

Chapter I The World of the First Christians

In Jesus' day, the empire of the Romans engulfed the Mediterranean Sea, and by 50 CE¹⁵ reached northward into the British Isles. The estimated population of the empire at this point numbered about 60 million. The Jewish people accounted for about seven million, or roughly 10-15%, of Rome's subjects.¹⁶

A Jewish synagogue could be found in almost every Greco-Roman village and city of significant size. Substantial Jewish communities populated Spain, Egypt, Asia Minor and Italy. About a million Jews resided in Egypt, with over 200,000 in Alexandria. Moreover, some two million Jews lived beyond Roman borders to the east as far as India and south into Ethiopia. About one million lived in the land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*), residing in Galilee and Judea.

¹⁵ CE as the abbreviation for the "Common Era" or "Christian Era" replaces the designation AD as some object to AD, *Anno Domini* (in the year of our Lord), on historical, political, and religious grounds. CE can mean the Common Era or the Christian Era and BCE Before the Common Era or Before the Christian Era.

¹⁶ While exact figures do not exist, there were perhaps as many as nine million Jews worldwide in 30 CE. Significant Jewish centers in the Diaspora existed all over the Roman world, to the east as far as India, and south into Ethiopia. The Jewish population of the Roman Empire west of Judea, as understood by Sir Martin Gilbert (a British historian), was "over six million, of whom a million lived in Egypt, mostly in Alexandria" (Gilbert 1992:12; see also Johnson 1976:11). The Jewish population in the Latin-speaking western part of the Roman Empire was fairly small and scattered, and clustered in Jewish neighborhoods of Roman cities and settlements. Historian Paul Johnson suggests that Jews in the Diaspora outnumbered the settled Jews of Judea and Galilee by perhaps 4.5 million to 1 million (Johnson 1976:12). Wayne A. Meeks (Yale University Woolsey Emeritus Professor) held that in the first century some 5 to 6 million Jews lived in the Diaspora, that is, more or less permanently outside of Judea and Galilee, with a substantial Jewish population, from about 10 to 15 percent of the total population, in virtually every town of any size in the lands of the Mediterranean (Meeks 1983:34).

Life expectancy for the Greco-Roman population was quite low. Those who survived birth and their toddler years could expect to live into their fifties, but infant mortality was high. Life expectancy at birth, in a statistical sense the expected number of years of life remaining at birth, was somewhere between 22-25 years. Moreover, men significantly outnumbered women in the Greco-Roman world due in part to the practice of female infanticide and the number of women who died in childbirth or through having an abortion. People living in the country could expect to live longer than those in the city.

Greco-Roman cities were pestholes of infectious diseases and the death rate in them was high. This created a serious labor vacuum and, in order to feed the economy, the Romans imported foreign workers and placed pressure on rural populations to move into the cities. However, consigned to living in filth in cramped and squalid quarters, these new laborers could expect their lives to end in about three years. Consequently, the cities needed a continual and sizeable flow of newcomers to maintain their populations (Stark 1996:156).

The need to import laborers into the cities energized the slave trade. But ultimately, feeding the insatiable demand for laborers decimated the Roman countryside and destabilized the empire. Slave and foreign worker populations became its rank-and-file.

Life in Judea and Galilee

Life in the Judea and Galilee was not particularly different. The gospels introduce a Jewish motherland afflicted with widespread poverty and sickness, wherein the common people—the people of the land (*Am ha-Aretz*)—lived in misery, suffering and despair. Physical and mental illness abounded. A heavily taxed population, resenting Roman dominance, yearned for freedom.

The distinguishing characteristic of its people was one of ethnicity as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Religiously, however, the Judaisms of the Jewish homeland were not monolithic for they were influenced in various ways by Hellenism, occupation by foreign powers, puppet despot kings and governors, corrupt and narcissistic priests, and apostasy. Into this diverse cultural milieu Jesus of Nazareth was born.

Migdal Eder

The birth of Jesus of Nazareth occurred in Bethlehem but apparently not as commonly portrayed in the orthodox Christianity of the Roman Catholic and Protestant world. His birth and life is to be understood in the first century Jewish context of the Gospel accounts.¹⁷

It seems that Jesus' birth occurred at a watchtower called *Migdal Eder* (the Tower of the Flock) at Bethlehem of Judea. *Migdal Eder* was not the watchtower for ordinary flocks. At *Migdal Eder* specifically trained shepherd-priests of the Second Temple guarded the Temple-flocks all the year round for these flocks consisted of sacrificial animals for continuing Temple ritual. At that time Bethlehem covered a significantly larger area than does present day Bethlehem and at time the Tower of the Flock was within its bounds. Biblical scholar Alfred Edersheim argued that:

This *Migdal Elder* was not the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheepground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. A passage in the Mishnah leads to the conclusion, that the flocks, which pastured there, were destined for Temple-sacrifices, and, accordingly, that the shepherds, who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds. The latter were under the ban of Rabbinism, on account of their necessary isolation from religious ordinances, and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely, if not absolutely impossible. The same Mishnic passage also leads us to infer, that these flocks lay out *all the year round*, since they are spoken of as in the fields thirty days before the Passover - that is, in the month of February, when in Palestine the average rainfall is nearly greatest. Thus, Jewish tradition in some dim manner apprehended the first revelation of the Messiah from that *Migdal Elder*, where shepherds watched the Temple-flocks all the year round. Of the deep symbolic significance of such a coincidence, it is needless to speak. (Edersheim, 1993, pp. 131-132.).

These shepherd-priests understood what the necessary qualities of a sacrificial animal were and their responsibility was to ensure that none of the animals were hurt, damaged or blemished. During lambing season the shepherd-priests brought the sheep to the watchtower from the fields. The lower level functioned as the birthing place for the sacrificial lambs. Keeping themselves ritually undefiled the priestly shepherds would have to strictly maintain a ceremonially clean birthing place. Once birthed, the shepherd-

¹⁷ Migdal Eder appears in the Hebrew Scriptures at Micah 4:8.

priests would routinely place the lambs in the hewn depression of a limestone rock known as the manger and wrap the newborn lambs in swaddling clothes, preventing them from thrashing about and harming themselves until they had calmed down so they could be inspected for the quality of being without spot or blemish.

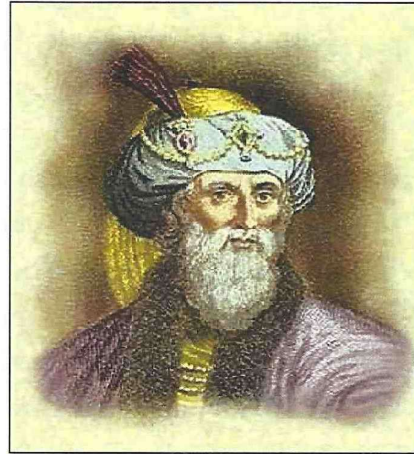
Luke 2:8-18 records that at Jesus' birth there were shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their sheep by night. The implication is that they were the shepherd-priests of *Migdal Edar*. The angels told the shepherds that they would find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. There was no need for the angels to give these shepherds directions to the birth place because they already knew. These were the men who raised sacrificial lambs that were sacrificed in the Temple. When the angelic announcement came, they knew exactly where to go, as Luke 2 indicates, for the sign of the manger could only mean the one at the base of the Tower of the Flock.

...shepherds watched the flocks destined for sacrificial services, in the very place consecrated by tradition as that where the Messiah was to be first revealed. Of a sudden came the long-delayed, unthought-of announcement. Heaven and earth seemed to mingle, as suddenly an Angel stood before their dazzled eyes, while the outstreaming glory of the Lord seemed to enwrap them, as in a mantle of light. Surprise, awe, fear would be hushed into calm and expectancy, as from the Angel they heard, that what they saw boded not judgment, but ushered in to waiting Israel the great joy of those good tidings which he brought: that the long-promised Saviour, Messiah, Lord, was born in the City of David, and that they themselves might go and see, and recognize Him by the humbleness of the circumstances surrounding His Nativity. (Edersheim, 1993, p. 132.)

At this time Herod the Great was king of Judea, Galilee, Iturea, and Traconitis. Herod was a despotic ruler, an Idumean client king, appointed by the Roman government. First-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (17.6.4), tells of a lunar eclipse in the final year of Herod's life. The only eclipse that meets Josephus' description and allows for

the 4 BCE birth of Jesus of Nazareth occurred January 9/10 in 1 BCE (1721066 JD) placing Herod's death in 1 BCE.

Josephus' account records that sometime after the eclipse, Herod—afflicted with a painful and loathsome disease—went beyond the Jordan River to bathe in hot sulfur springs. The cures he undertook were unsuccessful. His condition worsened, and he returned to Jericho. There, in a wild rage, the paranoid monarch plotted the deaths of many prominent Jews. Herod ordered his firstborn son, Antipater, slain. Josephus



further reports that Herod's death occurred before a spring Passover (Josephus *Antiquities* 17.9.3). This fixes the death of Herod the Great between January 9 and March 1 in 1 BCE.

Months after the birth of Jesus, travelers from the east, referred to as magi (magician astrologers), came to Jerusalem seeking the one “who has been born King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Learning of their quest Herod called in the priests and scribes. Obviously he grasped that the magi were looking for the Messiah. He demanded to know at what place the Messiah was to be born. Their answer was Bethlehem of Judea (Matthew 2:5).

This Herod could not tolerate. He moved to eliminate all who could possibly fit the profile of a newly born Messiah in Bethlehem. From the magi Herod learned exactly when “the star” first appeared to them.

Taking leave of Jerusalem the magi were led by “the star,” which stood over the place where “the Child” was “And when they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (v. 11). The Magi came to “worship” a child they recognized as King of the Jews! By the time they arrived Jesus was no longer a baby or an infant, but rather a toddler. The NIV Study Bible comment about this visit reads:

Contrary to tradition, the Magi did not visit Jesus at the manger on the night of His birth as did the shepherds. They came some months later and visited Him as a “child” in his “house.” (NIV pp. 1442, 1444.)

King Herod was not looking for an infant; he ordered the murder of all male children two years old and younger in the Bethlehem area (v. 16). Jesus had to have been a toddler when the Magi came to worship Him! The implication is that Jesus' birth was about two years before Herod ordered the murder of the boys in Bethlehem. His execution order would have issued ca. 2 BCE. One wonders if God inflicted Herod with a terminal, painful and loathsome disease as punishment for his murderous behavior.

Learning that Herod sought to kill Jesus, his family fled from Bethlehem to Egypt with him where they remained until they learned of Herod's death. Returning from Egypt the family settled in Nazareth in the Galilean hills where Jesus grew up.

Feast of Unleavened Bread in Jerusalem

Under the ordinances of the Old Covenant the people who lived in the Land of Israel annually observed the Passover and the days of unleavened bread within the ritual limits of Jerusalem. Luke's gospel tells of the occasion of Jesus and his family observing the feast there when Jesus was twelve years old (Luke 2:41). His family left Jerusalem for home at Nazareth assuming Jesus was with them but he was not, hastening their return to the city to find Jesus, where:

...after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers. (Luke 2:46-47.)

Nazareth Abandoned by Jesus

Nazareth was the home of Jesus during his childhood and young adulthood but commencing his ministry he was not accepted by those with whom he grew up. He commenced his 3½ year ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth by reading out of the scroll of Isaiah and professing that he was the fulfillment of the prophecy (Luke 4: 16-30). This occurred on Pentecost in 27 CE during a Sabbatical year observed 1 Tishri 26 CE to 1 Tishri 27 CE.

Matthew's gospel records that “When Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Then on leaving Nazareth, he

went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali” (Matthew 4:12-13). From a historical perspective there is nothing at Nazareth today that bears on our understanding of this period. In our time Nazareth has become nothing more than a Muslim city set with tourist traps for Christian visitors and pilgrims.

Jesus' Headquarters at Capernaum

Jesus moved to Capernaum (or *Kfar Nahum* in Hebrew), mentioned repeatedly in the Gospels, which became his dwelling place or headquarters after he abandoned Nazareth (Matthew 4:13). Jesus performed many miracles here (Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:34). Its location was on the northwestern shore of Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) along the border of the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali (Matthew 4:13). It is 2½ miles from the point where the Jordan River enters the Sea of Galilee and about 10 miles from present-day Tiberias. The town proper lies in a very fertile area and it was a busy place. Located on the highway from the Mediterranean coast to Damascus, called the *Via Maris*, merchants would bring silk and spices from Damascus and take back the dried fish and fruits of the plains of Gennesaret.

The crest of a ridge of hills, just to the west of the ancient town, is the mountain of Capernaum (Matthew 28:16, Mark 6:46) referred to the Byzantine pilgrim Egeria as *Eremos* (Pixner 1992:34). The town received no mention in the Hebrew Scriptures and it only appears in the New Testament in the Gospel accounts. Matthew refers to Capernaum as Jesus' "own city" (Matthew 9:1).

The town at that time was a minor fishing village extending along the lake shore for a distance of about 1600 feet. Several of Jesus' disciples resided there including Simon (called Peter), his brother Andrew, James son of Zebedee, and his brother John, and the tax collector Matthew (Levi son of Alphaeus).

Jesus often returned to Capernaum after preaching in the countryside along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 9:1; Mark 2:1), possibly as a houseguest of his disciple Peter and his wife. The Apostle Paul attests to Peter having a wife ca. 55 CE, a believing one at that, who accompanied him on his travels (1 Corinthians 9:5). Peter's mother-in-law appears to have resided in the house as well (Matthew 8:5, 14; Mark 1:31).

Peter and his brother Andrew, originally from Bethsaida (John 1:44) had settled in Capernaum (Mark 1:29).

A structure known as the House of St. Peter lies just outside the entrance of the town's first-century basalt synagogue, 84 feet to the south, less than a minute walk away. Mark's gospel states: "And immediately after they came out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John" (Mark 1:29). This suggests not only that Peter's house was in Capernaum but that it was extremely close to the town's synagogue.

Whether or not archaeologists have established sufficient evidence for the identification of this structure as Peter's house is an open question. Loffreda (Loffreda 1993) and Finegan (Finegan 1992) write as if this was a foregone conclusion. What is known is that Greco-Roman Christians, both clerics and laity, from about 325 CE understood the traditional site of the House of St. Peter as authentic. How they arrived at this conclusion is unknown.

Since Capernaum was at the political border separating Herod Antipas' tetrarchy of Galilee from Gaulanitis, ruled by his brother Philip, it was the location of a customs house (Matthew 9:9). The tax collector Levi, who became Matthew the author of the first Gospel, worked at the customs house (Matthew 9:9). The duties performed by publicans commonly included the levy and collection of duties or tolls from merchants traveling along the *Via Maris*, taxing fishermen on fish caught in the Sea of Galilee, and maintaining some semblance of public order (Pixner 1992:35).

There was also a small military garrison, quartered to the east of the Jewish town, under the command of a centurion presumably one of Herod Antipas' mercenaries (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10). The garrison's quarters included a representative Roman bath with *caladium*, *frigidarium*, and *tepidarium*. A Centurion commanding the garrison in service to Herod Antipas sought Jesus help in the healing of his servant (Luke 7:1-10). Jesus commends this Gentile officer for understanding that Jesus could heal from far off and his physical presence in a ceremonially unclean Gentile compound was not necessary. This kept Jesus from becoming ceremonially defiled according to the Mosaic Code.



The photo reveals part of the ancient basalt synagogue's foundation. The Romans destroyed this earlier synagogue, in which Jesus taught, in 69 CE in the course of the First Jewish Revolt. The details concerning the physical nature of this structure are wanting and the Capernaum synagogue remains speculative (Grabbe 1995:22; Flesher 1995:34-35). Only column fragments and the floor remain from this first-century basalt synagogue, but it is enough to identify it. The main hall of the synagogue measured 80 feet by 61.2 feet (24.4 meters by 18.65 meters), and two inscriptions, one in Greek and the other in Aramaic, apparently commemorate those who helped construct the building.

Despite its relative prosperity (augmented by local fishing in the Sea of Galilee), the town was quite small but large enough for a small basalt synagogue with a population of no more than 1000 to 1500 people. Apparently the Jewish inhabitants did not have the financial resources to build their own synagogue. “And when Jesus entered Capernaum, the centurion came to Him, imploring Him...” and the Jewish residents praised this Gentile centurion for building it (Luke 7:5). Jesus healed the centurion’s servant (Matthew 8:5; Luke 7:1; Mark 2:1).

Josephus recounts that he was brought to Capernaum, or Cepharnome, on route to his headquarters at Tarichea, after injuring his wrist when his horse fell into a quagmire in a battle near the Jordan River during the First Jewish Revolt, 66-73 CE, with imperial Rome (Josephus, *Life* 72; Whiston 1957:26). He also wrote of the springs of Heptapegon as the springs of Capernaum (Josephus, *Wars* 3.10.8; Whiston 1957:736).

Golgotha and the Place of Jesus' Entombment

The sites of the Crucifixion and interment of Jesus of Nazareth have not been established with reasonable certainty. There are three sites generally proposed as the place of the Crucifixion.

The traditional Crucifixion site dating to the time of Constantine is a small outcrop of rock now encompassed by the Holy Sepulcher Church (pictured at right is a model lodged in the British Museum). The traditional burial site also lies within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.



The Holy Sepulcher site is not a practical candidate for either the Crucifixion or the burial cave and should be rejected. The archaeological evidence demonstrates that the location was the second century CE site of the Capitoline Temple to Jupiter built above an old graveyard. The site has nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth and it is a fraud selected for imperial political purposes (Germano, Golgotha! Calvary and the Elusive Tomb of Jesus of Nazareth -- the Bishop's Secret!, 2009).



remains of ancient cisterns.

The problem with the Garden Tomb Theory is that the tomb was not a new tomb when Jesus died. Its construction preceded his death by possibly

Just as fraudulent is the Protestant alternative site known as Gordon's Calvary. This lies at the top of a hill near the Garden Tomb often called the place of the skull (pictured to the left). Below the hill is a busy bus station across from Jerusalem's Damascus Gate. The skull-like features of the hillside are

two or three centuries. It also has a massive rolling stone which except for royalty, leading priestly families, and the very wealthy were not typical of tombs of the first century CE. There is no extant archaeological evidence supporting the Garden Tomb. Moreover, there is no mention of the Garden Tomb as the place of Jesus' burial before the nineteenth century.

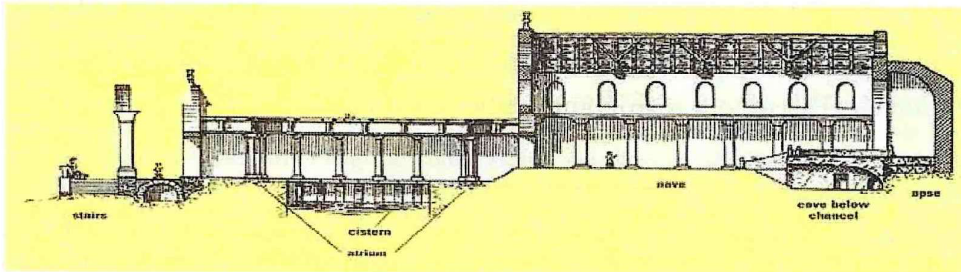
The third alternative site lies on the *monticulus*, or a little hill or hillock, now the location of the *Imbomon* or Chapel of the Ascension at the summit Mount of Olives (pictured at the right). Nathan provides evidence placing the Crucifixion on the Mount of Olives (*Vision Spring* 2010).



The exact spot according to Martin (*Secrets of Golgotha* 1988:273 278), lied within twenty or thirty yards of the *Imbomon* (Chapel of the Ascension), The Chapel is the traditional place from where Jesus Christ ascended into Heaven located at the southern summit of Olivet. It is under the control of Muslim authorities. He further holds that the best credentials for the site of Jesus' burial and resurrection is a cave/tomb under the ruins of Eleona Church of which the Carmelite Convent at the Pater Noster Church is the custodian (*Secrets of Golgotha* 1988:271).



The picture of Eleona Church at the left is a section of the Byzantine mosaic in the apse of the Basilica of St. Pudentiana in Rome. The apse image dates to about 400 CE and is the only contemporary one known. This basilica stands on the ancient remains of a two-story house belonging to the senator Rufus Pudens. The remains of the original Roman house are still visible underneath in the crypt.



The drawing above shows a cross-section of Eleona Church, built by Constantine's mother Helena, based on the archaeological record but the

atrium may have been added later. The Pudentiana mosaic only shows the main structure.

The New Testament tells us that the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was a newly hewn tomb (Matthew 27:59-60). Martin holds that it was an enlargement of an already existing cave located on the southern summit of the Mount of Olives. The arguments he makes for the authenticity of the site rest first on his proposition that the Crucifixion took place on the Mount of Olives, that this site is the only place recognized in history as being “holy” to the Christians around Jerusalem before 326 CE, and it was near this cave that the early bishops of Jerusalem were buried. This is a fragile argument (we can't falsify this hypothesis because "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence"). Jesus may have been placed in a temporary tomb on Olivet but we do not have archaeological evidence identifying that exact location.

Multiform Judaism

In Jesus' day there were many Judaisms. In the first-century Christian world the Judaism of the Pharisees, the Judaism of the Sadducees, the Judaism of the Essenes and the like, embodied a great diversity of opinions, convictions, ideas and beliefs (Crossan 1998:184). Except for a general consensus that there was but one God (as Jews practiced a strict monotheism that separated them from the polytheistic and pantheistic pagan cults of other nations), there was little or no unity or commonality of practice and belief. Each faction had its own ethics, politics, solutions for problems, and its own philosophical basis. Jewish society had a far greater range of cultural diversity than is often recognized (Howlett 1957:171; Bowker 1969:7-8; Johnson 1976:14-15).

“In Palestine”¹⁸ says religious studies professor John Bowker “the diversity of Judaism was very great at the time when Jesus was alive and outside Palestine Jewish communities constructed their own interpretation

¹⁸ Many writers incorrectly refer to first-century Judea, Samaria and Galilee as Palestine. However, the region was not called Palestine until after 132 CE, when the Romans renamed it because the Jews had twice rebelled against their authority. By this action they made the point that this region was no longer *Eretz Israel* (the land of Israel) but rather Roman turf, and to humiliate the Jews they renamed the land after Israel's most bitter enemy, the Philistines. The word comes from the Latin *Palestina* (Philistine land).

of Judaism” (Bowker 1969:7). Paul Johnson, a British conservative popular historian, concluded that the quarrels over varied approaches to the Law were compounded by rival interpretations of the post-Maccabean situation. He held that:

Palestine Judaism was not a unitary religion but a collection of sects: it is possible, even from the fragmentary sources, to enumerate as many as twenty-four. All the sects were monotheistic, of course, and all accepted the law in some form. But agreement went no further. (Johnson 1976:14-15.)

While perhaps as many as two dozen Jewish sects could be found in the Judea and Galilee of Jesus’ time, only three Jewish theological or philosophical paradigms seem to have significantly impacted the first Christians.

The Three Philosophies

These well-known subdivisions of first-century Judaism were the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. Josephus referred to them as the three philosophies.¹⁹ He explained:

For there are three philosophical sects among the Jews. The followers of the first of whom are the Pharisees; of the second the Sadducees; and the third sect, who pretends to a severe discipline, and called Essenes. (Josephus *Wars* 8.2§119.)²⁰

These three sects formed relatively small but significant minorities. As organized factions, each exerted influence and power beyond what their numbers would suggest. In this context, the early apostolic Church, with its Judeo-Christian perspective, emerged as just another small Jewish sect.

¹⁹ Josephus wrote of “the philosophy of our nation” (*Against Apion* 2.4§47) and even of a fourth philosophy with Pharisaic overtones founded by Judas the Galilean (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.1.6§23). The Jewish philosopher Philo Judaeus wrote of “the philosophy of Moses” (*De Mutatione Nominum* §39) and referred to Judaism as “the philosophy of our fathers” and as “Judaic philosophy” (*De Legatione ad Caium* §23 and §33). The Apostle Paul told of a Jewish heresy troubling the congregation at Colossae, which he denounced as a “philosophy and empty deceit” (Colossians 2:8 NKJV); or perhaps better rendered, since the Greek includes the definite article, “Beware lest anyone take advantage of you through the empty deceit of the philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”

²⁰ In *Antiquities* Josephus states: “The Jews had for a great while three sects of philosophy peculiar to themselves; the sect of the Essenes, and the sect of the Sadducees, and the third sort of opinions was that of those called Pharisees...” (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.1.2§11).

Known in the Jewish homeland as the Nazarenes, the early church was at first comprised only of Jews and exhibited many of the ideas, values and characteristics of the indigenous population. Nevertheless, the teachings and beliefs found in this original Christianity differed vastly from those of the Jerusalem establishment and various first-century Judaism, particularly in the customs (*halakah*) of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees arose following the uprising of the Maccabees (168–164 BCE). Often characterized as a peoples’ or populist movement, the Pharisees included various groups of observant Jews seeking to order their personal lives with physical acts of righteousness. By this they sought to fulfill God’s commission to Moses, recorded in Exodus 19:6, calling for the children of Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The name Pharisee probably derives from the Aramaic root *prš* meaning “separate” or “detached.” By remaining free and aloof from ritual uncleanness, Pharisees saw themselves as being holy and righteous.

The Pharisees, who according to Josephus numbered somewhat about 6,000 in Jesus’ day, were the religious fundamentalists—the orthodox—of first-century Judaism (Josephus *Antiquities* 17.2.4§42; Whiston 1987:453-454). They resisted Hellenism, though influenced by it, and rejected any accommodation with the pagan world. This exasperated the Romans as it had the Greeks before them.

As lay teachers of the Torah, both written and oral, the Pharisees drew mainly from the middle and lower classes. While relatively small, the Pharisee movement, with its political-religious overtones and aggressive efforts at imposing righteousness on the Jewish public, became known as the sect of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5 KJV, NKJV), or the Pharisees’ party (Acts 23:9 KJV, RSV). Reputed to be “the strictest sect” of the Jews (Acts 26:5),²¹ the

²¹ Josephus attributes this honor to the Essenes which he says was a sect “who pretends to a severer discipline” and which “reject pleasures as an evil, but esteem continence, and the conquest over our passions, to be virtue” (Josephus *Antiquities* 8.2.2§§119 120.) His comments about the Essenes notwithstanding, Luke’s records in Acts the Apostle Paul’s statement that “according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee” (Acts 2:4 NKJV).

Pharisees appeared to be the most pious people in the land because of the way they observed their religious precepts in daily life—in public displays of paramount importance. They were not particularly popular with the Jewish public, the people of the land (*Am ha-Aretz*), although Josephus, a Pharisee himself, wanted his readers to believe they were. The general public tended to hold the Pharisees in awe but as a rule did not join in their religious fervor.

From 273 BCE to 40 BCE, the period of the *Zugot* (“pairs”), there were two rabbis (“teachers”) at the helm of Pharisaic Jewish tradition. One was the *Nasi* (the head of the *Sanhedrin*) and the other the *Av Beit Din* (“Father of the House of Justice”). For a list of these pairs see *Pirkei Avot: Ethics of the Fathers* (Marcus 2005).

The *Sanhedrin*, having religious and civil functions and composed of seventy members, was the highest court and supreme council of the Jewish people in the post-exilic period. The *Av Beit Din* was always the second-highest ranking member of the *Sanhedrin*. He presided over the *Sanhedrin* in the absence of the *Nasi* and as the chief of the *Sanhedrin* when it convened as a criminal court, sitting with seven other judges while hearing a case.

The last pair of rabbis was Hillel, the *Nasi*, and his friendly adversary Shammai, the *Av Beit Din*. These gave rise to two schools of Pharistic thought—the followers of Hillel and the followers of Shammai. Hillel held that the traditions, or *halakah*, of the Pharisees were even superior to the written Torah. Shammai and his followers disagreed. Hillel’s grandson, Gamaliel I (Gamaliel the Elder), was a leader of the Pharisees in the mid first century.²² He was the teacher of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:3), who became Paul, the apostle to the uncircumcised, after becoming a follower of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 13:2-3, 9; Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:7).

Their Beliefs

The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead and the Sadducees did not (Acts 23:6-8; cf. Matthew 22:23, Mark 12:18 and Luke 20:27). Does this suggest that the Pharisees, holding to a form of Greek

²² Gamaliel was a respected sage, a Pharisaic teacher of the Torah, both written and oral, and a member of the Great Council (Acts 5:34). Paul said that he was “educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers [that is, the *halakah*], being zealous for God, just as you all are today” (Acts 22:3).

dualism, believed in the immortality of the soul? This appears to be the opinion of Josephus who wrote:

They also believe that souls have an immortal rigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again; on account of which doctrines they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people;... (Josephus Antiquities 18.1.3§14; Whiston 1987:477.)

In his *Wars of the Jews*, Josephus further explains the Pharistic view: “They say that all souls are incorruptible; but that the souls of good men are only removed into other bodies,—but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment” (Josephus *Wars* 2.8.14§163; Whiston 1987:608). This idea appears typical of a majority of Jews during the Herodian Period.

According to Garland, in *The Greek Way of Death*, anthropologists frequently find that many peoples “believe that the soul of the deceased does not reach its final destination immediately after death but remains for a time marginally between two worlds” (Garland 2001:38). Interestingly, these first-century Jews thought that the soul did not fully abandon the body for three days.

Consider this quotation in *Genesis Rabbah* from the *Midrash Rabbah* (dates from the sixth century CE):

Bar Kappara taught: Until three days [after death] the soul keeps on returning to the grave, thinking that it will go back [into the body]; but when it sees that the facial features have become disfigured, it departs and abandons it [the body]. (*Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* C.7; Freedman 1983:995.)

The *Midrash Rabbah* states in *Leviticus Rabbah* (which dates from the middle seventh Century CE) that:

For three days [after death] the soul hovers over the body, intending to re-enter it, but as soon as it sees its appearance change, it departs, as it is written, When his flesh that is on him is distorted, his soul will mourn over him (XIV, 22). Bar Kappara said: The full force of mourning lasts for three days. Why? Because [for that length of time] the shape of the face is recognisable, even as we have learnt in the Mishnah: Evidence [to prove a man’s death] is admissible only in respect of the full face, with the nose, and only [by one who has seen the corpse] within three days [after death]. (*Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* XVIII:1; Freedman 1983:226.)

Moreover, *Midrash Rabbah* (“Great”) at *Ruth Rabbah* III:3 (Rabinowitz 1983:44-45)] and *Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah* at I:14§1 (Rabinowitz 1983:44-45) presuppose that the soul does not abandon the body for three days. A passage in the Tractate *Semahot* (“Mourning”) corroborates this view.

One may go out to the cemetery for thirty [three]²³ days to inspect the dead for a sign of life, without fear that this smacks of heathen practice. For it happened that a man was inspected after thirty [three] days, and he went on to live twenty-five years; still another went on to have five children and died later. (The Tractate “Mourning” [Semahot] 8.1; Zlotnick 1966:57.)

In this thinking, the soul could reunite with the body within three days. Sometime on the third day, however, when the soul recognized the irreversible decay of the body, particularly of the face and nose, it would depart. This kind of thinking naturally created a justifiable concern about premature burial, so where the possibility existed that a person may seem to be dead, but not really be dead, the death of the decedent had to be witnessed for three days and then certified on, or after, the third day. In *Death and Euthanasia in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa*, Walter Jacob says:

In ancient times it was considered necessary to examine the grave after cave burial to be certain that the individual interred had actually died. This was recommended for a period of three days (*Semahot* 8.1). This procedure was not followed after Mishnaic times. (Jacob and Zemer 1995:129.)

The Mishnah²⁴ explains the duty of witnesses as follows:

They derive testimony [concerning the identity of a corpse] only from the appearance of the whole face with the nose, even though there are signs of the corpse’s identity on his body or garments. They derive testimony [that a man has died] only after he has actually died [and been seen dead], and even if they [the witnesses] saw him mortally wounded, crucified, or eaten by a wild beast. They give testimony [about the

²³ In an endnote, Zlotnick, the translator of *Semahot* 8, suggests the reader take note at *Semahot* 8.1 “that instead of ‘thirty’ the variants read ‘three,’ a reading supported by many medieval commentators...; moreover, ‘three’ makes good sense in a non-Aggadic passage, ‘thirty’ being taken as an *aberratio oculi* from Chap. 7” (Zlotnick 1966:135). However, in antiquity, visits to a tomb on both the third day and the thirtieth day were common (Garland 2001:104).

²⁴ The Mishna (mish·NA, also *Mishnah*), meaning to repeat (later), to learn or teach, is the first part of the Talmud containing traditional oral interpretations of scriptural ordinances (*halakah*), that is, the Oral Law compiled by the rabbis about 200 CE. Mishna scholars are known as *Tannaim*.

identity of a corpse] only during a period of three days [after death].
(*Mishna Yebamot* 16:3.A-E; Neusner 1988:376.)

This ancient Jewish perception illustrates why Jesus did not travel immediately to Bethany when he first learned that his friend Lazarus was ill. By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days (John 11:6, 17) and the witnesses had already officially verified his death, following their close examination of the body and finding decay of the face, on the third day. By waiting until the fourth day to appear in Bethany to resurrect Lazarus, Jesus ensured that the Jews would have no doubt that Lazarus was dead and that his resurrection was a miracle. That fact did not escape the attention of the authorities as John's gospel reports:

...a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus. (John 12:9-11 NKJ.)

Traditions of the Elders

The Pharisee sect added the “traditions of the elders” or “Oral Law.” These constituted an elaborate set of oral practices or *halakah*, which came to be the foundation of the later formalized “Oral Torah” of rabbinic Judaism. Pharistic *halakah* consisted of their interpretation of the injunctions of the Hebrew Scriptures. These traditions were not divine revelations of God's will but rather self-imposed religion.

Anciently, God revealed His will through the media of the *Urim* and *Thummin* to the high priest (the *Cohen Gadol* in Hebrew), dream visions, angelic messengers and the prophets. The sacred lots²⁵—the *Urim* and the *Thummin*—were sometimes used in combination with the high priest's breastplate and provided a means by which the high priest could communicate with God when a compelling matter required an immediate answer.²⁶

²⁵ This method of receiving communication from God may seem strange. People today are far removed from the time of the Hebrew Scriptures and the formation of the New Testament. However, there is no evidence that any communication from God has come via the *Urim* and the *Thummin* since Old Testament times.

²⁶ The sacred lots resided in a breastplate attached to the front of a priestly garment, known as an ephod, worn over the shoulders by the high priest. The breastplate was a bejeweled

The high priest could seek God's direction through a series of questions, each capable of only a "yes" or a "no" answer (1 Samuel 23:9-12). A set of this type of linear questions was similar to those employed today to develop binary-oriented flow charts used in writing computer programs. So enabled, a high priest could utilize the *Urim* and the *Thummin* to seek God's will as important issues arose.²⁷

However, there is no indication that the *Urim* and *Thummin* survived into the postexilic period. With the rise of the prophets and the decline of the priesthood, God's will was made known in a far more public way, and once the Hebrew Scriptures were complete such methods ceased altogether. No evidentiary connection links the rise of the Pharisees in the post-exilic period with the body of "oral instructions" conveyed to the high priest by the *Urim* and *Thummin*—or by any other means. The degree, if any, to which the *halakah* of the Pharisees consisted of any "oral instruction" obtained through the high priest by *Urim*, dream, angel, or prophet, is mere speculation.

Derived from the Pharisee's own traditions, the *halakah* should be distinguished from the instructions given by God through the agency of Moses and Aaron, and subsequent generations of high priests, but which were not preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures, e.g., the Hebrew calendar rules and the like. Jesus of Nazareth and the apostles challenged the veracity of the *halakah* of the Pharisees, declaring that it was not instruction from God but rather the traditions of men (see Matthew 15:1-6; Mark 7:3-13).

The record in Acts describes the ca. 32 CE appearance of Stephen before the Great Council, or *Sanhedrin*, in Jerusalem. Stephen stood accused of speaking "against this holy place, and the [oral] law" (Acts 6:13). This was a reference to the Second Temple and "the customs which Moses handed

receptacle for the sacred lots, adorned with four rows of semiprecious stones, three in a row, engraved with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 28:2-30; 39:8-21; see Kennedy 1988:319 and Harrison 1979:544).

²⁷ God rejected King Saul for his disobedience in the matter of Agag and the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:7-23). Thereafter, "When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets" (1 Samuel 28:6). When the Philistines came against Saul they terrified him and receiving no instructions from God he made the mistake of consulting a medium at Endor (1 Samuel 28:7-12).

down to us” (Acts 6:14). These “customs” referred to the “traditions of the elders” or Oral Law (*halakah*). After the Second Temple Period²⁸ these customs slowly emerged as rabbinical law.

It was through the *halakah*, or “traditions of the elders,” that the Pharisees sought the legitimation of their self-proclaimed religious “authority.” They added these practices themselves but wanted the Jewish public to accept them as authentic.

As to the Pharisees, Josephus said:

...there was a certain sect of men that were Jews, who valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers, and made men believe they were highly favored by God,... (Josephus *Antiquities* 17.2.4§41; Whiston 1987:453.)

The Pharisees were more or less usurpers of priestly and Levitical authority. Jesus said that the scribes and the Pharisees seated themselves in the chair of Moses (see Matthew 23:2 NASB). They took upon themselves the authority scripturally belonging to the Levities, and began teaching and guiding the public about the things of God. Often they succeeded in forcing their interpretations upon the priests. Josephus said that “they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices; they perform them according to their direction” (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.1.3§15; Whiston 1987:477). Jesus took issue with their teachings and conduct. He condemned them as hypocrites seven times in Matthew 23:13-29; cf. Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; Mark 7:6; Luke 12:56; 13:15). He said “you [Pharisees] travel around on sea and land

²⁸ In contemporary scholarly literature, the Second Temple Period or the period known as Second Temple Judaism, lies between the completion of the Second Temple in 516 BCE and its destruction in 70 CE. However, this supposition is not technically correct. In 141 BCE, the Hasmonians captured the Acra (located on a hillock, anciently known as Mt. Zion, lying south of the Gihon Spring on Jerusalem’s southwestern ridge) and set about to destroy it (1 Maccabees 13:49-51). Simon the Hasmonian resolved to tear down the desecrated Second Temple, which dated to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and dedicate a new third one. The Hasmonians built their new Temple, technically the third temple, and dedicated it on Kislev 25, 124 BCE, which should infuse new meaning into the Festival of Hanukkah.

to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15 NASB).



A basalt "Seat of Moses" from the ancient synagogue at Korazin, or Corazin, probably dating to the fourth century CE. This was a symbolic physical chair of honor within ancient synagogues where the chief rabbi or elder would sit. Inscribed on the chair, which was the only inscription found on the site, are the words "Remembered for good Yudan son of Ishmael who made [or donated] this stoa and its steps from his [own] property. May he have a portion with the righteous" (Fine 1997:491; Schoville 2004: 18). Photo by courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Note the biting irony of Jesus' words. He said, "all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them" (Matthew 23:3 NASB). Contrary to what many believe, Jesus was not telling his followers to obey his critics and enemies. He was using sarcasm to say just the opposite.²⁹ As to the Pharisees he said, "Let them

²⁹ Jesus used obvious irony. When he said, in effect, "Do as they say but not as they do" (Matt. 23:1-3), the passage suggests borderline sarcasm. Matthew 23:2-4 is a chiasm [the arrangement of elements (e.g. of a text) in the form of mirror-like reflection: ABba or abcd*DCBA]. D. A. Carson, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* article "Matthew", refers to it as a "neat chiasm". He goes on to say that "The reluctance of many scholars to admit that vv. 2-3 are biting irony overlooks the tone of much of this chapter (e.g., vv. 23-28) and superb parallels elsewhere in the NT (e.g., 1 Cor 4:8a, 10)" (Carson 1984:473-474).

alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch” (Matthew 15:14 NKJV). So why would Jesus tell his faithful followers to follow blind guides that would lead them into a spiritual ditch? He wouldn’t!

The Pharisees claimed no less a hero than Moses as their progenitor and the legitimating authority for their customs. They believed that the legislation and instructions included in their Oral Law had been given to Moses by God in addition to the written Torah. For them, this divine origin of *halakah* made its obedience obligatory. The Pharisaic Oral Law came to be as highly regarded by later rabbinic Judaism as the written *Torah* itself. Subsequently, some Jews even considered it more important. Lee I. A. Levine summarized this phenomenon. He wrote:

A basic Pharisaic doctrine differentiated the sect from others. For the Pharisees, the Oral Law was the authentic amplification of the Written Law of Moses. As such, the two stood side by side, and one was incomplete without the other. The Oral Law provided the correct interpretation and application of the Written Law, although the Written Law remained the ultimate authority, the primary text and the basic parameter within which the Oral Law evolved and developed. The crowning recognition of the Oral Law as legitimate and authentic was the Pharisaic claim that it, too, was given at Sinai; God gave not only the Five Books of Moses to the Jews, but the Oral tradition as well. Armed with this notion, the Pharisees presented themselves to the people as the sole legitimate bearers of Mosaic tradition. (Levine 1988:202.)

Some Pharisees were scribes—referred to in the New Testament as the “scribes of the Pharisees” (Mark 2:16, Acts 23:9 NASB). A scribe was one specifically educated in Jewish religious law. While a number of scribes were Pharisees, the majority were not. Most Pharisees were laity.

The New Testament writers gave the Pharisees a more prominent role in the gospels than other Jewish sects because of the continuing tension and conflict between them and Jesus and his followers. The teachings of Jesus, and later the apostles, consistently clashed with those of the Pharisees about their customs and traditions. The amount of space in the gospels devoted to the Pharisees does not suggest that they were the dominant force in Judea but only that they openly and consistently opposed Jesus and the apostles.

Many readers of the gospels falsely assume that the *halakah* of the Pharisees describes the general religious practices of the Jewish public in their homeland. But beyond matters of ritual purity it did not. The Pharisee worldview and lifestyle reflected their own religious ideas and values, not those of the general public. The gospels only provide part of the story, and their focus is on the fundamental conflict between the teachings of the Pharisees and the teaching of Jesus—specifically, his rejection of the *halakah*. The accounts of the conflicts between the two opposing movements record the activity of relatively small groups. The general population of the first-century Jewish homeland was not Pharisee, Sadducee, or Essene.

The portrayal of the Pharisees in the New Testament is as the epitome of intolerance and hypocritical fundamentalism. Some writers today, seeking to rehabilitate the Pharisees and to deny that the New Testament provides an accurate account of the events recorded in the gospels, would have you believe that the Pharisees were not all that bad. The crux of the argument is that the Pharisees were actually reformers, the progressive section of first-century Judaism, opposed to the right wing, reactionary Sadducees. These writers minimize the New Testament record by characterizing it as biased. In various academic and religious circles, it is not politically expedient to depict the Pharisees in a negative light. Moreover some, rejecting the veracity of the Bible, undertake the literary destruction of the New Testament in an effort to reach their contemporary agendas and to shun its instruction for right living. This form of anti-intellectual bigotry is present in both the secular and religious worlds.

Be aware that written history is always an interpretation within the paradigm and agenda, whether it be political, religious, or otherwise, of its authors. Christians, Jews and others will always write their histories from their own reality. Those who see the New Testament as the inspired word of God find that it unequivocally criticizes and condemns the Pharisees and distances the true religion of God from them. Understanding the Christianity of the first Christians, the Judeo-Christianity of the apostles, and the nuances embedded in the Judeo-Christian set of documents known as the New Testament, necessitates discerning the sociocultural context of first-century Judaism, particularly that of the Pharisees.

The Sadducees

Similarly, the Sadducees, a relatively small but dominant group who generally held the high priesthood, arose from the faction of the priestly sons of Zadok (King David's high priest) who aligned themselves with the Hasmoneans. They became the sect of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17 NKJV) or the party of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17 RSV). The Sadducees drew from the upper classes—mainly priestly families and lay families with whom the priests had intermarried. These constituted the pro-Roman and pro-Greek establishment, with reactionary leanings bent on maintaining their control of the vassal Jewish state. The Pharisees were constantly at odds with this unpopular, priestly aristocratic establishment power group.

Politically right-wing reactionaries, the Sadducees were seen by the Pharisees as decadent. In turn, the Sadducees rejected many of the Pharisees' teachings, which they saw as unjustified innovations. Josephus, more than a little biased Pharisee himself, wrote:

What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers; and concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them, while the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude on their side;... (Josephus *Antiquities* 13.10.6§§297-298; Whiston 1987:355.)

As politically astute realists, the Sadducees not only held control of the priesthood, but indulged the Romans and the Greeks and resisted any change that would threaten their privileged status. While the Sadducees controlled the high priest, the Pharisees were able to bring sufficient pressure on the rest of the priesthood so that they often deferred to the Pharisees and carried out Temple ritual according to their Pharistic instruction (Safarai 1992:133; *Mishna Yoma* 1:5-6; Neusner 1988:266; *Tosefta Sukka* 5:1 (Neusner 2002a); *Tosefta Parah* 3:8; Neusner 2002b). Moreover, Josephus would have his readers believe that even the Sadducees would give in to the Pharisees, because if they didn't, the public would not put up with them (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.1.4; Whiston 1987:477; cf. *Antiquities* 13.10.6§298; 1987:355).

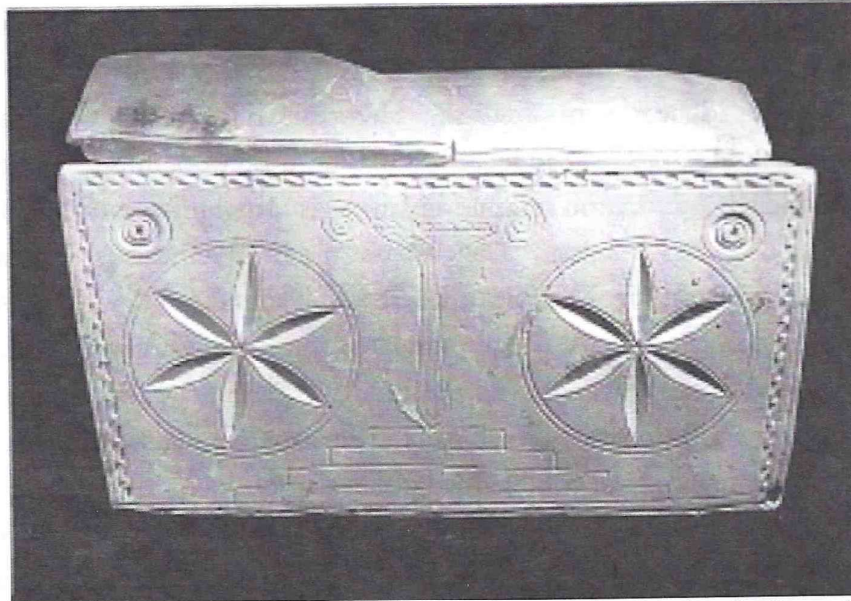
The Sadducees, held in contempt by many Hellenized Jews and resisted by the Pharisees, readily aligned themselves with their Roman masters—for they comprised a classic collaborating elite. The Levitical priests of that time, who were largely Sadducees, were Hellenistic and assumed Greek names. In fact, in the writings of Josephus not a single first-century high priest is recorded as having a Hebrew name.

The Sadducees supported the Herodian ruling family, as did the Boëthusian high priests. Sadducee leader Simon Ben Boëthus (high priest in 25-24 BCE), was Herod's father-in-law—his daughter was Mariamne II, Herod's wife. Nevertheless, "The views of the B. [Boëthusians] were similar to, but not always identical with those of the Sadducees" (*The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* 1970:331). Supporters of the ruling family of Herod, the pro-Herodian party, were known as Herodians. With respect to Jesus and his followers, the Sadducees occasionally came into conflict with them when their public oratory and conduct had political overtones.

Joseph Caiaphas, known simply as Caiaphas in the New Testament, was the Jewish high priest 26 to 37 CE who organized the plot to kill Jesus and participated in the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus. According to the Gospel accounts, Caiaphas was the major antagonist of Jesus. His interment was in Jerusalem and archaeologists uncovered his family tomb closed with a large round blocking stone and containing his ossuary. Of the over 900 rock tombs discovered in and around Jerusalem from Herodian times only four have round blocking stones. The rest are squared.

In Jesus' day round massive blocking stones, set in stone tracks, were extremely rare and found only in the tombs of wealthy and distinguished families. This was neither the kind of stone placed at Jesus' tomb nor the kind of tomb into which Joseph of Arimathea placed him. Kloner shows that Jesus' tomb was not one with a large round rolling stone such as associated with the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Gordon's Calvary but was rather a poor man's tomb with a squared blocking stone (Kloner, 1999). Jesus' tomb was a standard small burial room, with a standing pit and burial benches along three sides, with a square blocking stone placed at its entrance (Kloner 1999:23). The process of burial in the Early Roman Period took place in two stages. First the placement of the dead person was on a ledge or in a *loculus* of a rock-hewn tomb. Then after about a year, when the body had

decomposed, family members of the deceased returned to the tomb, gathered the bones and put them into a small box of limestone or wood called an ossuary. An ossuary was a “bone box” or depository for the bones of the dead, a rectangular box with lid, usually hewn out of limestone.



Above is the decorated long side of Ossuary 6 from the Caiaphas family tomb which was the ossuary of the high priest Joseph Caiaphas of the New Testament. Photo courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Every culture has its unique approach to the interment of the dead. Today some of these customs appear quite foreign and bizarre. The reason for such a custom was practical-religious since the bones were the only remains after a determined period of time. Hence, they were considered an extremely important symbol of the deceased person. Also, space in the tombs had to be conserved promoting the use of the ossuary over the sarcophagus.

The Essenes

While not prominent in the New Testament, the sect of the Essenes made up a significant subdivision of early first-century Judaism. Josephus identified three distinct levels within the sect of the Essenes—celibates devoted to the study of ancient documents (Josephus *Wars* 2.8.6§136), certain celibates focused on prediction of future events (Josephus *Wars* 2.8.12§159), and those who lived as the others but encouraged marriage of their members (Josephus *Wars* 2.8.13§160).

The Essenes were an extremist monastic group, holding to a rigid, austere and bizarre form of ascetic religion, awaiting the Messiah to appear to deliver them to a new Israel. The sect, which had no concept of an oral law, chose to preserve their teachings in writing (Flusser 1989:45). Josephus says that:

...when they send what they have dedicated to God into the temple, they do not offer sacrifices, because they have more pure lustrations of their own; on which account they excluded from the common court of the temple, but offer their sacrifices;... (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.1.5§19; Whiston 1987:477.)

For the most part the Essenes held themselves aloof from Jewish society, which they saw as worldly and corrupt, and they shunned the company of women. According to Josephus:

There are about four thousand men that live in this way, and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants; as thinking the latter tempts men to be unjust, and the former gives the handle to domestic quarrels; but as they live by themselves, they minister one to another. (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.1.5§20-21; Whiston 1987:477.)

In Essene thinking God was to be approached through self-abasement or asceticism. They normally clothed themselves in white garments (Josephus *Wars* 2.8.3§123) and generally lived a monastic life style. They also practiced a kind of proto-Marxism, abandoning the ownership of private property—including their clothing—and pooled all their resources into a common fund that was shared according to need (cf., Colossians 2:20-23).

The Essenes advocated ritual purity in everyday life, celibacy, vegetarianism, new moon observance and the adoption of their solar calendar for festivals and annual Sabbaths (their weekly Sabbaths were on the same days as traditional Jews). Their views on ritual purity were such that they even refused to succumb to the call of nature by eliminating on the Sabbath. Few married, as they eschewed every act of concupiscence (Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* 9.20).

As celibacy was the common practice among most of the Essenes, the sect had to continually recruit from Jews and Judeo-Christians to keep from dying out. In their efforts to proselytize, itinerant teachers visited synagogues in the Hellenic Diaspora in search of converts. This resulted in Essenism

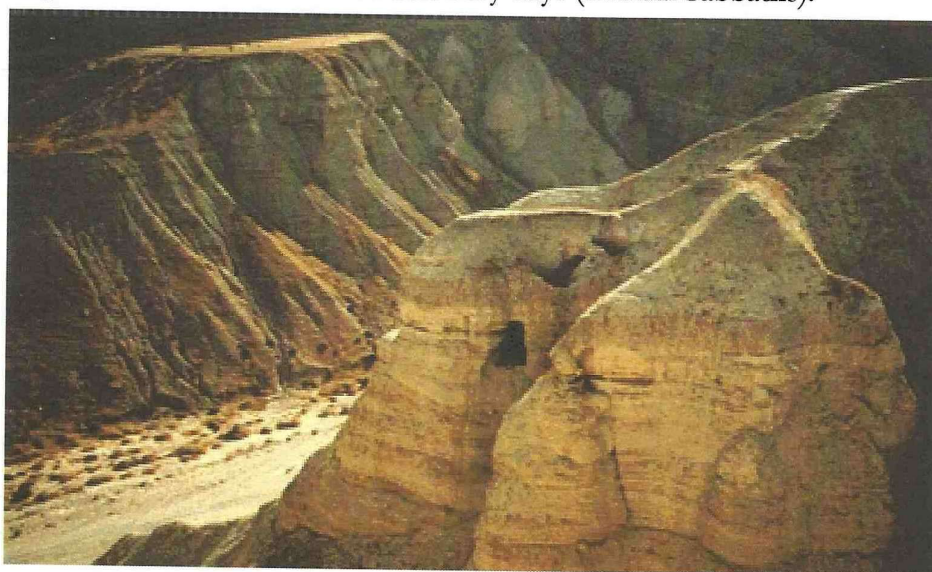
intruding at times into early Judeo-Christian congregations, such as the one at Colossae.

Essene Jubilees Calendar															
	Month I					Month II					Month III				
Sun		5	12	19	26		3	10	17	24	1	8	15	22	29
Mon		6	13	20	27		4	11	18	25	2	9	16	23	30
Tue		7	14	21	28		5	12	19	26	3	10	17	24	31
Wed	1	8	15	22	29		6	13	20	27	4	11	18	25	
Thu	2	9	16	23	30		7	14	21	28	5	12	19	26	
Fri	3	10	17	24		1	8	15	22	29	6	13	20	27	
SAB	4	11	18	25		2	9	16	23	30	7	14	21	28	
	Month IV					Month V					Month VI				
Sun		5	12	19	26		3	10	17	24	1	8	15	22	29
Mon		6	13	20	27		4	11	18	25	2	9	16	23	30
Tue		7	14	21	28		5	12	19	26	3	10	17	24	31
Wed	1	8	15	22	29		6	13	20	27	4	11	18	25	
Thu	2	9	16	23	30		7	14	21	28	5	12	19	26	
Fri	3	10	17	24		1	8	15	22	29	6	13	20	27	
SAB	4	11	18	25		2	9	16	23	30	7	14	21	28	
	Month VII					Month VIII					Month IX				
Sun		5	12	19	26		3	10	17	24	1	8	15	22	29
Mon		6	13	20	27		4	11	18	25	2	9	16	23	30
Tue		7	14	21	28		5	12	19	26	3	10	17	24	31
Wed	1	8	15	22	29		6	13	20	27	4	11	18	25	
Thu	2	9	16	23	30		7	14	21	28	5	12	19	26	
Fri	3	10	17	24		1	8	15	22	29	6	13	20	27	
SAB	4	11	18	25		2	9	16	23	30	7	14	21	28	
	Month X					Month XI					Month XII				
Sun		5	12	19	26		3	10	17	24	1	8	15	22	29
Mon		6	13	20	27		4	11	18	25	2	9	16	23	30
Tue		7	14	21	28		5	12	19	26	3	10	17	24	31
Wed	1	8	15	22	29		6	13	20	27	4	11	18	25	
Thu	2	9	16	23	30		7	14	21	28	5	12	19	26	
Fri	3	10	17	24		1	8	15	22	29	6	13	20	27	
SAB	4	11	18	25		2	9	16	23	30	7	14	21	28	

In the Jubilees Calendar of the Essenes shown above the dates in bold indicate weekly Sabbaths, annual Sabbaths, and the new moons of the first, fourth, seventh and tenth month. Roman numerals indicate the month beginning with the first month. The months had no names and were known

by number only. The seven annual Sabbaths appear in the black cells. The first day on the first month always begins at sunset (Jerusalem time) on the Tuesday evening following the vernal equinox (I Enoch; Finegan 1998:46). The calendar had a year of 364 days. As Jubilees set the Festival of Weeks (Pentecost) on III 15 the offering of the wave sheaf (Leviticus 23:11), the omer-waving ceremony from which it is dated, always fell on Sunday the 26th day of the first month (Jaubert 1965:27; Finegan 1998:42).

The Essenes did not accept the ordering of the calendar and feasts as set by the priesthood (Bowker 1969:27). Rather, the sect observed a solar calendar known as the Jubilees Calendar, which preserved the weekly Sabbath but perverted all other festivals and holy days (Annual Sabbaths).



Entrance to Cave 4 at Qumran. In this artificial cave overlooking the Wadi Qumran more than 15,000 fragments from over 200 works were found. Cave 4 lies only a short distance from the ruins at Khirbet Qumran. A BIBARCH™ Photo by Rodrigo Sylva.

The Jubilees Calendar consisted of a solar year of 364 days divided into seven-day weeks, and twelve months of thirty days each, except for one extra day in the last month of each quarter. According to this calendar, the major feasts, c.g., the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Tabernacles and the Last Great Day (the day after the seven day Feast of Tabernacles) always began on Wednesday, actually at evening the day before as the Jews began days at evening not midnight (Simon 1967:73).³⁰ Trumpets,

³⁰ Romans began their days at midnight. See Roman Questions by Plutarch [46 AD - 120 AD]

Tabernacles and the Last Great Day always occurred in the seventh month of their calendar.

D. David Flusser suggests that the Essene calendar differed significantly from that of the priests in order for the Essenes to distance themselves from the Jerusalem establishment (Flusser 1989:43). In any case, the sect generally secluded themselves from Jewish society, which they regarded as fouled, defiled and doomed. They did not participate in temple sacrifices as they believed the priests defiled the sanctuary (*Dead Sea Scrolls Damascus Document* 5.6-7, 14-15). Josephus says they did not offer sacrifices (Josephus *Antiquities* 18.5§19) as does Philo (Philo *Good Person* 75).

The Essenes not only forbade marriage but also taught vegetarianism. In his first letter to the evangelist Timothy, the Apostle Paul apparently had the Essenes in mind when he wrote of men teaching abstinence from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in...” (1 Timothy 4:3 NASB). While the general term Gnostic is becoming less useful to scholars, it applies to this group as the sect espoused secret knowledge known only to its members. The sect followed the traditions of men, human reasoning and philosophy.

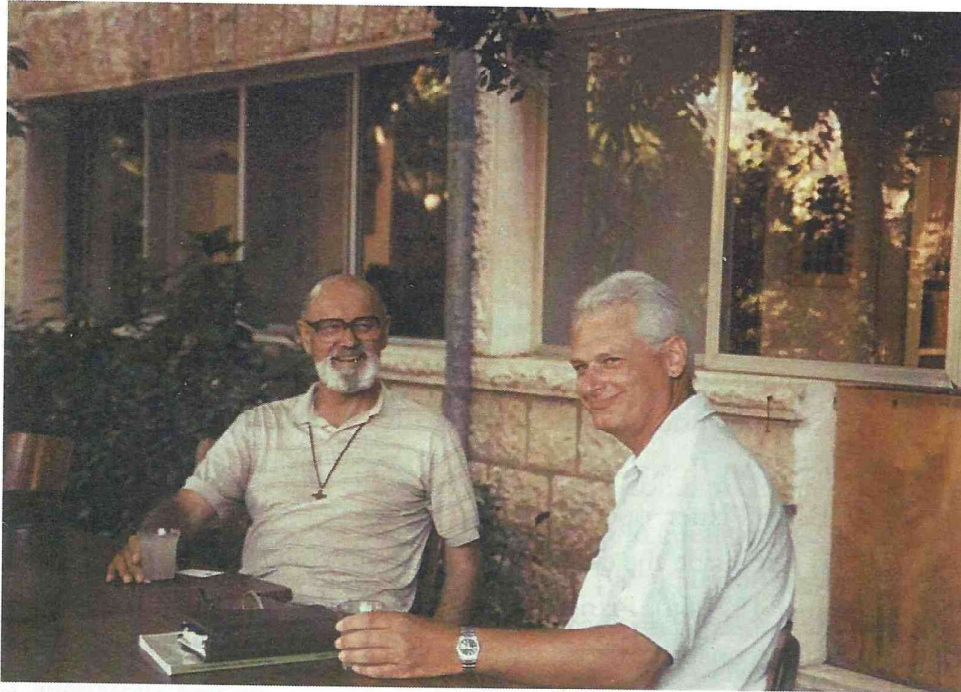
The sect presumably arose in reaction to the Hasmoneans (Armstrong 1996:121). The Essenes resided above Ein Gedi and its spring (Cansdale and Crown 1994:28-29) and possibly Qumrân. There is scant literary or scientific evidence to link *Khirbet Qumrân* with the Essenes although it has been popular to do so (Cansdale and Crown 1994:25-26; Davies 1994:126-142). However, there is insufficient evidence to conclusively rule it out.

References in ancient literature to an Essene presence in Jerusalem in the first centuries, before and after Jesus of Nazareth, include those in: Philo Judaeus (*Hypothetica* 11.1–18; Colson 1960:437–443; *Quod Omnis Populus Liber Sit* 75–91; Colson 1960:53–63); Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.1.5, *Wars of the Jews* 5.4.2; Whiston 1987:477 and 704); Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia* 5.15, 5.73; Rackham 1961:277); and Hippolytus (*Rufutatio Omnium Haeresium* 9.12–23; Roberts and Donaldson 1986:133–137; Wendland 1977:246–259).

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According to archaeologist Bargil Pixner, the Essenes had a major “camp” or “quarter” on Jerusalem’s western hill (the Upper City in Herodian Jerusalem), now known as Mt. Sion (Pixner 1976:245-275). Richard Mackowski held that the material evidence on Mt. Sion shows that it “was not only the mahaneh of the Essenes during the time of Jesus, but also the birthplace of this extremely orthodox Jewish sect in Jerusalem” (Mackowski 1980:63 cf., 145).



Bargil Pixner and Michael P. Germano at Tabgha on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Germano interviewed Pixner about several topics including the Cenacle in Jerusalem, first-century life on the Sea of Galilee and the day of the week of The Last Supper.

No physical evidence, however, of an Essene quarter within the city attests to this theory. The Essenes considered Jerusalem polluted and unclean, so why would they defile themselves by living in Herodian Jerusalem? The Essenes, more likely, lived beyond the city walls in an area outside the Essene Gate. As the road from the Damascus Gate led to Damascus, so arguably the road or path leading away from the Essene Gate led to the Essene encampment.

Bargil Pixner argued that Jesus of Nazareth kept the Last Supper with his disciples on a Tuesday night at an Essene guesthouse in the Essene quarter of Jerusalem. R. Steven Notley, writing in the *Jerusalem Perspective*

Online, argued that Pixner's theory is inconsistent with the facts of the matter:

Not one shred of physical evidence or clear mention in the historical sources indicates that there was an Essene Quarter in first-century Jerusalem. It is true that a first-century gate complex was excavated on today's Mount Zion. That gate may indeed be the "Essene Gate" mentioned by the Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius (War 5:145). But it need not follow that the gate was named for a nearby Essene Quarter. The gates of Jerusalem are often named after the destination points to which they lead. For example, the modern Damascus Gate of Jerusalem opens northward in the direction of the Syrian capital, and the ancient Shushan Gate faced east towards Susa, the capital of Persia. It is just as likely that the name "Essene Gate" indicated it faced southward in the direction of an Essene settlement outside of the city. In the end, we simply do not know how the gate received its name, and we are in no position to assume that its name indicates an Essene Quarter within the walled city of Jerusalem. (Notley 2004.)

In a description of the city walls of Jerusalem, as they were at the time of the First Jewish Revolt (CE 66-73), Josephus wrote of the Gate of the Essenes as lying south of the Hippicus tower and Bethso, and east of the Pool of Siloam (Josephus Wars 5.4.2§145; Whiston 1987:704). This gate, argued Bargil Pixner, opened into the Jerusalem Essene community living on Mt. Sion just inside the city wall, in the southwestern quarter of the ancient city (Pixner 1997:66). Pixner believed that in the early third century Judeo-Christians reconstructed this gate, as well as a makeshift wall around their neighborhood, to protect their Mt. Sion community and synagogue from outsiders (Pixner 1997:25, 29-31).

While the archaeological evidence suggests that early third century Judeo-Christians did reconstruct a gate from the Herodian period city wall, it is not at all clear that this was the Gate of the Essenes mentioned by Josephus. Moreover, in the third century, this Judeo-Christian synagogue on Mt. Sion, considered by some as the mother of all churches, was known as the Church of the Apostles and the Holy Church of God (Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel* 6.18; Ferrar 1920b:30-31). Cyril said it was the "Upper Church of the Apostles" (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 16.4; Schaff and Wace 1989a:116).

While Jesus of Nazareth was not an Essene,³¹ Pixner argued that the Last Supper, also known as the first Christian Passover, occurred in this Essene community. “To my mind” writes Bargil Pixner “this took place in the Essene guesthouse on Mount Zion on the Tuesday night” (Pixner 1992:64). Mackowski held that this “must have been a very simple dining hall in keeping with the simple life of the Essenes” (Mackowski 1980:141).

Consider the literary evidence found in the gospels of Luke and Mark. Both state that on the day of the slaughtering of the Passover lambs, in reference to Nisan 14, Jesus instructed Peter and John to enter Jerusalem and to look for a man carrying a pitcher of water (Luke 22:8-10, Mark 14:13). They were to follow this man to where he entered a house and there to inquire of the *oikodespote*, housemaster, about the guest room where Jesus would eat the Passover with his disciples. This was 24 hours before the traditional Passover of the Jews observed at the beginning of Nisan 15. Jesus said “He [referring to the housemaster] will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there” (Mark 14:15 NIV; Luke 22:12).

The implication is that either Jesus had made some prearrangement for dining there, or that he knew this facility was open to guests on this occasion. It appears that the housemaster expected Jesus’ party. He and his staff had a room furnished and ready. The two disciples made preparations, and when it was *opsios* (late), that is, at nightfall, Jesus and The Twelve³² came (Mark 14:16-17). They observed the Last Supper in this Upper Room at night on (or at the beginning of) Nisan 14, not Nisan 15. The debate among Christian theologians and historians has yet to resolve the issue of whether or not the Last Supper included a Passover Seder. The New Testament very clearly, however, fixed the New Passover or Christian Passover at the beginning of

³¹ The public adult baptism of Jesus of Nazareth by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21; cf. John 1:29-34), rather than Essene immersion of oneself within the solitude of the cult for the remission of sins upon confession in order to gain and maintain ritual purity, conclusively separates him from the Essenes (Howlett 1957:165).

³² Technically, Jesus arrived with ten of his disciples, because John and Peter were already at the site. The use of “The Twelve” here implies that “the name-status of the group was “The Twelve” irrespective of the presence of individual members.

Nisan 14, a full twenty-four hours before the traditional observance of the Passover of the Jews at the beginning of Nisan 15.

Bargil Pixner held that Jesus celebrated this Last Supper as a Pascal meal on a Tuesday night because on this specific occasion he was following the Jubilees Calendar (also called the Qumran calendar). By this calendar the Passover always occurred on a Tuesday night. The first Annual Sabbath, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, was always on a Wednesday in that calendar system. Interestingly, a homily of Pope Benedict XVI, entitled “Mass of the Lord’s Supper,” delivered April 5, 2007, states:

In all likelihood, however, he celebrated the Passover with his disciples in accordance with the Qumran calendar, hence, at least one day earlier; he celebrated it without a lamb, like the Qumran community which did not recognize Herod’s temple and was waiting for the new temple. (Ratzinger 2007.)

Pixner, who believed that Jesus’ Crucifixion took place on a Friday afternoon, theorized a reconciliation of the chronology of the synoptic gospels with that of John by claiming that Jesus observed the Passover on a Tuesday night according to the Jubilees Calendar, and that this was at least three days before the Friday night Passover of traditional Jews. However, Pope Benedict XVI, in the reference to the Qumran (the Jubilees) Calendar in the homily above, makes it clear that the Last Supper “In all likelihood” occurred on a Tuesday night “at least one day earlier” than the traditional Passover of the Jews! This scenario would place the Crucifixion on Wednesday afternoon.

The biblical evidence confirms that the Last Supper did in fact occur on a Tuesday night based on the priestly calendar of the Jews but not the Jubilees Calendar.³³ The internal evidence of the gospels demonstrates conclusively that the Crucifixion was on a Wednesday and that Jesus remained entombed for three consecutive 24 hour periods (three days and three nights). Recall that in first-century Jewish thinking the soul would not have abandoned the body until the third day and Jesus, therefore, was not conclusively dead until

³³ During the period 26-34 CE, the Essene Passover fell one day earlier than the traditional Passover only twice—in 27 and 30 CE.

the third day ended. This would place the Resurrection on Saturday at sunset as the third day of Jesus' entombment concluded.

Aside from the arguments of Bargil Pixner, and those of his school of thought about the time and place of the Last Supper, the Essenes have a limited role in the New Testament. In about 60 CE, a Jewish heresy sprang up within the congregation at Colossae due to the efforts of itinerant teachers. The heretical doctrine proclaimed by these Jewish teachers involved the ideology that Jesus was not the center of God's plan of salvation, but rather that God was to be approached through self-abasement or asceticism (Colossians 2:23).

McDaniel in his *Combating the Rhetoric of Essenism: St. Paul's Language Strategy in Penning the Epistle to the Colossians* writes:

the apostle Paul penned the Colossian letter specifically to address the rhetoric of the Essenes, a mystic sect that was influencing the new church at Colossae. By examining the first-century influences at Colossae, the sources of the Colossian philosophy, the beliefs of the Essenes as well as the Jewish/Essenic rhetoric addressed by the language of the Colossian text, one can see how current rhetorical and linguistic scholarship now holds that the apostle penned the Colossian text to combat the rhetoric and philosophy of Essenism, a belief that he deemed was dangerous to the young church at Colossae. Rhetorical scholarship seen in the examination of language/vocabulary selection in the text itself shed valuable light in understanding how the specific words used by St. Paul were rhetorically chosen to combat the philosophy and practice of a mystic Jewish sect that threatened the religious belief and spiritual well-being of the new Christian converts in this fledgling church. (McDaniel 2008:2-3.)

Writing in *The New Bible Commentary*, 21st edition, Peter T. O'Brien says that at Colossae "the heresy seems to be Jewish, because of the references to food regulations, the Sabbath and other rules of the Jewish calendar" and further:

Recent scholarship...considers that the false teaching...was connected with ascetic and mystical forms of a Jewish piety (as found at Qumran). It was for a spiritual elite who were being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge so as to attain true 'fullness'. (O'Brien 1994:1261.)

While under house arrest in Rome, the Apostle Paul learned of the attempt by these troublemaking teachers to proselytize among the believers at Colossae. He wrote his epistle to the congregation to combat their

heretical teaching which, in fact, did not deal with the keeping of the weekly Sabbath as both Judeo-Christians and the Essenes observed the Sabbath on the same day.

Paul instructed the Colossian believers to not let anyone become their judge in matters pertaining to food and drink and to the calendar—new moons, festivals, annual Sabbaths (which are a shadow of future events in God’s plan)—but the Church of God (the body of Christ) for it was the judge in such matters (Colossians 2:16-17). In other words, in context, the Church of God, under the authority and direction of Jesus’ apostles, was the judge in matters of the law for Christians, not outsiders. This authority is still determinative for the people of God today through the New Testament and the spiritual offices it accredits.

Other Significant Groups

Zealots

The Zealots, dating to Maccabean times, were a force in the first century Jewish homeland, and were ultimately responsible for the military collapse of the Jewish nation and the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman legions. Among Jesus’ disciples, one of The Twelve belonged to this movement. In his Gospel, Luke refers to him as “Simon who was called the Zealot” (Luke 6:15 NIV) and in Acts as “Simon the Zealot” (Acts 1:13 NIV).

Under the leadership of Judas the Galilean, his sons, and grandson, the Zealots became an aggressive and relentless political force and resistance to Roman rule. They actively sought to bring about a messianic kingdom through violence and terrorism. Of Judas’ three sons, James and Simon fell as martyrs opposing the Roman rule under Tiberius Alexander (Josephus Antiquities 20.5.2§102; Whiston 1987:531). His other son, Menahem, was a chief leader of the revolt in 66 CE. He was captured, tortured and killed by other Zealots when he became a barbarously cruel tyrant and so pompous that he appeared in the Temple clothed in royal garments (Josephus Antiquities 2.17.8-10§433-449; Whiston 1987:625-626). Before Josephus joined the Roman cause, the Zealot-dominated Sanhedrin sent him to Galilee to convince the Sepphorites to join with the authorities at Jerusalem in the liberation of Judea (Life of Flavius Josephus 7-8§§29-31; Whiston 1987:3).

Samaritans

In Jesus' day, the population of Samaria, the former territory of the northern kingdom of Israel,³⁴ was of mixed blood and ancestry. The Samaritans were the descendants of people from Mesopotamia and Aram, resettled there by the Assyrians following their conquest of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17:24).³⁵

Some believe these settlers intermarried with the Israelites left behind when the people of the northern kingdom were exiled. Interestingly, one of the false Israelite priests, who had been deported by the Assyrians, was brought back from exile to Bethel to teach the settlers how to worship the god of the land (2 Kings 17:26-29). Consistent with Mesopotamian practice, these Gentile settlers continued to worship their own gods, but also took up a false form of worship of the Lord as the "god of the land" (2 Kings 17:24-41).

Bitter and open hostility existed between the Jews and Samaritans. Note that the Apostle John, in a parenthetical inset, explains to his readers the Jewish attitude toward the Samaritans of his day. He writes, "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9 NASB). Jews saw the Samaritans as half-breeds, both physically and spiritually, and treated them accordingly (Matthew 10:5-6; John 4:20-22; see also Ezra 4:3). Observant Jews held that Samaritans, as all other Gentile peoples, were biblically "unclean", so to avoid becoming ceremonially unclean, they would not even use dishes that Samaritans had used.

³⁴ The northern Kingdom of Israel separated itself from the Kingdom of Judah at the beginning of the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam. The northern tribes formed the Kingdom of Israel. The tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi made up the Kingdom of Judah to the south. In 722 BCE the Kingdom of Israel fell to Sargon II and the Assyrians. By order of its conquerors, the substantial majority of its inhabitants relocated in Assyria as captives, exiles and slaves. This was the original Diaspora. These became known as the lost ten tribes. At this time some members of the northern tribes, a remnant, fled to the south and joined themselves to the Kingdom of Judah. Evidence of this refugee movement into Judah can be found in the new neighborhoods and building programs at Jerusalem at that time. Hence the people known as the Jews involved some admixture of the tribes.

³⁵ In Ezra's time the people of Samaria claimed that it was Esar-haddon, King of Assyria, who had them settled in Samaria (Ezra 4:2, 10, 17). Osnappar (Ezra 4:10) appears to be a reference to Ashurbanipal.

Ebionites

About 50 CE, a group of Pharisees who believed broke away from the Nazarenes—the name used by the Jews of Judea to refer to the apostles and the followers of Jesus—over matters pertaining to the Law as applied to Gentiles. They became known as the Ebionites, and lived in and around Judea and Palestine from the 1st to the 4th century.

Ebionites were Messianic Jews in the sense that they believed a Gentile had to become a Jew—including undergoing the rite of ritual circumcision for males and having to observe all of the Law of Moses—to be an authentic Christian. The Ebionites troubled the churches by raiding congregations and recruiting, using false arguments and heretical teachings.

The Ebionites viewed Jesus of Nazareth as a mortal prophet, the last and greatest, and not as an incarnated member of the godhead. They believed that God adopted Jesus as his son when John baptized him in the River Jordan, and that he became a supernatural angel when he was resurrected (Chrysostom 1984:6-7).

Their view of the Apostle Paul is quite clear—they held him in contempt. Epiphanius (bishop of Salamis c. 366-402) reports that the Ebionites possessed a document called the *Ascent of James*, which preserves the following tradition:

[Paul] was Greek and the son of a Greek mother and father, but... he had gone up to Jerusalem, stayed a while, and desired to marry a daughter of the high priest. He therefore became a proselyte and was circumcised. But since he still could not get that sort of girl he became angry, and wrote against circumcision, and the Sabbath and Legislation. (Epiphanius *Panarion* 1.2.16.9; Williams 1987:132.)

While some authors associate the Apostle James, the Lord's brother and pastor of the mother church at Jerusalem, with the Ebionites, this is misinformation. James was the leader of the Nazarenes, not the Ebionites. James issued the decree at Acts 15 which resulted in the Ebionites breaking with the apostles. Later Greco-Roman Orthodox Christian writers confuse the Nazarenes and the Ebionites at times, and one must exercise care in dealing with such material. The Ebionite sect, clearly Judaizers, died out as traditional Jews. Judeo-Christians and Greco-Roman Orthodox Christianity all rejected it as heresy.

Nascent Christianity

Such was the Greco-Roman world into which the Church of God was born. Founded on the day of Pentecost in 31 CE, the Church at Jerusalem—the mother of all churches—was initially taught and guided by the original twelve apostles, and later presided over by James, a half-brother of Jesus of Nazareth. If any Christians could be expected to have firsthand knowledge of what Jesus Christ actually said and did, it would be these. Even the New Testament itself is the product of their work.

