Religion and Politics in New Testament Times

By Warren J. Palmer, Ph. D.
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Introduction

Although the New Testament is a timeless document, it was written against a backdrop of religion, politics, and culture. The purpose of this handout is to provide some explanation of the major political, religious and philosophical influences on Jewish life, and the life of the church at the time of Jesus and for the rest of the first century and beyond.

Understanding the times, thinking and groups enhances our appreciation of God’s word, and helps us better understand what is written.

The Flow of History

It helps to view the history of the Jewish people over a long stretch of time in order to see how their national experiences prepared them as a people and set the stage for the coming of the Messiah. As far back as the Exodus, they were a people who were divided in their loyalties, loving God, but at the same time, straying from Him, being tempted always to adopt the ways and customs of the nations surrounding them. They grumbled in the desert with Moses, questioning his leadership. Once settled in their land, they followed their own whims as opposed to God’s Law, being called back to Him multiple times through what has been called the “sin cycle”.

Despite the fact that God wanted to be their king, they wanted one of flesh and blood so that they could be like the nations around them. God granted their wish, and three kings ruled over a more or less united nation. Yet, upon the death of Solomon, who had severely backslidden in faith, the nation was divided, and again they suffered through sin cycles similar to those during the time of the Judges.

The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians about 722 BC, and its inhabitants were mostly carried off to captivity. Those who remained intermarried with foreigners who were resettled in the land, creating the Samaritans of New Testament times. The southern kingdom fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC, and its inhabitants were taken captive and removed until about 532 BC, when some of them were allowed to return to Palestine to rebuild.
The Babylonian period of Jewish history ended around 331 BC, when Alexander the Great defeated the Babylonian empire. When Alexander died in 323 BC, four of his generals divided the empire. Israel was initially under Ptolemy and his dynasty, and were for the most part treated well. Their scriptures were translated into Greek, and in many cases Jewish people began to adopt the Greek language and customs, becoming Hellenized. Many Jews moved out from Palestine into other areas, such as Alexandria in Egypt.

In 198 BC, the Selucid dynasty in Syria, under Antiochus III took Palestine from the Ptolemies, ending that period of Jewish history. The subsequent persecution and forced Hellenization of the Jews, particularly under Antiochus Epiphanes, let to the fracturing of Judaism into Hellenistic and Hasidic factions. The forefront of these factions led to those who became the Sadducees and Pharisees. It also led to revolt.

Jewish independence was established as a result of the Maccabean Revolt in 167 BC. From 142 BC until 37 BC, the Jewish people enjoyed independence from foreign rule. During this period, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essence sects became clearly defined. The Hasmonean dynasty governing Palestine lasted until 37 BC, when the Roman general Pompey conquered the region and made it subject to Roman rule.

Under the Romans, Antipater, an Idumean (Edomite) rose to power, and to favor with Rome. His son, Herod the Great succeeded him as king and reigned from 37 BC until 4 BC. Although the Roman senate approved his monarchy, Herod had to gain regional control by force of arms. That, combined with his ancestry, caused great resentment among the Jews. He was a clever politician, and despite his other excesses, he did order the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem in the hopes of placating the Jews and making it easier to rule them. He was succeeded by his sons who divided his kingdom into four regions, each then ruling one region.

It was into the sociopolitical situation that Jesus was born, and against this backdrop, the New Testament was written. We will now examine the groups and institutions of Jesus’ day.

**Places of Worship**

*The Temple*

From the time of Solomon until the fall of Judah around 587 BC, the Temple served as the center of Jewish worship. Adult males were required to pay an annual temple tax to support it, and three times per year they traveled to Jerusalem to worship during special festivals. When the Temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity (around 515 BC), the Zadokite priesthood reestablished the sacrifices and the festival calendar. The temple tax and the offerings from pilgrims made it the richest institution of its day.
The wealth of the temple, combined with the fact that the monarchy was not also reestablished, caused the power of the temple priests to grow significantly. The Temple became a center of politics as well as religion. There is even some speculation among scholars that the Temple also became an economic institution, lending money to finance business and stimulate the local economy. Its power helped lead to the formation of religious factions who disagreed with the priesthood in matters of doctrine and practice.

Herod the Great, had the second temple rebuilt and upgraded. Reconstruction began in the 18th year of his reign and lasted 46 years. Herod may have believed that his efforts on behalf of this powerful, popular Jewish institution would lead to greater cooperation from and control of his subjects. The Temple was destroyed in 70 AD when the Roman general Titus captured Jerusalem.

The Synagogue

As an institution, the Synagogue began in Egypt among the Jews who had settled there after the fall of Judah. During the Hasmonean (Maccabean) kingdom, it found its way into Palestine. By Jesus' time, most villages of any size had one, and they served as a secondary place of worship (after the Temple). They had also spread throughout the Roman world, wherever there was a sizable population of Jewish people. Many non-Jews also attended, and even converted.

Synagogues served as houses of worship and community meeting places, and centers of biblical study. Early Christians, who were for the most part also Jewish, maintained their membership in their synagogues until finally driven out. The apostles also used Synagogues as places at which to begin missionary work in a given locality.

Religious and Political Groups

The Romans

As noted earlier, Judea had been Roman province for at least 37 years when Jesus was born, and well over 60 at the time of His ministry. Almost no one alive at time Jesus ministered could remember a time where Rome was not part of their lives.

There were constant reminders. Roman soldiers were garrisoned throughout the region. There were Roman patrols. There was a Roman governor and a Roman garrison in Jerusalem.

The Romans brought their rule, their law, economics, their taxation, their culture and their religion. And as with any occupier, they found resistance to their rule, and they found those who would try to collaborate and even profit from it.
Roman tax collectors were given a quota of money to collect. They were compensated by whatever they could charge above and beyond their quota. As such, they were very unpopular.

Roman rule was often very enlightened by ancient standards. Some local governance was permitted. There was tolerance of local religions, provided that the local population would participate in Emperor Worship. The Jewish people were even granted an exception to that as a concession to their faith.

But love Rome, use Rome or hate Rome, every man, woman and child living at the time of Jesus had to live their lives under its shadow.

**The Sanhedrin**

The Sanhedrin was a ruling council consisting of a total of 71 men, one of whom was the High Priest. When it was first formed during the Hasmonean period, it ruled over civil matters relating to the death penalty. Under Roman rule during New Testament times, its function seems to have been reduced to judging religious matters only. In addition, popular opinion either helped (as in the case of crucifying Jesus) or hindered (as in the case of punishing the apostles) the Sanhedrin in rendering its verdicts.

**The Pharisees**

Their name from the Hebrew (Perushim) means "the separated ones." Their origins trace to the period of Jewish independence under the Maccabees, with some sources placing their founding at around 135 BC. According to Josephus, there were about 6000 Pharisees during New Testament times. Despite their small number (only about 5% of the total population) they were highly influential, not only in their own time, but for setting the foundations for modern Judaism.

They could be called the religious conservatives of their day, believing in the resurrection from the dead, angels, Satan, and predestination. They were also concerned with ritual cleanness and uncleanness. They were also more merciful in matters of civil law than were their theological opponents, the Sadducees. The Law was something they sought not only to safeguard and preserve, but to fully apply in every situation of daily life.

It would be fair to say that the Pharisees were closer to the common man of the time than any of the other groups., and certainly had the broadest base of popular support. They were mainly shopkeepers and skilled craftsmen, thus in very close touch with the people. In addition, they wielded great influence through the synagogues, and even in the Sanhedrin. In addition, they were organized into a tight fellowship that was capable of swift, united action.
They developed what has come to be called the Oral Torah, a body of interpretations and applications that is given the same authority as the written Torah. It is this Oral Torah, and the mindset behind it, that Jesus spoke out against strongly and often in His dealings with the Pharisees. Often, interpretations would run contrary and out of context to the written Word. Take the following passage as an example:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to ‘honor his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’”

Matthew 15:1 - 9 (NIV)

Before we become overly critical of the Pharisees ourselves, it is well that we remember that many Christians take the same approach to the reading and application of scripture, and in the name of "relevance" repeat the same error condemned by Jesus.

**The Scribes**

Scribes as a group are older than most. They are first seen in the Old Testament in the book of Ezra, who was himself a scribe. Initially, their function was to carefully copy the written scriptures, and at least in Ezra’s case, be able to read, translate (from Hebrew to Aramaic) and interpret their meaning.

In New Testament times, it is best to think of the Scribes as a more of a professional group rather than as a religious group, although by Jesus’ time most belonged to the sect of the Pharisees. They were interpreters and teachers of the Old Testament law and the judicial interpretations derived from it. They taught in the temple and in the synagogues. They were typically more educated theologically than the Pharisees.

**The Sadducees**

There is some controversy as to the name Sadducee (Hebrew - tsaduqim). Some sources say that the name was derived from Zadok, the High Priest under king Solomon. Others claim that it was derived from one Zadok, a disciple of Antigonus of Socho, who
taught that one ought not serve God for personal reward. Still others claim the name simply means “the righteous ones.”

The Sadducees were composed mostly of the religious and political elite of Jewish society. They controlled the priesthood, and more often than not, the Sanhedrin. They were more disposed to cooperating with the Romans for the sake of preserving the nation. They were also the most "Hellenized" of the groups (in dress and in some other customs), and were, in many ways, as out of touch with the common man as were the monastic Essenes.

Some scholars see their existence as a reaction to phariseeism. Theirs is a more intellectual, less practical system of beliefs. They held closely to the Torah and denied the inspiration of the so-called Oral Torah being promoted by the Pharisees. They denied predestination and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, personal life after death, or eternal judgment.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees usually opposed each other on every major theological point. However, their joint distaste of Jesus' teaching caused them to cooperate in their opposition of Him.

The Herodians

The Herodians, as their name indicates, supported the dynasty of Herod, and by implication, the rule of rime. They were a small but influential group, probably centered in Galilee. Once can imply that they were more Hellenized than most and might have been more aligned in beliefs with the Sadducees. They were far more political than religious.

The Zealots

The Zealots appear to have been formed around 6 AD, when Judas of Galilee (see Acts 5:37) organized a response to the Roman imposed census. Unlike the other three religious/political philosophies, the zealots were far less organized. Indeed, there were many small groups who called themselves “zealots” but gave no loyalty to a common leadership.

Insofar as religious beliefs were concerned, the Zealots were more or less aligned with the Pharisees. They differed in their views in the sense that the Zealots taught that violently demonstrating against the Roman rule and taxation, and thus provoking Roman response, would cause God to come to the aid of His people. Their extremism and terrorist actions helped inspire the opposition groups that revolted against the Romans in 66 AD, leading to the end of the Jewish state in 70 AD and their final defeat at Masada in 74 AD.
One of Jesus’ disciples, Simon (not Simon Peter), was believed to be from the Zealot party (See Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).

**The Essenes**

Their name, according to some scholars, means “the outsiders”, and indeed, that was the place that they chose in Jewish society. This monastic, spiritual order was founded around 152 BC according to some sources.

Most Essenes repudiated marriage and lived in monastic communities such as Qumran on the coast of the Dead Sea. Those who were married stopped all cohabiting with their wives after several years of marriage. Much of their growth and perpetuation came from persons outside their group joining them, and by adopting children to raise in the precepts of their sect.

Essene community life was full of ritual and secrets. Meals were treated as a sacrifice to God and were presided over by a priest of their order. They shared a common purse, built and sustained by their common labor. While they did not deny the Temple worship of their day, their rituals and vows would not have left time for it, and indeed, they considered it polluted.

Becoming an Essene required passage through four steps over a several year period, which included the giving of all personal property to the community. Those of lower stages were considered unclean by those of a higher stage, and contact required going through a ritual cleansing. The final stage of their vows included promises:

1. Not to conceal anything from their fellow members
2. Not to disclose their doctrines to outsiders
3. To hand down their doctrines exactly as they had been received
4. To abstain from robbery
5. To guard the books belonging to the sect, and the names of the angels

Essenes generally outperformed the Pharisees in their adherence to rules and regulations. They also wore white robes to symbolize their own purity. Given Jesus’ aversion to the Pharisees legalism and public show, He doubtless would have said similar things to the Essenes.

The Essenes are not directly mentioned in the New Testament but were there nonetheless in the background of those times. Scholars doubt, based on what was known of their teaching, that there would be much compatibility between their teachings, and Jesus' ministry. However, they may be less invisible than we might think though from reading the Gospels and the book of Acts.
The Essenes were intensely eschatological, and believed, among other things, in the coming of two messiahs: one who had a military/political orientation, and one who had a priestly orientation. They would, over the course of a forty-year war, bring the messianic kingdom into being, which they would then surrender to the angel Michael.

When we consider the book of Hebrews, which begins by comparing the excellency of the Son of God over all of the angels, and his priesthood (after the order of Melchizedek- both a priest of the Most High and the king of Salem) we might be able to conclude that the Essenes had some influence that one New Testament writer sought to address and overcome.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

_Hebrews 5:8 - 10 (NIV)_

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.”
Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.

_Hebrews 7:1 - 3 (NIV)_

**Rival Philosophies and Heresies**

*Gnosticism*

In the first centuries after Christ, perhaps the single greatest threat to the church was the philosophy of Gnosticism. While there was no single set of beliefs, Gnostics claimed a special, hidden knowledge not available to ordinary people. They generally held that the material world was evil. They believed that it was created by a lesser being, and that only in escape from the material world into the spiritual can we find salvation.

There were wild swings of Gnostic practice. Some believed in following a strict ascetic lifestyle, denying physical pleasures as a means of enlightenment and salvation. For others, since the material world did not matter, self-indulgence in all forms was seen as being of little consequence.

Because the material body was considered inferior and evil, the spirit of an individual was seen to be dwelling in an alien atmosphere. This belief led the Gnostics to look upon Jesus as a human who received his Christ component, or part, during his lifetime,
probably at his baptism. Therefore at his crucifixion he did not die but ascended to God from whom he came.

Gnostic philosophy both competed with the Christian faith and infected it as well. Paul’s epistle to the Colossians took on Gnosticism and refuted it from the perspective of the gospel.

*Docetism*

A modified form of Gnosticism, Docetists claimed that the humanity of Jesus was an illusion, because matter is evil. They separated God from nature, seeing Him as being far above it.

*Ebionites*

The Ebionites believed that Jesus was a mere man upon whom the divine Spirit fell upon for a season and then left.

**The Challenge to Modern Times**

*The Church is Born*

In the midst of these socio-political forces, Jesus was born, lived, made disciples, ministered, was executed on a Roman cross, died and rose again. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. A group of about 120 (Acts 1:15), including the Apostles, swelled to over 3,000 after Peter’s sermon. That works out to 25 new converts per person. Yet, the foundation that had been laid in the 120 enabled them to manage that number. They became a community of faith.

What would happen to a modern church of 120 adults if it suddenly swelled to 25 times its size?

*The Church Expands Beyond Jewish Believers*

One of the greatest culture shocks to the early church was the simple fact that the Holy Spirit welcomed non-Jews into the faith. What is fascinating is the environment in which that invitation was answered. Consider the following discussion of the Apostle Paul’s missionary efforts in the region of Galatia.

If we take into account their travel time, Paul and Barnabas spend only three to five months planting each Galatian church. This is a pattern that holds throughout Paul's entire ministry. He will spend a short amount of time laying a solid foundation for an infant church. Then he will abandon
it for a long period of time without human headship or designated leadership.

Two years will pass before Paul will return to see the Galatian believers. Most of the converts in South Galatia are heathen Gentiles. There are some God-fearers and some Jews among them. The Gentiles were once unwashed pagans. They come from a back-ground that is racked with superstition, false gods, and immorality. The God-fearers are Gentiles who attended the synagogue to hear about the God of Israel. The Jews are the clean-cut, cultured, morally-conscious members of the church.

By conservative estimates, over fifty percent of these converts are slaves. A large number are freedmen, which are former slaves.

There maybe a few believers who are part of the Roman army. And there may be a few merchants.

In the Greco-Roman world, slaves were not distinguished by any physical or educational differences from the general population. Most were used in manufacturing and household maintenance. The most common route of slavery was lost wars; piracy was also a major way that people were made slaves. Failing to pay personal debts was another. Children of slaves remained slaves, and even free children were sometimes sold into slavery, especially females. "Freedmen" consisted of former slaves who did not possess full rights as citizens. Most of them are extremely poor since they have less security than they did in their previous lives as slaves.

The new converts in South Galatia do not have any Bibles. The NT has not been written yet. Possibly a Jew in one of the four churches has one or two scrolls of some OT Book. But it is highly doubtful that any of the churches in South Galatia have a complete OT. Yet even if every convert had an entire Bible, it would profit them little. For only five to ten percent of the population in the Roman Empire are literate. (An estimated ninety percent of the Empire is functionally illiterate. In a few Hellenistic cities, the literacy rate may be as high as twenty to thirty percent. But in the Western provinces of the Roman Empire, it is unlikely that the literacy rate is as high as five percent.) Letter writers, stenographers, occasional poets, and legal scribes make up only four percent of the population at best. Those who can write become farsighted by the age of forty. Thus they will need an amanuensis (a secretary that serves as a professional scribe) to pen their letters. For this reason, Paul needed an amanuensis to write his epistles (e.g., Romans 16:22). Yet with his own hand he would sign the last part of each letter to confirm its authenticity (Galatians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 16:21). Sometimes he would add a
marginal note with his own hand (Philemon 19). Trusted amanuenses had
great freedom to shape the form, style, and even the content of an
author's letter.

The poverty among many of the Galatians is daunting. Many of the
freedmen in the church live on the borders of human survival. They will
seek to find work every day in the marketplace.

When they work, they are paid a day's wage (one Roman denarius). This
will buy barely enough food to feed their families. The normal diet of a
lower class person in the first century is veggies, bread, wine, olives, fish,
and fruit. Meat is eaten on very rare and special occasions. Higher class
folks had meat more frequently.

In the Roman colonies, the towns are built according to the pattern of
Rome (more on that later). In short, they are dirty, smelly, and unsafe.
Because of these conditions, many of the people are racked with disease
and malnutrition. The average life expectancy for a male is 45. The
average life expectancy for a female is 38. (Of all humans born in the
Empire, half die before age five.) Women usually marry in their early
 teens and raise families until they have passed child-bearing age. Very
little birth control is practiced. Twenty-five percent of babies do not
survive their first year. Three of every ten Jewish children die before the
age of eighteen. The number is higher among the Gentiles. Baby girls are
some-times "exposed" (abandoned in remote places to die) if their
parents are too poor to care for them.

For most of the population, first-century Galatia is a thank-less, loveless,
horrible place to live. This is the world into which two apostolic workers
from Syrian Antioch come to establish the church of Jesus Christ. Keep in
mind that these new Galatian churches are surrounded by Gentile
immorality and idolatry. Also, there are Jews in their towns who hate the
new faith.

In the face of these insurmountable problems, Paul and Barnabas spend
only three to five months with these people. The apostles tell them about
Jesus Christ and then leave them on their own. After their brief revisiting
trip, the new Christians in Galatia will not see the hair of an apostle for
almost two years. But the gospel that Paul and Barnabas preach will be
rich and high enough to cause the Galatian churches to survive without
any outside help. What Paul and Barnabas preach cause these once
heathen, superstitious, selfish, miserable Gentiles to fall in love with one
another, to sing, to smile, and to glow with the joy of Jesus Christ.
How did these two men from Antioch of Syria pull off such a thing? It is because they stood in the lineage that stretches back to the dateless past. Like the Twelve before them, they were called, trained, and sent. And they preach an indwelling Christ that will sustain them through the pressures of life.

The churches of Galatia are classless societies where social distinctions are erased. Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, rich and poor no longer exist. The believers see themselves as part of the same family, part of a new race, and part of a new colony from the heavenly realm. They eat together, work together, greet each other with a holy kiss, raise their children together, take care of one another, and bury one another. It is this joy and love that the Galatian Christians have one for another that will shake the Roman Empire to its very foundations.¹

How has our understanding of the Gospel changed from when it was preached until now? Are we willing to accept the difference in the results of the Gospel we live from the Gospel lived in the first century?

¹ Viola, Frank. The Untold Story of the New Testament Church, pgs. 79 - 82
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Two Times journalists talk about the challenges of covering religion during a pandemic in a campaign season. “Trust grows over time, so I try to build long-term relationships with people I interview,” she said. Credit...Rozette Rago/The New York Times. By Will Dudding. Oct. 28, 2020. Times Insider explains who we are and what we do, and delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how our journalism comes together. The discourse surrounding the background of the Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett and the support of white evangelicals for President Trump has deepened political divisions in the country, and the conversations are two examples of why it’s important to understand conservative Christians. A The God of the New Testament, while described anthropomorphically at times, is not sinful as the New Testament understands it. He is holy, just and merciful, and his control of all things is contingent upon nothing but his sovereign will guided by pure love. Therefore, the end result is that the world-view of the “mystery-believer,” is substantially different from that of the apostles. G. The Bacchae 470 and Colossians 1:23. It is common in the mystery religions for the adherents or initiates to be prohibited from telling others (i.e. outsiders or the “non-initiated”) the new testament as political documents. 1. Jeremy Punt. Old and New Testament. Stellenbosch University. Abstract. A call) religion and politics. Ruler cults were not new phenomena in the East, but imperial Rome realised the ideological and socio-political value of promoting and supporting the Roman Emperor cult (Crossan 2008:59-73; Friesen 2001 and Price 1984). As Price (1984:237) summarises, A Christianizing theory of religion. A categories for thinking about empire, at the same time caution is advised to avoid imposing anachronistic and ethnocentric concepts on NT times. Nevertheless, admitting to the diversity and complexity of imperialism, a number of helpful parameters aid our understanding of the notion. The New Testament presents to us different flavors of a religion known as Judaism, which, although it had similarities with Old Testament teachings, was mainly composed of self-righteous religious traditions. In his monumental work "Antiquities of the Jews," the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus lists at least four main non-Christian religious sects of first century Judaism. They are the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes and a sect founded by Judas the Galilean (the Zealots). Only two of these are specifically called sects in the New Testament. Although a bit obvious, it should be stated that each group claimed a monopoly on the truth (either regarding God or politics in general). They usually argued and fought with one another over the correctness of their respective views.