In 1945 the so-called Gnostic gospels were found in Nag Hammadi in Egypt. These gospel texts and fragments are not recognized to be part of the Church's official canon of scriptures, yet many scholars use them as important resources for discovering what diverse Christian communities believed about Jesus. Finally, both past and present archaeological discoveries have offered valuable insights into the past history of Palestine. Extremely revealing "digs" have been done most recently under the Temple mount, as well as in Sepphoris, a city near Nazareth. All of these resources can help us in our search to better understand the person Jesus.

Palestine

Jesus was a Jew from the ancient area of Palestine, where his people, the ancient Hebrews, had lived for thousands of years, going back to the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This area had been conquered by the Hebrew tribes that then, under the leadership of Saul, David, and Solomon, coalesced into a nation.

The Hebrew nation suffered a long series of conquests, first by the Babylonians in 539 B.C., and then by the Persians, Greeks, and finally the Romans about fifty years before Jesus' birth.

Though dominated by Rome, the Palestine of Jesus' day was relatively independent. Rome preferred to control its conquests remotely through loyal local leaders if possible. As long as the taxes kept coming into Roman coffers and the borders were kept stable, the Romans did not see a need to rule with a strong military presence.

During Jesus' time, the Herodian family held authority in Palestine. Herod the Great, who ruled for thirty-three years and died around the time when Jesus was born, had been appointed king by the Romans. He had been a loyal soldier who had fought Jewish civil wars on the side of the Romans, and Rome knew that he would be a strong leader and a loyal instrument for Roman imperialism.

No doubt Jesus heard many negative remarks about the tyrannical rule of Herod and his family over Palestine. The Herodians, first of all, were not considered to be authentic Jews, but were rather viewed as "half-breeds" from Idumea. Herod the Great's lavish lifestyle, which included a series of ten wives and a sumptuous existence in palaces built from taxes ruthlessly extracted from the people, caused a great deal of resentment among the Jews. Moreover, Herod's taxes supported an enormous building program, which included monuments, theatres, sports arenas, baths, fortresses, and even entire new cities. Much of this construction aped the Roman culture and was done to impress the Emperor. Herod did make an attempt to appease his people with a lavish reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, but the heavy burdens that this placed upon the people only generated further resentment toward him. His ruthless behavior, including the murder of his own wives and children when they became a threat to his power, further repulsed Herod's subjects.

When Herod the Great died, the Romans divided his kingdom among his three sons: Archelaus was given Judea, Samaria, and Idumea; Philip ruled over the areas north and east of the Sea of Galilee; and Herod Antipas took over Galilee and Perea. Since Jesus was a Galilean, Herod Antipas would figure in his life and even his death. Though the period during Jesus' life was relatively free of rebellion, it was this minor prince, Herod Antipas, who executed Jesus' mentor, John the Baptist. Herod also figures in Luke's

passion story, where he mocks Jesus before his crucifixion. Luke also reports that Jesus spoke of Herod Antipas as “that fox”(Lk 3:32).

Archelaus proved to be a cruel and disastrous leader in Judea, so much so that his subjects went to Rome and persuaded the authorities to depose him and send him into exile. The Romans decided to place a Roman prefect in charge of Judea, who would reside in the Herodian palaces at Caesarea and Jerusalem. One such prefect was Pontius Pilate, who gained infamy for decreeing the death of Jesus.

Pilate was widely known for his brutality. The gospels tell us that Pilate had some of Jesus’ fellow Galileans killed while they were offering sacrifice (Lk 13:1). On another occasion, Pilate had some Jews beaten to death for protesting the use of temple money to build aqueducts. Eventually, Pilate’s barbarities were reported to Rome and he was summoned to the capital to account for his atrocities. After that, Pilate disappeared from history, and we have only legends that possibly he was executed by Nero or that he took his own life.

A Man from Galilee

Jesus was known to be a Galilean, that is, a person who hailed from the northern province of Palestine. All Jesus’ apostles, with the possible exception of Judas, were also from Galilee. Since this province was not under the direct rule of Rome, Galileans were known for their strong sense of independence. Galilee’s distance from Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious authority, placed Galileans out of reach of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. Furthermore, the province was rich in farm products, lumber, fruit, wool, figs, olives, and fish; and Galilee’s access to the key trade routes in the north provided its citizens with ample opportunities for commerce.

Galileans had a reputation for being cocky and rebellious, and this province was at times the flash point for revolutionary activities. Many of its residents had lost their lands during the Roman occupation, and were now required to forfeit large portions of their harvest to the landowners and to pay exorbitant taxes. Although Jesus lived during a rather peaceful period, he would have witnessed some incidents of rebellion. Around the time of Jesus’ birth, a rebel called Judah the Galilean broke into the arsenal in Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, stole weapons, and led an uprising. The Romans retaliated by burning much of Sepphoris, and either crucified or

sold into slavery thousands of rebels. Again, when Jesus was about ten, Judah led another rebellion against a Roman census and unjust taxes. Finally, forty years after Jesus' birth this rebellious spirit exploded in the great uprising against Rome in 66 CE. The Romans slaughtered the Jewish rebels and destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE. Early in the second century Rome put down one final rebellion.

Some scholars today describe Jesus the Galilean as a rebel. Though Jesus' strategies were nonviolent, still he was confrontational and aggressive in his criticism of oppression and injustice. In the gospels, Jesus carries himself as one who is independent, critical-minded, and a strong advocate for the down-and-out. His firm commitment to a "kingdom" of justice, particularly for the poor and downtrodden, no doubt made him many enemies and was partly responsible for his execution.

He seems to have led a nonviolent revolution that threatened both Jewish and Roman authorities committed to violence, and disappointed those who longed for a warrior leader who would restore the glory of Israel.

Since many Galileans lived in rural areas, they often had the reputation of being "hicks" or "country types," and Jesus has been traditionally portrayed as being from a poor peasant background. Most Galileans lived in ghettos as poor tenant farmers or shepherds. Many had been relocated by the Romans from the coastal areas and had lived in their own homeland as refugees and tenant farmers. Jesus the Galilean probably shared in the anger and resentment that was widespread among his oppressed people.

Nazareth

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a village so obscure that it was never mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. Nazareth was situated among the hills of southern Galilee, a fertile area where tenant farmers worked hard to bring in two harvests a year from the rich alluvial basins, and where herds of sheep and goats could be pastured on the green hillsides.

Nazareth was a Jewish ghetto of perhaps five hundred people, whose forebears had migrated there a century earlier. It was isolated and clannish, and its people lived close to the edge, struggling for subsistence. Perhaps in the everyday challenges of this tiny village, Jesus learned the importance of equality and community. It is also possible that, in the face of heavy taxation and the demand for a large portion of the crop from the landowners,

Jesus would identify with the poor and oppressed.

Life in Nazareth was quite simple, yet arduous. The narrow dirt streets were lined with square one-roomed houses, each having a yard for a few sheep, a goat, and perhaps a donkey. The houses, made of fieldstone and with thatched roofs, were clustered together so that resources could be shared with neighbors and extended families. (This context must have been foundational for Jesus' later teaching on the love of neighbor and service to others.)

Sanitation was primitive, disease endemic, and life expectancy short. Water was scarce and had to be carried from local wells. The diet was simple, consisting in local grain, fruit, figs, vegetables, and the occasional meat. In times of drought there was a shortage of food and water. These conditions generated a system of local care for the less fortunate, especially the elderly, the disabled, and diseased. (Could it have been in this environment that Jesus learned to reach out to outcasts, and the needy, and to bring healing to the disabled?)

Though a Jewish ghetto, Nazareth did not exist in total isolation. It was in fact near several urban areas and the main trade route. As mentioned earlier, Sepphoris, a sophisticated Hellenistic Jewish city, had been destroyed in reprisal by the Romans, and rebuilt by Herod Antipas. During Jesus' youth, the city had a population of about 8,000 people, mostly Jews who lived well in Roman style. Sepphoris was located just about four miles from Nazareth and may have provided Jesus opportunities for work as well as cultural enrichment. Tiberias was another urban area only twenty miles from Nazareth.

The pastoral tone of Jesus' public teaching would indicate that he was more influenced by rural life than urban. While Jesus certainly could hold his own with the learned in Jerusalem, in fact he showed little inclination to preach and teach in urban areas with all their hierarchical authoritarianism and materialism.

When Jesus was a young adult, he moved to Capernaum, a fishing village of about 1,000 inhabitants on the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps he first moved there to find work, and then made this the location where he would select his disciples and set up the center for his ministry. In any event, it was here that Jesus began his public ministry, which was largely confined to the hillsides of Galilee.

Educational opportunities in rural Galilee were limited. Tiny synagogue schoolhouses were available to only a few, and most of the population was illiterate. Most likely Jesus' education was gained at home and at synagogue meetings until he was of age, namely, twelve. Jesus obviously did not have the opportunity to attend one of the fine rabbinic schools in Jerusalem. He may have known enough Hebrew to read the Torah, and if he wrote at all he left no record. His native language was Aramaic, and he possibly knew enough Greek for business transactions. The brilliance of Jesus' later teaching leads us to believe that he had a great deal of natural intelligence, and that possibly he received some excellent teaching at home or in the synagogue school in Nazareth.

Jesus grew up and lived among rural peasants, and worked for eighteen years with his hands as a craftsman. He is described as a "*tekton*," which can refer to an artisan in wood or stone. The social strata of the time in descending order was comprised of rulers, priests, retainers who worked for those in power, merchants, peasants, artisans, and outcasts, including beggars and slaves. Jesus, as you can see, was very low in the pecking order. Most likely he had to seek jobs in construction in the neighboring towns and cities. Much of his work would have been arduous, working outdoors in the sun with wood, stone, and clay. Tools were primitive, and the hauling of wood, sometimes from great distances, as well as the cutting, was grueling labor. Jesus' appearance, therefore, would have been rugged, his face leathered and tanned by the sun, his frame well-muscled, and his hands calloused from hard work. His Middle Eastern skin and eyes would have been dark. His stature, typical of the time, would probably have been slightly over five feet in height.

Jesus was a devout Jew. He would have honored the Sabbath and the Jewish feasts, and he would have discussed the Torah while working in the fields at harvest time, at the table fellowship meals, or on the rooftops in the cool of the evening. He would have attended the local synagogue meetings for liturgical prayer and study. (No synagogue structure has been excavated in Nazareth). Jesus' public teachings reflect a deep wisdom and understanding toward his religion, as well as a feverish desire to reform it. Common sense tells us that he did not arrive on the scene in his public ministry as a master teacher and healer without having prepared himself well through extensive study and experience beforehand.

Jerusalem

The Book of Ezekiel (38:12) describes Jerusalem as “the center [or navel] of the earth,” and at the time of Jesus Jerusalem was still the center of Judaism. The city symbolized the culmination of the exodus into the promised land and the days of glory when King David ruled the nation. It was the “Holy City,” where Yahweh dwelt in the Temple, the center of Hebrew worship, authority, and education.

The Roman eagle dominated Jerusalem more than in Galilee because the province of Judea was under the direct control of a Roman procurator. Especially on the great feasts, troops of the empire, many of them Gallic, German, and Italian mercenaries known for their brutality, were visible throughout the city. Anyone who had doubts about who was in charge had only to look at the crosses outside the city, on which hung those convicted of sedition or rebellion.

It is not known how many times Jesus went to Jerusalem. The gospel of John indicates that Jesus made three visits as an adult. The synoptic gospels refer to only one adult visit. Two gospels recount a visit with his family when Jesus was twelve. Although there was a law that required male Jews to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, it is doubtful that this law applied to a province as distant as Galilee.

Jerusalem was about one hundred miles from Nazareth, a trip usually taken with a slow-moving caravan for a week or more. There were dangers aplenty on this journey. Brigands and robbers lived in the hills, waiting to pounce on the pilgrims bringing their tithes to Jerusalem. (The well-known story of the good Samaritan gives an account of such an attack.) There was also the danger of skirmishes with hostile Samaritans, or attacks from the wild animals that then roamed the deserts.

For Jesus, a visit to Jerusalem had its negative aspects. Here in the metropolitan area lived the wealthy absentee landlords who held high mortgages on the lands of his people. Here dwelt the infamous customs and tax officials who were so oppressive to his neighbors. And the Sanhedrin, with its many unreasonable edicts and harsh punishments, was also located in the big city of Jerusalem.

A rural workman like Jesus must have experienced culture shock when he joined the hundreds of thousands of visitors for the great feasts in

Jerusalem. In the enormous marketplace merchants hawked their wares. Traders from the great port in Tyre displayed precious glassware and the renowned purple dyes. Fine white linen and scarlet woven materials had been brought from Babylon. Huge caravans of camels moved into the city laden with spices and exotic products from Mesopotamia. Many fish merchants sold dried fish from the Sea of Galilee. Jesus must have been stunned to see slaves sold on the auction block, and must have looked wide-eyed at the chariot races, the wild animal shows at Herod's Hippodrome, and the latest musicals and dramas at the theatre. The spectacles of sumptuous banquets, exotic dancing, and open prostitution must have been disturbing to this simple craftsman from the north.

Jesus would no doubt have looked forward to visiting with friends and relatives who would gather in Jerusalem for the feast. Perhaps at times he stayed with his friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in nearby Bethany. If that were not possible, he would have to either battle the crowds for scarce accommodations in the city or pitch a tent outside the city and walk to the festivities.

The main attraction for the devout Jew in Jerusalem was the Temple, the place where Yahweh dwelt and the center of Hebrew worship. The Temple visited by Jesus was the so-called Second Temple. The First Temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. This magnificent Second Temple was built by Herod the Great and had been completed about ten years before Jesus was born. (Workers continued to decorate this Temple until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE.)

At the Temple Jesus would have seen the high priests and Sadducees appointed by Rome and often known for their corruption. They lived in magnificent villas on the hillsides, and walked about in the finest materials from India, bedecked in precious jewels. Revenues poured into the Temple coffers from tithes, from the sale of sacrificial animals and birds, as well as from the required exchange of "unclean" foreign money for the half-shekels required for the Temple tax. The huge profits enabled these Jewish leaders to live extravagantly and support several wives, along with many slaves and servants. The gospels recall one occasion when the chaos and corruption in the Temple court pushed Jesus over the edge. He trashed the money tables and drove the merchants and animals out of the Temple court. (The significance of this event will be discussed in the chapter on the trial and execution of Jesus.)

We have so far seen how specific places provided a context for Jesus' life

and formation. Now we shall examine some of the religious figures who were contemporary with Jesus, and by comparison and contrast gain further insight into the uniqueness of his personality and message.

Religious groups

Information about the nature and status of all the religious groups existing during Jesus' life is not available. While there were many groups active at that time, Josephus, the Jewish historian, describes only three: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. His descriptions are sketchy, at times conflicting, and often skewed by his own prejudices. The gospels offer considerable material on the Pharisees and scribes, little on the Sadducees, and oddly never mention the Essenes. The rabbinic sources available were written much later than Jesus' time and therefore have limited value as resources. Especially with regard the Pharisees and Sadducees, these sources tell us little about their origins, beliefs, or social structures and render any definitive reconstruction most difficult except by way of speculation. With these limitations in mind, let us attempt to describe some of the groups that existed in Jesus' time.

Pharisees

Pharisees have acquired a bad reputation over the centuries. The standard dictionary definition of a "pharisee" is one who is a hypocritical, self-righteous person. This negative image is derived largely from the gospels, where they are described as "blind guides," "frauds," "white sepulchers," and even as individuals who work for the devil. Even later rabbinical literature presents a disparaging picture of the Pharisees, putting them in seven categories and praising only the last. They are described as pompous, foolish, and filled with false humility.

Many scholars today point out that the extremely negative view of Pharisees found in the gospels might come in part from a period later than the time of Jesus, that is, the time after the destruction of Jerusalem. During this period, the Temple, the Jewish state, and the parties and sects were obliterated, with the exception of the Pharisees. Judaism moved north to Jamnia, where it reinvented itself, and gave the leadership over to rabbis and Pharisees. It was these pharisaical leaders, including Paul, who cast the Christians out of the synagogues as heretics and hunted them down. These

later Pharisees, who prevailed during the times in which the gospels were composed, seem to have been written into the gospels as the enemies of Jesus. At the same time, the gospels do seem to reflect strong memories of conflicts between Jesus himself with some of the Pharisees of his own time.

The word “pharisee” is derived from the Hebrew word *perushim*, which means “the separated ones.” This has been traditionally interpreted to mean that the Pharisees saw themselves as the elite and stood aloof from those who did not follow the law. More recent scholarship reveals that the Pharisees of Jesus’ time were not separated from the people, and were closely identified with the working people. The Pharisees had trades themselves, and often represented a more common sense and flexible approach to the law. At the same time, the Pharisees were careful observers of the law, especially the dietary, purity, and Sabbath laws. They valued community and table ministry and seemed to have a strong support among the people. They used this popular support to gain political influence with the officials of government and temple.

Jesus had much in common with the Pharisees. Like many of the Pharisees, Jesus was a tradesman without formal scribal training. Like them, Jesus was more a practitioner of the law, one who preferred to serve the poor and outcasts than engage in scholarship. Jesus also shared the Pharisees’ preference for a simple lifestyle. He shared their appreciation for table ministry, for conversion of the heart, and viewed acts of love and justice as of higher value than the priestly cult in the Temple. He would have agreed with the Pharisees in their Jewish belief in the afterlife, and would have sided with those Pharisees who were nonviolent in their opposition to Roman rule.

Still, Jesus had his points of disagreement with many of the Pharisees. He challenged them as the accurate interpreters of the law, did not place the same emphasis on the scribal oral tradition, and was not as rigid when it came to observing purity regulations and Sabbath laws. Jesus preferred to teach his own version of the law on his own authority, and laid the foundations for the eventual setting aside of the Torah and the scribal tradition for his own oral tradition.

As to following the law in everyday life, Jesus displayed even more liberal views than the Pharisees. He shocked and angered some of them by his willingness to cure on the Sabbath. Moreover, he went beyond their open

table ministry and included prostitutes (the story at Simon the Pharisee's house) and tax collectors. Jesus also went beyond the Father God of the Pharisees and called God by an even more intimate name, Abba.

While many Pharisees saw disease and disabilities as punishments from God, Jesus taught a God of wholeness and extended his hands in healing miracles. Jesus' growing support from the common folk, as well as his founding of a community bent on reforming Judaism, would have been threatening to the social and political position of many of the Pharisees. The Pharisees prided themselves on the support they received from the common folk, and were most cautious about their political links to the establishment.

The synoptic gospels tell us that as soon as Jesus began his ministry, the Pharisees took strong opposition to him. The earliest gospel, Mark, presents the Pharisees and scribes as Jesus' chief opponents in Galilee. We are told that the Pharisees plotted with the Herodians for Jesus' death after he healed on the Sabbath (Mk 3:6). In the gospel of John, the Pharisees, along with the Jews and chief priests, are the most important opponents to Jesus. (This contrasts, however, with Luke's view (13:31), where some Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is seeking him.)

The Scribes

The scribes during the time of Jesus held positions ranging from mere copyists to religious intellectuals and scholars, even to advisors of the royal court. Since scribes did not make up an official party of their own, some scribes belonged to the Pharisee sect and a good number of them were also priests. Jesus, while he shared their commitment to the Jewish tradition and practices, differed from the higher scribes significantly in that he had no formal training as a scholar. Jesus did not belong to any official group in the hierarchical structure of his religion, including the priesthood.

Some higher scribes viewed themselves as the successors to the prophets. Others were official teachers, who organized scribal schools where they passed on their esoteric and secret knowledge of the law. These were the creators and teachers of the oral law, which was viewed as being equal to the Torah. Ultimate authority was given to this tradition and it had to be learned and passed on precisely as formulated by the scholars. In Mark, the scribes treat Jesus as a subordinate and even condemn him as a

blasphemer when he forgives sins (Mt 9:3). Jesus in turn challenges the social standing of scribes and contradicts their teaching.

It was not easy to become one of the elite among the scribes. One had to be a male from a well-to-do family and apprentice under a master scribe for years. During these years the candidate acted as servant to the teacher, while studying carefully every word and gesture of the master regarding the laws of Sabbath and purification. Once finished, the candidate could be ordained as a scribe, and henceforth would be venerated by the people and worthy of the highest places of honor at feasts and in the synagogue. Matthew's gospel indicates that such scribes had governing power, by virtue of their association with the chief priests and elders. At times, these scribes are portrayed as joining forces with the Pharisees as opponents to Jesus.

Once again, Jesus can be seen in stark contrast to such scribes. Jesus apparently had no formal training in any of the exclusive rabbinic schools. He was a teacher without portfolio, and instead of quoting from the scholarly opinions and the oral law, he taught on his own authority, using homey stories and parables. Jesus selected his own disciples, both male and female, largely from the uneducated working classes. His teaching was open to the masses along the roadsides and seashore. And rather than call his disciples servants, he called them friends. Jesus taught his followers to disdain places of honor, and sent them to humbly serve others, especially the poor. Jesus placed the law of love and mercy over the scribal laws, and freely associated with outcasts and sinners.

The gospels contain evidence of the deep animosity that some of the scribes felt toward Jesus. They slander him and attempt to trick him in debate. Scribes are among those in the arresting party in Gethsemane, and in the group that presents Jesus to Caiaphas for judgment. They accuse Jesus before Herod, mock him on the cross, and persecute the disciples.

Not all the scribes were hostile toward Jesus; indeed, some seemed to be among his admirers. One addresses Jesus as "Teacher," and offers to follow him as a disciple. Another admires Jesus' answers to the Sadducees when they tried to ridicule his teaching on the afterlife with a question about a woman who had been married seven times. Jesus commends the scribe for his insights and says that the scribe is "not far from the kingdom of God" (Mk 12:28–34).

The Sadducees

Jesus stands more in contrast to the Sadducees than to any other group of his time. Although sources tell us little about them, it appears the wealthy aristocracy in the Jewish society of Jerusalem could be counted among the Sadducees. Included in their number were the high priests, elders, and nobles of the community in Jerusalem. Some Sadducees led patrician families who controlled the wealth and land of Judea and Galilee. They might be compared to the privileged few families in many societies today who control the wealth and power and live off the labors of the underclass and minorities. Jesus, on the other hand, was from peasant, working-class stock, a man of simple means who worked many years with his hands before he became a wandering preacher. He viewed wealth as an obstacle to holiness, taught the value of “power for,” rather than “power over,” and advocated a life of detachment and simplicity.

Josephus describes the Sadducees as boorish, heartless individuals who followed the letter of the law and imposed harsh sanctions on those who disobeyed the laws of the Torah. They are portrayed as competitive and hard to get along with. Many of them seemed to have been strict and literal in their interpretation of the written law, and thus rejected the oral law of the scribes and Pharisees, along with interpretations of the law outside of their influence. No doubt they would have disapproved of Jesus’ freedom in teaching an oral law of his own, as well as of his liberal views on the observance of Sabbath and purification laws.

For the Sadducees in governing positions, the greatest good was sustaining the Temple and its rituals, even if it meant collaborating with their Roman occupiers. Jesus seems to have valued authentic Temple ritual also, but for him, love was supreme. He cautioned his followers not to judge, to reach out to sinners with mercy and compassionate service. He strongly condemned the hypocrisy of oppression, whether it be on the part of his own religious leaders or the Romans.

Ironically, in spite of their rigid dedication to the Torah, the Sadducees seemed to have been quite materialistic in their approach to religion. They viewed their wealth, success, and power as signs of God’s blessing. This earthly life was all important to them, since they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or a divine providence that intervened in human life. Jesus’ message on the blessedness of the poor, the resurrection into eternal

life, and God's intimate everyday care for all, especially outcasts, would probably have been strongly opposed by most of the Sadducees.

Some of the Sadducees were part of the governing body of the Sanhedrin, the highest political and religious body in Judaism, led by the Roman-appointed chief priest. Other members of the ordained class, the scribal Pharisees, were on the Sanhedrin, but were no match for the wealthy and Roman-connected Sadducees. Still, the Sadducees had to be cautious of the Pharisees, because of their strong support from the common folk. Jesus' alliance with some of the Pharisees may have been problematic for the Sadducees.

The gospels tell us little about the relationship of Jesus with the Sadducees. Their exclusiveness would have given Jesus little opportunity for contact with them. The gospel of Mark recounts the Sadducees questioning Jesus before his passion, and challenging his views on resurrection. We do know, however, from the passion stories, that the Sadducees considered Jesus to be a dangerous person, and they are portrayed as key figures in his condemnation and crucifixion.

The Zealot movement

It is unlikely that there was an organized Zealot party during Jesus' lifetime, yet there does seem to have been a revolutionary movement among his contemporaries. This movement advocated the violent overthrow of the Roman occupiers, along with their Jewish collaborators. It erupted from time to time, but for the most part smoldered underground until the 60s. At that point, violent revolution broke out and continued until the final stand of the rebels at Masada in 73 CE.

Jesus may have shared some of the sentiments of those in the Zealot movement, and seems to have chosen an apostle from their number, Simon the Zealot. Jesus would have agreed with these rebels in their dedication to the one God, and their rejection of the pagan view that Caesar was divine. Jesus told his followers to give Caesar the coin of tribute and nothing more. He would have opposed the brutal oppression of his people by the Romans and shared the Zealot dedication to opening the way for the true reign of God. He could have shared their motto taken from Elijah the prophet: "With zeal am I zealous for the Lord God of Hosts."

Where Jesus and the Zealot movement parted company was in the area

of violence. Jesus taught his disciples to turn the other cheek to violence and to love and pray for their enemies. His was not the warrior God who wrought vengeance on enemies, but the God of love, mercy, and forgiveness. He could never have supported the holy wars of the Zealots, where acts of terrorism were seen as the will of God. Jesus supported confrontation, aggressive action against oppression, vigorous dedication to the cause of the poor, but gave no support to violence! For Jesus, the reign of God was recognized within by the presence of peace, justice, mercy, and love. He taught his disciples to not even carry a staff, and told them to put aside their swords.

The Essenes

Both Josephus and Philo mention the Essenes, but we have known little about them until the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a collection of their manuscripts (the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls) were found in caves where the Wadi Qumran flows into the Dead Sea.

The Essenes were a group of sectarian Jews who lived a strict monastic life. Some think that they had their origin in the Hasidim during the time of the Maccabean revolt; in any event, they remained in existence for about 200 years. The Essenes broke off from mainstream Judaism because they did not recognize the legitimacy of the Temple priesthood, and established themselves as the true remnant of Israel. They set up their own priesthood and rituals, and lived in the expectation that several messiahs would come exclusively to them on the final day. Their largest monastery was at Qumran, but they had many other communities throughout the cities and towns of Palestine. There were possibly several thousand Essenes during the time of Jesus. They were quite hierarchical in their structure, and legalistic to the point where they seriously punished members who broke communal laws.

It is quite possible that Jesus encountered some of these austere monks as they silently moved in their white robes from one community to another. Jesus would have admired their fervent commitment to the one God, Yahweh, their esteem for Moses, their dedication to the Torah, and their commitment to truth, humility, and justice. He would have shared their concerns for the coming of a messiah, their struggle with Satan, and their anticipation of the coming of the endtime. Their regard for table fellowship, poverty, helping the poor, as well as their dedication to prayer and

hard work would also have won Jesus' admiration. It is possible that he heard of their call for repentance from his mentor, John the Baptist, who might well have been influenced by the Essenes.

But there are many areas where Jesus would have taken exception with the Essenes. Jesus recognized the validity of the Temple and its priesthood, even though he was critical of its corruption. Jesus wanted to reform Judaism and bring it to its most authentic traditions, and not to break from it and start a new sect.

Jesus would have also differed from the Essene approach to community. Jesus' discipleship included females and males, married and single, the healthy and handicapped, and all traveled about as brothers and sisters. In contrast to the hierarchical model among the Essenes, and indeed in his own religion, Jesus developed a fellowship of equals, where the first is to be last and the servant of all. Jesus never punished the members of his group, even when they betrayed or abandoned him. He would also have opposed the Essenes' contempt for those outside the community, especially the rich. Jesus, though he valued poverty, persistently taught love of rich and poor, friend and enemy alike. His movement openly welcomed all children of God, especially outcasts.

Neither would Jesus have shared the Essenes' rigid adherence to the Sabbath laws. The Essene would not help a friend or animal on Sabbath, where Jesus felt quite comfortable extending a healing or forgiving hand to an outcast or one suffering on the Sabbath. Nor would Jesus accept the Essene's apparent acceptance of violence toward enemies. Jesus stood strongly for nonviolence and taught his followers to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecuted them.

The main community of the Essenes at Qumran was annihilated by the Romans during the revolution in the 60s and 70s CE. Apparently the last of them died alongside the revolutionaries at Masada, possibly perishing in a mass suicide. The Essenes ended in death and destruction. Jesus' life also came to a brutal and violent end, but his followers experienced him raised to new life and his movement now numbers in the billions.

Summary

Jesus of Nazareth was a person of his time, a Jew who grew up in Palestine during difficult times of occupation. As a Jew, he shared in the devotion

and fidelity of his people to Yahweh and the Hebrew tradition. Jesus was most likely deeply affected by the oppression, unrest, and periodic rebellion in his native province of Galilee. The small village of Nazareth where he was raised, the town of Capernaum where he lived as a young adult, and the metropolis of Jerusalem all played roles in his formation.

We have seen how Jesus might be compared and contrasted with those of other religious figures of his time. The gospels often use these figures as straw men against which they highlight the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ. Looking back, the gospel writers, and the communities that they represent, see Jesus as a Jewish reformer who stresses a unique perspective on the Jewish tradition, one which sees God's rule as one of love, peace, and nonviolent resistance to oppression. It is a strong position against religious corruption in the forms of greed, empty ritualism, self-righteousness, and hypocrisy. Jesus confronts absolutism, legal rigidity, and hierarchical structures that exclude the poor and outcast. Jesus advocates nonviolence, the acceptance of a loving, liberating covenant with Abba, and a covenant lived out in prayer and sacrifice. Jesus stands uniquely on his own, a singular individual introducing the beginning of a new movement in religious belief and practice among his people.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Discuss how the place(s) where you grew up influenced you.
2. In what ways did Jesus reflect the image of a Galilean?
3. What feelings do you think Jesus had toward the occupation of his country by the Romans?
4. Discuss the image of Jesus that you had as a child. Has that image changed?
5. How would living and working in Nazareth have influenced Jesus?
6. Compare and contrast Jesus with the Essenes, Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees.

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