

PARALLEL GUIDE 3

The World to Which the Word Came:

Geography; The Synagogue and the Law; The Priesthood; The Parties

Summary

Jesus was born in a world marked by political and religious divisions. Galilee was geographically separated from other areas populated by Jews. Some Jews thought Galileans unsophisticated. This chapter describes life in Galilee and Judea, especially for Jews—the importance of worship, the centrality of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the importance of the Law and the priesthood. It also presents the various political/religious divisions within the Jewish world and shows how Christianity emerged from these.

Learning Objectives

Christianity grew out of the Jewish experience in Palestine. Identify some of the other groups that may have influenced Christians.

Learn the importance of the Temple in Jerusalem, the priesthood at the Temple, and the role of the Law.

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Identify groups in our society today that may parallel religious/political groups that existed in the first century. Can you find modern parallels to the Essenes, the Zealots, and the *amme ha-arets*?
2. Political parties also reflected religious convictions. How and where is this different today? How and where is it the same or at least continues the tradition of government that mixes church and state?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Come prepared to talk about the political and religious issues at the time of Jesus and compare them with our own in the new millennium.

What does all this say to some of the issues in our own times, such as those of violence, discrimination, and democracy?

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THE WORLD TO WHICH THE WORD CAME:

Geography; The Synagogue and the Law; The Priesthood; The Parties

We have listened to Mark telling a story—a story that is, as we have said, set in a world in many ways very different from our own. We have already noted his use of the phrase “kingdom of God,” which he seems to have assumed his hearers would understand as he did, as referring to God’s active, personal intervention to redeem and restore Israel. Doubtless he also assumed they would know about many other things to which he refers quite casually, such as the geographical settings of his narrative, and the parties and groups in Israel to which he refers. Our own appreciation of his narrative will deepen if we can share some of that knowledge.

Geography

Geography is something Mark mentions very early. Indeed, he begins his narrative proper with it. People, he says, came to John the Baptizer “from the whole Judean countryside, and the people of Jerusalem were going out to him” (1:5). Jesus, on the other hand, “came from Nazareth of Galilee” (1:9; also 1:28, 6:1-6). Later we hear of a very significant conversation that took place between Jesus and his disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi (8:27-38); later still how Jesus and his disciples went to Judea (10:1) and then, as the story moves toward its climax, to Jerusalem (10:32; 11:11). Once they are there we hear how Jesus went up to the Temple and performed a prophetic act of cleansing (11:11, 15-19), then how, in what were to be the last days of his earthly life, he taught, gave a farewell discourse to his disciples, celebrated his last supper with them, and was arrested, tried, crucified, and raised—all in Jerusalem (11:27-16:8).

Geographically Galilee was cut off from the rest of the Jewish world. To east, west, and north were pagan territories, and even to the south Galilee was separated from Judea by the Hellenistic Decapolis and by the hostile territory of Samaria (see OAB, Map 11). Politically Galilee had been separated from Judea at the time of the Roman takeover in 64-63 BCE. The two territories were reunited during the reign of Herod the Great (37-4 BCE), then separated again after his death. Following the reign of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas (4 BCE-39 CE), a Herodian tetrarch, ruled Galilee throughout the lifetime of Jesus. This is the “Herod” referred to several times in the Gospels (e.g., Luke 3:1). He should not be confused with Herod the Great, who is mentioned only in Matthew’s birth stories (Matt. 2:1-23). King Agrippa II (39-44 CE) followed Herod Antipas. Despite their limitations the Herodians could make some claim to being a native aristocracy. In contrast to the Judeans (see below), Galileans did not have to suffer the constant humiliation of an obvious imperial presence.

Galilee

In the time of Jesus, Galilee was comparatively well off. Its fishing industry was prosperous. The land was fertile and exported olive oil in large quantities to Jews in the diaspora. Josephus wrote that it was so rich in soil and pasturage and produced such a variety of trees that even the most indolent were tempted to agriculture. We may suppose that these rich resources gave Galilee a sense of self-sufficiency that fostered the independence and pride of those who lived there. “Never,” wrote Josephus, “did

the men lack courage or the country men” (see *War* 3.42-44). They were, he says, “from infancy inured to war” (*War* 3.41). As Jews, and despite the doubts of some Judeans (see below), they undoubtedly considered themselves second to none.

There were also in Galilee splendid cities such as Tiberias and Sepphoris, the “ornament of all Galilee” and its “strongest city” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.27, *War* 2.511). Sepphoris was only about six and a half kilometers from Jesus’ home in Nazareth and clearly visible from there, for it was a city built on a hill (cf. Matt. 5:14!). During Jesus’ boyhood Sepphoris was entirely reconstructed by King Herod Antipas, when it seems to have changed from being a largely Greek city to being “a loyalist Roman city of Jewish and gentile population” (James F. Strange, *ABD* 5:1091). Its loyalty to Rome became evident during the disastrous Jewish rebellion of 66-70 CE (the so-called “Jewish War”), which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Although Sepphoris had a large Jewish population, it did not join the rebellion, but sought (and received) Roman protection and refused to aid the rebels even when the Temple was threatened (Josephus, *Life* 346-48).

Sepphoris is not named in the New Testament, but it is worth noting that a journey from Nazareth to Cana in Galilee would naturally have taken Jesus through it. According to a tradition recorded by the Piacenza Pilgrim in the sixth century and echoed by Theoderich late in the 12th, Mary’s home was in Sepphoris “when the angel came to her” (*Travels* 161, 1977, 79).

Economic prosperity does not necessarily lead to a just distribution of resources or a sense of social well-being. A number of scholars believe that Galilee in general was a political trouble spot. Early in his account Josephus speaks of Ezechias, whom he calls a “brigand chief” (*War* 1.204), who raised a force and ravaged upper Galilee until he was captured and executed by Herod in about 47 BCE. When Herod died in 4 BCE, his son, Judas of Galilee, raised a considerable body of followers. He broke open the royal arsenals and armed his companions; then they “attacked the other aspirants to power” (*War* 2.56). It is possible that the entire resistance movement against Rome that culminated in the Jewish rebellion of 66-70 CE had its origins in Galilee. In spite of all Josephus’ determination to show that only extremists caused trouble for Rome, he does not deny that Caligula’s threat to place his statue in the Temple produced massive popular demonstrations in Galilee (*Antiquities* 18.274). Similarly, the Galilean pilgrims whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices (Luke 13:1) were probably agitating against Rome. It was certainly a group of Galileans who, according to Josephus, in 49 CE urged the Jewish crowd at Jerusalem “to resort to arms” and throw off the yoke of Roman domination (*Antiquities* 20.120).

In this light it is hardly surprising that any Galilean with a popular following might have appeared to the political establishment, Jewish or Roman, to be a potential funder of trouble. That is how Josephus describes Herod Antipas’ view of John the Baptizer, also a Galilean:

Eloquence that had so great an effect on humankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as though they would be guided by John in everything that

they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising. (*Antiquities* 18.117-118)

There were other views of citizens of Galilee. One was that the Galileans were boors. Some of the third-century rabbis claim that “the Galileans were not exact in their language,” and they tell stories about it:

A certain Galilean once went about inquiring, “Who has amar?” “Foolish Galilean,” they said to him, “do you mean an ‘ass’ (*chamar*) for riding, ‘wine’ (*chamar*) to drink, ‘wool’ (*amar*) for clothing, or a ‘lamb’ (*immar*) for killing?” A [Galilean] woman once wished to say to her friend, “Come, [my friend] (*shelovti*) I would give you some fat to eat (*d’okhlikh halva*),” but what she actually said was “My castaway (*shelokhti*), may a lioness devour you (*t’khlikh lvi*)!” (b. *Erubin* 53b)

In short, as one scholar put it, “the Galileans dropped their aitches.” No wonder the little servant girl in the high priest’s courtyard (Mark 14:66-69) was able to spot Peter immediately!

For the rabbis, however, Galilean sloppiness in language was a symptom of sloppiness in more serious matters. “The Judeans who cared for their language retained their learning, but the Galileans who did not care for their language did not retain their learning” (b. *Erubin* 53a). For the rabbis, of course, “learning” meant, above all, Torah: the Law. The epithet “*amme ha-arets*” (“peasants”—literally, “people of the land”: see further below) was generally applied to Galileans, with the implication that they were ignorant in religion as well as in other ways. An anonymous rabbinic saying declares: “Greater is the hatred wherewith the *amme ha-arets* hate the scholar than the hatred wherewith the heathens hate Israel” (b. *Pesachim* 49b). Yochanan ben Zakkai, a disciple of *Beit Hillel* and the spiritual leader and refounder of Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem, spent some years in Galilee before 50 CE. According to tradition his despair at his lack of impact was such that he concluded, “Galilee, Galilee, you hate the Torah!” (b. *Shabbat* 15d). Exactly the same view of relations between the Judean rabbis and Galileans is presented by the Fourth Gospel.

Of course, these things are relative. Much of what we have quoted probably represents no more than the irritation of those with high standards of academic or spiritual discipline toward those who take life more easily. Such irritation is by no means confined to the early years of the Christian era or to rabbis. In any university one can hear present day academics, in moments of frustration, speak quite savagely about their students and still pass them at the end of the course. All that we have said about relationships between the learned and the Galilean *amme ha-arets* does not alter the fact that Galilean pilgrims continued going up to Jerusalem, that there were synagogues in Galilee, that there was, as the story of Yochanan ben Zakkai itself illustrates, some Pharisaic presence in Galilee, and that Galilee even produced *chasidim* (“saints”) after its own style. Men such as Chanina ben Dosa and Honi the Circle Drawer were in some ways a little eccentric, and undoubtedly did not always

act entirely as the rabbis would have liked, but none denied their holiness.

Judea

United with Galilee in a single kingdom during the reign of Herod the Great, Judea had again been separated from Galilee at his death. For a short time it was ruled by Archelaus, a son of Herod the Great. He, however, was banished to Gaul in 6 CE following complaints by the Judeans themselves to Augustus. From that point, and throughout the entire lifetime of Jesus, Judea was administratively a part of the Roman province of Syria. It was under the direct rule of a Roman procurator who governed from Caesarea Maritima and was himself subordinate to the proconsul of Syria in Antioch (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.355, 18.1). Apart from a brief period (41-44 CE) under another member of the Herodian family, Agrippa I, this situation continued until the rebellion in 66. Among the procurators of Judea was Pontius Pilate (26-36 CE).

Undoubtedly the Romans ceded to the Sanhedrin and the Jewish priesthood real powers. Immense prestige was attached to the fact that Judea centered on Jerusalem, David's ancient capital and now a magnificent city in the Hellenistic style with the Temple as its crowning jewel. Nevertheless, throughout the lifetime of Jesus and until the rebellion, Judea (in marked contrast to Galilee) remained humiliated by an obvious imperial presence.

Jerusalem and the Temple

According to Mark the climax of the Messiah's life and ministry took place in Jerusalem. Two-thirds of the way through Mark's narrative, Jesus' face is set toward Jerusalem (10:32), and, so far as Mark understands matters, he never looks back. Few in Mark's audience who knew anything of Israel's traditions would have been surprised by this. According to the prophets, it is to Jerusalem (also known as "Zion," the city of David: see 2 Sam. 5:6-10) that the nations of the world will in the end bring their gifts. It is to Jerusalem that they shall all come, along with Israel, to keep the Feast of Booths (Zech. 14:16-21). Thus Judaism's concern with "the land (of Israel)" is not improperly called "Zionism" (see Psalm 137:1-6). For nearly two thousand years of exile that concern continued to be expressed in the Passover ritual's expression of hope: "next year in Jerusalem."

In the light of this reflection we can understand not only Mark's concentration on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, but also much else in the New Testament. Luke's Gospel begins and ends in Jerusalem; his second book, the Book of Acts, begins in Jerusalem and ends with Paul preaching at Rome. So the entire work accords with the prophetic word:

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

(Isa. 2:3b, Mic. 4:2b)

We should understand part of Paul's concern for the "Jerusalem collection" from his Gentile churches in the context of Jewish hope that in "the last times" the nations would bring gifts to Jerusalem. In light of Zionist hope we can understand how even the seer of the Book of Revelation, writing after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70,

can still find no way to conceive of final blessedness other than in a new Jerusalem that fulfills the hopes of the prophets and whose Temple is the Lord God and the Lamb (Rev. 21:9-22:5). Certainly the Book of Revelation represents a spiritualization of the original understanding of the holy people's relationship to the physical territory of Israel. That development is by no means unparalleled elsewhere in Jewish writings of this period and earlier. But the fact that the imagery chosen to represent final blessedness should be that of Zion remains important.

There is a dark side as well. Jerusalem, in common with the rest of Israel, did not live up to its calling. Jesus, as Mark makes plain, goes up to Jerusalem to *die* (10:33-34). The other evangelists show Jesus speaking with even greater clarity of the bitter irony of this:

“... I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

(Luke 13:33-34; cf. Matt. 23:37-39)

Jesus echoed another aspect of Jewish tradition. Hebrew Scripture itself spoke of the killing of Uriah the prophet in Jerusalem by King Jehoiakim (Jer. 26:20-23), and alongside that there were other traditions, not recorded in scripture but certainly current in the time of Jesus. There was the story of King Manasseh who “killed all the righteous among the Hebrews, nor did he spare even the prophets, some of whom he slaughtered daily, so that Jerusalem ran with blood” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 10.38). There was the story of Manasseh killing Isaiah (*Ascension of Isaiah* 3.1-12; 5.1-16). This is the background against which we are to see Jesus as the evangelists show him riding into Jerusalem.

According to Mark as soon as Jesus has arrived at Jerusalem, he goes to the Temple; and it is in the Temple, on the following day, that he performs a prophetic act: the symbolic “cleansing.”

The Temple, built under Solomon, destroyed by the Babylonians, and rebuilt under Zerubbabel and Joshua the high-priest, had recently been refurbished by Herod. So magnificent was this restoration that the result is sometimes referred to as “Herod's temple.”

The Importance of the Temple

The temple worship was a powerful reminder to Israel of God's covenant with the nation and a vivid sign of God's presence. Philo, a Jew of the dispersion, speaks of going to “our ancestral Temple to offer up prayers and sacrifices” (*On Providence* 2.64). The prophet Ezekiel saw the sanctuary as the heart of the land of Israel (Ezek. 40:1-47:12, 48:8-22). It is the sanctuary that makes Jerusalem, the city of Zion, David's city, holy. It is the sanctuary that makes “the land” holy. While there is no doubt a degree of idealization in Philo's description of Jewish eagerness to pay the tax (they did so, he says in *Special Laws* 1.144, with “thankfulness, and an eagerness that beggars description”), still there is reason to suppose that there were many for whom this was true. Josephus tells us of thousands who died at the time of the

siege of Jerusalem defending the high priest and the Temple against Idumeans and Zealots (*War* 4.318-325), and of priests who died at the altar rather than give up their duties (*War* 1.148).

Yet, as with all institutions that involve human beings (including, of course, the Christian church), there was always about the Temple a disturbing and dangerous ambiguity, not to say ambivalence. The Temple itself, as Jeremiah had said, standing within its gate, shared in the pollution of God's people and God's land.

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Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? . . . Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this is the command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people, and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you." Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels . . . (Jer. 7:9-11, 21-24a)

In the Temple itself, then, Jesus also must issue his prophetic call for the renewal of God's people, and naturally as he does so, he alludes to the prophets, including the passage from Jeremiah just quoted:

Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?"
But you have made it a den of robbers. (Mark 11:17)

The Synagogue and the Law

As we listen to Mark's story, it is not very long before we become aware of other Jewish institutions with which it is engaged. The first of Jesus' mighty acts of healing took place, Mark says, in the synagogue on the Sabbath (1:21); a second found him involved in the question as to whether it was "lawful" to heal on the Sabbath (3:1-6), and by that time he has already been challenged about the "lawfulness" of other behaviors permitted by him on the Sabbath (2:23-28). Such questions continue to be raised not only in Mark, but also in the other Gospels. Synagogue and Law: here, then, are two more things of which we need to know something if we are to hear the evangelist as he might have expected to be heard.

Synagogue

The Temple was a powerful symbol of God's presence with God's people. Yet the position of the Temple in Judaism was not what it had been. Twice, at the Exile and at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt, Judaism had shown that it could survive without the Temple. At least three groups in Palestine before 70—the Essenes, the Pharisees, and the followers of Jesus—continued to revere the Temple yet were, in their different ways, critical of its administration. In fact, a new element had entered

Judaism. We may conveniently refer to it as “synagogue Judaism.”

The synagogue seems to have originated in the Babylonian Exile wherever groups of Jews, deprived of a temple, gathered to worship. But it was not until the Scriptures—or at least the Five Books of Moses—became generally accepted and available (probably about 325-300 BCE) that the synagogue could have begun to be what it was by the first century of the Christian era. The fact that the word “synagogue” is itself a Greek word (*synagoge*) suggests an origin in the Greek-speaking diaspora. When a group of Jews far from Jerusalem found itself in possession of sacred writings that had to be preserved, studied, and handed on to new generations, there we have the essence of the synagogue.

By the first century of the Christian era, whatever its place of origin, the synagogue was flourishing in Palestine and in Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire. Even at the beginning of the first century the synagogue probably had more regular influence on the lives of ordinary Jews than the Temple. Judaism and Christianity after 70 were both, in many respects, outgrowths of “synagogue Judaism.” The synagogue was a house of study and a house of prayer. The Scriptures were read from continuous parchment scrolls. Philo wrote:

The Jews every seventh day occupy themselves with the philosophy of their fathers, dedicating that time to the acquiring of knowledge and the study of the truths of nature. For what are our places of prayer throughout the cities but schools of prudence and courage and temperance and justice and also of piety, holiness and every virtue by which duties to God and humankind are discerned and rightly performed? (*Life of Moses* 2.216)

In other words, the synagogue attempted to apply the principles of scripture to ordinary life. The Bible was the textbook and the people were the students.

What the synagogue studied is variously referred to as “the Scriptures” (that is, what is written) or “the Law”—in Hebrew, *torah*. “*Torah*” is a word meaning “teaching” and “guidance,” and in this context refers to the teaching and guidance given to Israel at Sinai. Since this teaching and revelation came from God and showed Israel how it ought to live, *torah* comes also to carry the further senses of “divine revelation” and “commandment.” Those who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek generally chose the word *nomos* to render *torah*—a particularly apt choice in view of the frequent association of *nomos* in Greek philosophical literature with divine commands and sanctions (Aristotle, *Politics*, 3.16. 1287a, 28ff).

The Law

Torah in Jewish usage is a difficult word to understand if defined too closely. *Torah* can refer to the commandments. It can refer to the Pentateuch. It can refer to the whole of the Jewish Scriptures. The section of the Mishnah that begins “Moses received the Torah at Sinai” (*m. `Abot* 1.1) probably means something more than any of these things. The Law is the fullness of God’s gift. It is a possession and an inheritance that marks Israel as different from other nations. The Law is the Wisdom of God, which found no resting place in the rest of the world and was eventually

assigned by God to Israel.

Above all, as we have seen, the Law as enshrined in the Jewish Scriptures tells Israel its story—the story of God’s grace and love for it, of its failure to live as God wants, and of God’s continuing faithfulness and promise to this people. Throughout the entire story *trying* to keep the commandments remains the response to God’s grace whereby God’s children remain within the covenant. Always what is asked in the Law is that they confess God’s sovereignty by *attempting* obedience, not that they succeed in obedience. God’s “quality of mercy” (*middat rachamim*) is always greater than God’s “quality of justice” (*middat ha-din*). The point is well made in a parable attributed to Rabbi Meir (c. 120-140 CE), commenting on the text, “You will return to the LORD your God” (Deut. 4:30):

This can be compared to the son of a king who took to evil ways. The king sent a tutor to him who appealed to him saying, “Repent, my son.” The son, however, sent him back to his father: “How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you.” Whereupon his father sent back word, “My son, is a son ever ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to your father that you will be returning?” Similarly the Holy One, blessed be He, sent Jeremiah to Israel when they sinned, and said to him: “Go, say to my children, Return . . .” Israel asked Jeremiah: “How can we have the effrontery to return to God?” . . . But God sent back word to them: “My children, if you return, will you not be returning to your Father?”
(*Debarim Rabbah* 2.24)

With such confidence the Law teaches the Jew to stand before God. The Law is “sweet” (Ps. 119:103) and to be meditated on day and night (Ps. 1:2).

Jesus is shown by Mark and the other evangelists in frequent disputes about the Law. Does this mean that he rejected the Law? On the contrary! When Jesus is accused of breaking the Sabbath Law, he appeals to the fundamental principles of the Law: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4) He acts in the same way when he is accused of laxity over purity laws (Mark 7:1-13). What is at issue in these disputes is not the Law but the interpretation of the Law—not least, of course, those elements in the Law that Jesus’ followers saw as referring to his own work. As for the abiding significance of the Law—on that subject they quoted Jesus himself:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”
(Matt. 5:17-18)

The Priesthood

Jewish priesthood is hereditary, limited to descendants of Aaron of the tribe of Levi. Apart from a number of superior officials, priests in the first century of the Christian era were not permanent residents of the Temple. They lived throughout Palestine. Since the Exile they had been organized into twenty-four “courses” or “divisions”

which took turns going to the Temple for a week of service. The different tasks were appointed by lot. As the Mishnah makes clear, on any given day a number of priests would not have any task to perform. Thus for Zechariah it was no routine matter, but a very special occasion when, “serving as priest before God and his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense” (Luke 1:8-9).

The high priesthood was, at least in principle, for life. No doubt many criticized those who held the office, and Jesus was certainly among such critics. Like modern prime ministers and presidents, high priests changed and were not always worthy of their office. Yet, as with prime ministers and presidents, the office could be, and was, distinguished from the holder. Josephus tells us how Herod locked up the high priest’s robe, how it was later restored to the control of the priests by order of the emperor Tiberius, and how then, after the death of Herod Agrippa I, there was another argument about its control (*Antiquities* 15.403-408; 18.90-95). This alone suggests how much importance was attached to the office, quite apart from the character of the incumbent. Of course, many priests were worthy. Josephus gives high praise to Ananus, high priest in 70 CE (*War* 4.318-325). We have already spoken of the thousands who, according to Josephus, were willing to die defending him and of those other priests who were also willing to die rather than abandon their duty.

The Parties

We have spoken of Jesus in dispute with Pharisees. That, too, is something that Mark shows us quickly.

Pharisees

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”
(Mark 2:16)

Such hard or hostile questions from Pharisees will be a fairly common feature of Mark’s narrative. Other groups mentioned by Mark are the Herodians (3:6; 12:13) and the Sadducees (12:18).

Who were these people?

The name “Pharisee” probably originated as an epithet meaning “separatist.” We have remarkably little information about the Pharisees, and perhaps none that comes directly from themselves (although the tractate in the Mishnah called *Taharoth* [Purities] may represent their views).

In the New Testament the Pharisees are often presented as criticizing Jesus for his association with “sinners” (e.g., Luke 15:2). In turn they are criticized by Jesus, sometimes vehemently (Matt. 23). But that is only one side of the matter. Pharisees are also presented in friendly relationships with Jesus (e.g., Luke 7:37, 13:31; John 3:1-15; 19:39) and as by no means unfriendly to the young Christian movement (Acts 5:38; 23:9).

After 70 the attitude of the rabbis to those they call *perushim* (by which they are normally assumed to have meant “Pharisees”) is at least as unclear as that of the New Testament. In some rabbinic stories the *perushim* are heroes (e.g., b. *Qiddushin* 66a). Others speak of them critically. A rabbi at the beginning of the second century called some *perushim* “destroyers of the world” (m. *Sotah* 3.4), and another passage describes seven types of *perushim* of whom five are either eccentric fools or else fussers about detail (b. *Sotah* 22b). So different are the attitudes to *perushim* suggested by the different passages that some scholars believe they do not all refer to Pharisees. This is certainly possible, but by no means obvious.

According to Josephus, who presents Pharisaism as another Jewish philosophical “school,” the Pharisees were a more broadly based and popular movement than the Sadducees, being accustomed to “cultivate harmonious relations with the community” (*War* 2.166). They valued scripture very highly but were receptive to change and development in its interpretation; hence they were believers in a resurrection and were committed to an oral as well as to a written Torah. In passages of rabbinic writings the Pharisees are scholars who uphold both written and oral law, in contrast to the Sadducees.

Josephus says of the Pharisees that “they hold that to act rightly or otherwise rests, indeed, for the most part with men, but that in each action Fate cooperates” (*War* 2.163). In other words they seem to have believed both in the freedom of the human will and in divine providence, holding the two notions in tension.

The rabbinic writings and the New Testament (e.g., Mark 7:3-4) also suggest that the Pharisees were what modern scholars call a “purity sect,” that is, a group particularly concerned about being in a state of ritual purity and hence with matters such as the precise application of food laws as a condition for sharing meals. Scholars disagree about the accuracy of this description. Josephus does not mention it. Since he speaks approvingly of such rules in his description of the Essenes (*War* 2.130-133, 139), it is hard to see why he does not touch on them when talking about the Pharisees.

Josephus, alone of our sources, also says that the Pharisees had immense popular support, so that, even when they spoke against a king or high priest, they would be believed (*Antiquities* 18.12-15), and everyone followed their views on prayer and worship (*Antiquities* 13.288). Josephus says this, however, only in the *Antiquities*, written in 96 CE when he was clearly trying to persuade the Romans that the survivors of the Pharisees were the people with whom the Romans should deal, if they were to govern the Jews successfully. The earlier *War* makes no such claim, so we are inclined to think that Josephus was writing political propaganda. Unfortunately his propaganda has conveyed to some who have taken it seriously the impression that in arguing with the Pharisees, Jesus was arguing with the whole Jewish nation. This is, of course, nonsense. Jesus was at most arguing with some members of one party among others.

Perhaps the differences within Pharisaism itself are the real explanation of the contradictions that we find in Jewish and Christian tradition, for Pharisaism was evidently

not a monolith. Differences between Hillel and Shammai, two famous Pharisaic leaders in the century before Jesus, are enough to illustrate that. These differences, as rabbinic tradition remembers them, are characterized in the following story:

A Gentile came before Shammai and said to him, “You can make me a proselyte provided you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one leg.” Shammai chased him away with a stick. Then he came before Hillel and made the same request. Hillel replied, “That which you do not wish men to do to you, do not do to them. This is the Law and the Prophets. The rest is commentary; go and learn it.” (*b. Shabbat* 31a)

Shammai and his school (*Beit Shammai*—“House of Shammai”) are remembered for being strict and uncompromising, whereas the school of Hillel (*Beit Hillel*) in general is noted for being irenic and flexible.

Beit Shammai appears to have sympathized with the Zealots and generally to have supported the Jewish rebellion of 66-70. Apparently *Beit Hillel* did not. Before 70 CE the Shammaites appear to have dominated; after 70, the Hillelites. Yochanan ben Zakkai (who characterized the rebellion as foolish and disobedient to God) was himself of the school of Hillel. Contrasting opinions of the two schools continued to be debated until about 90 CE when, according to the Talmud, the rabbis ruled that the views of *Beit Hillel* were to be accepted. In general we gain from the rabbinic literature a bad impression of *Beit Shammai* and a good impression of *Beit Hillel*. Of course in evaluating that impression we need to remember that this history, like most history, was written by the winners. Yet that does not mean that the “winners” were necessarily wrong in all their perceptions. Did many Pharisees before the rebellion of 66 CE share the attitudes and behavior toward outsiders and deviationists that the former Pharisee Paul attributes to himself prior to his conversion (Gal. 1:13-14; Phil. 3:5-6)? If so, it would hardly be surprising that some among their successors, anxious to cultivate what Josephus calls “harmonious relationships with the community,” should characterize them as “destroyers of the world.”

Was Jesus a Pharisee? The suggestion has been seriously made and merits consideration. The debates between Jesus and his Pharisaic opponents would then be seen as “in-house” debates between Pharisees of different views, with Jesus tending to support the views of *Beit Hillel* and his opponents, the views of *Beit Shammai*. This would fit quite well with Mark 7:1-13, the one clear case in the Gospels where Jesus is actually shown debating a purity issue with Pharisees (see further below). That Mark 7:1-13 is the one clear case of Jesus debating such an issue is also the reason that one might doubt whether Jesus was a Pharisee. The fact is that the overwhelming mass of traditions about Jesus simply do not suggest that he was much interested one way or another in the kinds of purity questions that apparently did interest Pharisees of every stripe.

Besides Mark 3:6 and 12:13 (and Matt. 22:16, evidently following Mark 3:6) there is no other reference in ancient literature to “Herodians” as a group. Presumably they were people who supported the rule of Herod Antipas, who was Tetrarch of Galilee

Herodians

and also “that fox” of Luke 13:31-32. He had divorced his wife in order to marry his niece Herodias, who was already married to his brother Herod when he met her. In that matter and in various other respects he was hardly a Pharisaic role model. One can imagine that Mark relished heartily the irony involved in his vignette of Pharisees allying themselves with the supporters of such a man in order to destroy Jesus.

Sadducees

3

The origin of the name “Sadducees” is obscure, and so is practically everything else about them. In trying to understand them we suffer the disadvantage that our information comes only from their opponents. The Gospels are hostile to them and the *Mishnah* even more hostile, declaring them to be among those “who have no share in the world to come” (*m. Sanhedrin* 10.1). To be exact, the *Mishnah* here denies a share in the world to come to anyone “that says there is no resurrection of the dead laid down in the Torah.” But since this is one of the few things that it seems fairly certain the Sadducees *did* say, we can feel pretty sure that the barb was aimed at them.

Josephus presents the Sadducees to his Hellenistic readers as one of three Jewish philosophical schools (see *War* 2.119, 162-166). In contrast to the Pharisees the Sadducees were, he says, rigorous and literal in interpreting the Scriptures. They denied “fate,” i.e., presumably “providence,” and emphasized free will. They denied penalties and rewards after death, that is, they denied resurrection. In this the Gospels and the Book of Acts agree with Josephus. They did not believe in angels. They refused to accept any law not enjoined in the Scriptures. Resurrection of the dead is, of course, mentioned in Daniel, but presumably the Sadducees did not accept this as scripture. The denial of angels presents more of a problem since angels appear more than once even in the Pentateuch. Possibly what is meant is that the Sadducees denied the developed teachings about angels (“angelology”) that appear in books such as Daniel, or the view that at Sinai the Law was not given to Moses directly by God but instead by the mediation of angels (cf. Gal. 3:19). The Sadducees were, Josephus concludes, “even among themselves, rather boorish in their behavior, and in their intercourse with their peers are as rude as to aliens” (*War* 2.166)—which tells us not much more than that Josephus did not like them.

From our sources we gain the picture of a conservative, aristocratic group, closely identified with the priesthood (itself, of course, hereditary) and the Temple. The Gospels and the Book of Acts present them (rather than the Pharisees) as playing a leading part in the execution of Jesus and in the persecution of the young Christian movement (e.g., Acts 4:1). They also agree with our other sources in suggesting that they were willing, on grounds of *Realpolitik* if for no other reason, to work with the Romans, and that they were motivated by a desire to preserve the *status quo*. It is perhaps not surprising that a group so closely bound up with the political institution should not have survived the disaster of 70.

Other Groups

Certain other groups and identifiable parts of the Jewish community are not named in Mark but are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament or are known to have existed in this period. For the sake of completeness it may be helpful to comment briefly on them here.

The name “Essene,” of which one Greek form is *Essaioi*, may come from the Hebrew *ayin hoseh*, meaning “doer,” but this is by no means certain. The Essenes certainly saw themselves as “doers” of Torah and “doers” of God’s justice. Josephus describes them as a group in Judaism standing beside the Pharisees and Sadducees. Indeed, he devotes more space to them than to the other two groups put together (*War* 2.119-166). Philo also speaks of them at length and clearly has a high opinion of them (*That Every Good Man is Free* 75-91). From his account we gather that they were a respected religious community in Palestine and also in Syria. In his treatise *On the Contemplative Life* he writes of a group called the Therapeutae who lived not far from Alexandria, where he himself lived. Philo begins his treatise by referring to earlier comments on the Essenes:

After discussing the Essenes who zealously cultivated the active life and excelled in all or, to put it more acceptably, in most of its spheres, I shall now proceed at once, following the sequence demanded by the treatment of this subject, to say what is fitting concerning those who have espoused the life of contemplation.

(*On the Contemplative Life*, 17)

Some scholars understand this to mean that the Therapeutae were contemplative Essenes. If so, then the Essenes were known and honored in Egypt also.

Most scholars believe that the Dead Sea Scrolls are the remains of the library of an Essene community at Qumran. Doubts have occasionally been expressed about this view, but it does not appear that in most cases they are very securely grounded. If the majority view of scholars is correct, then a considerable amount of Essene literature has survived.

We learn something of the structure of the sect from documents known as the *Damascus Document* and the *Community Rule*. It is clear from these that the community that produced them was an ascetic group living under a strict rule. They seem in their organization and practices to have been influenced by some of the ideas and forms of Neo-Pythago-reanism. They apparently regarded the Jerusalem Temple as improperly run and so did not take part in its worship. The *Damascus Document* and the *Community Rule* both stress the importance of purity, separation from sinners, oaths of loyalty, and obedience to authority. They differ, however, on details. The *Document* speaks of a group who live in “camps among other Jews, owning property and slaves but wary of contact with Gentiles or Jews who are not members of the sect. The *Rule* speaks of a much stricter commitment involving community of goods and celibacy. Members underwent a probationary period of three years.

What, if any, were the connections between the Essenes and Christianity? In the years since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls suggestions have run the gamut from total identification to no connection at all. There is some possibility that John the Baptizer, who was an ascetic and was said to have been “in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel” (Luke 1:80), might have had Essene connections and was perhaps even raised by the monks of Qumran. It has been argued that the Letter to the Hebrews was addressed to former Essenes. Scholars have noted the

obvious resemblance between the shared ownership of property prescribed in the *Rule* and the so-called Christian communism of the Book of Acts (Acts 4:32-5:11). Comparisons have also been made between the Qumran method of interpreting scripture and that of the NT. The method, exemplified in the sect's *Commentary on Habakkuk*, is called *peshet* ("explanation") and consists of applying passages from scripture directly to events in the sect's own history. This method is also by no means unknown in rabbinic discussions of scripture.

Once note has been taken of these parallels, however, the following considerations must also be borne in mind:

- the Essenes were ascetics; the founder of Christianity was accused of being a winebibber and the associate of tax collectors and prostitutes;
- the Essenes were largely a closed order; early Christian preaching was open and public;
- the Essenes would accept converts only after three years of rigid preparation; Christians accepted converts on profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
- the Essenes would not take part in the worship of the Temple; Christians continued to worship in both Temple and synagogue (Acts 2:46).

In view of these rather obvious differences the suggestion of any deep connection between Christianity and the Essenes appears to be farfetched.

Zealots

After describing the death of Herod the Great, Josephus presents the causes of the disastrous anti-Roman rebellion of 66-70 CE (the so-called "Jewish War"), which had resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. In this conflict he speaks of a "fourth school of philosophy," a group established by a man called Judas the Galilean, assisted by a Pharisee called Saddok, to resist the Roman incorporation of Judea as a province in 6 CE (*Antiquities* 18.4-10, 23-24). This group, says Josephus, "agreed with the Pharisaic notion," but held God to be their only ruler. They were not afraid of death, their own or anyone else's. In these references some have seen evidence of the origins of the Zealot party, but the connection is not certain. What is definite is that in the years just before the rebellion against Rome a nationalist group called "Zealots" became prominent and played a major role in events during the siege of Jerusalem.

Because one of Jesus' disciples was called *zēlotēs* (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), because a parallel was drawn between Jesus and Judas the Galilean, and because Jesus died at the hands of the Romans, some have suggested that Jesus himself was a Zealot. In general, however, the cast of his teaching and demands is quite against such a notion. The question with regard to his disciple Simon is rather more complex. It is not sufficient to say, as one occasionally hears, that the epithet *zēlotēs* had in this case more to do with an attitude toward the Law. The word *zēlotēs* seems in fact to have been a way of speaking of precisely that kind of "zeal" for the Law that was

prepared in the spirit of Phinehas (Num. 25:7-8) to be violent in defending it. Perhaps that was Simon's background before Jesus found him, as it was certainly Paul's.

It is a feature of the Gospels that Jesus is from time to time criticized by the learned for his relationships with "sinners." We must be careful to avoid a confusion that, regrettably, is sometimes found even in books with pretensions to scholarship: namely, the idea that when Jesus is criticized in the Gospels for his relationships with "sinners," he is being criticized for relationships with the *amme ha-arets*, the peasants. Such statements suggest that the whole rabbinic understanding of "sin" was quite trivial. The major faults of the *amme ha-arets*, in the eyes of the learned, were stupidity and ignorance. No doubt the learned would have preferred Jesus not to have condoned these faults, but no rabbi suggested that such flaws put those who had them outside the boundaries of salvation or of the Jewish community. Nor is such a suggestion ever attributed to any Pharisee. Indeed, rabbinic Judaism shows a considerable sensitivity to the concept of diminished responsibility. The learned did not expect the common people to know and do everything they (the learned) did. According to the rabbis, sins of the learned count as heavy sins of the unlearned, and heavy sins of the unlearned as light sins of the learned.

**Sinners and
*amme
ha-arets***

3

What then is at issue when the Gospels speak of "sinners"? "Sinners" (Greek: *hamartoloi*, and, lying behind it, the Hebrew: *rahim*) is a technical term to describe those who were deliberate and unrepentant transgressors of God's commandments. Certain ways of earning a living—such as tax collection under the imperial system or prostitution—clearly involved such deliberate transgression. This was a very different matter from being *amme ha-arets*.

Jesus was willing to relate to such "sinners" and to see in them and their ability to respond to him personally qualities that spoke of the kingdom of God. Remarks such as "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31) would have been highly offensive to many of the religious and learned even if we allow, as we should, for a considerable degree of hyperbole. (One suspects such remarks, if heard with any degree of freshness, would still be offensive to most Christians.) We shall touch upon this matter again. For the moment let us note that in this matter, Jesus undoubtedly did offer a stumbling block to some of the pious of his day; but let us not suggest that what caused them to stumble were matters that we should regard as trivial.

