

CHAPTER 2

NEW TESTAMENT BACKGROUNDS

Jewish Religious Writings

In addition to the OT, available to the Jews in the original Hebrew, the Aramaic Targums, and the LXX, there were other Jewish religious writings produced up to NT times. Protestant Christians do not believe these other writings were inspired, but they do provide valuable information regarding the popular religious beliefs and aspirations of the Jews at that time.

Intertestament apocrypha and pseudepigrapha

From ca. 200 B.C. to ca. A.D. 100 various Jews and early Christians produced many writings which are religious in nature and were considered by many to be important or even canonical. These writings can be divided roughly into two groups: the Apocrypha consists of works which were considered canonical by some, and many of which are an official part of the Roman Catholic Scriptures; the Pseudepigrapha are works under a false or assumed name.

Two standard works are R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; 1913); and James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; 1983). A helpful survey is Leonhard Rost, *Judaism Outside the Hebrew Canon* (trans. By David E. Green; 1971, 1976). Also helpful is Henry R. Moeller, *The Legacy of Zion, Intertestamental Texts Related to the New Testament* (1977), which quotes sections that can provide background for NT passages.

Apocrypha

The term “apocryphal” means “hidden,” and was applied by the Jews to books they felt were unsuitable for reading in the synagogues. Most of these books have come down to us in the Greek MSS of the LXX. A few of them have been found in Aramaic or Hebrew among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Rost lists the apocryphal books as follows:

- Judith
- Wisdom of Solomon

- Tobit
- Ecclesiasticus
- Letter o Jeremiah
- 1 Maccabees
- 2 Maccabees
- Additions to Esther
- Additions to Daniel
- Prayer of Manasseh
- 3 Ezra (or 3 Esdras)

While the Roman Catholic Church accepts the Apocrypha as canonical, the early church did not. Protestants receive the same canon held by the Jews in the apostolic period, the 39 books of the OT (cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:8). Nowhere does the NT quote the Apocrypha as Scripture.

Pseudepigrapha

These writings are “falsely named”; they are attributed to authors who did not write them. Rost lists these works as follows:

- Letter of Aristeas
- 3 Maccabees
- 4 Maccabees
- Enoch (Slavonic & Ethiopic eds.)
- Sibylline Oracles
- Apocalypse of Baruch (Greek & Syriac)
- Psalms of Solomon
- 4 Ezra
- Jubilees
- Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs
- Assumption of Moses
- Martyrdom of Isaiah
- Life of Adam and Eve

These works have less of a claim to credibility than do even the Apocrypha. But they are of great importance in revealing some of the underlying attitudes of Judaism in its various groups during the NT period.

In a few places the NT parallels the Pseudepigrapha in its information. In these cases we assume that the Pseudepigrapha record true tradition.

- Heb 11:37; cf. Martyrdom of Isaiah
- Jude 9; cf. Assumption of Moses
- Jude 14-15; cf. Book of Enoch

Other intertestament writings

The discovery in 1945 of the Dead Sea texts at Qumran and in the surrounding caves has revealed several writings of that sect, in addition to copies of writings already extant. The non-canonical writings are these:

- Rule of the Community (or Manual of Discipline)
- Damascus Document
- War Scroll
- Commentary on Habakkuk
- Genesis Apocryphon
- Thanksgiving Scroll
- Temple Scroll

Trends in intertestament literature

For helpful summaries of the background and content of these writings, see these articles in the *ZPEB*: R. K. Harrison, “Apocrypha” and “Dead Sea Scrolls”; W. W. Gasque, “Pseudepigrapha.”

Gasque sums up the prevailing emphases of this literature as follows: “Various new features are prominent in these writings. Among them are: a highly elaborate system of angelology; a concentration on the apocalyptic; speculation concerning the coming of Messiah and the nature of the Messianic age; and a strong doctrine of the resurrection of the body. In addition, there is a common body of religious ideas and terminology (e.g. the doctrine of the two ages, the Son of man, etc.) that the Pseudepigrapha writings share with the NT writings.” (*ZPEB* 4:950)

Study of these writings, therefore, is of great help in the general study of NT backgrounds and theology.

Jewish Groups in the NT Period

Several prominent Jewish groups or subcultures developed by the end of the intertestament period. Many of them are mentioned in the NT.

Pharisees

Theologically and practically, the Pharisees were the most powerful force in Judaism in the time of Jesus and the apostles. They had the most allegiance from the Jewish population, and set the tone for traditional and Orthodox Judaism ever since.

Background

The Pharisees were the successors of the earlier Hasidim, who became the strong popular party under the Hasmoneans. The derivation of the name “Pharisee” is uncertain. Most take it to come from the verb *paras*, “to separate.” In that sense, the Pharisees considered themselves “separate” from the wicked rabble around them. Some have suggested that the term is related to *Parsi*, “Persian,” and that the Pharisees were given that name by their opponents, who accused them of sympathizing with Zoroastrian ideals and traditions.

The party of the Pharisees is first heard of in the reign of John Hyrcanus. At that time they opposed the monarchy, being popular and anti-aristocratic. Later the Pharisees opposed Herod the Great and his family, and nursed an underlying hostility to Rome.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 all Jews sympathized with the Pharisee position, and Pharisaism became normative Judaism, and continued to do so until modern times. Today Pharisaism survives in Orthodox Jewry.

Beliefs

The Pharisees prided themselves in their high ideals, especially in their desire to live according to the laws of the Torah and the related regulations promulgated by the rabbis, later codified in the Mishnah and Talmud. Thus their law consisted in the 613 Commandments found in the books of Moses plus hundreds of additional laws passed on by oral tradition.

Theologically, the Pharisees were more ready to believe supernatural doctrines, and in that sense could be considered as conservative. They adopted the following beliefs:

- Inspiration of the entire OT
- Supreme authority of the law and oral tradition
- Divine sovereignty
- Angels and demons
- Immortality of the soul
- Bodily resurrection of the dead
- Rewards and punishments in the afterlife

While many of these beliefs were good (cf. Acts 23:6-9), the Pharisees’ adherence to their tradition and their spiritual pride blinded them to the heart of the gospel (Matt 15:3; 23:13, 23).

Sadducees

In the time of Christ the Sadducees, although fewer in number, were the most powerful group politically. The high priestly family was Sadducee, and that group ruled the Sanhedrin, and cooperated with the Romans in the rule of Judea.

Background

Just as the Pharisees were derived from the earlier Hasidim, the Sadducees were the descendents of the Hellenizers. However, when the Hasmonean kings achieved freedom from Syrian (and, therefore, Hellenistic) pressure, the Hellenizers lost their *raison d'être*. Therefore, they became the strong pro-monarchy party, as opposed to the more popular Pharisees. This political evolution created the historical irony that the descendents of the Hellenizers were now allied with the descendents of the Maccabees. The name "Sadducee" comes from an unknown source. Many believe that it is related to the name Zadok, the high priest under David and Solomon, whose line dominated the high priesthood for hundreds of years. Other theories associate the name with the word *sadiq*, "righteous," or with the Greek word *sundikos*, "syndic," meaning "judge," or "fiscal controller."

The Sadducees from the time of John Hyrcanus were the pro-monarchy party. They were exclusive and aristocratic. While many of them were priests, and their leaders were high priests, many Sadducees were not priests. Quite often Jews who returned to Israel from the Dispersion joined the Sadducee party, because they were more at home in the Greek and Roman culture then current.

By and large, the Sadducees controlled the Sanhedrin, but they were a minority party in Judaism. They were largely indebted to the Romans for their place of power; thus they felt threatened by his ministry and claims (John 11:48-51). After the revolt in A.D. 67-70 the Jews considered the Sadducees and pro-Roman traitors, and Sadduceeism ceased to be a force in Judaism.

Beliefs

The Sadducees considered themselves the conservative party in Judaism. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees held to only the written law, and refused to add the traditions of men to its requirements. Only in the area of ritual Levitical purity were they legalistic, observing many traditions related to the temple service itself.

Most of what we know about their doctrines is in the form of negations; they contradicted Pharisaical doctrines in the following ways:

- No law or Scripture but the Torah (with the exception of temple regulations)
- "Free will" instead of predestination
- No angels or demons
- No soul or afterlife
- No resurrection
- No rewards or retribution after death

In two places in the NT the Sadducees' doctrine comes to the fore:

- Dispute with Jesus in the temple (Matt 22:23-33 and parallels)
- Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:6-10).

The Sadducees, along with the Pharisees, opposed the ministry of Christ and his apostles (cf. Acts 5:17-18, 40).

Essenes

The Essenes comprised a subculture of diverse groups that denied the spiritual leadership of the mainline Jewish groups. Often mystical or reclusive, the Essenes lived on the fringes of Jewish society. Many believe they were represented by the Dead Sea community that produced the DSS.

Background

The Essenes possibly originated as Hasidic refugees under Alexander Jannaeus. These purists separated themselves from institutional corruptions as well as the ceremonial ones. Therefore, they established their own customs and ceremonies.

Beliefs

The only historical literary sources that describe the Essenes are references in Philo and in Josephus.

The Essenes were an extremely legalistic sect of Jews, which held itself aloof from normal Jewish religious life. The Essenes were separate from the Jerusalem temple; they believed it was tainted and corrupt. They worshiped the Lord with their own calendar and ritual. Their writings appear to have an apocalyptic emphasis, with their living in the end times.

The Essenes were very exclusive, with a period of trial for every new candidate for their sect. Also, they did not believe in marriage, but remained celibate. Josephus describes them as wearing white garments, and traveling two by two, preaching their doctrines throughout the villages of Judea.

Possible relation to Qumran

In many ways the rigid rules and austere life of the Qumran community are similar to the lifestyle of the Essenes. Yet there are important differences, including differences in ceremonies and sacrifices, dietary regulations, special days, and especially marriage—the Qumran community may have lived in families, as remains of children have been found there. In addition, the Essenes apparently were pacifists, while Qumran literature glorifies “holy” warfare.

These results have led many scholars to conclude that the Qumran sect was a group related to the Essenes, but perhaps a breakaway from them. Others suggest that there were many such independent groups at the time, the Qumran sect being one such group. [For a good summary of the evidence, see Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (1955), 279-298.]

Possible relation to John the Baptist

Some have suggested that Luke 1:80 indicates that John spent his childhood and youth under the tutelage of an Essene community in the Judean desert, perhaps even at Qumran itself. They point also to his unusual clothing and eating habits (Matt 3:4).

While it is possible that he had contacts with such sects, it is apparent from his preaching that John's source of values was derived not from the Essenes, but from the OT. In addition, as the last of the prophets of that dispensation, he received divine guidance in his preaching. In contrast to the Essenes, he encouraged the normal worship of the Jews, including the temple services in Jerusalem; only he insisted that the religious leaders should repent and bring forth the fruits of righteousness. Jesus shared the same perspective.

Scribes

In the NT accounts of Jesus' ministry he often was questioned and interacted with scribes, translated "teachers of the law" in the NIV. They are found in the company of various Jewish groups.

Background

In earlier OT times a scribe was an amanuensis, one who took dictation or copied manuscripts. Such a one was Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah (Jer 36:4, 32). However, by the time of the return from Babylon, a scribe was also considered a student and teacher of the law, the most prominent example being Ezra the scribe (Ezra 7:6, 10).

In the intertestament period the scribes were the leaders in establishing and conducting the synagogue schools throughout Israel, and they also often directed the synagogues themselves.

Because of their interest in the fine points of the law, and, later, the tradition of the elders, nearly all scribes belonged to the party of the Pharisees. When the gospels speak of "the scribes and the Pharisees," normally they consider them as one group, that is, a group of Pharisees, some of whom were also scribes.

Duties of scribes

The Jewish scribes in the time of Jesus had three main functions:

1. To preserve and develop the law. The scribes remembered and passed down to the next generation all the “traditions of the elders”; these consisted of the 613 individual commandments of the Torah and the various additional interpretations and regulations designed to “hedge” these laws about, so that no one could break them.
2. To teach the law. The scribes were the ones who taught the Jewish children and the whole populace what these laws, regulations, and traditions were.
3. To administer the law. Often the scribes, because of their detailed knowledge of the law and jurisprudence, served as lawyers and judges (cf. Matt 22:35; Mark 2:16).

The scribes wielded much power in Jewish society and were highly respected by the Jewish people. For this reason a scribe was called “Rabbi,” meaning “my great one” or “my master.” This form of address is used one time in the NT for John the Baptist (John 3:26) and often for Jesus (e.g., John 4:31). John and Jesus both received this title because they were religious teachers.

Zealots

The Zealots were more of a political party than a religious group. They were the active opponents to Roman rule. Their main Jewish enemies were the Herodians, the pro-Roman party (cf. Mark 3:6; 12:13).

In Acts 5:35-39 Gamaliel referred to the Zealot leader Judas the son of Ezekias. Most of these Zealot-led revolts began in Galilee.

The radical or fanatical wing of the Zealots was the *Sicarii* (from the Latin word *sica*, “dagger”). These people used terrorism, assassination, and revolution to fight for independence. The Roman tribune in Jerusalem mistakenly associated Paul with this movement (Acts 21:38).

As Jewish history progressed toward the revolt of A.D. 67-70, the Zealots became bolder. By A.D. 66 the Zealots had reached sufficient influence to bring the whole country into open revolt against Rome.

Apparently, one of Jesus’ disciples was a Zealot. His name is recorded twice as *Simon Zealotes*, or Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). In two other places his name takes another form. In the KJV it is rendered “Simon the Canaanite”; but that is a mistranslation of the Textus Receptus, which has only one *a* and should be rendered “Simon the Cananite,” that is, a man from Cana in Galilee (Matt 10:4; Mark 3:18). However, the best Greek MSS read in those two references “Simon the Cananaean” (*Simon ho Kananaios*); his name is rendered such in many standard translations (ASV, RSV, NASB, ESV). The word “Cananaean” probably does not refer to a town, but to the Zealots, coming from the Aramaic word *Qanan*, meaning “enthusiast, zealot” (see *BDAG*, 507). If that is the case, his name should be translated “Simon

the Zealot” in all four occurrences, as in done in the NIV. We assume that, after becoming an apostle of Jesus, Simon gave up his involvement with the Zealots.