

To find the answers to these questions, we need first to understand the world where they lived, which itself was far from homogeneous, and encompassed two significant and distinctive contexts: the Greek and Roman, and the Jewish and Palestinian.

The Greek heritage

In the world of the first Christians, the outward forms of administration and government were those of the Roman empire, but its cultural roots were embedded in a different world altogether. The way people spoke and thought, their aspirations and achievements, and their hopes and fears all went back to pre-Roman times. For though the Romans had shown themselves to be skilled in technology, building impressive roads and water supply systems wherever they went, the underlying ideology of their empire had its real origins some 300 years before the time of Jesus, in the vision of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC).

Alexander rose to fame almost overnight. He began as the son of a little-known local ruler in Macedonia, but he was such a brilliant general that within a very short time he was able to defeat armies much more prestigious than his own, and establish himself as undisputed emperor of the whole of the world that was then known to people living in the Mediterranean lands. The Persian empire fell first, followed by Egypt, and ultimately by other lands even further to the east. Then just ten years after his first major success against the Persians, Alexander died at the young age of thirty-three. By then his empire stretched from Greece in the West to the Indian subcontinent in the East.

Politically, it did not survive his death intact. He had no obvious heir, and there was much squabbling among Alexander's military commanders as they jostled for position to succeed him. It took another twenty years before the succession was finally resolved, in which his territories were divided between the various protagonists. It was nearly 300 years later that they were finally reunited, when the Roman Octavian, later known as Augustus (63 BC – AD 14), eventually incorporated the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea into his own empire.

Hellenism

Octavian was himself a brilliant strategist. But he owed much of his lasting success to the fact that there was already a substantial cultural unity among almost all the nations which he had



Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), whose policy of Hellenization created a world in which it was easy for Christianity to spread.

conquered. In spite of their diverse national traditions, people throughout the Mediterranean world were deeply conscious of being part of a wider world. They even spoke the same language – Greek – and the inhabitants of both east and west had common hopes, similar educational opportunities, and much the same understanding of life.

All this sprang directly from the genius of Alexander the Great. One of his near-contemporaries, Isocrates (436–338 bc), could claim with some justification that “the name ‘Greek’ suggests no longer a race but an intelligence, and the title ‘Greek’ is applied to those who share our culture rather than to those who share the same blood” (*Panegyricus* 50). Alexander had never been addicted to the exercise of power just for its own sake. In his youth he was a student of the philosopher Aristotle, and he never forgot what he had learned from him. Alexander was a fanatic for his own native culture, and was genuinely convinced that civilization had reached its ultimate goal with the Greek way of life. He was determined to share it with the whole world, and took steps to ensure that Greek customs, religion, philosophy and language would be adopted throughout his domains. New cities were built in the Greek style, incorporating temples, theatres and sports arenas. The way of life that resulted – “Hellenism” – lasted for nearly a thousand years after Alexander’s death, and had a profound impact on the future course of the whole of European civilization. The early centuries of Christianity were dominated by the need to engage with this monolithic worldwide cultural edifice, and church leaders eventually found themselves forced to articulate, even to redefine, their faith in terms of the Hellenistic worldview.

The degree to which any particular nation accepted this Hellenistic culture naturally varied from place to place. Sometimes the changes were only superficial. The names of local gods and goddesses might be changed into Greek forms, but their worship often continued much the same as it had always been. In addition, ordinary working people had little time or opportunity for philosophical debates and sports activities, and it was generally the ruling classes who became most involved in such pursuits. They were also the ones who

The tetrapylon at Palmyra in Syria. It was in Hellenistic cities that Christianity spread most rapidly



were most at home with the Greek language, for it meant they could make international contacts without the tedious necessity of learning several languages. But Greek influence was everywhere, and in one way or another it penetrated to all sections of society.

This Greek-dominated world offered some obvious benefits to the earliest Christians as they sought to proclaim their message. There were few language problems; cultural barriers were minimal; and by the Roman age great roads were being built which would make it easy to travel from one part of the empire to another. But these were not the only factors that moulded the world of the first Christians. For by the first century AD many people also had other concerns.

Philosophy

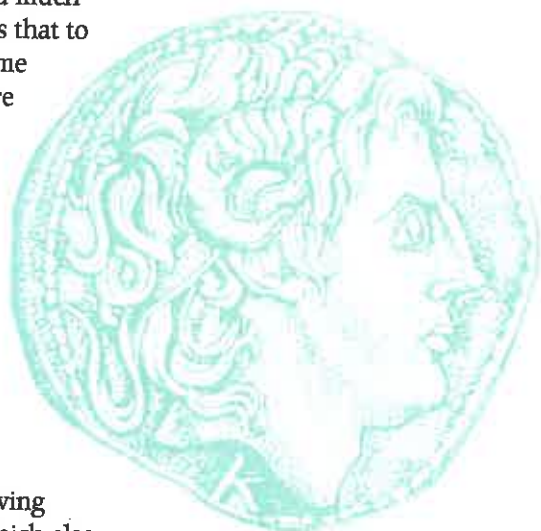
Alexander had been inspired by a love for the great classical Greek philosophers. But by New Testament times their heyday was long past. Those who succeeded the original generation of creative thinkers were not of the same intellectual calibre, and much philosophy was concerned with detailed arguments about things that to ordinary people seemed trivial and irrelevant. But there were some whose ideas were more accessible than others, and who therefore attracted a following among many ordinary citizens.

The Stoics appear as a group encountered by Paul in Athens (Acts 17:18), and their influence can also be traced elsewhere in the New Testament. This philosophical school was founded by Zeno (335–263 BC), a native of Cyprus who subsequently moved to Athens where he established his own school in the *Stoa Poikile* ("painted portico"), from which the name "Stoic" was derived.

Ancient philosophers often searched for a single principle that lay at the heart of all things, and for the Stoics that core property was "reason". In order to live the good life, individuals therefore needed to be in tune with "reason", whether through living in harmony with nature or by following their own conscience, which also was motivated by "reason". Since this was always a matter of individual choice, Stoic teaching prioritized the importance of living a life of "self-sufficiency". Stoics were widely respected for their high standards of personal morality, and it was not uncommon for them to be prepared to commit suicide sooner than lose their self-respect and dignity (hence the modern use of the term "stoic" to indicate a single-minded devotion to a tough set of challenges).

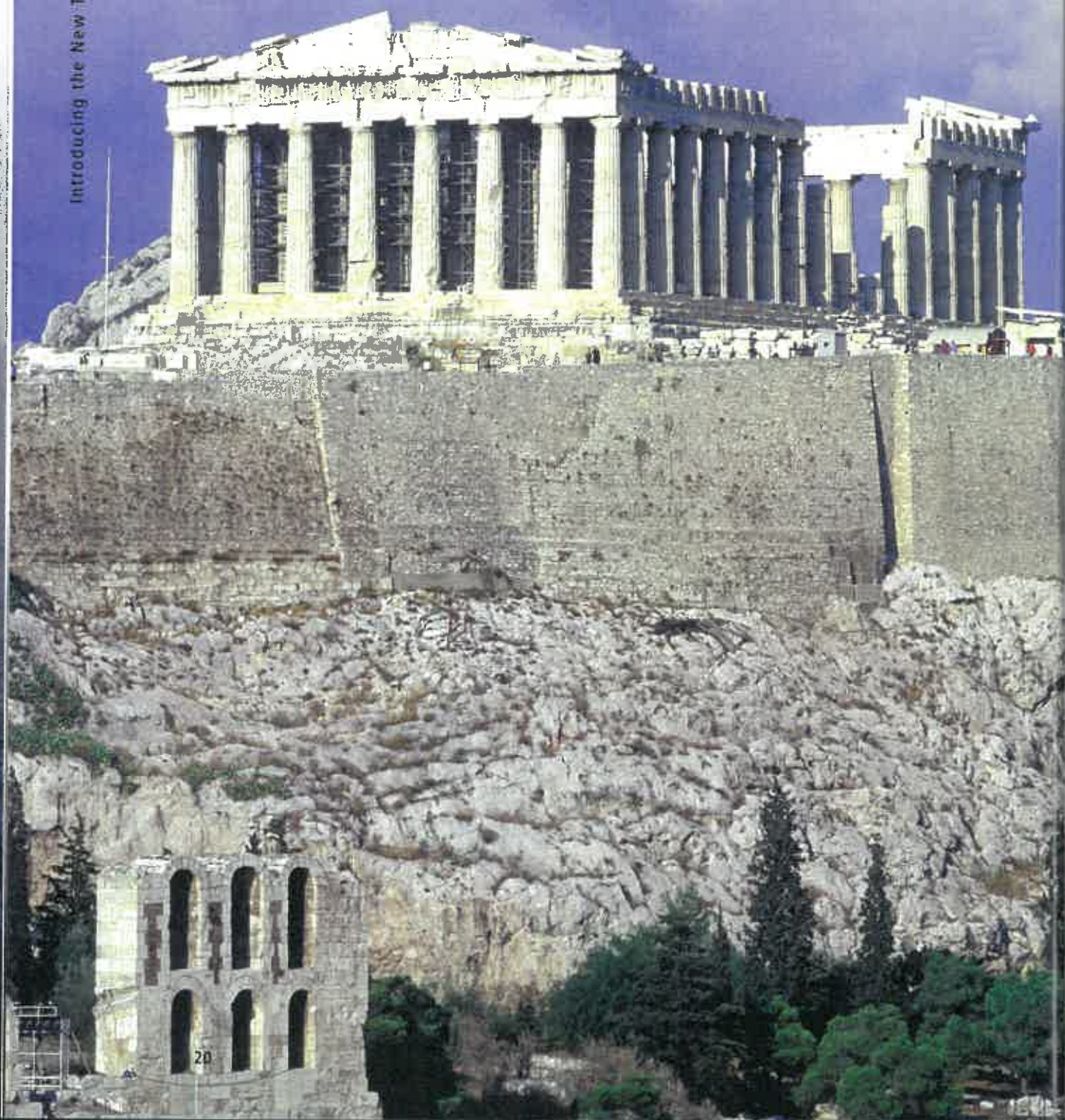
Inevitably, this way of understanding life did not convince everyone – not least because living a life of self-sufficiency hardly began to explain social realities. For if "reason" filled and inspired everything, then why were all people not the same? Why were so many slaves condemned to eke out a wretched existence? Stoics could claim that, in their minds, slaves were equal to the emperor, but that offered little consolation either for slaves or for those who were concerned for their welfare.

The Epicureans were another popular philosophical group in the Hellenistic age. They too



Alexander the Great portrayed as a god on a coin minted by Lysimachus, king of Thrace from 306 to 281 BC.

The Parthenon in Athens,
home to many of the
ancient Greek philosophers,
and still a place of influence
in New Testament times.



had an ancient pedigree, tracing their origin back to the Greek Epicurus (341–270 BC). Epicureans adopted a totally different view of life. Though many Greeks had debated what happens at death, they argued that death is the end, a belief that was backed up by a complicated theory about the nature of atoms and space in relation to the visible universe. So the only way to make sense of life is to be as detached as possible from it. A good life consists in "pleasure", which for Epicurus meant an abstemious lifestyle characterized by qualities such as friendship and peace of mind. But many of his followers interpreted it differently, and gained a reputation for reckless living. Religion was widely regarded as a source of much human misery, and though the traditional Greek deities featured in Epicurean theory they were largely ignored in practice. As a consequence, Epicureans and Christians often found themselves labelled as "atheists" because they were indifferent to the traditions of Hellenistic civil religion.

These philosophical schools remained popular in New Testament times, but their appeal was mostly to the leisured classes. Ordinary people had enough on their hands just getting through from one day to the next, and had neither the time nor the intellectual curiosity necessary to organize their lives in this way.

Religion

A majority found religion to be a more helpful way of making sense of life. But for those who took Hellenism seriously, few certainties could remain. Philosophical theories might well be dense and incomprehensible, but their criticisms of traditional belief systems sounded a bit too plausible to ignore. While they continued to honour the traditional Greek and Roman deities, everyone knew that many educated people claimed to be able to prove that these gods did not really exist. International movements of trade and people had also made Europeans more conscious of other gods and goddesses who were revered in the eastern part of the Roman empire. Did they exist – and if so, what relevance could they have for life in the urban centres of Greece and Italy?

Questions such as these eventually led to what can appropriately be described as a failure of nerve in the Hellenistic world. The philosophers had discredited traditional ways of making sense out of life, but they had failed to offer an alternative that would appeal to the masses. As a result significant numbers of people were living in a moral and spiritual vacuum. There was no shortage of rival faiths offering to fill the gap, and people whose confidence in their inherited spiritualities had been eroded were ready to try anything that might give them new hope in an uncertain world.

Countries on the eastern fringe of the Roman empire had their own ancient faiths, which were largely unknown to those living in the urban centres of the west. But the little that was known about them seemed to suggest they were more "spiritual" than the over-rationalized and materialistic worldviews of western thinkers. These factors, combined with a natural curiosity about the unknown, encouraged a growing interest in non-western faiths. In addition, two of the more accessible concerns of Greek philosophy looked as if they might be compatible with these eastern faiths:

- In order to explain the existence of evil in the world, philosophers had often argued that this world is neither the only world, nor is it the best. There is, they suggested, another world of

goodness and light, and that is the most important sphere of existence. People belong to it because they have a "soul", a spark of light that is related not to bodily existence in this world, but to spiritual existence in the other world. Our brief existence here is merely an unfortunate encumbrance, and to find true meaning and fulfilment it is necessary to escape the body.

- Alongside this, but not altogether separate from it, a major concern of many philosophers was what we would today call science (and which they called "natural philosophy", to distinguish it from "moral philosophy"). Roman and Greek thinkers were fascinated by the movements of the planets and the stars, which seemed to operate with such precision and regularity that many believed the key to the whole of life was somehow locked up within them. Pythagoras (c. 580–500 BC) is best known as a mathematician, but for him this was a spiritual discipline that would enable the soul to focus on the world of the eternal, and thereby work out how to escape the limitations of the body (which he described as "the prison of the soul").

So the way was prepared for the establishment of many oriental religions in the Roman empire. For centuries, astrology had been of great interest to eastern sages. So had the possibility of reincarnation. When these ideas were combined with the conclusions of Greek philosophical scientists they produced a new kind of spiritual movement in the Hellenistic world.

Gnosticism

"Gnosticism" is a word often used to identify this movement. The origins of "Gnosticism" are shrouded in mystery, and scholars are unclear as to its precise origins, and in particular whether it existed at all in the first century or whether it emerged later as a result of the spread of Christianity. It is well enough documented in the second and third centuries AD, through Gnostic texts as well as from the writings of church leaders who wrote to oppose it. At that time it was obviously a widespread – though fragmented – religious movement, and not all the groups who would be regarded as "Gnostic" today would have applied that label to themselves. Rather than being any sort of organized movement with a belief system or particular way of life, the outlook we call "Gnosticism" was more like a generic term describing a spiritual environment, combining snippets of spiritual wisdom from many different sources into a highly eclectic mixture. However we choose to define it, it is unlikely that this way of being existed in any organized form in the New Testament period, though the later groups clearly did not construct their systems out of nothing, and several New Testament books make reference to notions that later became central to Gnostic thinking.



Traditional Greek religion

Greek and Roman religion were very similar, indeed the same gods feature in each under different names. By the fifth century BC twelve gods and goddesses were identified by name as the key deities in the pantheon, each one with their own designated sphere of influence. To ensure that every aspect of life would be blessed, citizens needed to be attentive to all of them.

The twelve major deities were pictured as living in an extended family at Zeus's palace on Mount Olympus (hence the term "Olympians" by which they were often known). Other deities existed, and were known as the "chthonians" (from the Greek word *chthon*, meaning "earth"), though they were not imagined to be in opposition to the Olympians, either morally or spiritually. Gods of the underworld and of death were included in this category, though the chthonians were not generally regarded as negative influences, and even Zeus could have an earth-bound, chthonic aspect to his character. Indeed, most of the leading gods had an endless list of adjectives applied to them which defy neat classification. Individual communities constantly sought to define the qualities and powers of their particular deities as being in some way distinctive and different from the wider spirituality that was shared with other people throughout the Hellenistic world. Thus,

for example, the "Zeus of mountain tops" had qualities not possessed by "Zeus of the city", or (to give an example that features in the New Testament), "Artemis of Ephesus" (Acts 19:28) would bestow blessings and favours that would not be available to devotees of Artemis as she was revered in other Hellenistic cities.

Though gods might be portrayed in human form and, like people, originated from Mother Earth, they were never born, nor did they eat regular food, or grow old, or die. Any golden age when gods and people may have mingled freely with one another was long since past, and for now there was a great gulf between the two modes of existence. There was however a third group, namely the heroes, who were lower than the gods but might also be worshipped. A typical hero was someone who had died, having achieved great things, and whose tomb might become a centre of devotion.

Hellenistic religion had no organized central structure that could impose a uniform belief system at all the many local shrines. Though individual deities had their own priests, there was no recognized professional priesthood, and being a priest was not a full-time job. Authority in religious matters generally rested with those who had civic power, which in the household meant the father, while in the city-states it would be the local magistrates, or even the assembly of all citizens. The most important religious functionaries were often

Mount Olympus,
traditional home to
the gods in Greek
mythology



seers, who would deliver oracles interpreting the divine will to any who asked their opinion – which they did, on matters as diverse as personal guidance, healing, the development of national policies, or military campaigns. The oracle at Delphi was one of the most highly respected sources of such spiritual insight

This was a religion of observance, in which the dominant factor was the need to ensure ongoing security and prosperity in every aspect of life rather than matters of belief about divinity or the nature of the world and its people. Devotion was expressed through acts of respect directed toward the deities, with different gods or goddesses being acknowledged for their influence in different circumstances and at different stages of life. For this reason, to speak of Greek or Roman religion as if it was a system of ritual or belief is somewhat misleading. It was an everyday spirituality, in which the involvement of the gods and goddesses was recognized as a natural aspect of everyday life, and the acknowledgment of them was a means of preserving social stability, whether in the context of rites of passage, or of legal transactions, or military expeditions, or any other concern that people may have. Hellenistic spirituality was therefore not at all individualistic, and the notion of having a personal relationship with one of the gods would not have been a regular part of it. From a sociological point of view it was all about maintaining the well-being of the community, by observing the correct social forms at the right times and in the proper places. This could easily be done, for example, by the head of a household acting on behalf of all members of a family, or by local magistrates as representatives of an entire community. Appropriate sites for devotion did not need to be special shrines or temples, and many thousands of *herms* (stone pillars with the head of the god Hermes on top and a phallic symbol in front) have

been discovered at roadsides, or on street corners, inviting passers-by to seek divine protection, and in the process affirming their solidarity with the community in which the *herm* was located.

Sacrifice was a regular way of gaining the favour of the gods – usually of animals, though grain or fruit could also be offered. Far from being a gloomy occasion, this was generally a time for festivity and celebration, for only the poorest parts of sacrificial victims were actually offered to the gods, with the best cuts of meat then being eaten in a communal banquet. There was of course a serious side to it all, and worshippers regularly made offerings in order to obtain some particular favour from the deity. This was understood not so much as an attempt to bribe the gods, but more as a way of affirming that the human-divine relationship was a two-sided affair operating in a cause-and-effect way that was predictable, and therefore orderly.

In the earliest period, it had been taken for granted that the stories about the gods and their doings were about real deities, and what was described in these stories had actually happened. Under philosophical influence, these stories (and their divine subjects) had been explained as symbols of some first force or abstract principle that lay behind the world, and while that did not invariably lead to an intellectual atheism or a discontinuation of the traditional forms of devotion, by the New Testament period cultural change (which included a fresh awareness of alternative religious traditions) was combining with growing spiritual uncertainty to undermine the easy acceptance of traditional Hellenistic beliefs – though they never disappeared entirely until they were eventually supplanted by Christianity itself centuries later.

The sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. The oracle in residence here was consulted by all Greek and many foreign states before embarking on major undertakings.



Traditional deities of Greece and Rome



Jupiter

Zeus

Chief god, father of other gods;
Roman Jupiter (Jove)

Hera

Sister and consort of Zeus;
Roman Juno

Athena

Goddess of war, wisdom and
the arts, Roman Minerva



Athena

Hermes

God of commerce, invention,
cunning, theft, messenger for other
gods; patron of travellers and
rogues, conductor of the dead to
Hades, Roman Mercury

Hephaestus

Disabled god of fire and
metalworking, Roman Vulcan



Demeter



Apollo

Apollo

God of sun, prophecy, music,
medicine, poetry, Roman Apollo

Artemis

Virgin goddess of chastity, the
hunt and the moon, twin sister of
Apollo, Roman Diana

Poseidon

God of sea, earthquakes, horses,
brother of Zeus, Roman Neptune

Aphrodite

Goddess of love and beauty,
Cytherea, Roman Venus

Ares

God of war, Roman Mars

Demeter

Goddess of agriculture, fertility,
marriage, Roman Ceres

Dionysus

God of wine, ecstasy and orgasm;
Roman Bacchus

The foundational belief was one we have already encountered: that there are two worlds, the world of spirit, which is pure and holy; and the world of matter, which is evil and corrupted. A supreme deity who is holy and pure, Gnostics argued, can by definition have no involvement in the material world. Salvation (however it might be defined) cannot be related to life here, but can only be a quality to be found in the other, spiritual world. A person's best chance of finding ultimate meaning is therefore to escape from this material world into the spiritual one, and discover true fulfilment there. For most Gnostics, this chance to escape came at death, when the soul left the body behind. But not everyone could expect to reach the world of spirit. Only those individuals with a divine spark embedded in their nature would make that transition, and without it they would return to this world to start another meaningless round of bodily existence. Even those who possess this spark of deity can never be absolutely certain of finding ultimate release, for the evil creator of this world (the *Demiurge*) and his accomplices (the *Archons*) jealously guard every entrance to the world of spirit. To outwit them, the spark must first be enlightened about its own nature and the nature of true salvation, and this comes through "knowledge" (*gnosis* in Greek). This "knowledge" is not a rational or intellectual comprehension of religious dogmas, or indeed of science, but instead refers to a mystical experience, a direct "knowing" of the ultimate ground of all being.

In practical terms, this way of thinking led to two quite opposite extremes. Some argued that their aim of complete liberation from the grasp of the material world could best be achieved by a rigorous asceticism that would effectively deny the reality of their bodily human existence. But others believed that by virtue of their mystical "knowledge" they had already been released from all embodied existence, and therefore what they did in their present life was totally irrelevant to their ultimate spiritual destiny. They saw it as their duty to spoil everything connected with life in the material world, including especially its standards of morality and what were regarded as conventional forms of behaviour. They might therefore promote anarchic and undisciplined behaviour as part of their spiritual quest.

It is not difficult to trace connections between this outlook and various groups who are mentioned in the New Testament. Paul's letters to the church in Corinth often seem to be criticizing views that would certainly be congenial to later Gnostics, while Colossians, 1 John and Revelation 1–3 also seem to be concerned with debates about people who were seeking to understand the Christian faith in similar terms.

Mystery religions

Personal mystical experience of the divine also played a key role in the various mystery religions which sprang up in the Roman empire. Mithraism was one of the best known of these, and was very popular especially among the officers in the Roman army. But there were many others, associated with deities from Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) and Egypt as well as traditional Greek practices. These groups were by definition secret societies, and our specific knowledge of them is therefore inevitably limited. It seems likely however that many of them evolved from the various fertility religions that had been popular for thousands of years throughout the ancient Middle East. Their mythologies frequently reflect the cycle of the seasons, as the new life of spring follows the barrenness of winter, all of it symbolized by the death and rebirth of the deities of fertility.

The ancient religions of Egypt and Palestine had generally celebrated this cyclical worldview in annual festivals in which priests and priestesses would engage in sexually significant rituals, and in the Hellenistic mysteries such rituals became mystical experiences for the individual worshipper. Their original mythology was transferred from the ongoing life of nature into the experience of individual people, who themselves spoke of undergoing the death and rebirth that was so important to the prosperity of the ancient farmer.

A person could gain access to this mystical experience by way of an initiation ceremony. One account of the consecration of a priest tells how the subject was placed in a pit in the ground, covered with a wicker framework (Prudentius, *Peristephanon* X.1011–50). On this a bull (symbol of life and virility) was slaughtered, and its blood ran down and soaked the initiate. When the priest emerged, those around would revere him, as he had now become divine himself through being drenched in the life of the bull. No doubt the initiation of a priest differed in some details from that of an ordinary person, but it is a safe guess that a similar pattern would be followed, while there is plenty of evidence to show that sexual rites of various kinds would often play a central part.

The Mysteries gave a sense of hope and security to their initiates, in both personal and social terms. Individuals gained a sense of personal meaning and purpose in life. They also became part of a distinctive group who shared the same secret experiences, and often operated as a mutual aid society in times of difficulty or hardship.

Judaism

Judaism was also popular in the Hellenistic world. It was readily accessible, as substantial numbers of Jews lived in all the major cities of the Roman empire and continued to observe their traditional beliefs and lifestyle. These Jewish communities were always concerned to maintain a distinction between themselves and their Gentile neighbours, but they were not generally exclusive groups, and were usually more than happy for others to join them. Many Greeks and Romans were attracted by what they saw.

From the perspective of city dwellers in the western empire, Judaism was essentially an eastern religion, and held all the attractions of mystery and intrigue that such an origin implied. But unlike the esoteric mystery cults, Judaism was far more accessible to outsiders. They could see its practical outworking in the everyday life of their Jewish friends, because it found expression in the ordinary life of the home. Enquirers could also read the Jewish Scriptures for themselves in their own Greek language, and reflect about it in their own time before committing themselves to connecting with the Jewish faith community.

Jewish teachers were not slow to exploit this openness to Judaism among those who were not ethnically Jewish people. Even in the time of Jesus, the persistence and enthusiasm of Jewish rabbis in sharing their faith with others, crossing land and sea to do so, was legendary (Matthew 23:15). Moreover, the Jewish emphasis on rigorous standards of personal and social morality found a warm reception among many Greeks and Romans who were dissatisfied with the permissiveness of their own culture. A minority became full members of the Jewish faith, accepting all the demands of the Hebrew Scriptures to become full members of the community ("proselytes"). Many more adopted the moral teaching, and were just as welcome but with a lesser status as "God fearers". These converts to Judaism played a significant role

in the life of the early Christian church. One of the first non-Jewish Christians mentioned in the New Testament – Cornelius, a Roman centurion – was a “God fearer” (Acts 10:1–48), and as the first Christian missionaries took their message into the wider Roman empire they often found an enthusiastic response among such people. Indeed, Paul felt it was so important to share the message with these people that he made it a specific policy always to go first to the Jewish community in every town he visited.

Christianity

This, then, was the world into which the first Christians brought their message about Jesus. It was a world that had been cut adrift from its roots, a world that was in search of a new self-understanding, and a world full of competing faiths and ideologies, all of them claiming to have the answers to the big questions about life and its meaning.

The phenomenal success of the Christian faith in this context can be explained in many ways. One of the key factors is simply that the Christian message addressed the concerns of people in that culture at that point in time. As the original followers of Jesus moved from their homeland on the fringes of the empire into the large urban centres of the western Mediterranean, they met people at their point of need. Not only were they able to engage with the questions that people were asking on an intellectual level, but in addition – and, if anything, even more significantly – the groups of Christian believers which they established throughout the empire demonstrated in a practical way the sense of purpose and meaning in life for which so many were searching.

The claim that Jesus was the fulfilment of the highest ideals of Judaism gave his followers a head start. Greeks and Romans – and expatriate Jews – naturally wanted to know what the Christians had to say, and because the Hebrew Bible had already been translated into Greek, the Christians had no difficulty at all in explaining their message in specific terms. In addition, Christianity had a certain curiosity value to the western city dwellers, as one of the many religions that were moving in from the east. Palestine itself was widely regarded as the very edge of the civilized land, and anything coming from that quarter would always be given a hearing by those who were disillusioned with their own religious heritage.

These early Christians could also appeal to individuals who were attracted to Gnosticism and the mystery religions. The whole thrust of Jesus’ teaching was quite different from those world-denying systems of thought. But for that very reason it gave a more convincing explanation of life as it is in this world, rather than encouraging people to opt out and dream of the possibilities of life in some other world. With its emphasis on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christian message was firmly based on events that had taken place in the same world in which people lived every day. It did not require believers to distance themselves from life as they experienced it, but offered them transformational possibilities within their existing environment by insisting that this is the context in which God is active and can be known in personal and life-changing ways. Christians also affirmed that a good life could not be achieved by human ingenuity, and without denigrating the value of human rationality (as the mystery religions tended to do), they claimed that reason was not capable by itself of discerning the meaning of life. True satisfaction could only be found, they argued,



Jews and Judaism in the Roman empire

Though Jewish people always looked to Jerusalem as their true homeland, in New Testament times there were more Jews living in a city such as Alexandria in Egypt than in Jerusalem itself, and overall there were significantly greater numbers living scattered throughout the major urban centres of the Roman empire than there were in Judea and Galilee as a whole. Josephus quotes the Latin author Strabo's comment that the Jewish nation "has already made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation, and in which it has not made its power felt" (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.7.2).

In more ancient times, the land and people of Israel had been regarded as a self-contained geographical and national entity. The story of the Hebrew Bible is largely concerned with how Israel's ancestors had been gathered from various ethnic origins to be united in their common heritage, which was identified with their land, and the city of Jerusalem in particular. But by the time of Jesus the process was working in reverse and Jewish people were living all over the world. This scattering, or *Diaspora* ("Dispersion"), had begun in 586 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, invaded the kingdom of Judah. As a way of imposing absolute control over the conquered nation, he took the most gifted and influential inhabitants of Jerusalem off to a new life in Babylon. This was a disaster of immense proportions for the Jewish people, and it would be the twentieth century before they were to regain the possibility of a self-determined political identity. Despite that, however, this Jewish exile in Babylon was to become one of the most creative forces in the whole history of Jewish religious history.

In the heyday of the faith, the worship of the Temple in Jerusalem had been of central importance. It was by regular visits to the Temple and the offering of sacrifices there that people declared their loyalty to the God of Israel and their continued determination to obey the traditional Law. But Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple, and though the remnants of the population who were left in Jerusalem still continued to worship in its ruins, even that consolation was not possible for those who had been deported to Babylon. Their feelings were poignantly expressed in the words of Psalm 137:

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat down, there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows near by we hung up our harps. Those who captured us told us to sing, they told us to entertain them: 'Sing us a song about Zion.' But how can we sing to the Lord in a foreign land? May I never be able to play the harp again if I forget you, O Jerusalem!"

In the event, Jerusalem was not forgotten, and it was not long before the exiles discovered that though at first it seemed inconceivable, they could indeed "sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land". It was in the synagogue that they did so. In a different social setting, things had to change, and the local synagogue was not a replica of the Temple back in Jerusalem. Sacrifices were no longer possible, and in worship at the synagogue the place of sacrifice had to be taken by something else. The new form of worship placed a new emphasis on those traditional observances that could be carried out anywhere: prayer, the reading of the Torah (the Law, or first five books of the Hebrew Bible), keeping the sabbath day, circumcision, and the observance of regulations concerning the preparation and consumption of food.

This adaptation of traditional worship was so successful that when Jews from Babylon were eventually able to return to their homeland, they took it with them. Later still, following the conquests of Alexander the Great, other enterprising Jews decided to emigrate voluntarily to different parts of the Mediterranean world, and it was natural that they should adopt the synagogue as the central expression of their religious and national allegiance. By the time the first Christian missionaries were beginning to travel with their message about Jesus, there was an extensive network of Jewish synagogues extending the length and breadth of the Roman empire.

Not all synagogues were exactly the same. In earlier times, the Temple in Jerusalem had imposed a certain degree of central control over religious beliefs and practices, and it continued to do so in Palestine until its final destruction in AD 70. But the synagogues were much freer to develop their own ways of thinking. The problems of being a Jew in Babylon were quite different from the challenges facing Jews in Rome, while the Egyptian city of Alexandria was different again. In each local centre, people had to work out for themselves how best to adapt their ancestral faith to the demands and opportunities of their new environments. Even

within the same locality, different synagogues might reach different conclusions. In Rome, for example, some Jews were quite happy to go along with many aspects of Hellenistic culture, even giving their children Latin or Greek names, and adopting the art forms of Roman civilization, while others in the same city deplored what they saw as a dilution and betrayal of their ancestral faith, and stuck rigidly to a more traditional understanding of the laws of the Hebrew Bible.

Some Jews became interested in the study of Greek philosophy. The most famous of these was Philo, who was born in the Egyptian city of Alexandria and was an older contemporary of Jesus (c. 20 BC – AD 50). He was a member of an influential Jewish family, and some of his relatives were influential in the politics of Egypt and other places. But Philo was very interested in exploring the thinking of Greek writers, especially the Stoics. He found many of their ideas congenial, and set out to show how the Hebrew Scriptures and Greek philosophy were really saying the same things in their own distinctive ways. In order to demonstrate this, he had to regard the traditional stories of his people as an allegorical or symbolic presentation of the rather more abstract ideas expounded by the philosophers.

Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC – c. AD 50), whose writings interpreted the Jewish Scriptures using Greek categories of thought.



Orthodox Jews elsewhere in the empire would certainly have regarded Philo as a traitor to his religion, but he saw himself as a faithful interpreter who was proud of his ancestral traditions, and had no doubt that what he was doing was both worthwhile and necessary.

There was, however, one thing on which all the synagogues of the Roman world were united. This was in their use of the Greek language. As one generation succeeded another it was not long before the vast majority of Jews in the Mediterranean world could speak no other language, and so it became important that the ancient Jewish Scriptures, originally written in Hebrew, should be translated into the language that most Jews now spoke and understood best.

The actual origins of their Greek Bible are shrouded in obscurity. According to one ancient legend, the Jews of Egypt managed to persuade the Egyptian king, Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 BC), to sponsor the project. The story tells how he sent to Jerusalem for seventy men who knew both Hebrew and Greek, and locked them up in seventy cells while each one produced his own translation. When their work was finished, to everyone's amazement the seventy men not only expressed the same ideas, but also used the very same Greek words to do so – whereupon Ptolemy was so impressed, that he was immediately convinced of the divine origins of their work! Another ancient source, *The Letter of Aristeas*, offers a more prosaic account by suggesting that the translators set the precedent for almost all subsequent translations, and worked as a committee.

It is unlikely that either of these stories fully reflects what actually happened, and more recent research suggests that the Greek Septuagint version of the Jewish Scriptures (the LXX, so-called after the Seventy) just evolved gradually over several generations. However it came into being, it had enormous influence and was widely used not only by Jews all over the Roman empire, but was also read by curious Romans who wanted to know more about the Jewish faith. It also became the Bible of the first Christian churches, and its easy accessibility greatly assisted the Christians in sharing their faith throughout the Hellenistic world.

through a close personal relationship with God. Through the work of God's Spirit, this shared some of the characteristics of the mystical experiences so popular at the time, but by virtue of being rooted in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth it was always grounded in the embodied realities of life in this world. In addition, Christianity was not only concerned with individual self-fulfilment, but invited people into a new set of relationships with one another that could change the world and offered a meaningful context for a corporate as well as an individual spirituality.

It is not difficult to see why and how the early Christians were able to fill the spiritual vacuum of the Hellenistic world so successfully. But the story of their faith is much more complex than just a haphazard coincidence of social factors in the Roman empire. Indeed, the story does not really begin in this predominantly Greek world at all. To understand it more fully, it is necessary to delve into the sometimes convoluted world of Jewish history and religion.

Palestine and its people

When Alexander conquered the ancient world, most nations went along with his policy of Hellenization. In many instances they accepted it only grudgingly, and quite often Hellenism made little impact on native customs. National institutions would be adjusted to conform to the Greek style, and the upper classes in particular found it advantageous to adopt Greek habits, while the life of ordinary people could remain virtually untouched by the Greek influence.

Most conquered nations would have preferred to retain full control over their own destiny, but they knew well enough that the political realities obliged them to co-operate with the superpowers of the day. In any case, even if Alexander's policy of cultural uniformity was rather more thoroughgoing than the demands of most previous empires, it was not an entirely new concept. For centuries, subject nations had demonstrated their subordination by accepting the culture of their conquerors. It was taken for granted that this would include at least a token allegiance to the religions of their overlords. Modern states change the image on their postage stamps or currency when a new regime seizes power: in the ancient world, they changed the statues and altars in their temples. It can have come as no surprise to discover that under Greek rulers, subject nations would be expected to find a place for images of the Greek deities.

Most were willing to do so, but not the Jews of Palestine. For them, practical politics and deeply held religious convictions could never be reconciled quite so easily. For 500 years or more, their ancestral faith had insisted that there is just one God, to be worshipped without visual representations and according to carefully prescribed regulations. Other nations might declare their allegiance to Zeus by placing his statue alongside their own gods and goddesses, and expanding their existing rituals so as to include him, but Israel could never do that without denying some of the most central aspects of the faith.

Hellenism and Judaism

Alexander himself was far too shrewd an operator to allow such misgivings to become a major bone of contention, and it was only long after his death that they became a real issue, under the Greek ruler of Palestine, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BC), a member of the Seleucid dynasty which had seized control of Palestine just over twenty years previously. His predecessors had allowed the indigenous rulers in Jerusalem a good deal of local independence, exercised through the high priesthood. The high priesthood itself became embroiled in an internal power struggle at exactly the same time as Antiochus suffered a humiliating defeat in Egypt at the hands of the Romans (168 BC). Determined to reassert his authority by whatever means he could, Antiochus saw the Jews as an easy target and marched on Jerusalem determined to show who was in charge. He knew enough to realize that the factional arguments about the priesthood were not purely political, but involved differences of opinion among the Jews themselves about their own religion – something that he neither understood nor cared for, but if it was causing trouble then he was ready to reduce its power.

Antiochus responded by inaugurating a thoroughgoing policy of enforced Hellenization. All the things that were most distinctive about Jewish life were banned, including circumcision, keeping the sabbath day, and reading the traditional Scriptures. Even worse from a Jewish perspective, Antiochus decreed that the Temple in Jerusalem be dedicated to the Greek god Zeus. To rub salt into the wounds, he opened the Temple up to the whole population of the land, which included people who were not themselves Jewish believers. This kind of cultural integration had always been desirable to the Greek rulers of Palestine, but whereas his predecessors had taken a more pragmatic view, Antiochus believed it was now essential to stamp out Jewish distinctiveness in order to ensure his own political survival. Whether they liked it or not, and regardless of the consequences, everyone in the land would be united in a thoroughly Greek way of life.

Antiochus had seriously underestimated the strength of Jewish religious feeling. It was one thing to erect altars to Greek gods – but it would be another thing altogether to persuade the Jews to worship at them. Antiochus's efforts to enforce his new regime only increased the determination of the Jewish people to fight back. It was not long before an armed resistance movement was established by Mattathias, a priest from the village of Modein, along with his five sons. They came to be known as the "Maccabees", and their tactics of guerrilla warfare were so successful that it took only three years for Antiochus's troops to be defeated and for his policies to be reversed.

Jews and Romans

All this took place nearly 200 years before the time of Jesus. In the intervening period, the Greeks had been replaced by the Romans as the dominant superpower. But the Jews of Palestine never lost their firm determination to resist religious compromise and, if possible, to re-assert their right to political self-determination.

This fiercely independent posture was inspired by their belief that they had been specially chosen by God to rule the world under the leadership of a promised divine deliverer, whom they called the "Messiah". Ancient stories from the days of David and Solomon, almost a

thousand years before the birth of Jesus, depicted their forebears as a significant political power, and their more recent successes against Antiochus had shown that they were still a force to be reckoned with. But it was obvious to most Jews living in Palestine in Jesus' day that something of almost supernatural proportions would be required if they were ever to be released from the iron grip of Rome.

At the same time, not all Jews wanted to be freed from Roman rule. Some sections of Jewish society found it was advantageous to be friendly with the Romans, and even among those who saw freedom as an ideal, not many were prepared to take practical action to secure it.

The Romans had an unenviable task in Palestine right from the start. For them, its continuing security was essential, as it was the main eastern frontier of their entire empire. Even so, they were on occasion prepared to make allowances for Jewish scruples. When they appointed Herod the Great as ruler of Judea in 37 bc, they hoped he would be acceptable to Jewish public opinion, for as well as being a person whom the Romans felt they could trust he was also half Jewish, a fact which they assumed would commend him to the Jewish people and diminish their resistance to foreign rule.



Coin of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 bc), who believed he was divine.

Herod the Great

The story of Herod's rise to power, and indeed of the rest of his reign, is a classic tale of intrigue and ruthlessness. As a king he was a combination of diplomatic brilliance and personal insanity. Though there is no record of it outside the New Testament, the story of how he murdered the children of Bethlehem after Jesus was born (Matthew 2:16) is quite consistent with all that is known of his character and behaviour. He never thought twice about killing even his own family: one of his wives, Mariamne, was executed on his orders, and he was involved in the murder of two of his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, while only five days before his death in 4 bc he ordered the execution of yet another of his sons, Antipater, the one who had been expected to succeed him.

As a politician, though, Herod fully deserved the epithet "Great". In contrast to previous rulers, he maintained peace and order throughout his territory and started a massive building programme that included a new Temple at Jerusalem, which was still unfinished during the lifetime of Jesus. He even sponsored such projects in other Roman cities well outside his own territory.

The three Herods

When Herod the Great died in 4 bc the Romans divided his kingdom among his three remaining sons. While none of them was as pathologically disturbed as their father, they all inherited some of his traits.

- Judea, the part of Palestine that included Jerusalem, was given to his son Archelaus. He was not allowed to call himself "king" of Judea, as Herod had been, but received the title "ethnarch" instead. After only ten years the Romans had to remove him from office, and in AD 6 Judea became a third-grade province of the Roman empire under an officer of the upper class-equestrian rank, who was himself under the command of the Roman governor of Syria. These Roman rulers of Judea were later called "procurators", and had their headquarters in Caesarea. The best known of them, certainly in relation to the New Testament story, was Pontius Pilate, who governed Judea from AD 26 to 36 (and who had the title "prefect" rather than "procurator").
- The northern part of Palestine was given to Antipas, another son of Herod. He was known as the "tetrarch" of Galilee and Perea, territory that included the village of Nazareth where Jesus grew up. Antipas was very much like his father, a devious man who enjoyed the good life and was determined to leave a legacy in the form of new buildings. One of his major projects was Sepphoris, a town only four miles from Nazareth, which was reconstructed on thoroughly Hellenistic lines, with theatre and bath-house as well as impressive public buildings. He was also responsible for the new city of Tiberias by Lake Galilee, named in honour of the emperor Tiberius. It was Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist executed (Mark 6:17-29) and who was involved in the trials of Jesus (Luke 23:6-12).
- A third brother, Philip, inherited territory to the north-east of Palestine when his father died. He founded the town of Caesarea Philippi at the foot of Mount Hermon. Of all the sons of Herod the Great, Philip was the only one who proved to be a balanced and humane ruler, and he survived as "tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis" until the year AD 34.

After Archelaus was replaced by a Roman governor, there were many revolts against the Romans in Judea. The Jews became more and more frustrated at not having control of their own affairs, while the Romans for their part became less interested in trying to understand the special issues of the Jewish people. The oppression and corruption of many of the Roman rulers, encouraged by a rising tide of Jewish nationalism, continued to increase until eventually in the year AD 66 a general revolt broke out. This revolt was finally crushed in AD 70 when Jerusalem was largely destroyed by the Roman general Titus.

Religious loyalties

Josephus was a Jewish historian who lived toward the end of the first century AD. He began as a commander of forces opposing the Roman invasion in AD 66, but subsequently switched sides and spent the remainder of his life writing up the history of his people to commend their traditions and faith to a wider audience throughout the empire. In describing the religious views of Jews in Palestine at the time of Jesus, he identified three main opinions: "Jewish philosophy takes three forms. The followers of the first school are called Pharisees, of the second Sadducees, and the third sect, which has a reputation for being more disciplined,

is the Essenes" (*Jewish Wars* 2.8.2). He also mentions a fourth group, Zealots, but not as a "philosophical sect", so presumably they formed some looser sort of association (*Jewish Wars* 4.3.9). The origins of all these groups can be traced to the years following the Maccabean Revolt, though gauging their numerical strength is largely a matter of guesswork. Three of them feature regularly in the New Testament: the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Zealots.

The Herodium is a fortress 7 m/12 km south of Jerusalem. Built by Herod the Great between 24 and 15 BC, it stands on the spot where he achieved one of his most important victories over the Hasmoneans in 40 BC.



The Sadducees

Sadducees are often mentioned alongside the Pharisees, though the two groups were quite separate and actually held opposite opinions on almost everything. The Sadducees were only a small group, but were very influential because they consisted mainly of the more important priests in the Temple at Jerusalem, along with others drawn from the most well-to-do classes of Jewish society. Little is known of them apart from what is reported by Josephus and in the New Testament itself. They held conservative views on most things and resisted change, whether religious or cultural. In particular, they wanted to keep the Romans happy, and even if they believed in the coming of a Messiah (which is by no means certain) they would never have supported the political protests that often accompanied such a belief.

Several explanations are possible for the name "Sadducee". The most obvious meaning would be "son of Zadok", though they were certainly not direct descendants of the priest Zadok mentioned in 2 Samuel 15:24–29. Other suggestions are that it derives from the Hebrew word *sadiq*, meaning "moral integrity" or "righteousness"; or even from the Greek word *syndicoi*, which could mean "members of the council". Many Sadducees were certainly members of the ruling Jewish council of seventy (the Sanhedrin), though since the remaining members were Pharisees it is doubtful if this would be the origin of their distinctive name.

Sadducees were conservative not only in politics, but also in their understanding of Judaism. The only religious teaching that they acknowledged as authoritative was the Law contained in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Pentateuch or Torah). The remaining books were always secondary, while any attempt to reinterpret the ancient Scriptures in the light of contemporary issues was regarded as illegitimate. As a result, some beliefs that were widely held in the first century were rejected by the Sadducees because they were not explicitly contained in the Torah. This included matters such as belief in a future life, resurrection, and a final judgment, along with the notion that history had a purpose and ultimate significance that was guided by God.

The Pharisees

This was a much larger group, and has been estimated to be around 6,000 strong in the time of Jesus. Some were full-time students of the Scriptures, but a majority had ordinary jobs. They were a national organization, with local groups found in most towns and villages throughout Palestine, each with their own officials and rules. Religiously, they were probably the most influential group during Jesus' lifetime. The Sadducees disliked them because they believed and did things that went well beyond a literal understanding of the Law of Moses, but they were highly regarded by most ordinary people.

The Sadducees' chief complaint against the Pharisees was that they had developed their own rules of life as a way of

A Torah scroll.



applying what they regarded as the true meaning of the Law. The purpose of these rules was simple enough: the Pharisees knew that life in the Roman world was quite different from the sort of society envisaged in the Torah, and if the spirit of the Law was to continue to be relevant then it needed to be applied in new ways. Since they still had a high regard for the actual words of the Hebrew Scriptures as given directly by God, they were not free to alter the original text, and so the next best thing was to create an authoritative commentary that would explain how it could be observed in the new circumstances. For example, the Ten Commandments instructed people to keep the sabbath day "holy" (Exodus 20:8). But what did that really mean in everyday terms? What should people do and not do on the sabbath day? The additional rules devised by the Pharisees were intended to provide a practical answer to that kind of question.

The *Mishnah* is a collection of material that reflects debates among religious leaders following the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Much of its material must have originated in the period immediately preceding that event, and one of its sections in particular (*Pirke Aboth*) probably originated in Pharisaic circles. It opens with the recommendation to "make a fence for the Law", which meant: "protect the Law from infringement by surrounding it with cautionary rules that can act as a warning notice to stop people before they get within breaking distance of the actual God-given commandments themselves". The logic of that approach is clear enough, though critics complained that it too easily led to the multiplication of petty rules so that keeping the Law became an onerous burden rather than the joyful celebration of God's goodness that it was meant to be. A typical example would be the rules concerning the sabbath. Tailors were not allowed to go out carrying a needle late in the day before the sabbath, in case they were caught with it still in their pockets when the sabbath began (which was at sundown, not daybreak). But like everyone else, they could go for a walk on the sabbath day – provided it was no further than 2,000 cubits (roughly two-thirds of a mile), a distance determined by reference to the space between the people of Israel and the ark of the covenant when they first entered their Promised Land (Joshua 3:4). This became known as the "sabbath day's journey".

In spite of the apparent absurdity of some of these notions, there can be no doubt that many Pharisees did actually keep these rules, and Josephus comments that "the people of the cities hold them in the highest esteem, because they both preach and practise the very highest moral ideas" (*Antiquities* 18.1.3). They are regularly denounced in the gospels for "hypocrisy", which in this context seems to have been a complaint that the keeping of these rules had become an end in itself rather than directing attention to the God-given Law itself.

That tendency is by no means unique to the Pharisees, and history has many examples of religious people who displace the core values of faith by an over-scrupulous attention to the outward trappings of religion. But the gospels depict Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees on more substantive grounds, for it seems that a person's ability to keep the rules had also become a form of social stratification, something that Jesus repeatedly questioned with his insistence that God had a special love for the outcasts and marginalized members of society, and a corresponding disdain for those whose faith was only displayed through conventional religious practice. A good case can be made for supposing that members of Jesus' own

family were Pharisees, and this is why he understood their attitudes so well – and also why he was far more critical of them than of any other single group of people he dealt with.

Behaviour was not the only topic on which the Pharisees had distinctive views. Unlike the Sadducees, they regarded the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative, and not just the Law of Moses – and they also had no difficulty in believing that there was a life after death. They may well have expected a Messiah to come and right the wrongs of their people, though they themselves never took part in open revolt against the Romans.

The Zealots

These were the people who became most involved in direct action against the Romans. Josephus names their founder as Judas, a Galilean who led a revolt in AD 6 at about the same time as Archelaus was removed from office by the Romans (*Jewish Wars* 2.8.1). He also reports that “these men agree in everything with the opinions of the Pharisees, but they have an insatiable passion for liberty; and they are convinced that God alone is to be their only master and Lord... no fear can compel them to give this title to anyone else...” (*Antiquities* 18.1.6). While Pharisees were prepared to challenge the system from within, the Zealots could not reconcile theocratic rule by God with any sort of acceptance of Roman rule. The Zealots continued as a guerrilla movement until the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, and perhaps sporadically even after that. At least one of Jesus’ disciples, a man called Simon, was a Zealot, and it is often thought that Judas Iscariot was as well (Mark 3:18). But more typical Zealots seem to have been people like Barabbas, whom the crowd chose to liberate in preference to Jesus (Mark 15:6–15), or the unnamed rabble-rouser with whom Paul was once confused (Acts 21:37–39).

The Essenes

The Essenes are mentioned by several ancient writers. Philo of Alexandria, the Latin author Pliny, and Josephus all mention them, though they are not explicitly named by any of the New Testament writers. As with the Sadducees and Pharisees, they originated in the period following the Maccabean Revolt. But while the other two worked to

achieve their political and religious ambitions within the system, the Essenes regarded the system itself as hopelessly corrupted and sought to live their life in isolation from mainstream society and wait for some divine intervention that would change things.

Though there is a good deal of debate about the details, the consensus of opinion identifies one particular community of Essenes with the documents known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.



A Hebrew half shekel coin, minted at the time of the first revolt against Roman rule, AD 66–70.