

The Religious Background of the New Testament

Religion in the societies into which Christianity was born permeated almost every aspect of life. The ancient Mediterranean world contained a cornucopia of religious options. A bewildering diversity of belief systems and rituals pervaded the Hellenistic world. Judaism was also diverse, much more so before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 than afterward. Intriguingly, almost every religious option in the first century has its counterpart in today's world; only the names have changed.

Hellenistic Religion

The Greco-Roman world in the age of Jesus Christ was in substantial religious flux. The first century has been seen as a time of crisis of conscience. Old worldviews and ideologies became increasingly outmoded. New cults abounded. As people were uprooted from their traditional homes and lands, they encountered conflicting truth claims when they resettled. Mixtures and combinations of beliefs and behaviors created a pluralism that was often intolerant of a narrow, exclusive religion such as Judaism or Christianity.¹ We can sketch only the rough contours of the most prominent movements here.

Traditional mythology. The classic pantheon of Greek gods had reached its height in popularity during the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.—Zeus and Hera (king and queen on Mount Olympus), Hermes (the messenger god), Apollo (the sun god), Poseidon (god of the sea), Aphrodite and Artemis (goddesses of love and fertility), and many more. After conquering Greece, Rome adopted most of the Greek gods and gave them Latin names: Jupiter and Juno (for Zeus and Hera), Mercury (for Hermes), Neptune (for Poseidon), and so on. The origins of these gods and the mythological adventures surrounding them are debated. Probably they were the outgrowth of primitive animism or spiritism, in which objects and forces of nature were deified and worshiped. Later the gods were seen as distinct beings, described in very anthropomorphic (humanlike) categories, dwelling on the loftiest peak of the Greek mountains. They no doubt formed a primitive substitute for scientific understanding as people sought to explain both the regular and erratic behavior of heavenly bodies and the powers of nature. One had to know which god to whom to pray and sacrifice and had to carry out the prescribed rituals in exactly the right ways in order to receive rain for crops, safety in sea travel, a large family, and so on.

By the Christian era, however, belief in the traditional mythology was seriously declining. As scientific understanding developed, people realized, for example, that the sun was a fiery ball in the sky and not a god with a personality. The geographic limitations of the gods also hindered their staying power. The fact that Rome was able to overrun the land of the Greek gods demonstrated something of their impotence. Indeed, emperors from Alexander to Augustus regularly exceeded the accomplishments of the gods in their conquests. Urbanization; population mobility; the mingling of cultures; and the upheaval of stable, local traditions throughout the Roman world all led to the loss of appeal of the gods and goddesses of old.

To be sure, Augustus attempted a renaissance of the traditional myths by building numerous temples to the gods in Rome and by encouraging their use for worship, but this project was largely politically motivated. Stable traditions led to a stable, unified empire, and on several occasions Augustus hinted that his was the spirit (Latin, *genius*) that infused the powers or qualities the gods had traditionally represented.

The majority of first-century Greeks and Romans probably still gave lip service to the old mythology. For example, families poured out food and drink on their hearths or fireplaces (named after the Greek goddess Hestia) as the sacred center of protection in each home. Nevertheless, the myths still had substantial influence in only three prominent areas.

1. The traditional mythology remained particularly tenacious in rural or insulated areas. Paul and Barnabas, for example, were mistaken for Zeus and Hermes at Lystra in Acts 14:12—a superstitious identification unlikely to have occurred in first-century Athens or Rome.
2. The gods were consulted and believed to appear to people, particularly in their dreams, as they stayed overnight at healing shrines and received oracles of prophecy. The Asclepian shrines combined elements of medicine, recreation, and religion in a kind of ancient health spa. Thousands of pilgrims consulted the oracle at Delphi, Greece, to seek guidance for planning political or religious events, while priests and priestesses at the Sibylline oracles claimed the ability to predict future events, particularly surrounding the end of the world.
3. Seasonal and annual festivals and temple rituals still persisted, often bringing great socio-economic benefit to the local merchants or temple keepers. Two prominent New Testament examples surround the worship of Artemis in Ephesus (see Acts 19:23-28) and the “sacred prostitution” practiced at the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth.

Philosophies. Although today we think of philosophy as distinct from religion, it was not so in antiquity. All of the major philosophers articulated worldviews about correct behavior as well as belief. Indeed, the closest parallels in the Greco-Roman world to the Christian concept of conversion came when people became full-fledged adherents of a given philosophy.² Most of the major strands of Greco-Roman thought current in New Testament times were in some measure indebted to the fourth- and fifth-century B.C. philosophers Socrates and Plato, but the actual schools of thought they founded were no longer widespread. Platonism, however, bequeathed to the later empires a pervasive dualism between matter and spirit.

- **Platonism.** Plato and his followers viewed the material world as a mere shadow of the unseen spiritual world of ideas. True reality was immaterial reality. Thus, salvation was escape from the unreal world of matter to the real world of spirit by means of knowledge of the highest good or Supreme Mind. Sin was ignorance. Salvation produced a disembodied immortality of the soul, not a resurrection of the body. Plutarch tried, largely unsuccessfully, to reawaken interest in Plato’s thought in the late first century AD. The thought of Socrates, to a certain degree, was preserved in the emphasis on rhetorical training of the movement known as the Sophists, although at times, unfortunately, it valued style above substance.

Paul probably combated some form of Sophistry in his epistles to the Corinthians, but this is less of a full-fledged religious worldview than the other philosophies.

- **Stoicism.** The original Stoic was Zeno, an early third-century B.C. philosopher who came to Athens and taught on outdoor porches (Greek, *stoa*). He was essentially a materialist, believing all that exists is matter, except he saw all matter infused with a world soul that he called reason or *logos*. Stoicism was, therefore, also pantheistic (God is everything) or at least panentheistic (God is a part of everything). The key to contentment in life was to realize what humans could control and what they could not. Where inexorable natural or moral law exists, one must simply accept it, do one's best to fit in, and remain in harmony with the cosmos. Zeno believed there was some greater good in all apparent external evil. One's goal, when possible, was to avoid all extremes of emotion or passion and to seek self-control, calmness, and stability in all circumstances. This goal was accomplished by focusing on reason and rationality. As the power of the mind was cultivated, one prepared oneself for death and unification with the Mind that fills the entire universe. Moral choices depended heavily on remaining true to one's conscience, and suicide became a noble option when there were no realistic alternatives to intense, long-term suffering. Stoicism seems to have been the most popular of the Greco-Roman philosophies.³

The most famous early first-century Stoic was Seneca, Nero's tutor as a boy and later an adviser to the adult emperor early in his reign. The most famous late first-century Stoic was Epictetus, who taught that happiness was attainable only by the conscious restriction of one's ambition. One must concentrate on cultivating inward virtues and distance oneself from the accumulation of external possessions. Paul encountered Stoics in Athens in Acts 17:18 and even quoted some of their poets (Epimenides and Aratus in v. 28), stressing that God is immanent ("He is not far from each one of us," v. 27). But against Stoicism Paul balanced God's presence with His transcendence; God is distinct from his creation (vv. 24-26).

- **Epicureanism.** Epicurus also taught in Athens and founded his rival school of philosophy about the same time Zeno was establishing Stoicism. If, from a Christian perspective, the god of Stoicism was too immanent, the gods of Epicureanism were too transcendent. Epicurus too was a materialist, but he saw the whole universe as made up of tiny, invisible particles (a view foreshadowing atomic science). He did not deny the existence of the traditional gods but saw them as of a similar substance as the world and so far removed from its affairs as to have no influence over it. Gods, thus, were unknowable, and death ended one's conscious existence.

The key to this life, therefore, was to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This philosophy generated the famous slogan "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." But far from promoting hedonism, Epicurus was a somewhat sickly, retiring person who sought long-term peace of mind and happiness, not the immediate or wanton indulgence of bodily appetites. Epicureans placed a premium on cultivating friendship and enjoying cultural activities. Their philosophy clearly left the door open, however, to abuse and excess by those unprepared to delay gratification of bodily appetites for greater long-term pleasure. Paul encountered Epicureans in Athens in conjunction with the Stoics (see Acts 17:18) and agreed with them, against the Stoics, that God is distinct from His creation. But he

made it abundantly plain that God is also intimately involved with human affairs and will one day judge the whole world (see vv. 24-31).

- **Cynicism.** Antisthenes (early fourth century B.C.) was probably the first philosopher to articulate Cynic thought, but the name of the movement itself comes from one of his followers, Diogenes of Sinope. Diogenes was called a dog (Greek, *kuon*—hence the term *cynic*) by his detractors because of his vulgar, unkempt lifestyle. He was known for deliberately violating social convention by using abusive language, wearing filthy clothing, and performing acts of sex or defecation in public. Cynicism as a movement was generally not so extreme. It evolved into a philosophy in which “the supreme virtue” was “a simple, unconventional life in rejection of the popular pursuits of comfort, affluence, and social prestige.”⁴ A later Cynic writer summed up his creed this way: “Take care of your soul, but take care of the body only to the degree that necessity requires” (Pseudo-Crates, epistle 3). Cynics largely objected to wealth and relied on begging to survive, limiting their traveling possessions to a cloak, bag, and staff.
- **Skepticism.** Founded by Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360–270 BC), skepticism sought to challenge dogmatism—the traditional claim that absolute truth could be known. A plausible case was made in certain circumstances for denying any absolute claims. Morality involved merely living according to the accepted norms of a given society. Skeptics did not absolutely deny God; that would have been inconsistent with their system. But they were the agnostics of the ancient world. Their resulting lifestyle was remarkably indifferent or apathetic to supporting any causes; it merely sought the suspension of judgment, the practice of peace and gentleness, and freedom from disturbance.
- **Neo-Pythagoreanism.** The first century saw a revival of interest in the teachings of the sixth-century B.C. mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras. Neo-Pythagoreans formed communal groups that devoted themselves to a combination of mathematical investigation, mysticism, numerology, vegetarianism, and belief in reincarnation. They emphasized harmony, the resolution of opposites, and the discovery of the divine within oneself.

Mystery religions. Some historians have called this option the most characteristic type of religion during the Hellenistic period. With mythology on the wane and the philosophies largely reserved for the elite few, a major part of first-century Hellenistic life that increasingly filled the religious void for numbers of people involved the so-called mystery religions. This term describes a wide variety of secret organizations or cults often largely unrelated to one another, but several common features can be observed. They sought to bring the initiate into communion with the god(s) or goddess(es) the cult worshiped. They often promised conscious, eternal life in union with the gods, which many other religious alternatives did not. They offered equality across the greatly stratified society that rigidly determined one’s lot in many other realms of life. At night in a forest, senator and slave could worship together as spiritual equals, even though by day the one might rule over the other. They also held out hope for transforming one’s pilgrimage through life in a world beset with many seemingly arbitrary terrors, because their gods were not localized but had pioneered worldwide journeys

themselves. Many of the people who would have been attracted to mystery religions, therefore, would also have found Christianity appealing.

Some of the mystery cults arose from ancient tribal and even fertility rituals. Some were indigenous to Greece; others were foreign imports, especially from Persia and Egypt. Several had periodic times of public pageantry, when the myths of their gods were reenacted. In addition, all had more regular, private meetings, with membership reserved for those who had gone through various initiatory rites. Sacramental meals, detailed rules for participation, and strong internal leadership characterized most mystery religions. A typical gathering involved a purification ceremony for members, mystical instruction, contemplation of sacred objects, the enactment of the divine story, and a crowning of new initiates.⁵

Ritual practices could vary dramatically, from the serene to the grotesque. The former category included meditations on an ear of corn or stalk of wheat in the cult of Demeter (a corn god), a quiet river bath as part of the cult of Isis (the goddess of the Nile), or fellowship meals of bread and water in Mithraism (devotées of a bull slayer). In the latter category were the Cybele cult's blood baptism, in which the high priest stood in a pit beneath wooden latticework, over which a bull was slaughtered so that the blood ran down and covered the face and garments of the priest. Lower-level priests devoted to Atargatis castrated themselves, and the drunken orgies associated with the worship of Dionysus were well known and less a secret or mystery than many of the other cults' practices. One accurate generalization, harking all the way back to Aristotle, sounds remarkably contemporary: initiates into the mystery cults were "not to learn something, but to experience something."⁶

Magic. Overlapping the mystery religions but found in combination with many forms of belief and ritual, was the practice of magic. Magic, as phenomenologists of religion use the term, has to do with the attempt to manipulate God or the gods into doing what a person wants by means of incantations, spells, formulas, or various ritual techniques. It is based on coercion rather than petition. Magic provided an alternative to the capricious behavior of the goddesses Fate and Fortune, who otherwise seemed omnipotent. Often people wanted to make someone fall in love with them or to receive healing from illness or good weather for harvest. Hundreds of magical papyri with such spells and incantations have survived from centuries just after the New Testament era. Many of them involve long lists of nonsense syllables or names of deities; occasionally, people tried to mix in Jewish or Christian names for God and Jesus into their lists.

In their most sinister forms, ancient magicians were akin to sorcerers, while magic was similar to what we would today call the occult, including spells designed to curse people. Acts 19:19 describes a huge bonfire of magical scrolls at first-century Ephesus as a result of the preaching of the gospel. Horoscopes and stargazing in hopes of divining the future were also popular.

Gnosticism. Another increasingly prominent religious movement roughly coinciding with the birth of Christianity was Gnosticism. Based on the Platonic dualism of matter and spirit, Gnostics argued that the material world was inherently evil; only the spirit world was

potentially good. This led to one of two ethical systems. Some adherents engaged in hedonism, indulging their bodily appetites because they were irredeemable anyway. More commonly, Gnostics practiced asceticism and attempted to deny themselves normal bodily satisfactions because the flesh was inherently corrupting. Both approaches may have been present in Corinth (see 1 Cor. 6–7).

Salvation for the Gnostic thus involved the attempt of the soul to escape the fetters of the body by recognizing and liberating the divine spark that dwells within every person. This salvation became possible through *gnosis* (Greek, *knowledge*), not of an intellectual nature but by a secret revelation known only to members of a given Gnostic sect. The relevant knowledge usually involved understanding one's divine origin, one's current state of slavery, and the redemptive possibilities of the future. One could then be said to have already attained to the resurrection in this life; all that remained was for one to die and be fully liberated from the material world. Second Thessalonians 2:2 may reflect such a claim that Paul had to combat.

To articulate their theology, Gnostics developed an elaborate mythology. Each sect had its own distinctive twists, but a composite account of generally common features might read as follows. The original god of the universe is remote and largely unknowable. He did not directly create the heavens and the earth. Rather, from him came forth aeons—impersonal emanations usually described as abstract virtues or entities (for example, love, light, truth, justice). Together with the remote god these aeons formed the fullness of the godhead or deity—the same expression Paul applied to Christ in Colossians 2:9. One of these aeons rebelled against God's designs by creating the material world; hence, matter is by nature evil. Another aeon thus had to be sent to redeem the world. This is usually Sophia (Greek, *wisdom*) although occasionally she is seen as the culprit rather than the savior. The ultimate goal of redemption is the restoration of all things to their pristine perfection.

Information about Gnosticism became much more abundant just after World War II, with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt—a collection of more than 60 mostly Gnostic documents, many of them in Coptic, generally dating from the mid-second to mid-fifth centuries A.D. Some are complete editions of works that had previously been preserved only in Greek fragments; some had been known only through references by the early Church Fathers. Many were previously unknown to the modern world. These works include “Gospels” attributed to various disciples, including Mary, which usually comprise little more than lengthy discourses of the risen Jesus, supposedly given in private to different groups of His followers but articulating Gnostic thought. Other documents are more like epistles, treatises, or apocalypses. Consistently in these works the Gnostic redeemer is equated with Jesus, even though little else resembling New Testament thought may survive.

Although it was popular a generation or two ago to assert that Christianity had borrowed its views of Jesus from a Gnostic redeemer myth, it is now widely recognized that such mythology postdates the birth of Christian thought and more likely derived from earlier, more orthodox theology. On the other hand, non-Christian and even Jewish forms of Gnosticism (or forms that ultimately derived from Judaism) seem to predate or at least be contemporaneous with the composition of the New Testament. Clearly, several of the heresies

Paul combated in his various epistles bear resemblance to later, more fully developed Gnostic thought. Most scholars, therefore, use terms like *proto-Gnosticism* or *incipient Gnosticism* to speak of the various Gnosticlike ideas that developed throughout the first century. They then reserve Gnosticism proper for the schools of such second-century teachers as Basilides and Valentinus, and perhaps the late first-century Ephesian teacher Cerinthus, whose false teachings may have precipitated the writing of 1 John.

Emperor worship. Inasmuch as the new world rulers of the time of Christ seemed greater than the traditional gods themselves, it is not surprising that they should have eventually been deified. By the middle of the first century, most Greeks and Romans gave lip service to emperor worship, but those from the western parts of the empire, unused to taking such beliefs too seriously, probably viewed this as little more than an act of patriotism or an acknowledgment of the emperors' great powers (and occasionally virtue). Precedent for such practice could also be found in the deification of ancient Greek or Roman warriors (for example, Hercules) or healers (for example, Asclepius). In the eastern parts of the empire, where rulers had been deified for centuries, emperor worship was probably taken somewhat more seriously.

The first emperor to be deified was Julius Caesar, acclaimed after his death in 27 B.C. as a god by Augustus. This act, of course, legitimized Augustus as a son of a god, but Augustus generally repudiated attempts, usually from the east, to worship him as a god during his lifetime. The precedent he established, however, was continued by Tiberius, who declared Augustus to be divine when he died in A.D. 14. Gaius Caligula (37–41) was the first emperor to seek acclamation as a god during his lifetime, and his increasingly bizarre behavior led some to think he had gone mad. The Roman senate denied him deification at his death. Not until Nero (54–68) did an emperor seek to reinforce worship of himself—and then only toward the end of his reign and only sporadically and largely as part of the persecution of Christians in and around Rome (64–68). Domitian in the mid-90s finally sought to establish the practice on a more widespread scale, although even then it was short-lived. Christian refusal to call the emperor Lord and God (*Dominus et Deus*) and to offer a pinch of incense in sacrifice to him must have struck the average Roman in somewhat the same way as the refusal by Jehovah's Witnesses to pledge allegiance to the flag strikes the average American today. But Christians saw in the sacrifice a blasphemous attribution to Caesar of the divine honors worthy of God alone, and thus, for the most part, they refused to participate. Jews, of course, were exempt because they were still under the protection of being a *religio licita*, at least until the events that precipitated the war with Rome in the late 60s.

Judaism

A basic understanding of Jewish law and an awareness of certain developments in Jewish thought in the first century provide a backdrop for many interactions between Jesus and His countrymen.

Jewish law. The Jewish authority for life was called *halakhah*, which means *Jewish law*. It was not simply a set of beliefs but a comprehensive way of life, filled with rules that affected every aspect of life: prayer, diet, clothing hygiene, marriage, and doctrine. *Halakhah* consisted of both written and oral law.

The written law, or *Torah*, corresponds to what we know as the Old Testament, divided into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. In addition to the written law, Jews followed the customs adopted by the rabbis—the oral law, known as the *Talmud*. When the Jews were exiled in Babylon, beginning in 586 B.C., they no longer had access to a temple in which to gather and offer sacrifices. Drawing on biblical texts like 1 Samuel 15:22 (“To obey is better than sacrifice”), they began to substitute prayers of repentance and good works as the means of atonement for sin. Because they sought to apply the law to every area of life, a body of oral tradition—interpretation and application—began to develop around the written law of Moses to explain how to implement its commandments in new times and places. After the Jews returned from exile, beginning in 539 B.C., they became increasingly preoccupied with the law, convinced that their exile was punishment for disobedience and that God would grant them complete freedom when they more completely obeyed His Word. The oral law featured prominently in Jesus’ interaction with Judaism centuries later.

The *Talmud* consisted of wise sayings by devout rabbis, who explained how the *Torah* was to be interpreted and applied. Once these sayings and teachings were collected in written form in the second century A.D., they became known as the *Mishnah*. Both oral and written law were considered binding on Jews of the first century.

General characteristics of first-century Judaism. Although pre-70 Judaism was far more diverse than the rabbinic movement that developed from the ashes of the destruction of Jerusalem, we can still identify numerous consistent trends and developments with significant import for New Testament and Gospels studies.

1. Perhaps as a result of Persian influence, there was a noticeable increase in interest in angelology and demonology. Supernatural beings other than God are present but relatively rare in the Old Testament; they proliferate in intertestamental Jewish literature. Concepts of life after death, including the bodily resurrection of all people, either to everlasting life or to everlasting punishment (see Dan 12:2), solidified as well. Angels ministered to Jesus (see Mark 1:13), exorcisms played a prominent role in His ministry (see Mark 1:21–28; 3:20–30; 5:1–20), and He frequently taught about heaven and hell (see Matt 25:31–46).
2. A large quantity of poetry and wisdom literature emerged between the testaments—psalms, proverbs, and theodicies (reflections on the problem of evil). Building on the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8, much of this literature represented wisdom as a quasidivine emissary from God to humanity. Jesus too is portrayed as divine Wisdom in a variety of ways. Therefore, although Judaism remained staunchly monotheistic, it became possible to talk about beings other than Yahweh himself (both angels and great human beings) in categories closely resembling deity. After all, Daniel 7:9, with its reference to plural thrones in heaven where “the Ancient of Days took His seat,” opened the door to speculation about two powers in heaven. The New Testament writers who directly equate Jesus with God go beyond any of these developments, but such trends may have made the transition somewhat easier for them.

3. An increasingly positive view of human nature began to develop. Less was heard about the original sin of Adam and Eve that left all people in need of redemption, and more was said about each person's two impulses or natures, one good and one bad. This emphasis, in turn, prepared the way for the emergence of merit theology: the belief that good works and bad deeds would be weighed at the final judgment and whichever won out would determine a person's eternal destiny. Other rabbis went even further, believing the merits of the patriarchs, especially Abraham, could be imputed to later Jews.

On the other hand, we must beware of claiming that this trend was overly influential. One dominant framework of first-century Jewish thought was covenantal nomism; the law was given to be obeyed as a response to the covenant God established with Moses (and before him, with Abraham). Just as Sinai came after the salvation experience of the Exodus, obedience to the law is the proper response to God's grace. In short, one does not obey the law to get into God's covenant; one obeys it to stay in.⁷ Nevertheless, we must be alert to the diversity within ancient Judaism so that one neither dismisses the accounts of Jesus' (or Paul's) disputes with certain Jews as historically improbable nor assumes that all Jews would have believed or acted the way those specific individuals and groups did.

4. Prayer and good works came to be viewed as an adequate substitute for animal sacrifice. This change was necessary if forgiveness of sins was to be obtained at all when the Jews were in exile or in the diaspora since access to the temple in Jerusalem became impossible. After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, this approach ensured Judaism's survival. Old Testament precedent was found in such passages as 1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:16; and Hosea 6:6. Even in pre-70 Israel the primary context of worship for the average Israelite had already become weekly Sabbath synagogue service, along with the daily recitation of fixed prayers and confessions (particularly the Shema, Deut. 6:4-6) and times of family devotions, rather than seasonal pilgrimages to the temple that Scripture commanded.
5. A massive interest in apocalyptic themes and literature developed. Instead of looking for the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth in all its fullness through ordinary, historical developments, more and more Jews came to believe that only supernatural intervention by God would usher in the messianic age. This belief easily led to a second: that it was the responsibility of a select group of Jews within the nation to prepare the way for the advent of that coming age by intense obedience to the law. Both the Essenes at Qumran and the disciples of Jesus may be viewed as apocalyptic sects. In the latter case, though, the expectation is revised to allow for two messianic advents, and obedience to the law is replaced by following Christ.
6. Synagogue worship and study took on forms that became central in the development of the Christian church. The order of the Sabbath service was largely taken over by early Christian worshipers. Prayers and hymns opened and closed each service. In between came the reading of the Torah, Prophets, and Psalms (eventually in a fixed lectionary cycle), with the *targum* (Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible) and homily (sermon) by one of the synagogue elders, based on the texts for the day. Assistants to the elders may have provided a model that later inspired the Christian office of deacon. The synagogue was also used for

community gatherings of various kinds, most notably elementary education for boys from about ages 5 to 12 or 13. Jews were also forbidden to use secular courts to solve their own civil disputes, so the synagogue leaders functioned as a local judiciary when necessary (see 1 Cor. 6:1-11; Jas. 2:1-13).

7. Scribes took on an increasingly more prominent role in society. Originally, they were mere copyists of Scripture, but their familiarity with its contents led them to become experts in and teachers of the law. Indeed, the terms *lawyers* and *scribes* in the Gospels usually refer to the same group of individuals. They were found in any of the Jewish sects, although most probably came from the Pharisees. The two most famous scribes of the early first century were the Pharisees Hillel and Shammai, the former usually more liberal and the latter usually more conservative on various disputes about the *Torah*. Jesus' teaching on divorce offers a good example of His response to one of these intra-Pharisaic debates (see Matt 19:1-12). These scribes were the forerunners of the more formal post-70 office of *rabbi*. In Jesus' time *rabbi* was still a more informal title for *teacher*, whether trained or untrained (see Matt. 23:7-8; John 1:38,49; 3:2,26; 6:25).
8. The Sanhedrin played an increasingly prominent role in Jewish life, at least in Judea. This "supreme court" and legislative body wrapped into one, ideally composed of 71 members led by the high priest, included both Pharisees and Sadducees and perhaps other non-aligned elders of the people. Although Pharisees seem to have outnumbered Sadducees in general and to have been more popular with the people, the distribution of court appointments usually led to a Sadducean majority on the Sanhedrin. After all, Rome appointed the high priests and wanted to ensure that the court remained loyal to the empire, and this loyalty came more easily for the Sadducees. Otherwise, Rome largely permitted the Sanhedrin freedoms of self-government, while reserving the death penalty in at least certain cases for itself (see John 18:31). Smaller sanhedrins (lower courts) also dotted the landscape, and it is not entirely certain whether in Jesus' day there was one permanently appointed Great Sanhedrin, as later described in the *Mishnah*, or merely a variety of temporarily convened sanhedrins, including those directly under the high priest.
9. Judaism increasingly commended itself as a religious option for the Gentile world. Scholars dispute just how active Jews were at proselytizing (see Matt. 23:15). Some believe this activity was largely limited to following up on interested God-fearers—Gentiles who had already come to worship the God of Israel and to obey much of his law.⁸ At any rate, monotheism was increasingly accepted in the Hellenistic world.

A good summary of the way first-century Judaism presented itself involves the three badges of national identity and the three symbols of that nationalism that permeated the corner of the world into which Christ was born. Whatever else a Jewish man did or did not obey, three practices were virtually inviolable if he wanted to remain a member of the community in good standing:

1. The dietary laws
2. Observing the Sabbath
3. Circumcision

Tellingly, Jesus challenged the first two of these head on (see Mark 7:1-23; 2:23-3:6), and Paul later spoke of the third as a matter of moral indifference (see Gal. 5:6)!

And here are the three symbols that went along with these badges of national identity:

1. *Temple*. The temple was the political, religious, and economic center of Israel, wielding enormous influence as the home to hundreds of daily animal sacrifices and to thousands of seasonal pilgrims attending the annual festivals of Passover; Pentecost; New Year's (with the Day of Atonement), culminating in Tabernacles; and, of a much lesser scope, Hanukkah and Purim. The elaborate, ongoing ministry of as many as 20,000 priests and Levites taking their turns to serve in the temple and its precincts, with all of the daily sacrifices and purity rituals that accompanied them, remained central in Jewish thinking.
2. *Land*. Living in the land of Israel, free from foreign oppressors, remained the dream of most, inasmuch as Scripture had promised the land to the Jews in perpetuity. But it was contingent on achieving adequate obedience to the law, hence the third symbol.
3. *Torah*. All truth was contained in this book, if one knew how to find it; therefore, the law became the object of enormous amounts of study and exposition.

Again, Jesus challenged the adequacy of all three of these institutions as they stood, seeing them instead as fulfilled in Himself (see Matt. 5:17-48; John 2:13-22; 4:19-24).

Individual groups or sects. The vast majority of Jews in Israel were not aligned with any special group. They were ordinary farmers and fishermen, craftsmen and merchants, trying to eke out a living. They no doubt believed in the God of Israel and tried to follow the primary laws of the Old Testament faithfully, offering sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem for the forgiveness of sins when they were able to make the trip there. But they did not concern themselves with the numerous oral traditions and additional legislation that had grown up around the Bible. They probably longed for the redemption of Israel, and it was from this group of fairly faithful, rather ordinary, and at times impoverished Jews that Jesus found almost all of his first followers.

The special Jewish groups probably composed no more than 5 percent of the population in Jesus' day. These were the members of the four different parties or groups that played the most prominent roles among the leadership sects in first-century Jewish life: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. For information about these groups, see the article "Jewish Parties in the New Testament" on the CD-ROM provided in *Read the Bible for Life Leader Kit* or on the Web site www.lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife.

A Pluralistic World

The first-century religious world offered a potpourri of possibilities for Greeks, Romans, and Jews alike. The Hellenistic options could be mixed together in various combinations (what is known as syncretism). A Roman equestrian, for example, might give lip service to emperor worship and the traditional myths at the appropriate times for doing so each year, study a little philosophy on the side, and participate in a mystery cult one night each week. Astrology, mixed with primitive astronomy, though not an entire religion or worldview, was often added to whatever other religious beliefs and practices one followed. By Judeo-Christian standards the general level of morality was abysmal. Religious ritual was generally divorced from ethical living. Far more prominent and accepted than even in our deteriorating Western world were the practices of homosexuality, heterosexual promiscuity, divorce, abortion, infanticide (especially of baby girls), slavery, and “sacred” prostitution. The one well-known modern religious option that was extremely rare in the ancient world was pure atheism.⁹

Judaism’s monotheism and morality stood out in sharp contrast, as did Christian life and thought as it emerged. But these religions also succumbed at times to syncretism, especially in their Gnostic varieties. In an age dominated by pluralism, when Greeks and Romans were willing to add anyone’s god to their pantheon, the intolerance for polytheism by Jews and Christians was striking. To the extent that many Jews had come to believe God would find His own ways of saving righteous Gentiles, early Christian insistence that Jesus was the only way (including for Jews) seemed even more intransigent. The problems of pluralism and immorality that increasingly afflict our world today are not new; for appropriate responses to them, we need to turn again and again to the New Testament.

Adapted from Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 10–11, 29–56.

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3. C. B. Puskas and D. Crump, *An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 13.
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6. Klauck, *Religious Context*, 87, citing Aristotle, fragment 15.
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