

## The Life and Times of Jesus Christ

# 5

## The People of the Messiah

As you read the Gospel accounts, you quickly discover that Jesus didn't exist in an environment of one. His teachings and his actions were in response to life as it unfolded around him. For this reason, it is vitally important to understand the social environment in which the Messiah walked. Only when we understand the people of Jesus' day will we understand why Jesus said the things he said.

The Gospel record reveals a rich tapestry of people constantly interacting with Jesus. As Donald Senior observes:

“Jesus...seems to conduct his ministry in a mobile arena constantly ringing with debate: Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Herodians, high priests, elders... Around the circle of the arena swirl the crowds – some curious, some grateful, some pleading: publicans, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, fishermen, lawyers, the sick and disabled.”<sup>1</sup>

And in the middle of this mobile arena walks Jesus, interacting with the political tensions and religious prejudices, healing the hurting and rebuking the proud. In this lesson, we will look at this rich tapestry of peoples. For, as Donald Senior advises, “The more we want to know about Jesus, the more we should know about his world.”<sup>2</sup> But the best starting place for our investigation is to look at the land of Israel itself, for the geography of Israel has very much shaped its people and their history.

### A Portrait of the Messiah

### The Divinity of the Messiah

### The Birth of the Messiah

### The Childhood of the Messiah

### ▶ **The People of the Messiah** ◀

### The Inauguration of the Messiah

### The Opposition to the Messiah

### The Last Week of the Messiah

### The Trial of the Messiah

### The Death of the Messiah

### The Resurrection of the Messiah

### The Ascendancy of the Messiah

## The Six Regions of Palestine

Israel was, and continues to be, a land of contrasts. It is an unbelievably small tract of land, scarcely one hundred and fifty miles long and only fifty miles or so

wide at its broadest point. It has a hilly backbone, flanked by an arable coastal plain to the west and a barren desert to the east, where the Jordan River flows through a rift valley, separating the hills of Israel from the hostile wilderness of Moab, and linking the Sea of Galilee, to the north, with the Dead Sea (the lowest point on dry earth) to the south.

The Jews knew the land as Israel. The Romans called the region Palestine (named, ironically, after the Philistines, not the Jews) and divided it into six regions. Starting from the north, these regions were:

- Galilee
- The Decapolis
- Samaria
- Judaea
- Idumaea
- Peraea

For the most part, the Gospel story flows from Galilee toward Judea, for it is in the Judean capital, Jerusalem, where the Gospel climaxes in the death and resurrection of the Messiah. Let's then take a look at each of these six regions and see the role they played in the Gospel record.

## **Galilee**

### **Read Matthew 4:23**

This is the main focal point of much of the Gospel story, and the main arena for Jesus' public ministry. It is in southern Galilee that Nazareth is located, in the hill country bordering the northern edge of the Valley of Jezreel. It is along the Sea of Galilee (also called Kinnereth, which means "harp," for the lake is shaped like a lyre) that Jesus called his first disciples and preached in the many lakeside villages. As described by the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*:

"...Galilee is the most richly diversified and picturesque district in Western Palestine...in beauty and fertility it is strongly contrasted with the barren uplands of Judah."<sup>3</sup>

The lush beauty of Galilee supplied much of the imagery Jesus used in his parables – the sower sowing his seed on ground that produced a hundred-fold harvest, the fishermen casting their nets, the workers in the vineyard, the birds of the air, the lilies of the field. Thus the fertile Galilean landscape has left its indelible mark upon the Gospel narrative. As *Easton's Bible Dictionary* notes:

"The entire province is encircled with a halo of holy associations connected with the life, works, and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth...It is noteworthy that of his thirty-two beautiful parables, no less than nineteen were spoken in Galilee. And it is no less remarkable that of his entire thirty-three great miracles, twenty-five were wrought in this province. His first miracle was wrought at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, and his last, after his resurrection, on the shore of Galilee's sea. In Galilee our Lord delivered the Sermon on The

Mount, and the discourses on ‘The Bread of Life,’ on ‘Purity,’ on ‘Forgiveness,’ and on ‘Humility.’ In Galilee he called his first disciples; and there occurred the sublime scene of the Transfiguration.”<sup>4</sup>

Galilean visitors to Jerusalem were easily identifiable by their temperament and accent. “The Galileans had a marked character of their own. They had a reputation for an independence and energy which often ran out into turbulence. They were at the same time of a franker and more transparent disposition than their brethren in the south.”<sup>5</sup>

Their coarse, peasant accent was deplored and ridiculed by the more cosmopolitan Judaeans (see **Matthew 26:73**; **Acts 4:13**). Galileans had particular difficulty with the guttural inflections of Aramaic, and they tended to drop their “alephs,”\* just as some modern English dialects drop their “aitches.”† As a Galilean, Jesus probably spoke with such a coarse Galilean accent.

The contempt of Judeans toward Galileans was strong. When the Sanhedrin sought to condemn Jesus as a subversive, Nicodemus, himself a member of the Sanhedrin, interceded on Jesus’ behalf. Their response in **John 7:52** reveals their utter contempt for Galilee:

“Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”

Their contempt blinded them to both biblical history and biblical prophecy. At least two prophets – Elijah and Jonah – had come from Galilee. And **Isaiah 9:1-2** clearly prophesied messianic activity in Galilee.

Why did God ordain that his Son grow up in Galilee, outside of the Judean mainstream of Jewish life? It was in Galilee that “the Messianic hope was cherished with the deepest intensity. When the Messiah appeared, with His own Galilean upbringing, it was from the north-countrymen that He received the warmest welcome, and among them His appeal elicited the most gratifying response.”<sup>6</sup>

It is thus significant that eleven out of the twelve inner disciples of Christ were Galileans, and possibly equally significant that the only Judean in their company, Judas Iscariot, ultimately betrayed Christ.

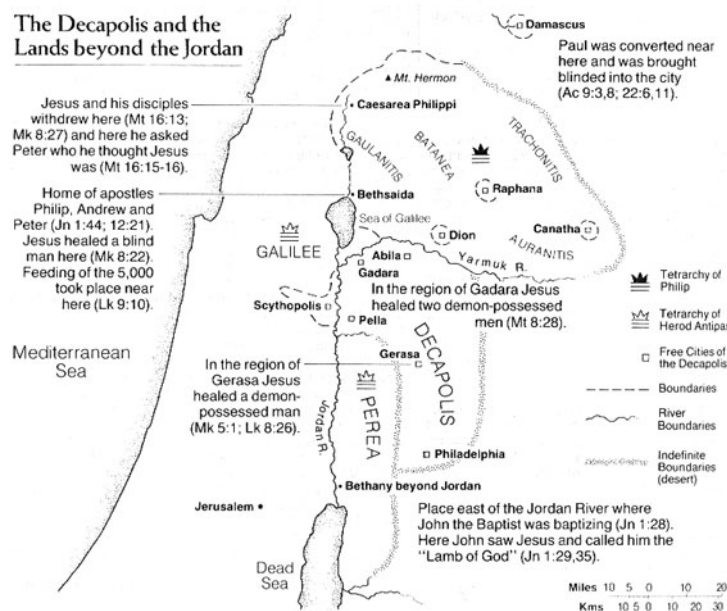
## ***The Decapolis***

### **Read Matthew 4:25**

The Decapolis was a region to the east and south of Galilee. It was a confederation of ten cities, hence its name, which in Latin means “ten cities.” It was largely a Gentile area (hence the herd of pigs in **Mark 5:1-20**). But there was also a sizeable

\* The Galilean accent has made its mark on the Gospel narrative. For example, the name Lazarus is a Hellenized version of the Hebrew name Eleazar. But because the Galileans notoriously dropped their “alephs,” they would have said the name as Leazar. When the Gospel writers Hellenized this name, instead of rendering it as Elazarus, they rendered it as Lazarus.

† In the movie *My Fair Lady*, Henry Higgins tries to teach Eliza Doolittle to say “Hurricanes in Hampshire hardly ever happen.” Eliza instead says, “‘Urrricanes in ‘ampshire ‘ardly hever ‘appen.” This is an example of the Cockney accent dropping its aitches. The Galilean accent would have sounded to the Judean somewhat like Cockney sounds to a British aristocrat.



© Zondervan Bible Publishers

Jewish population in some cities of the Decapolis, particularly those closer to the Sea of Galilee. The town of Bethsaida, which was on the northeastern shore of the lake, was the birthplace of Peter and Andrew, and the home of Philip, and was the scene of many miracles. Jesus also sometimes withdrew from Galilee into the deeper regions of the Decapolis to get away from the crowd and rest with his disciples.

Here are some of the Gospel events that took place within the Decapolis:

- ➔ The healing of two demonized men (**Mark 5:1-20**)
- ➔ The healing of a deaf mute (**Mark 7:32-35**)
- ➔ The feeding of the five thousand (**Luke 9:10-17**)
- ➔ The feeding of the four thousand (**Mark 8:1-9**)
- ➔ The healing of a blind man (**Mark 8:21-25**)
- ➔ Peter's revelation of Jesus as the Son of God (**Mark 8:27-30**)
- ➔ The transfiguration of Jesus (**Mark 9:1-8**)\*

## Samaria

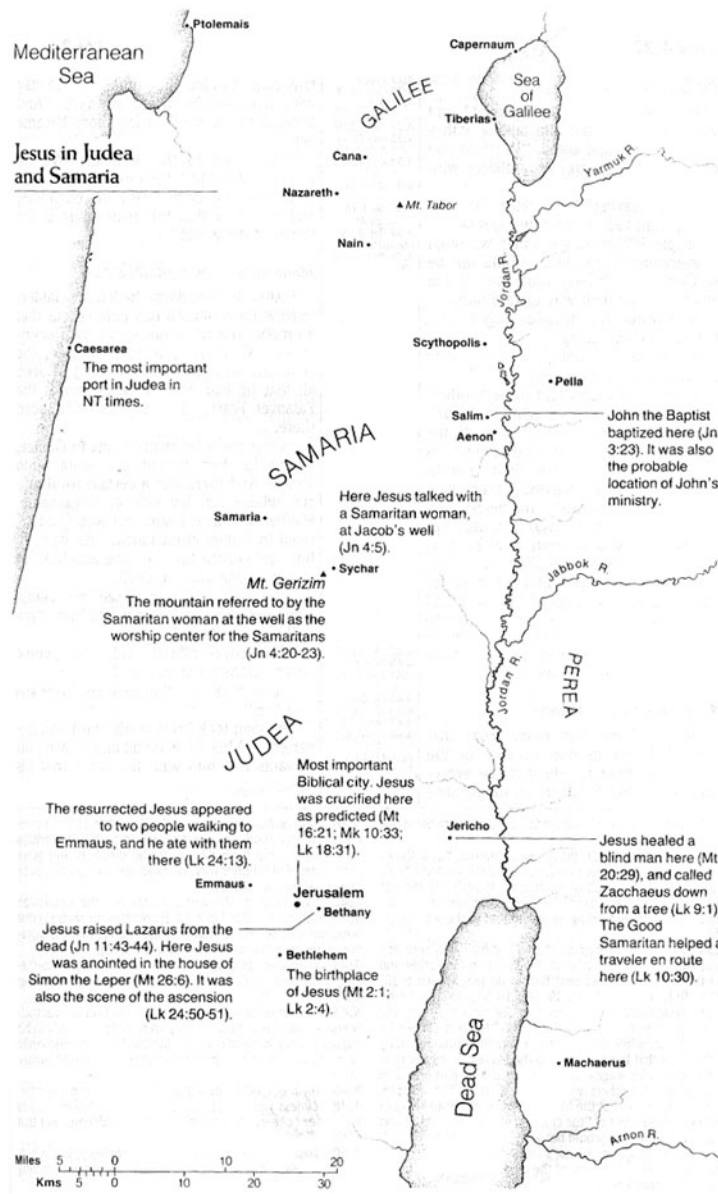
Sandwiched between Galilee and Judaea was the small mountainous region of Samaria. As the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* describes it:

“Samaria is a country beautifully diversified with mountain and hill, valley and plain. The olive grows plentifully, and other fruit trees abound. There is much excellent soil, and fine crops of barley and wheat are reaped annually. The vine also is largely cultivated on the hill slopes. Remains of ancient forests are found in parts.”<sup>7</sup>

\* There are two possible sites for the Mount of Transfiguration. The traditional site is Mount Tabor in Galilee. But a more likely site is the higher Mount Hermon in the Decapolis, which is much closer to Caesarea Philippi, the site of Peter's confession.

In the first century, however, the Jews referred to it as the “land of the Cuthim,” and did not regard it as a part of the Holy Land. They considered the people of Samaria – called Samaritans – ceremonially unclean (as the Samaritan woman observed in **John 4:9**). Even though the Samaritans worshiped YHWH, just as the Jews did, and obeyed the Law of Moses, they came from mixed ancestry and refused to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The slur, “You are a Samaritan,” was the worst insult a Jew could make against another Jew (**John 8:48**). Galilean Jews, on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, avoided Samaria, not only for religious reasons but also for safety reasons. Samaritans were as hostile to Jews as Jews were to Samaritans (**Luke 9:51-56**).



© Zondervan Bible Publishers

Copyright © 2001, The Online Bible College.

EVENING STUDY

The animosity between Jew and Samaritan was two-way. Josephus records that in AD 9 “Samaritan men, coming into Jerusalem in secret, began to scatter human bones in the porticoes and throughout the temple.”<sup>8</sup> Josephus then tells of a blood feud that arose in around AD 50 between the Samaritans and the Galileans:

“Next came a conflict of Galileans and Samaritans. For at a village called Gema, which lies in the great plain of Samaria, a certain Galilean was murdered, one of many Jews going up to the feast [in Jerusalem]. Thus, many from Galilee gathered to make war on the Samaritans. And when the unfortunate murder was announced in Jerusalem, the masses were agitated. And, abandoning the feast, they set out to fight with the Samaritans...But when the rest of the [Judean] masses rushed to fight the Samaritans, the rulers of Jerusalem ran out, wearing sackcloth and pouring ashes on their heads. And they begged them to return and not to anger the Romans against Jerusalem by revenge on the Samaritans. [They urged them] to have mercy on their country and temple, their own children and wives, who all were at risk of being destroyed, on account of revenge for one Galilean.”<sup>9</sup>

The Samaritans believed Gerizim, not Jerusalem, to be the mountain God had selected as his sacred place. “To the Samaritans, Mount Gerizim was the ‘navel of the world,’ the site God had explicitly chosen for his temple. It had existed before creation, had escaped the flood, and would survive Doomsday. Adam was made from its dust. Abraham went there to sacrifice Isaac.”<sup>10</sup> This was the principal point of religious conflict, and on this point, the *Talmud* asks:

“When will [the Samaritans] be accepted? When they deny Mount Gerizim and confess Jerusalem and the resurrection of the dead. After this, he who robs a Samaritan is like one who robs an Israelite.”<sup>11</sup>

In the light of this, it is noteworthy that Jesus did not enter into the Jewish-Samaritan debate over whether worship on Gerizim or in Jerusalem was scripturally ordained. Instead, he declared that a time was coming (and had now come) when the worship of God would not be defined geographically, but internally – “in spirit and in truth” (**John 4:19-24**).

## **Judaea**

### **Read Luke 23:5**

The Roman province of Judaea took its name from Judah, the southern kingdom of pre-exile times. Like Samaria, it was hilly country, but with less annual rainfall. The hillsides were stonier and the cultivated areas somewhat smaller and more scattered than their Samaritan counterparts.

The significance of Judaea to the Gospel story lies in two principal cities – Bethlehem (the location of Jesus’ birth) and Jerusalem (the site of the Temple and the location of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection).

## **Idumaea**

### **Read Mark 3:8**



The mountainous province of Idumaea lay to the south and southeast of Judea. Its name derived from Edom, for the people of Idumaea were primarily Edomites, descended from Esau. Ironically, Herod the Great, who was installed as king by the Romans, was Idumaeen – a half-Jew, half-Edomite. For this reason, the Judeans always considered his Jewish faith (and that of his sons) suspect.

### ***Peraea***

Peraea was the region east of Judea and Samaria, sandwiched between the Decapolis and Idumaea. It ranked along with Judaea and Galilee as a province of the land of Israel, and by Jesus' time, it had a sizeable Jewish population. But the name Peraea is never used in the Bible. In the Gospel record, it is simply called "the land beyond the Jordan."

#### **Read Matthew 19:1-2**

After opposition began to get intense, Jesus took refuge in Peraea (**John 10:40**), and it was there that he received news of Lazarus' death (**John 11:1-16**).

## **A Brief History**

The period in which Jesus lived was one of the most volatile in Israel's long, torturous history. It was like a tinderbox, awaiting a spark. In order to understand this period, however, we need to look at the history immediately preceding the appearance of the Messiah.

Old Testament history ends with the restoration of the Temple under Persian rule. But the historical gap between Malachi and Matthew needs to be bridged in order to properly understand the world into which Jesus was born.

### ***The Greek Era***

#### **Read Daniel 8:21**

#### **Read Daniel 10:20**

Daniel foretold the conquest of Persia by Greece. This happened about 330 years before the birth of Christ, when the army of Alexander the Great conquered the Persian armies of Darius III. But Greece conquered much more than just the Persian empire. Greek culture and language quickly pervaded the whole Mediterranean world, including the land of Israel.

After the death of Alexander, the Greek empire was divided up between his four generals – Antigonus, Seleucid, Ptolemy and Attalid (read **Daniel 11:3-4**). Each of these generals founded dynasties that controlled a portion of the Greek Empire. Seleucid and Ptolemy are particularly important to the story of Israel, since the Seleucid dynasty ruled Asian Minor and Syria (to the north of Israel) and the Ptolemaic dynasty ruled Egypt (to the south). In fact, the "king of the north" and the "king of the south" are prophesied in great detail in **Daniel 11:5-32**. The next 150 years was marked by constant conflict between the Seleucids in Damascus and the Ptolemies in Egypt, with the land of Israel torn between the two.

## Period One – Rule of the Ptolemies

For the first century of Greek occupation, the Ptolemies ruled Judaea, but since Egypt was relatively distant, the Jews enjoyed little interference in their internal affairs. This was a period, however, of gradual absorption of Greek culture into Jewish life. Theaters were built, as well as public baths and gymnasiums, all evidence of the growing influence of Greek culture and thought. Some Jews (particularly the merchant and upper classes) became “Hellenized” – they took on Greek names, spoke the Greek language and embraced Greek culture.

## Period Two – Rule of the Seleucids

This period of benevolent Greek occupation came to an end in 198 BC, however, when Israel came under Seleucid rule. Not long after this, in 190 BC, Roman naval forces routed the Seleucids and exacted a crippling tribute. The Seleucids, in turn, slapped oppressive taxes on their occupied lands. From that moment, the relationship between the Jews and their Greek overlords deteriorated rapidly.

Two sets of people had two very different reactions to this oppressive regime:

- **The aristocracy** – Since they had vested interests in maintaining the status quo, the wealthy and those in positions of power (including the priestly aristocracy) sought ways to placate and accommodate their Seleucid rulers. These people shaped what would later, in Jesus’ day, be called the party (or sect) of the Sadducees.
- **The common people** – A growing resistance, however, began to foment in the lower classes. A movement called the *hasidim* (or “pious ones”) emerged which was vocal in its denunciation of not just Greek rule but also Greek culture, which they saw as a threat to religious fidelity. The *hasidim* became the forebears of the party (or sect) of the Pharisees.

In 167 BC, events took a dramatic turn. In response to an attempted Judean revolt, the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV (who styled himself Antiochus Epiphanes – which means “Antiochus the Enlightened”) sacked Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the brazen altar. Even worse, he erected an idol of Zeus in the inner sanctuary (the Holy of Holies) of the Temple, an event called the “abomination that causes desolation,” predicted by the prophet Daniel.\*

### Read Daniel 11:31

## The Hasmonean Era

The Jewish reaction to this abomination was predictable. The Hasmonean family of Mattathias and his sons led a revolt against Seleucid rule. Due to Roman pressure to the west and Persian threats to the east, Antiochus IV was not able to give his full attention to Judaea, and was pushed out. The statute of Zeus was re-

\* Although the prophecy of [Daniel 11:31](#) found its fulfillment in the sacrilege of Antiochus Epiphanes, Jesus used the same prophecy to refer to an event that would happen in his future (see [Matthew 24:15-16](#)). [Daniel 11:31](#) is therefore another example of a dual fulfillment of prophecy.



moved from the Temple sanctuary in 164 BC, and the Temple was rededicated.

Following this, Israel enjoyed almost a full century of independence. But this time was by no means calm. The Hasmoneans ended up mimicking the worst traits of Seleucid rule, and three religious parties reacted in three different ways:

- **The Sadducees** – It was at this time that the party of the Sadducees began to take its first-century form, arising from the ranks of the priestly aristocracy, who found it politically expedient to compromise with the Hasmonean rulers as they had with the Seleucids before them.
- **The Essenes** – Another group chose to withdraw totally from the political and religious life of Jerusalem, and established self-sufficient monasteries in the wilderness of Judea, where they attempted to live in complete conformity to the Law of Moses.
- **The Pharisees** – This group also began to take form, but chose to “steer a middle course between the compromise of the Sadducees and the radical withdrawal of the Essenes. The Pharisees refused to sell out to expediency, thus abdicating much direct involvement in the religious and political ruling circles. But their reputation among the people as strict and faithful upholders of the religious laws of Judaism made them an influential movement that had to be reckoned with.”<sup>12</sup>

During this time, the Hasmoneans embarked on an expansion of their rule into neighboring territories. They conquered Idumea on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, enforcing the Jewish faith upon them. Next on the list was Samaria, to the north of Judea, and then finally Galilee was also annexed by the new Jewish state. Galilee’s large Greek population was forced to accept the Jewish faith or face the threat of deportation. This campaign of proselytization appears to have largely been a success, aided by concerted colonization of the area by Jews from Judea. By the time of Jesus, the majority of the population of Galilee appears to have been mainly Jewish (with the exception of some cities such as Tiberias and Sephoris), yet still remained forever “Galilee of the Gentiles” (**Matthew 4:15-16**) to the Jews of Jerusalem, and therefore always, in their eyes, suspect of religious laxity.

The Hasmonean rule, however, quickly deteriorated into political and religious strife, and by 63 BC, the Jewish state was close to civil war. “Like a bemused tiger, Rome bided its time, waiting for Israel to fall. When both Sadducees and Pharisees appealed to Rome for arbitration of the power struggle, Rome not only arbitrated; it took over the entire country.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Roman Era**

In 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey marched his legions into Jerusalem and later installed a vassal king, the Idumaeen Herod (who had repeatedly proven his loyalty to Rome) upon the Jewish throne. As Donald Senior explains:

“As was their policy throughout most of the empire, the Romans preferred to administer their territories through carefully selected local rulers.”<sup>14</sup>

Herod set about consolidating his rule through a combination of political savvy and brute terror. Although he sought to ingratiate himself with his Jewish subjects, he also had undeniable Greek tastes. A combination of this Greek cultural bias, and a desire for personal grandeur, caused Herod to embark on epic construction programs. But the most impressive building project of all was the Temple itself. He oversaw a lavish remodeling of the Temple originally rebuilt by Zerubbabel five centuries earlier. It took many years to complete (long after Herod's death) and had not yet been finished when Jesus was crucified (**John 2:19-20**). Ironically, it was completed just six years before it was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

## The Four Sects of Palestine

During the first century, four main sects, or religious parties, dominated the landscape of Jewish faith. These sects were:

- The Sadducees
- The Pharisees
- The Essenes
- The Zealots

### ***The Sadducees***

The Sadducees were a small but influential group that drew its numbers mainly from the priestly aristocracy (note **Acts 5:17**), and particularly from the Zadokite clan, descended from Zadok,\* the High Priest in the days of David and Solomon. The Sadducees were conservative and powerful, since they controlled the majority of the wealth of Jerusalem, and though relatively few in number, they dominated the 71-member Sanhedrin – Judea's traditional ruling council.

Politically, they were conservative, seeking to maintain cordial relations with their Roman overlords, and this is understandable, for they had vested interests in the established order. This conservative political stance was also reflected in a conservative religious stance. They held to a more literal reading of the Torah, and did not accept the oral law of the Pharisees. And since they viewed only the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) to be inspired, they did not believe in angels, demons, an afterlife or the resurrection of the dead.

**Read Luke 20:27-39**

**Read Acts 23:6-10**

Although Jesus made many enemies among the Pharisees (**Matthew 12:14; 15:12**), the Sadducees were his main opponents and the ones principally behind his trial and execution (note that it was the Sadducees who, after the resurrection of Jesus, tried to suppress the message of the risen Christ – **Acts 4:1-2**). According to Josephus, they were also responsible for the death of James, the Lord's brother.<sup>16</sup>

\* The name Sadducee probably comes from the Hebrew *Zadoki*, which means a descendant of Zadok. Zadok also means "righteous," and so the name Sadducee might have the meaning "righteous one."

## ***The Pharisees***

### **Read Matthew 5:20**

The Pharisees are mentioned an amazing 88 times in the Gospel record. As a sect, they descended from the *hasidim* of the Seleucid era. Their name is derived from the Hebrew word *perusim*, which means “separated ones.” They drew their numbers mainly from the scribes and synagogue rabbis.

“Few Pharasaic teachers and scribes were wealthy, and many followed rather lowly trades – one a charcoal burner, another a stonemason, and still another a public letter writer, and so forth. Once, the story goes, as a teacher named Joseph was perched on a scaffold, a disciple approached with a religious question. ‘Wait until this evening,’ the sage replied. ‘...I am paid by the day and I may not give a minute that belongs to my master away.’”<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the Sadducee, whose religious focus was upon the *written* Law, the religious focus of the Pharisee was upon daily adherence to the *oral* Law. Life for the Sadducee centered on the Temple, while life for the Pharisee centered on the synagogue.

Although the Pharisees worked among the common people, many kept themselves separated from those they called *am ha’aretz* – the “people of the land.” Since these people did not follow the strict ritual requirements of the oral law, Pharisees maintained a strict code of separation from them.

“Judgments varied about who were *am ha’aretz*, and so did the degrees of separation from them. Indeed, there were Pharisees who considered themselves defiled as a result of touching an *am ha’aretz*, and thus could not eat until they had taken a ritual bath. Although the *am ha’aretz* could include Jews of all economic strata, most were probably of the lower classes.”<sup>15</sup>

The Pharisees are often portrayed as the implacable enemies of Jesus, but this stereotype is not entirely justified. To be sure, a significant number became his enemies (**Matthew 12:14; John 9:13-34**). But some Pharisees warned Jesus that his life was in danger (**Luke 13:31**) and others invited him for meals (**Luke 7:36-50; 14:1**). Nicodemus, a Pharisee, sought Jesus out (**John 3**), and other Pharisees believed on him (**Acts 15:5**). Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee, cautioned a moderate line when dealing with the Nazarenes (**Acts 5:34-40**), and his disciple, Saul, an implacable enemy of the Church and a “Pharisee of Pharisees” (**Philippians 3:4-6**), later became a Nazarene leader and foremost missionary to the Gentiles.

What few people realize is that the Pharisees were divided into two different schools:

- **The School of Shammai** – This Pharisee faction was very rigid and unforgiving in outlook. They focused strongly on the wealthy classes and were extremely hypocritical and self-righteous.
- **The School of Hillel** – This Pharisee faction was more of a people’s movement. Many of Hillel’s ethical teachings foreshadow the ethical teachings of Jesus. Saul, for example, was of the School of Hillel, for his mentor, Gamaliel, was the grandson of Hillel.

Jesus encouraged a respect for the authority of the rabbis and Pharisees, while pointing out the seriousness of their error, as he says in **Matthew 23:2-3**:

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. *But do not do what they do*, for they do not practice what they preach.”

**Read Matthew 23:4-36**

### ***The Essenes***

Although never mentioned in the Gospel record, the Essenes formed a third and important group within first century Judaism. Unlike the Pharisees, who sought to live separated lives among the people, the Essenes sought separation by removing themselves entirely from everyday society.

They viewed the current priesthood of the Temple as illegitimate, and their own priesthood as the true “sons of Zadok.” They also viewed the world in distinctly apocalyptic terms. “The world, as they saw it, is divided into two innately hostile camps – the Sons of Light, representing the forces of truth and righteousness, and the Sons of Darkness. Each of these camps is controlled by a heavenly being appointed by God. There is a Prince of Light and an Angel of Darkness, and war continually rages between these two powers at every level, from the sphere of the angels down to the innermost chambers of the human soul.”<sup>17</sup>

It is likely that Qumran, on the shores of the Dead Sea, was an Essene monastery. Although some Essenes lived in towns and villages, the majority probably lived the Qumran community. Indeed the barren environs of the Dead Sea held special meaning for them, since they held themselves to be the fulfilment of **Isaiah 40:3**:

“In the desert prepare the way for the Lord...”

### ***The Zealots***

Ironically, the same Galilee that gave birth to the Nazarenes (as the early Jewish believers called themselves) also gave birth to the Zealots, who in time took the destiny of the Jewish nation into their hands. The term “Zealot” covered a broad range of different groups, which together Josephus called “the fourth philosophy” – the fourth after Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes.

The Zealot movement found its impetus in the rebellion of Judas of Galilee in AD 6-7, but the movement had earlier roots. Judas’ father, Hezekiah, was already a leader of a terrorist group that fought against Herod. And Judas’ son, Menachem, was one of the principal leaders of the Zealot movement that led the rebellion against Rome in AD 66.

Zealot theology was almost identical to Pharisee theology, but they believed in active resistance against the Roman occupation. One of Jesus’ disciples, Simon, was known as a Zealot (**Luke 6:15**).

## Yearning for a Messiah

Jesus was born into a society in foment. “Crushed by poverty and taxation, the great mass of urban rabble were largely unable to live by all the Pharisees’ precepts regarding purity and tithing, or by the priests’ rules of ritual and sacrifice. Their existence was frugal at best and could easily slide off into grinding, impoverished misery. They returned the most pedantic Pharisees’ contempt, resented the Sadducees’ wealth and privilege, sought the opportunity to labor in Herod’s new work force, yet clung for dear life to the usages of piety and fairness that the traditional culture represented.”<sup>18</sup>

The Jews of the first century were convinced that God would empower them to overthrow Roman rule, just as he had empowered the Hasmoneans to overthrow Greek rule. And so, among the poor, a cry began to rise – a cry for a savior, a Messiah, who would rescue them from the tyranny of the rich, break the shackles of Rome and establish the kingdom of God on earth. And when they heard of a young rabbi, just thirty years of age, who taught in the synagogues with a unique authority, they flocked to hear him. For the message he preached was, according to **Mark 1:15**:

“The time has come...The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

- <sup>1</sup> Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p.26.
- <sup>2</sup> Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p.26.
- <sup>3</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- <sup>4</sup> *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- <sup>5</sup> *WebBible Encyclopedia*, <http://www.christiananswers.net/dictionary/peter.html>.
- <sup>6</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- <sup>7</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.
- <sup>8</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 2:232-237.
- <sup>9</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18:29-30.
- <sup>10</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.209.
- <sup>11</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*, Kuthim 2:7.
- <sup>12</sup> Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p.35.
- <sup>13</sup> Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p.37.
- <sup>14</sup> Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p.37.
- <sup>15</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.74.
- <sup>16</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.75.
- <sup>17</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.217.
- <sup>18</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest, 1987), p.75.

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

The Online Bible College can be accessed at [www.online-bible-college.com](http://www.online-bible-college.com)