

Judean Background at the Time of our Lord

Sub-Dn. Lazarus Der-Ghazarian

By the time of the advent of our Lord Christ, Judea had been under foreign domination for six centuries. During this time, although politically dominated, Judea retained its religious sovereignty. The high-priesthood during this period became an important, coveted political position. There also came to be a body of advisors connected with the high-priesthood known as the Sanhedrin which in the late Greek period became the supreme Judean tribunal. The priesthood was the recognizable element of Judean formal religious life but it increasingly became viewed as non-representative of the religious aspirations of the common Jew. Several factors led the nation to turn its focus to the study of the Law. These included such things as a strong and independent sense of being God's Holy people and the end of the era of the prophets. The interpreters of the Law, the scribes, became increasingly influential in religious leadership. The Hebrew religion became centered on the Holy Scriptures and an authoritative mass of interpretative precedent [Walker, 12].

For purposes of worship and to enable the study of the Law, Jewish religious life began to be centered around the synagogue. The synagogue was comprised of a local congregation administered by a council of elders with a ruler over them. This council had the power to excommunicate and administer discipline. As the importance of the local synagogue grew, the temple though still highly revered diminished in its relevance to everyday Jewish life. This was also a result of the distancing of the priesthood from the daily life of the people [Walker, 12-13].

The next era, the Maccabean revolt, was the direct result of the policy of forced Hellenism by Antiochus IV, Epiphanes (BC 175-164). This in turn led to a short period Judean independence, resulting from the successes of the revolt. This independence ended with the Roman conquest of Palestine in BC 63. The ruling Maccabean family became joined to the high-priesthood office. It wasn't long before they became corrupt with purely political interests. With the Maccabean ruler John Hyrcannus, the aristocratic-political party and leading priestly families came to be known as the Sadducees. They were worldlier in outlook and represented the older, conservative form of Judaism. They denied a resurrection, personal immortality and the belief in spirits or angels [Acts 23:8]. The Sadducees were at once politically influential and unpopular with the majority of common people [Walker, 13]. The Sadducees' beliefs, with no hope of resurrection, did not speak to the great religious aspirations of the Hebrew people.

The Pharisees, whose name connoted "the separated," were in many ways opposite of the Sadducees. They were strongly against foreign influences, stood for the Law as interpreted by the traditions and were known for their legalistic outlook. Not a political party and never very large, the Pharisees held the admiration of the majority of the Jewish people. Yet the Pharisees held the mass of the Jewish people in derision for their lack of knowledge of the Mosaic Law. The chief emphasis of the Pharisees was the exact keeping of the Law. Unlike the Sadducees they believed in angels, the Resurrection and eternal rewards for the good and bad. Like the majority of the people, the Pharisees looked for the coming of the Messiah. From them came some of Christ's apostles including the most learned of them, St. Paul.

Despite the remarkable dedication of the Pharisees to the Law their ideology had two failings. First, they saw religion primarily as the keeping of external laws for the sake of rewards. This did not address the longing in man's heart to have a relationship with a personal, loving

Creator. Their emphasis on legal perfection also made those who were not as committed or perfected as the Pharisees to feel left out and without hope of salvation. In other words, the Pharisees' doctrine did not speak to the lost or unrighteous. As Walker states, "It disinherited the 'lost sheep' of the house of Israel" [14]. Because of this, the Pharisees "received the well-merited condemnation of Christ" [Walker, 14].

The next significant Judean leader was Herod the Great (BC 37- 4). Herod made significant advances re-building Judea including the re-construction of a magnificent Temple. Yet he was not accepted by the people because 1) he was only half Jewish and 2) because he was considered a tool of the Romans and a Hellenizer. Disliked by both Sadducees and Pharisees, upon his death, Herod's kingdom was divided between his three sons. Archelaus became ethnarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea (BC 4 - AD 6); Herod Antipas tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (BC 4 - AD 39), and Philip tetrarch of the heathen areas east and north of the Sea of Galilee. Archelaus, after being deposed by the Emperor Augustus, was replaced by a Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate (AD 26 - 36) [Walker, 14]. The immorality and political betrayal of the Jewish people by the Herodians made them long for a righteous king and a new David.

With Roman control of Judea ever increasing, the hope of the Jewish people for freedom turned more and more to the promised advent of a Messiah. They looked to the Messiah as a supernatural deliverer who would bring to an end Roman rule in Judea. This Messiah would be of Davidic descent (Mic. 5:1) and be preceded by a forerunner (Mal. 3:1). He would usher in a golden age of a restored Israel where the scattered sheep of Israel could return. At this time a body of literature was created to support and foster this hope. This apocalyptic literature typically painted a bleak picture of the present and contrasted this with a glorious one of the messianic age to come. It served to help give the Jewish people hope during perilous times and persecutions and also to offset the stark legalism of the Pharisees.

The third religious community, besides the Sadducees and the Pharisees, was the recently discovered community of Qumran which was likely connected with the Essenes mentioned in antiquity. These communities lived a semi-monastic life. Whereas the Qumran community allowed for marriage, the Essenes did not. These communities were formed in protest against the established Judaism of Jerusalem. They held in honor a Teacher of Righteousness. They renewed annually their Covenant and also shared ritual meals of bread and wine. They believed they were the true and enlightened Congregation of Israel. Their leaders consisted of an overseer, "priests of Zadok," elders, judges, etc. They looked forward to the rising of a new Prophet, a new Teacher, a High Priest and a King who would come to gather Israel together to combat her enemies and commence the "age of the Kingdom." These semi-monastic communities are believed to have had a profound influence on Christianity. Some suggest that St. John the Forerunner and even some of the twelve disciples may have come from them [Walker, 16].

Another important aspect of Judaism at the advent of Christianity that had a profound influence on Christianity was the concept of "wisdom." Wisdom, in certain Scriptures, was personified and described as being with God at the time of creation and even as being a co-creator with God. For instance, Proverbs 3:21 (LXX) states, "God by wisdom founded the earth and prepared the heavens with discernment." The Book of Wisdom speaks at length on wisdom stating that Wisdom is, "Holy, only-begotten... man loving, all powerful, the emanation of the pure glory of the Almighty, the radiance of eternal light, the image of His Goodness." In addition to this it is probable that the Stoic idea of the divine Logos also influenced Christianity via Judaism. All of these texts have parallels in the New Testament in regard to our Lord Christ. For

instance, He is referred to as the Logos (or Word) in the prologue of the Gospel of St. John (1:1-3). In the same Gospel, He is referred to as “only-begotten” (3:16). In the Book of Hebrews, Jesus is described as the one “through whom also [God] made the worlds” and “who being the brightness of [God’s] glory and the express image of His person,” is the one “upholding all things by the word of His power” (1:2-3). These are but a few of the texts demonstrating how the Jewish Old Testament personification of Wisdom helped the early Church and Evangelists to recognize that the Messiah was eternally present with the Father from the foundation of the world.

The Dispersion of the Jews itself greatly aided the spread and diffusion of Christianity throughout the world. Walker states that at the birth of our Lord Christ it was estimated that there were five to six times as many Jews living outside of Palestine as there were within it. There were substantial communities in Alexandria, Syria, Asia Minor and even a small population in Rome. In fact, there were few cities in the empire that did not have Jews in them. Thus as the Apostles went out with the Gospel to reach 1) the large Jewish communities and 2) then the smaller ones in the dispersion, the Good News inevitably spread to the host Gentile nations as well.

Because the Jewish Bible had been translated into Greek during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (BC 285-246) in Alexandria, Egypt, this further made the Christian faith accessible to the entire Roman Empire -to those who were literate. Because of Alexandrian interpreters of the Bible, like Philo, the belief began to prevail that the Old Testament and Greek philosophy were essentially in agreement. As Walker writes, this was “of far-reaching significance for the development of Christian theology” [17]. Philo viewed the Logos as flowing “out of the being of God Himself, and is the agent not merely through whom God created the world, but from whom all other powers flow” [17]. Philo was remarkable in the way he demonstrated that Hebrew and Hellenic belief could be combined as they actually were in the development of Christian theology.

Thus the background of Judaism in the time leading up the New Testament was marked by immoral kings, two dominant religious parties opposed to one another in political and religious ideology and a third religious semi-monastic movement in reaction to the religious establishment. The control of Israel had passed successively into the hands of such superpowers as Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and then Rome. The bleak Judean political outlook fed the apocalyptic fervor of the people and the literature which expressed and sustained this fervor. The influence of Greek thought had come to be seen by some as complimentary to the Hebrew faith to such an extent that even the Scriptures were now widely available in the Greek tongue. The world stage was set for the advent of the long-awaited messiah and the faith which He would establish.