



Jesus and the Birth of Christianity

I was once asked to guest lecture on “Judaism in the Time of Jesus,” and I had to reply, “Only if I get to rename the lecture ‘JudaismS in the time of Jesus.’” The life and teachings of Jesus need to be set against the backdrop of the Judaisms of his time, keeping in mind that Judaism was far from a monolith.

Judaisms in the Time of Jesus

Within the diversity of Judaisms of Jesus’s time, all Jews likely would have agreed on three important elements:

- **The centrality of the Jewish Temple.** Most Jews defined themselves either by their adherence to the Temple and its elaborate set of liturgies or by their explicit rejection of the Temple as having been corrupted. It was the home of the Ark of the Covenant containing the Law, and on the holiest of days, Yom Kippur, the High Priest made atonement there for the sins of the people. The current Western (or Wailing) Wall in Jerusalem is but a small fragment, a lower structural retaining wall, of the massive, gold-covered, awe-inspiring Temple.

- **The Law of Moses, or Torah.** Alongside the Temple, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible defined life for Jews. Many Jews also held to an oral law or set of traditions handed down with the books of the Law. For the Jewish people, who believed they were in a special covenant relationship with God, the Law was the means by which God’s will was recognized and fulfilled.



Figure 1 Map of Judea in the time of Jesus.

- **The growing place of the synagogue.** The synagogue was both the local site where the Torah was read and the occasional sermon preached, and a sort of local meeting house/community center for Jewish communities. It was particularly important in Galilee, north of Jerusalem, where Jesus operated and often taught. The synagogue gained increasing importance for Jewish communities scattered throughout the Empire.

Judaism had its fair share of groupings and divisions in Jesus's time. The most well known historian of the period, Josephus (died around 100 CE), famously listed three different groups: Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. The **Sadducees** focused on Jerusalem, the Temple, and religious observance. The **Pharisees** were their polar opposite: centered in Galilee, north of Jerusalem, they attended to Torah study and the local synagogue. The biblical Gospels speak often of Jesus's negative interactions with the Pharisees, but let the reader beware. Given that there was quite likely some conflict between Jesus's followers and Pharisees, reconstructing an image of them from the Gospels would be like reconstructing an image of the British from American sources from the Revolutionary War. Josephus also listed the **Essenes**, a catch-all term for ascetic, almost quasi-monastic expressions of Judaism. Later scholars have argued that the community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls were related to the Essenes.

Josephus's tidy threefold division doesn't capture the true range of Judaisms in Jesus's day. The foremost example is John the Baptizer, a charismatic teacher who gathered a group of followers and preached a message of repentance. The New Testament also mentions groups like lawyers and scribes, as well as zealots who advocated for liberation from the Roman Empire.

There was also a significant **Jewish diaspora**, or those Jews who lived in other parts of the world. Estimates are tough to come by, but it seems the Jewish population of the Roman Empire was likely between 5 and 10 percent. The Jewish community in the



Figure 2 The War Scroll from the Dead Sea scrolls, describing the war between the sons of light and sons of darkness.

city of Alexandria in Egypt was large enough to merit their own quarter of the city. Jewish communities spread even further afield, into the cities of the Persian Empire and as far away as what is now Ethiopia.

It's one thing to note that Jesus's ministry of preaching and teaching was grounded in a Jewish context: it's another thing to appreciate the complexity and diversity of that context.

Political Context

Jesus and his followers were surrounded by intense political ferment. The geographic entity we now see on a map as Israel was, in Jesus's time, several different political and cultural entities. The Jewish people sat at the crossroads of the great empires of the ancient world, ruled at various times by Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, and Medes, just to name a few. They also periodically enjoyed independence and self-rule. Just before the time of Jesus, the Jewish people once again enjoyed a period of inde-

pendence, following a successful revolt against the Syrian kings. Eventually, though, the Jewish people succumbed to Roman rule like much of what we now call the Middle East.

The **Romans** often preferred to rule indirectly through locals rather than get overly involved in regional matters. So the Romans set up a local king who managed day-to-day affairs but was responsible for sending taxes to Rome: **King Herod**, who ruled from 37 BCE to 4 BCE. At the time of Jesus, the territory of King Herod had been divided up. **Herod Antipas**, one of Herod's descendants, ruled Jesus's hometown of Galilee. Rome took direct control of the southern region around Jerusalem, called Judaea, appointing a series of governors, the most well known being **Pontius Pilate**, governor from 26 to 36 CE. So long as the taxes were paid and order kept, tolerance was the norm. Rome could, however, come down swiftly and forcefully if the authorities feared disturbance would result.

Given the diversity and geographic expansion of the empire, Roman culture served as the glue among a disparate people. Many subjects adopted the toga, honored Roman civic offices and organization, and participated in "emperor worship." This may seem blasphemous today, but you could think of emperor worship as an ancient version of pledging allegiance to the flag: the emperor was a symbol of unity, so people paid homage to him by burning a candle in front of his statue or pouring out a glass of wine in libation.

The Ministry and Teaching of Jesus

It was into this diverse, dynamic political and religious background that Jesus of Nazareth emerged. On the one hand, he was one of many teachers and preachers on the scene. On the other hand, he hardly fit into anyone's mold or expectation, certainly not for a Messiah, Son of Man or savior of the Jewish people. Some significant aspects of Jesus's ministry included:

- **His radical ethics based on the Law of Moses.** As Jesus said, he did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). If anything, he extended beyond the Sadducees and Pharisees in his application of the Law. Where the Law forbade adultery, Jesus said avoid even lust. Yet he reversed course to ignore elements of the Law that hindered true faithfulness or had become ends of themselves (such as some rules about washing and fasting). Jesus's shorthand description of this ethical teaching was "the kingdom of God," or "reign of God," a society reshaped in accordance with God's vision of justice and wholeness.
- **The apocalyptic element in his teaching.** Jesus believed God would intervene and restore the proper ordering of the world, but he warned that the period after his death and before the second coming would be a time of urgency for the spread of the message. Early Christianity was immersed in this tension and urgency.
- **His understanding of community.** Jesus often spoke directly to the Jewish people, to call them back to the covenant with God. But his sense of community stretched well beyond those bounds. He traveled outside of the land of Israel to preach; he included those traditionally marginalized by society, such as tax collectors and women, among his disciples; and he charged his disciples with gathering followers from every tribe and land to make one community.

Early Spread of Christianity

The Roman state executed Jesus around the year 29. The method was crucifixion, a penalty reserved for rebels and the lowest of criminals. His crime? He was considered a threat to the civil order. Many were unhappy with Jesus and his teachings, but it's

tough to tell who brought and really pushed those charges. There is a trajectory from the earliest Gospel (Mark) to the latest (John) to shift the blame increasingly from the Romans to the Jews. In Mark, it is a small, unnamed group of Jewish leaders; by the Gospel of John, Jesus's enemies are grouped under the inchoate and all-encompassing term "the Jews."

After Jesus's death, his followers came to believe he had been raised from the dead. The earliest Gospel, Mark, ends with an empty tomb, but stories of Jesus's post-resurrection appearances abound. Empowered by the belief that Jesus had been raised, the disciples continued to spread the message not only of Jesus's ethical and spiritual teachings, but of him as the risen Son of God, the vindicated righteous one. Here are just a few highlights about those early communities:

- **Jerusalem and the Temple.** Jesus's followers still went to the Temple and still observed the Jewish Law. Tensions occasionally erupted between disciples and other Jews in Jerusalem. James, who is called the "brother of the Lord," led the Jerusalem community until his martyrdom.
- **Pauline mission.** Saul of Tarsus, later to take the name Paul, was instrumental in helping spread Christianity from its Jewish base into the Gentile (or non-Jewish) milieu of the empire. Paul was steeped in Jewish law, having been a Pharisee. However he added an important element to Jesus's proclamation: The notion of the New Covenant mediated by Jesus that replaced the old Jewish law. In Jesus and in baptism, Paul said, there is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Therefore the old Jewish law no longer applied the same way, and Gentiles could be equal and full members of the community (Ephesians 2:11–22). It's not difficult to imagine the ensuing tension between groups inspired by Paul and those who sought continuity with the practices of Judaism.

Even in this short chapter, you can see the emergence of the organizing themes: the broad diversity of beliefs and expressions, the ways Jews and early Christians adapted to the Roman world, and the influence of global perspectives on Jewish and early Christian life. All these elements continue to shape the story and the faith as they spread further.