

Introduction

The Parties and their Characteristics

From birth to death Jesus of Nazareth was confronted with certain realities he had to take into account in his ministry.

One was the brooding power of the Roman Empire. Rome's legions ruled from the south of Egypt and the northern boundary of the Sahara desert in Africa to the Danube River in central Europe, to the mountains bordering the Slavic nations to the east and to what is now England's border with Scotland in the British Isles. No earlier "western" nation had ever ruled this much territory.

The Jews were one of the favored ethnic groups in the empire. They were permitted to celebrate their Sabbath, to try matters in their own courts, and to use some of their taxes to support their religious practices, even the temple in Jerusalem where they made their sacrifices. This was the benevolent face of the Roman Empire. But on great Jewish feast days, the Romans were likely to parade their power. Their banners and soldiers were on every street corner. Jesus' friends and neighbors faced exorbitant taxation that could lead to expropriation of lands and slavery for themselves and their families. Roman couriers could impress any Jewish man, no matter what he was doing, to carry his load for exactly one mile. Jesus used this custom as a parable to his people: "... *if someone compels you to carry his burden one mile, carry it two*" (Mt 5:41).

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In addition to Roman power, the Palestinian Jewish community was subject to the family of the Herods. These rulers, who were not Jews but Idumeans, served as Rome's surrogates in the two provinces of Galilee and Judea. Their kings were supported by a clan-like party called the Herodians. This party supported the Herodian dynasty, did its best to keep the dynasty in power, and embraced without question any practice the Herods advocated.

The Herods' rule, like the power of their Roman masters, was far from benevolent. Herod, called the Great by his devotees, killed members of his own family because he thought they were plotting against him. People were indiscriminately arrested, tortured, and executed. Often their families did not know what had happened to them, or why or how; they were what in our time have come to be called "the disappeared." Under these conditions, pressure for rebellion began to press upon Jerusalem.

In life and in death, Jesus lived under the weight of the Roman Empire and its surrogates. A course of taxation that took place around the time of the birth and early childhood of Jesus caused an insurrection in Galilee. According to reports, Herod put it down by summarily executing some 3,000 men, about 600 of them by crucifixion. The situation in Judea was even worse. Brigands and terrorists, some called *lestes* and others *sicarii*, roamed the land and as often as they could struck down Roman officials and Jews they saw as collaborators. Unrest in Judea was so great that Tiberias, the Roman emperor in those years, had to appoint a prefect in the place of the Herod who was ruling, and so Pontius Pilate came on the scene about 26 C.E. Eventually, Rome identified Jesus as one of its rebels and crucified him.

In addition to the governments of Caesar and Herod, Jesus was confronted with a number of parties within Judaism itself.

One such party was the Sadducees. The Sadducees were the party of wealthy priests and their aristocratic friends. As such they combined conservative religious attitudes with

power politics. Their center of strength was the temple, but their main interest lay in protecting the status quo and maintaining their own political power. They extensively collaborated with the Romans and adapted to certain Roman cultural influences like the theater and the race track. In effect, they “played ball” with the Romans, figuring they would be there when the Romans were gone, and they would still have their temple, sacrifices, position, and wealth. In crises, rather than trying to protect the Jewish people, they tended to close their eyes to everything the Romans were doing, including terrorizing people, to control insurrectionist tendencies.

Almost opposite to both the Sadducees and Herodians were the Pharisees. They were a party that tried to maintain the Jewish Law, the Torah, and traditions that they themselves had added to the Law. They ate only kosher foods, refused to eat with those who did not strictly keep the Law, and scrupulously observed the Sabbath. They refused to touch anyone who was ill and thought that any gentile, or woman, was “unclean.” They tried to apply the same laws to lay people that priests applied to themselves. In effect, their prayer was, “Thank God I am not a gentile; thank God I am not a slave; thank God I am not a woman.” The result of their position was that they did not want to have any contact with the world around them—slaves, gentiles, Romans, women, children. In politics and religion, they were pacifists because any sort of physical combat would bring them into contact with blood and gore and all kinds of unclean things.

Even more concerned with removing themselves from contact with the world were the Essenes. These men (they seem to have been nearly all men; few skeletons of women have been found in the cemetery of their base at Qumran) formed a community in the Judean desert adjacent to the Dead Sea. The caves and buildings in which they lived and worked were secluded, remote from the busy life of Judea and Galilee. There they ate, slept, lived, and died, worked on their manuscripts and dreamed of the coming battle when God would vindicate his faithful. In fact when the battle

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came, a Roman legion marched down the Dead Sea's shores and attacked Qumran; the community hid its manuscripts, died in the slaughter, and disappeared from history. It was only about sixty years ago (in the late 1940s) that archeologists discovered their caves, began to recover their manuscripts, and reclaimed their work's history.

Another set of Jews, more a movement than a group, were the precursors to the Zealots. In the New Testament these men were variously called thieves, robbers, and bandits—*lestes*, in Greek. while *zaelotes* (zealots) was the name the movement widely assumed when armed revolt broke out around 65 C.E. This revolt led to a siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. These men were the terrorists of their day with a program of obtaining weapons, a dagger or sword, and driving the Romans out. They moved stealthily, stole what they needed to live, food and clothing alike, and attacked Romans, Herodians, and Sadducees where they could. They generally caused such havoc in Galilee and Judea that the emperor had to remove the family of Herod from rule in Judea and Jerusalem and make personal appointments from Roman citizens like Pontius Pilate to quell insurrectionist tendencies.

Especially vicious in this movement were the assassins called *Sicarii*, named for the short-bladed sharp knives they carried under their flowing garments to strike at Roman officials or Jewish collaborators when the opportunity arose. Scholars have puzzled over the name "Iscaiot" that was attached to Jesus' follower Judas. Possibly Iscaiot is an Aramaicized form of *sicarii*, so that the real title for Judas was "Judas the Knife." In what is now Palestine, bandits and assassins were at work during Jesus' time to a degree that we are just beginning to understand today.

Along with many conformist individuals and groups, and slaves and serfs, the above parties were the types of movements that had already emerged in the midst of the turmoil and chaos when the Jesus movement came onto the scene.

In contrast to the alternatives formulated by these groups, Jesus began his ministry with the proclamation, “*The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel* (Mark 1:15). These words stand as a frontispiece for the Gospel of Mark certainly, and in essence for the whole New Testament. This proclamation sums up the message Jesus came to bring. Everything he said and everything he did expressed these sentiments.

The beginning of the Jesus movement was hardly conducive to popular success. Jesus had preached and ministered in Judea for about three years and in Galilee for a few months when he determined to go to Jerusalem to confront the authorities. In the confrontation he was crucified and his followers scattered. But some among his followers were convinced that God had raised him from the dead—“resurrected” was the term they used—and they gathered together to continue the ministry of healing, teaching, and preaching that Jesus had begun. They were convinced that in his resurrected body he would continue to give them guidance, support, comfort, and love. They started out courageously.

They chose a man named Matthias as the successor of the deceased Judas. In doing this, they restored the Disciples to their Jesus-chosen number. At Pentecost, approximately fifty days after Jesus’ crucifixion, Peter preached to a gathering of Jews who had come from diaspora cities to gather in the city of Jerusalem. Three thousand, according to Acts (2:41) were baptized that day and became part of the fellowship. Acts offers this idyllic picture of them, “*Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved*” (2:46–47).

The Disciples continued their preaching and healing, and large numbers of people were added to their fellowship (4:4, 5:12–16). Arrested frequently and consigned to jails, they emerged just as frequently and continued their work of preaching and healing.

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Then catastrophe came. Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians rose up against Greek-speaking Hellenist Christians. The contending parties were both parts of the Jesus movement, but they differed measurably from each other in their faith and practices. For the Hebrew party the temple was the center of their faith, and they went there regularly to sacrifice and pray. They met in synagogues where Hebrew was spoken and Hebrew Scriptures were read. They retained as much of historical Jewish life as possible. The Hellenists, while also coming from a Jewish background, met in synagogues where Greek was the language of teaching and prayer, and Scriptures were read from the Septuagint, the official Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In addition, “Hellenist” and “Hebrew” represented two different ways of life. Hebrews were more strict in applying their food laws and in marrying Hebrew husbands and wives. Hellenists were more lax in these matters. So the Hellenist branch set itself up as a distinct and separate part of the Jesus movement. Its overall leadership was given to “The Seven,” mostly Christians with Greek-sounding names, with one called Stephen foremost among them.

In the first utterance credited to him in Acts, Stephen the Hellenist made an incendiary speech in the presence of Hebrews. He said that the temple was an apostate institution and that the Law honored and observed by Hebrews was not directly from God (Acts 7:44–53). Predictably, these words upset the Hebrew group, so much so that *“they were enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen”* (Acts 7:53). And indeed they seized and killed him. In Stephen’s death the Jesus movement had its first martyr.

Stephen’s death marked a turning point in the life of this early Jesus movement. Its unity was destroyed. Now two groups, not one, made up the movement, and they were soon joined by two others. The roster came to read like this: Peter and the Twelve; Philip and the Hellenists; James, the brother of Jesus, and his Hebrew-speaking Brethren; Paul and the Apostles. Each group conducted its mission in different are-

nas: Peter among Galileans and along the Gaza strip; Philip with Hellenist Jews in the wider Mediterranean world; James going to Hebrew synagogues wherever he found them inside and outside Jerusalem; and Paul approaching the larger gentile world.

From his headquarters in Jerusalem, James, who was known from the beginning of the movement as “the brother of Jesus,” observed that Peter and Paul seemed to be pushing the envelope of faith and practice. Paul, working in gentile cities of Galatia, had begun to baptize persons into the faith who were not yet circumcised, and he insisted that the spirit of Jesus led him to do it. In Caesarea, Peter had a vision that convinced him that gentiles should be accepted into the faith without observing the food laws and without circumcision (Acts 10:24–29). In Antioch, Peter ate with gentiles. But when emissaries came to Antioch from James in Jerusalem, Peter drew back, separating himself from those who had adopted Paul’s way (Gal 2:11–12). James, noting these actions, summoned the two to Jerusalem to work out the issues before them.

The most prominent parties represented in the Jerusalem conference were “the Twelve and Peter,” “the elders and James” (representatives of the Brethren), and “Paul and the Apostles.” The Hellenists were not represented. At the gathering, Peter told what had happened in Caesarea when he met and ate with a Roman centurion, and said that the Holy Spirit had made no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Barnabas and Paul reported the signs and wonders God had done through them among the gentiles—those not circumcised.

James announced the decision of the conference, a compromise decision: Gentiles could be baptized into the church without first being circumcised, but once in the church these gentiles had to observe the Jewish dietary and other sanctity laws. This decision was to be reported to all the churches.

Apparently the earlier provocative actions of Stephen had so alienated other parties in the Jesus movement that the

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Hellenists were not welcome in the others' assemblies; as we have seen, they were not represented at this one. This same omission is apparent in a creed later incorporated into Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians. The creed, in 1 Corinthians 15, likely indicates that the conference and the creed's writing took place at almost the same time early in the church's life.

Paul states the creed as having been agreed to by all parties who were represented in Jerusalem:

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,
that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
that he was buried,
that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter],
then to the twelve,
then he appeared to five hundred brethren at one time
most of whom are still alive though some have fallen asleep,
then he appeared to James,
then to all the apostles,
last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Cor 15:3–8)*

It seems clear that this creed is not a mere recounting of recorded appearances of Jesus to his followers. From other sources we know that Jesus appeared to Peter (Cephas) and to the Twelve (reduced to Eleven by the death of Judas). The appearance to the five hundred brethren may have referred to the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Brethren in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Additional appearances not included in this creed are also recorded in the gospels—to the women, to Mary Magdalene, and to the men of Emmaus, among others. There is also the appearance of “The Son of Humankind”