

LESSON ONE – The New Testament Church

Judaism in Palestine

“The early Christians did not believe that the time and place of the birth of Jesus had been left to chance. On the contrary, they saw the hand of God preparing the advent of Jesus in all events prior to the birth, and in all the historical circumstances around it. The same could be said about the birth of the church, which resulted from the work of Jesus. God had prepared the way so that the disciples, after receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, could be witnesses ‘in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.’ Acts 1:8” – Justo L. Gonzalez¹

Palestine has long been a land of strife and suffering. This was mainly due to its geographical position. It was at the crossroads of the great trade routes that joined Egypt with Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor with Arabia. In the 4th century BC, Alexander and his Macedonian armies defeated the Persians and Alexander became master of Palestine.

Hellenism

- The conquests of Alexander sought to justify themselves on an ideological basis. He did not wish to simply conquer the world, but to unite it by spreading the insights of Greek civilization. The result is known as Hellenism. Although the precise nature of Hellenism varied from place to place, it did provide the eastern Mediterranean basin with a unity that opened the way to Roman conquest and later, to the preaching of the gospel.
- 63 BC – Roman General Pompey conquered Palestine.
- 40 BC – Herod the Great appointed king of Judea. Herod had a distant Maccabean claim through marriage.

Pharisees

- To the Pharisee party it was of utmost importance to be faithful to the law of Moses and for that reason they studied and debated how the law was to be applied in every conceivable situation. This is where the charge of legalism was attached to them. It is true that they were legalistic but they were also attempting to make the faith of Israel relevant to everyday situations and to the new circumstances of Roman rule. They also held to certain doctrines such as the final resurrection and the existence of angels that more conservative Jews declared to be mere innovations.

Sadducees

- The more conservative Jews were the Sadducees. Most of them belonged to the Jewish aristocracy and they were conservative in both religion and politics. In religion their focus centered around the Temple, which they held with the support of the Romans, who in turn found the political conservatism of the Sadducees much to their liking. The Sadducees rejected many of the doctrines of the Pharisees.

Diaspora Jews

- For centuries before the birth of Jesus, the number of Jews living outside of Palestine was increasing. By the time of Jesus there were large Jewish communities in every major city in the Roman Empire. These Jews, called the Diaspora, scattered throughout the Roman Empire still had strong emotional and religious ties to the land of their ancestors.
- Diaspora Judaism is very important for the history of Christianity because it was one of the main roads in which the new faith expanded throughout the Roman Empire. Diaspora Judaism also, unwittingly, provided the church with one of the most useful tools of its missionary expansion, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

The Septuagint (Greek Translation of the Old Testament)

- The Septuagint was of enormous importance to the early church. It is the version most quoted by the New Testament authors, and it profoundly influenced the formation of the early church vocabulary.

The Greco-Roman World

The Roman Empire brought unprecedented political unity to the Mediterranean basin. Although each region kept some of its ancient laws and traditions, the general policy of the empire was to encourage as much uniformity as possible.

Syncretism

- Mixing elements of various religions
- Emperor Worship

Rome wanted to have its subjects from different lands believe that, even though their gods had different names than the Roman Pantheon, they were ultimately the same gods. Traditions and beliefs were easily mingled among the people to the point that the original form was barely recognizable. In this context, Jews and Christians were seen as unbending fanatics who insisted on worshipping their one God.

Christianity and Philosophy

- Socrates and Plato
- Stoicism

The Church in Jerusalem

“The book of Acts affirms that from the very beginning there was a strong church in Jerusalem. But then that very book moves onto other matters, and tells us very little about the later history of that Christian community. The rest of the New Testament offers a few other bits of information. But it, too, deals mostly with the life of the church in other parts of the empire. Yet, by piecing together what the New Testament tells us with information gathered from other authors, one can come to a general idea of the life of that earliest Christian community and its later history.” – Justo L. Gonzalez²

“Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.” Acts 6:1.

- Acts 6 is not dealing with Jews and Gentiles, for the book of Acts makes it clear that at that time there were still no Gentiles in the church.
- Acts 7 tells us the story of Stephen who was one of the seven appointed as deacons in Acts 6.
- By Acts 9 the focus is shifting increasingly to Paul and less is told about the church in Jerusalem. Gentiles are quickly overshadowing the earlier Jewish Christian community.
- The earliest Christian did not consider themselves followers of a new religion. All their lives they had been Jews and still were. This is true of the twelve, the seven and Paul. Their faith was not a denial of Judaism but was rather the belief that the Messianic age had finally arrived.
- Jewish Christians continued to observe the Sabbath and attend Temple worship. To this they added observance on the first day of the week, where they gathered to break bread and celebrate the resurrection.
- Early communion services did not focus on the passion of Jesus but rather His victory through which a new age dawned.
- Two days of weekly fasting were set aside for sorrow for sin.
- Authority in the early church was mainly vested in the twelve apostles.

Increased Persecution

- Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great, ordered the death of James, the brother of John. (not to be confused with James the brother of Jesus)
- Herod arrested Peter, but Peter escaped.
- In 62 AD, James the brother of Jesus was killed by order of the high priest.
- The leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem decided to move to Pella, a city beyond the Jordan.
- Jewish nationalism was reaching a boiling point. In 66 AD a rebellion broke out which would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD by Roman armies.

Gentile Dominated Church

- Even though the church was now more Gentile than Jew it continued to appeal to Jews throughout the Roman Empire.
- The church continued to claim it was the fulfillment of Judaism.
- At this time there was always the inclination among Christians, even Gentile Christians, to go back to their Jewish roots in ways the leadership of the church thought was inappropriate.
- There were also Jewish groups seeking converts among the Gentiles putting them in direct competition with the church.
- The Jewish-Christian polemic continued long after the church had become mostly Gentile.

- Many Christians wrote treatises against Judaism. These were not directed at Jews but rather Christians who might be attracted to Judaism.

Mission to the Gentiles

I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. – Romans 1:16

“Those Christians whom Acts calls ‘Hellenist,’ while Jewish, showed a degree of openness to Hellenistic culture. Since they were the first to be persecuted in Jerusalem, they were the first to be scattered throughout the neighboring towns, and thus they were also the first to take the Christian message to those areas.” – Justo L. Gonzalez³

- Acts 8 tells us about the scattering of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians throughout Judea and Samaria.
- Acts 9 speaks of Peter’s visits to the Christian communities of Lydda, Sharon and Joppa, all of Judea.
- Acts 8 tells of the work of Philip in Samaria; and the visit of John and Peter.
- The mission of Philip in Samaria and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch are the first indications of the church’s willingness to receive non-Jews, but the issue is finally faced in Acts 10 with Peter and Cornelius which leads the church in Jerusalem to the conclusion: “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life.” Acts 11:18.
- The book of Acts devotes several chapters to Paul’s missionary journeys. It will suffice to say that Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Paul, and together they spent a year in Antioch, where followers of Jesus were first called Christians. During a number of voyages, Paul, along with Barnabas and others took the gospel to Cyprus, to several cities in Asia Minor, to Greece, to Rome and perhaps Spain, although that is not confirmed by any historical record.

Changes in Church Worship

- When Christians were removed from the synagogue, they began gathering in private homes, at least on Sunday to break bread, but more frequently for instruction and support in an increasingly hostile world.
- The increasing number of Gentile converts made it necessary for there to be longer periods of instruction and training before admittance into the church through baptism.
- Services were divided into two parts, the service of the Word and the service of the table. All would gather for the service of Word but before communion those who had not yet been baptized were dismissed.

Conflicts with the State

From the very beginning, being a Christian was not easy. Stephen was killed in the infancy of the church, James was killed at Herod Agrippa’s order and ever since, all the way to our day, there have been many who have sealed their witness with their blood.

- Early Christians did not believe they were following a new religion. They were Jews, and the main difference with the rest of Judaism was that they were convinced the Messiah had come.
- The early proclamation to the Gentiles was not an invitation to join a new religion, but rather to become participants in the promises made to Abraham and his descendants.
- From the viewpoint of the Jews who did not embrace Jesus as the Messiah, Christianity was seen, not as a new religion but as a heretical sect within Judaism.
- Many Jews believed that the reason they had lost their independence to Greece and then to Rome was that the people had not been sufficiently faithful to the traditions of their ancestors.
- Nationalistic sentiment was aroused by the fear that these new heretics would bring the wrath of God once again upon Israel.
- Romans, Jews and Christians agreed that what was taking place was a conflict among the Jews. As long as things were orderly, the Romans stayed out of the matter.
- The distinction between Christians and Jews became clearer as the church gained more converts among the Gentiles.
- This new awareness of Christianity as a separate religion was the root of two and a half centuries of persecution by the Roman Empire. From the time of Nero to the conversion of Constantine.

Persecution Under Nero

Nero reached the Roman throne in October of 54 AD. In the beginning of his reign, he was a reasonable ruler but he became increasingly infatuated by dreams of grandeur and his lust for pleasure. He surrounded himself with a court where all vied to satisfy his every whim. Ten years after his accession to the throne he was despised by the general population. Not long after the rumor began to spread that he was mad.

- In June of 64 AD a great fire broke out in Rome.
- The rumor arose and persists to this day, that Nero started the fire himself so he could rebuild Rome to his fancy.
- Two areas of Rome that did not burn contained many Jewish and Christian citizens. Nero saw this as a good excuse to blame the fire on the Christians.

The Roman historian Tacitus tells the story “In spite of every human effort, of the emperor’s largesse, and of the sacrifices made to the gods, nothing sufficed to allay suspicion nor to destroy the opinion that the fire had been ordered, Therefore in order to destroy this rumor, Nero blamed the Christians, who are hated for their abominations, and punished them with refined cruelty. Christ, from who they take their name, was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Stopped for the moment this evil superstition reappeared not only in Judea, where was the root of the evil, but also in Rome, where all things sordid and abominable from every corner of the world came together. Thus, first those who confessed [that they were Christians] were arrested, and on the basis of their testimony a great number were condemned, although not so much for the fire as for their hatred of mankind.”

Tacitus goes on: “Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it. Nero opened his own gardens for these shows, and in the circus he himself became a spectacle, for he mingled with the people dressed as a charioteer, or he rode around in his chariot. All of this aroused the mercy of the people, even against these culprits who deserved exemplary punishment, for it was clear that they were not being destroyed for the common good, but rather to satisfy the cruelty of one person.”⁴

- In 68 AD, Nero was deposed by a rebellion that had gained support of the Roman senate, and he committed suicide.
- A period of political turmoil followed and 69 AD is known as the year of four emperors. Eventually Vespasian gained control of the Roman government, and during his reign and that of his son, Titus, Christians were generally ignored by the Roman authorities.

Persecution Under Domitian

- Domitian became emperor after Titus and at first paid no attention to the Christians. Domitian loved Roman traditions and sought to restore them.
- Since Christians rejected the Roman gods and many of the religious traditions, they stood in the way of Domitian’s dreams and this was likely the cause of his persecution against them.
- Jews also fell out of favor with the new emperor and he enacted strict laws against Judaism.
- Persecution was not severe throughout the whole empire and seems limited to Rome and Asia Minor.
- Like Nero, Domitian was seen increasingly as a tyrant by many Roman citizens and was eventually murdered in his own palace.
- After Domitian’s fall, persecution ceased for a few years and Christians lived in relative peace.

¹ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 13

² The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 25

³ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 31

⁴ The Story of Christianity, Volume One, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 45