

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 3--HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Palestine, located on the trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia, had been overrun by various armies in the ancient world--Assyrian, Babylonian, Syrian, Egyptian, Persian, and Greek. No matter which nation was victorious, the Hebrew people and the land itself suffered accordingly. The reign of Herod the Great, however, had brought an era of prosperity. The city of Jerusalem, especially, had increased greatly in area, population, security, and commerce.

As far as the Jewish people were concerned, Herod's crowning achievement was the rebuilding of the Temple. It was with great difficulty that he obtained the consent of the people. Herod achieved this by promising that the existing temple, small and shabby as it was, would not be torn down until he was ready to build the new one. He also promised that no heathen hands would touch the sanctuary; thus, a thousand priests were trained as carpenters and masons. Desiring to please the Jews, Herod spared no expense in adorning the Temple with all manner of architectural lavishness. He began building in 19 B.C.; but according to the historian, Josephus, the Temple was not completed in every detail until about 63 A.D.

JEWISH LIFE IN PALESTINE

In the study of any of the world religions, it is worthwhile to study the country where that religion developed, as well as the life and teachings of its founder.

THE LAND - Palestine had been divided into provinces, each of which had its peculiar physical contours and characteristic type of people.¹ Jesus conducted most of his ministry in the provinces of Galilee and Judea, although he did some work in Perea.

Galilee was the more thickly populated of the two provinces. Its cities were large by ancient standards, and there were numerous villages whose population varied from ten to fifteen thousand. Because of Galilee's large Gentile population, it was sometimes spoken of as "Galilee of the Gentiles."

Certain parts of Galilee were extremely fertile, with large crop yields. A high, rolling plateau, cut by many fertile uplands, constituted the highlands of Galilee. Here Jesus may have spent at least a part of his youth. The Plain of Esdraelon, with its rich soil and abundant water supply, was the granary of Galilee.

Judea is not so much a land of rugged peaks as it is a lofty plateau, bearing upon it a mass of rounded limestone hills. Long gorges cut into this tableland on the west, which ends near Jerusalem in a maze of canyons. The area known as "The wilderness" slopes sharply down to the plain of Jericho; it includes the former Essene community of Qumran, located near the Dead Sea.

The River Jordan rises at the fork of Mt. Hermon, and flows down a steep descent into Lake Huleh. It continues its course through rocky gorges, finally reaching the Sea of Galilee. From thence it descends over a thousand feet to the Dead Sea. The Jordan was never navigable, but it will remain of interest because of its association with the name of Jesus. He was baptized in its waters near the river's mouth, and by its banks he called his first disciples.

THE PEOPLE - Palestine was probably never more densely populated than in the first half of the first century A.D., though today the combined population of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip may exceed its numbers. The Jewish historian, Josephus--whose statements have increasingly and consistently been shown to be reliable by other evidence--estimated that there were at least three million people in Jerusalem at the time of certain of the Passovers. On these religious holidays, people gathered from all over Palestine. Many Jews of the Dispersion, who lived in other areas, also attended the holiday.

Of this population, the Jews comprised the greater part. Although Rome ruled the area, Roman settlers were never very numerous in Palestine. Except for the Greeks, the Gentile population consisted largely of the descendants of various tribes that were prominent in Old Testament history.

The various occupations by which people earned a living reflect a wide range of interests. Many parts of Palestine were fertile. Here farmers tilled the soil, while shepherds and herdsmen tended their flocks and herds on the less fertile hillsides. Because they had to compete with slave labor, and were heavily taxed, the common people only eked out a bare existence. Also, much of the land in Galilee was divided into large estates, upon which farmers worked as tenants.

In the cities, some people lived as slaves or menials, while others were merchants, bankers, teachers, and physicians. This is in addition to religious and political officials. Some people were too poor to have a professed occupation, while others were too rich to need one.

THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE JEWS - Toward the close of the Pre-Christian Era, the Jews expected the coming of a remarkable person who would fulfill the Messianic Ideal. This is reflected in the teachings of some of the prophets (example: Book of Daniel), and also in some of the books of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (example: I Enoch).²

The way in which this expectation would be realized changed over a period of centuries. The earlier prophets believed that God's plan for Israel would be carried out by a Davidic king.³ Under divine guidance, he would gather the scattered Jews together. He would develop a kingdom that would be worthy to take its place among the powerful kingdoms of the world.

II Isaiah believed that Israel, through suffering and repentance, had fitted itself to become Jahveh's servant. Israel would carry salvation to the entire world.

A third conception found in Joel, Zechariah and Daniel held that God would intervene directly with majesty and power. By destroying the wicked, He would open the way for Israel to do her work.

According to the Qumran Manual of Discipline, the Essenes expected two Messiahs.⁴ One, a political Messiah, would be after the pattern of Moses. The other, a religious High Priest, would be after the pattern of Aaron. Note that the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews affirms Jesus as fulfilling the roles of both King and High Priest. The community to which this letter was addressed would have consisted at least partly of Essene converts to Christianity.

The Jews of Herod's day were under the influence of the apocalyptic writings, which were widespread at the time. They expected a deliverer, a Messiah, who would free them from Roman domination and establish a kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital. Keeping this background in mind helps to clarify many statements found in the Gospels.

THE EXPECTATION ABROAD - The apocalyptic expectation was not limited to Palestine. In other countries, also, a presentiment existed of some coming event that would change world history. Both Tacitus and Suetonius, Roman historians, declared that in the East a belief existed that there would arise, at this time in Judea, those who would rule the world.

JEWISH SECTS

Modern scholarship has documented the great diversity of Judaism during the First Century A.D. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes, however, were the most influential Jewish sects at the time.

THE PHARISEES - The Pharisees were a devout but narrow-minded group, who occupied themselves with a strict observance of all religious rules and ceremonies. Profoundly devoted to the Law, they are associated in the Gospels with the Scribes, the interpreters of the Law. They were scrupulous in their observance of all the minutiae of the washings, tithes, and fastings required by the Rabbinical Law. They also added many rules and procedures not included in the Torah. They "tithed mint and anise and cummin," but tended to forget the weightier matters of justice and compassion. Modern neuroscience would recognize evidence of left-brain fixation in their attitudes of mind.

The word "Pharisee" means "separated." As a group, they came into prominence during the Maccabean era of Jewish independence. At that time, they were known as the "T1Perushim" (Separatists); they separated not only from heathenism, but from the masses of their own people. In the Gospels, they appear as a group that has lost its spiritual vitality; they are a symbolic image of separation from God, reflecting self-righteous attitudes resulting from a false sense of separation.

Their long and faithful guardianship of the Scriptures, combined with their authoritative dogmatism and their ardent patriotism, gave the Pharisees strong public influence. Nevertheless, this influence weakened with the rise of dissenting sects, several of which practiced ritual washing or baptism in one form or another.

The Pharisees looked for a Messiah. Many of them believed that when he appeared, the faithful would be raised from the dead to live with him. Many also saw no need to take part in Roman politics, and made no attempt to throw off the Roman domination. For they believed that in due time, the kingdom of God would be miraculously established in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. For example, Daniel 2:44 declares: "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left

to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever."

A radical minority of Pharisees, however, favored throwing off the Roman yoke by violent means. This minority believed that before God would act to free them, they must strike the first blow in a military sense. The Zealots were the militant branch of the Pharisees, who led an unsuccessful revolt against the Romans in 66-70 A.D.

THE SADDUCEES - The Sadducees first came to power, as the hereditary priesthood of the Temple, in the Maccabean period. Apparently they were originally called "Sons of Zadok" or Zadokites, which name became modified to "Sadducees." Manuscript evidence proves that the Essenes of Qumran, a different sect, also called themselves "Sons of Zadok." This could mean either physical descent from Zadok, a high priest during the reigns of David and Solomon; or else spiritual descent, meaning that they sought to function in the tradition of Zadok.

The Maccabean revolt was a dramatic victory of traditional Judaism over Hellenism. Nevertheless, the victory was far from complete. The Sadducees were themselves strongly influenced by Hellenistic ideas. In attitude they tended to be pseudo-intellectuals, resembling some of the Greek rationalists of their time.

The Sadducees reached the height of their power during the Roman era, which began in 63 B.C. The high priests and high ranking officials came from their ranks. They were strong politically because they were always willing to make alliances with the ruling powers. They were generally unpopular, however, with the public at large. Evidently their fellow Jews ousted them from the Temple during the Zealot Revolt of 66-70 A.D., and they never again returned to power.

The Sadducees included the educated elite and prosperous businessmen, as well as the aristocrats and worldly-minded priests. They obeyed the literal commands of the Law, but rejected the "traditions of the elders" which at that time were passed down through word of mouth. They denied the resurrection, personal immortality, and retribution in a future life. They defined their doctrines not so much by what they believed, as by what they did not believe. Theirs was apparently a left-brain fixation on a more sophisticated level. In reply to a group of Sadducees, Jesus said in Mark 12:24: "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?"

The Herodians were not a religious movement. They consisted of Jews who were attached to the Court of Herod the Great, and later to his son, Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee and Perea. The Herodians served as officers, courtiers and servants; like the Sadducees, they were content with Roman rule.

THE ESSENES - The Essenes, in the communities which they established, were under the supervision of one of their members who was appointed by the group. They cultivated the spirit of fellowship to a high degree. They held all of their worldly possessions in common, and provided for the needs of all members of their sect. The hard core of their group was celibate, but they accepted the children of others to raise and to teach. John the Baptist was probably one of these children who grew to manhood at Qumran.

Essenian communities existed in various places in Palestine, and an important one also functioned near Damascus. These were usually located outside of their cities, since they considered the moral atmosphere of cities to be particularly bad.

The Essenes were loyal to the Jewish religion. They followed the Torah strictly; but unlike the Pharisees, they were also vitally open to the authentic life of the Spirit. Their literature shows them to have been both nationalists and mystics. After the resurrection of Jesus, many Essenes became converts to Christianity, though many others of them continued as before. Their literature, rediscovered after World War II in the Judean desert, continues to be a major resource toward understanding both the development of ancient Judaism, and the background of the New Testament.

The Qumran community used a calendar different from that in Jerusalem, and celebrated Passover and other religious festivals at different times. In this sense, they and the Sadducees were rivals. Current scholarship suggests that the Essenes and the Sadducees, in a historical sense, were branches from the same tree which developed in radically different directions.⁵

Given these differences, the Essenes did not participate in the Temple worship in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, they were strict in their observance of the rules governing the Sabbath, no doubt believing themselves to be the true representatives of Judaism. They interpreted their spiritual purpose as preparing the way for the coming of the Messianic Age. They applied Isaiah 40:3 to themselves and their mission, even as John the Baptist applied this verse to himself and his own mission:

A voice cries out:
 "In the wilderness prepare the way
 of the Lord,
 make straight in the desert a
 highway for our God."

NOTES

1. Several excellent atlases of the Holy Land are available today, including The Harper Atlas of the Bible, edited by James B. Pritchard.
2. See The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. 1, op cit, pp. 5-100
3. For a summary of ancient uses and understandings of the term "Kingdom of God," see Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom, op cit, pp. 15-88
4. Many books of varying quality are available on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Theodor H. Gaster's excellent book, The Dead Sea Scriptures, is published by Doubleday; use the Third Revised and Enlarged Edition published in 1976. Publication of a more comprehensive work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, edited by James H. Charlesworth, is in process.
5. Bible Review, October 1990 Edition, article on "The Significance of the Scrolls" by Lawrence H. Schiffman

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY MENTIONED IN LESSON 3

The Dead Sea Scriptures, Third Revised & Enlarged Edition - Theodor H. Gaster

REQUIRED BIBLE READINGS

Mark 2:1-3:35; 7:1-23; 8:11-21; 12:13-34

John 7:1-9:41

QUESTIONS

1. What was the expectation of the Jews at this time?
2. Discuss a few important facts about the Pharisees.
3. Discuss a few important facts about the Sadducees.
4. Discuss a few important facts about the Essenes.