

Introducing the New Testament

A Background to the life of Christ

1 The setting

1.1 The historical setting

The land of Israel at the time of the ministry of Jesus was a small country, divided into several tiny provinces. The most important was Judea, in the south, where the capital city, Jerusalem, was located. In the middle lay Samaria, and to the north, Galilee. In the west were the minor provinces of Trachonitis, Iturea, Perea and the Decapolis. During the adult life of Jesus, Judea and Samaria were governed directly by the Romans. The Roman 'client' king, Herod Antipas, ruled Galilee and the Decapolis region. Philip, who was Herod's brother, governed the remaining part of the land.

The people of Israel, the Jews, believed that they were God's 'chosen people'. This belief stemmed from the election of Abraham, the first of the Patriarchs, who lived around 2000 BCE. He had been chosen by God to be the father of a race of people who would be a holy, chosen people, and all Jews saw themselves as being sons of Abraham. God and Abraham had made a **covenant** together. This was an agreement by which Abraham and his descendants would be God's people, and God, in turn, would look after them and be their God. Israel itself was regarded as the Promised Land — the land that God had promised to his people.

Several hundred years later, the Jews were held as slaves in Egypt. Under the leadership of Moses, the people were led to freedom and received from God his Law and a renewal of the covenant made with Abraham. The Law, including the Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue, was to be the people's guide as to how they should lead holy and righteous lives.

The Jews settled in Israel and tried to live their lives in accordance with the Law, though frequently failed to do so and lapsed into sinful ways. Under the reign of King David, Israel enjoyed a golden age of prosperity, but around 950 BCE, internal quarrelling led to the land being split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The people ignored the covenant and neglected God's laws, although a series of prophets were sent by God to urge the people back into ways of righteousness. In 730 BCE the Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria and a century later

the Babylonians conquered the Southern Kingdom. Most of the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon. About 630 BCE the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians and the Jews were allowed to return to the Promised Land and a slow process of rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple began. The monarchy was never re-established.

In 325 BCE the land was conquered by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. Greek (Hellenistic) culture spread throughout the region. As time passed, this led to a division in Judaism. The more liberal Jews were content to keep the Hellenistic culture, but stricter Jews wanted to keep the Law of Moses without Hellenistic influences. In 198 BCE Antiochus II overran the land and a revolt broke out, led by a strict Jewish leader called Judas Maccabeus. He rid the land of invaders and also destroyed Hellenistic idols and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Peace followed until his death in 160 BCE when the land was conquered first by the Syrians and then, in 62 BCE, by the Romans.

1.2 The social setting

Jewish life centred in the home; men would work as either farmers or fishermen, whilst the poorest worked as shepherds. Some worked for the Romans as tax collectors and were universally hated. The women kept house and some resorted to prostitution. From the age of 6, boys received an academic education in the synagogue and learned a working trade from their father. At the age of 13 a boy became an adult, or son of the Law. Girls, meanwhile, were taught at home by their mothers; their education was usually concerned with household chores and child rearing. Three important customs affected everyone — birth, marriage and death:

- + **Birth** — a couple's happiness was measured by how many children, and particularly how many sons, they had. For a woman to be childless was, for her, the greatest sadness of all, and some saw it as a punishment from God. After the birth of her first son, a woman was known as 'the mother of...'. At birth, a baby's skin was rubbed in salt to make it firm and the child was tightly wrapped in 'swaddling clothes' to ensure that its limbs grew straight. After eight days, a boy would be circumcised.
- + **Marriage** — the bride's parents usually arranged marriages. There was little social mixing between the sexes. It was the duty of everyone to be married and, because a bride was seen as a working asset, she had to be paid for with a dowry. About a year before the actual wedding, the couple would become formally betrothed. This was a legally binding arrangement, carried out by a formal ceremony and exchange of gifts. At the wedding itself, the bridegroom and his friends would process to the bride's house; there the couple would be blessed and the groom would lead the procession back.
- + **Death** — after a person's death, the family would undertake an elaborate ritual. The body would be washed, wrapped in grave cloths, anointed and buried within 24 hours of death. The poor were buried in graves or caves; the wealthy had tombs cut out of rock and sealed with a boulder.

1.3 The religious setting

Religious life was centred on the synagogue and the Temple and was governed by a huge number of regulations which guided everyday conduct, sacrifice and offering at the great annual festivals.

Festivals

The greatest day of the year was the **Day of Atonement** (10th Tishri), which was the one occasion when the High Priest would enter the innermost shrine of the Temple to atone for his own sins and the sins of the people. The other great festivals were **Passover** and **Unleavened Bread** (14–21st Abib — the first month), which commemorated the escape from slavery in Egypt. The Festival of **Pentecost** or **Weeks** commemorated the start of the harvest, and **Tabernacles** was Harvest itself. **Purim** commemorated Esther's deliverance of the Jews.

The Law of Moses required all Jews to be present at the Temple for these festivals at least once per year. The great weekly festival was the **Sabbath**, which began at 6pm on Friday evening and lasted until 6pm on Saturday evening. It was a day when no work was done and when the people turned their attention to worshipping God in accordance with the commandment: 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy' (Exodus 20:8).

The Temple and the synagogue

Regular worship took place in the local synagogue. Only men were permitted to play an active part and women and children were usually confined to the gallery. In charge was the ruler of the synagogue and the service followed a pattern: the creed, prayers, readings from the Law and the Prophets, and a sermon. During the week, the synagogue would also act as a school and community centre.

The order to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem had been given by King Herod the Great, although it was still not completed during the lifetime of Jesus. It was a large open area, divided into several courtyards by a series of walls. Non-Jews were confined to the outer courtyard (the Court of Gentiles). The Temple was also the place where animal sacrifices would be carried out. At the centre was a building called the Holy Place, inside which, covered by curtains, was the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of God. This was the sacred place the High Priest entered once a year on the Day of Atonement.

The Temple administration was much criticised; the High Priest was a political appointment, and the ordinary priests were civil servants and open to corruption. The ordinary people had to pay a Temple tax for the upkeep of the Temple, which they greatly resented, and the Temple, with its own guards, often resembled a fortress and a treasury rather than a place of worship.

The Law of Moses

The Law of Moses had been expanded and amplified. Along with the Ten Commandments and the first five books of the Old Testament (**Pentateuch**), there had grown up a large body of traditions that had come to be almost as binding as the Law itself. There were, therefore, precise rules for every occasion — for example, 39 types of action were forbidden on the Sabbath. These rules had become very complex, strict and overbearing, governing the lives of all the Jews. The problem was, as Jesus was to point out, that the spirit of God's Law had become lost in a mass of regulations.

1.4 The authorities

The Pharisees

The Pharisees (from *Parash* — 'the separated ones') were the largest of the religious parties, numbering about 6,000. They were purists who had probably grown out of the second-century BCE group the *Hasidim* ('God's loyal ones'). They controlled religious, rather than political, affairs, and worked mostly in the synagogues. Their main concern was to ensure that the people kept the Law and traditions in every exact detail and they saw themselves as model Jews. To this end, they kept themselves apart from the ordinary people. This made them generally unpopular as they were regarded as arrogant and aloof. Moreover, the evangelists' presentation of their insistence on the precise observation of the letter of the Law made them appear dry and legalistic, rather than loving and just, which may not be an altogether fair picture of them.

Jesus is presented as coming into conflict with the Pharisees over this — he did not dispute their faith, but he did argue against the ways in which they interpreted God's Law. The issues they debated are ones which would have been of particular concern at the time: marriage, divorce, adultery, Sabbath regulations and purity laws.

The Sadducees

Although smaller in number, the Sadducees were a very powerful group within Judaism. They were drawn from rich landowners and their main interest seemed to be in maintaining political power. Despite their small numbers, they held half the seats in the Sanhedrin and most of the chief priests were Sadducees. They opposed armed conflict and did not resist the Roman occupation of Israel, choosing instead to compromise, which made them very unpopular with the ordinary people. They were conservative in outlook, refusing to accept any revelation beyond the Pentateuch, and they rejected ideas such as immortality, resurrection and the existence of angels and demons — all of which were supported by the Pharisees.

The Essenes

The Essenes ('pious ones') were a mysterious religious group, founded by the unknown Teacher of Righteousness. They saw themselves as the true people of God and lived a strict, religious life. They believed themselves to be sons of light awaiting the final battle against the forces of darkness. The largest group of Essenes lived in the desert at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, and it may be that John the Baptist lived amongst them.

The Zealots

The Zealots were probably founded at around 6 BCE and saw themselves as revolutionaries and freedom fighters. They despised the Pharisees and Sadducees, who they felt had accepted Roman rule, and instead fought to free Israel from the Romans. They led many unsuccessful uprisings, based on their intense patriotism and belief that Roman rule was an offence to God. One of Jesus's disciples, Simon (not Peter), was probably a Zealot.

The Samaritans

These people were Israelites who lived in the region of Samaria. The people of Jerusalem did not accept the Samaritans as true Jews because their ancestors had intermarried with the Babylonian invaders centuries earlier. As a result, the Samaritans had their own Temple and worshipped God in their own way. The Jews of Jerusalem and Galilee despised the Samaritans. Interestingly, the evangelists present Samaritans in a positive light in encounters with Jesus and as the chief protagonist in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10: 20-37) and in Jesus's meeting with the Samaritan woman (John 4: 1-26).

The system of justice

In the villages, the priests and elders, who sat at the gates of the village, resolved the everyday matters of justice. The Sanhedrin decided more important cases. This was the supreme court in Jerusalem, which consisted of 70 priests and elders under the rule of the chief priest at the Temple. The Romans had granted to the Sanhedrin the right to pass any sentence permitted under Jewish law except the death sentence.

The Romans

The Romans were the political authorities in Israel. The land was part of the Roman Empire and was a very important province because it lay on the main eastern frontier of the Empire and its security was essential. It was one of the most difficult parts of the Empire to govern, not only because of the harshness of the landscape and the hot climate but also because the Jewish people refused to submit to their Roman conquerors. The Romans, as Gentiles, found it very difficult to understand the Jewish religion and, in order to maintain peace, made allowances for Jewish scruples. When they appointed Herod the Great to rule in 37 BCE, the Romans hoped that because he was half-Jewish he would be acceptable to the people. To an extent this was true, but when he died in 4 CE the Romans found that his sons were not able to rule as firmly as their father had. In 6 CE Judea, the province that included Jerusalem, was placed under the overall command of the Roman governor of Syria and ruled by a Roman officer of the upper-class equestrian rank — later called *procurators* — the most famous of which was Pontius Pilate, who governed Judea from 26-36 CE.

There were many revolts and uprisings against the Romans. For their part, the Jews were angry at their loss of freedom, although there were some within Jewish society who felt that the Romans offered greater protection and had actually made things better. The Romans, meanwhile, found it almost impossible to understand the special problems of the Jewish people and resorted to harsh oppression to keep the Jewish rebels under control. Things came to a head in 66-70 CE, when the Jewish Revolt led to the Roman army destroying Jerusalem.

2 The titles of Jesus

Throughout the New Testament Jesus is given a variety of titles and descriptions, many with symbolic meanings:

+ **Jesus** — this is a common first name for a Jewish male. It derives from Joshua and means 'The Lord is my help'.



+ **Christ** — this was not part of Jesus's name, but was a title given to him. It comes from the Greek *Christos* and Hebrew *Mashiach* (*Messiah*) which mean 'anointed one'. It was first used to describe anyone entrusted with a divine mission, such as a prophet, priest or king. From this, the notion grew up that an anointed one would one day come from God to save Israel and usher in a new messianic age, the kingdom of God. Many Jews saw the Messiah as the ideal human being who would destroy the enemies of Israel and set up a Jewish kingdom, ruled by the line of David. On the Last Day, the Messiah would gather together God's people for judgment and life in paradise.

+ **Lord** — this was a title given to gods, including God in the Old Testament. It was little used by the Gospel writers, but a great deal by Paul (222 times) to express the idea of Christ's rule over the entire world.

+ **Son of Man** — this was a title that Jesus used to describe himself. It came from the Old Testament and is the form of address used by God when talking to the prophet Ezekiel. It also refers to a heavenly figure mentioned in Daniel 7:13 as one who will some day come down from heaven to bring salvation and judgment. Jesus seems to fulfil the roles attributed to this eschatological figure. He uses this term when he speaks of his messianic authority on earth and in the age to come, and also of his suffering, death and resurrection.

+ **Son of David** — this was a Messianic title coming from the Old Testament notion that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. Jesus's adoptive relationship with Joseph grants him onto the Davidic line.

+ **Son of God** — in the Old Testament, this phrase was used to describe the King of Israel (Psalm 2:7). In the Gospels it highlights Jesus's unique relationship with God and for the evangelists it is the pre-eminent title for Jesus. Mark brings his Gospel to a climax with the centurion's confession at the foot of the cross that 'Surely this man was the Son of God' (15:39).

+ **I am (*Ego Eimi*)** — 'I am' is the name of God, given to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Jesus uses it exclusively in the Fourth Gospel to highlight his own divinity.

+ **The Lamb** — at Passover, a lamb would be sacrificed as an atonement for sins. The evangelists see Jesus's death in the same way. This was itself highlighted by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who said that the Servant of God (possibly meaning the Messiah) would be 'led like a lamb to the slaughter' (53:7).

3 Why did Jesus have to die?

How could Jesus have been brought to the cross by people who were blessed by his signs and wonders? (Jeremias, 1964)

Understanding the death of Jesus is a problem that has puzzled both believers and scholars. The New Testament addresses the issue in two different ways — one that is based upon the historical events of the time that led to Jesus's death, and the other which offers religious and theological reasons for his death. The two are inevitably interlinked, as the gospel writers demonstrate how the divine plans and purposes are revealed in the working out of the political manoeuvrings in the last weeks of Jesus's life.

3.1 The historical viewpoint

The Gospels show that Jesus's words and actions created unrest amongst those who encountered him, particularly the Jewish and Roman authorities. Jesus angered the Jewish religious leaders with his teachings, his healings on the Sabbath and his interpretation of the Law of Moses. He condemned the Pharisees and Sadducees as hypocritical and angered them with his claims concerning his relationship to God. In particular, the cleansing of the Temple market and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem led them to see him as a great danger, not only to their own status and position but also to the religious faith of the people — they feared that the people would accept the teachings of a false Messiah.

At the trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy — for claiming to be the Christ — and was sentenced to death for the ultimate religious crime. However, the Jewish authorities did not have the power to carry out such an execution; that power lay with the Romans. Blasphemy was not a crime under Roman law, and the Gospels record that when Jesus was brought before Pilate, the Jewish leaders instead suggested that he was a danger to the Romans because he had committed the treasonable act of calling himself the King of the Jews. Pilate was not convinced, but condemned Jesus to death because he did not want to risk trouble by upsetting the Jewish leaders. In a historical sense, therefore, Jesus died as a matter of religious and political expediency.

3.2 The religious viewpoint

The death of Jesus has great religious and theological significance that believers claim has consequences for the whole of creation. Much of the language used is symbolic, and five particular images of the death of Jesus are offered:

- ✦ **Defeat of evil** — Jesus's ministry has been depicted as a struggle against evil — sometimes in the form of the Devil and the forces of darkness (as in the exorcism miracles), and at other times in the form of Jesus fighting against the power of sin in people's lives. With his death and resurrection, Jesus is seen as having defeated the power of evil and sin for ever.
- ✦ **An example** — Jesus's life of humility and love for others culminates in the sacrifice of his own life to save people from the power of evil. His life is an example to believers, to encourage them to lead lives of humility and self-sacrifice: *'Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps'* (1 Peter 2:21).
- ✦ **A sacrifice** — in the ancient world, animals (and sometimes humans) were sacrificed in the hope of pleasing the gods, to seek favours or as a guilt offering for wrongful actions. In the Old Testament, sacrificial procedures were laid down specifically: *'if a person sins and does what is forbidden in any of the Lord's commands... He is to bring to the priest as a guilt offering a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way, the priest will make atonement for him for the wrong he has committed'* (Leviticus 5:17–18). At the time of the first Passover, the people of Israel are saved by the sacrifice of a lamb — the blood from the lamb being put on the doors of their houses to save them from destruction (Exodus 12:13).

The sacrificial rituals of Judaism were very elaborate — the animals were killed as a reminder to the people that they were sinners who deserved to die. The priest

would take the blood of the animal to the altar as a symbol representing the sinner's life being given up to God — the animal, in effect, died in the place of the sinful human. This was called an act of **atonement** and meant that the punishment due for the sins had been carried out. God, in accepting the sacrifice, forgave the human sinner. Jesus was the ultimate sacrificial lamb. In the Last Supper he showed how his death would lead to the forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation of God and humanity: *'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'* (Luke 22:20), and Paul wrote, *'For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed'* (1 Corinthians 5:7).

✦ **A ransom** — a ransom is an offering made to free someone else, for example a fee paid to a kidnapper. In the Roman world, it was possible to pay a ransom to set a slave free. The New Testament often refers to humanity as being slaves to sin, and Jesus's sacrifice is the payment of the ransom price to secure freedom from this slavery to sin: *'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'* (Mark 10:45). *'His death was believed to bring perfect forgiveness and was a perfect offering of obedience to the Father'* (O'Donnell, 1999).

✦ **Taking humanity's place** — people are seen as being so weighed down by the burden and power of sin that they cannot be freed from it by their own actions, and so Jesus has to die in place of humanity because that is the only way in which humanity can be helped. The prophet Isaiah foretold this in the Old Testament. He spoke of the Suffering Servant who would take the punishment due to the people of God (Isaiah 53). This was later emphasised in 1 Peter 2:24: *'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds we are healed.'*

This concept is not about God being a judgmental figure demanding death as a punishment for sins, but is about the nature of love. God cannot just dismiss sins any more than a doctor examining a patient with a life-threatening illness can just say 'forget it and it will go away'. Sin must be dealt with and this is done through an act of punishment. However, humanity cannot itself take the punishment because it is too great. Humanity needs help and this is what Jesus gives. His death means that he takes the punishment for humanity, thus freeing them from sin: *'if there is anything distinctive about the teaching of Jesus, it has to be the way he redefined God, replacing the harsh, confrontational image of judgment and condemnation, with the language of family love and acceptance'* (Drane, 1999).

B The nature of the Gospels

1 The character of the Synoptic Gospels

Although the three Synoptic Gospels tell the story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, they all tell it from a slightly different perspective, depending on the author's own particular interests and purposes. The differences between the gospel accounts were overlooked — or blurred — for centuries, but a full appreciation of them is vital to understand the real concerns of the evangelists.