

## I. Introduction

A. The objective of these four sessions on the NT is twofold: (1) to introduce you to the ancient Mediterranean cultures in which Jesus and His contemporaries lived, learned, wrote, and proclaimed the good news of Christ crucified; and (2) to understand the theological agenda that is conveyed across its twenty-six books. Put simply, we will be seeking to establish the context of the NT and the message(s) it teaches. This session will be an attempt to illuminate the Jewish world of the first century. It is important that we make ourselves aware of this subject because one of the problems in reading ancient texts like the Bible in the twenty-first century is the danger of anachronism—the process by which one interprets ancient writings through the lens of their modern thought-world. As Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald illustrate:

“Describing the world in which we live today would be a complex business. It is no less so for the first-century world of the NT. This is not because the first-century Mediterranean world was so much more complicated than our own, but because the day-to-day world of Roman antiquity is so much less familiar to us. Too easily we mistake its thought forms for our own or imagine that people everywhere and at all times are like us. Holding Bibles written in our languages, we easily assume that our assumptions are shared by its writers, its first-century audiences. We forget that reading the pages of the NT is for everyone in the twenty-first century a cross-cultural experience. To attend to the NT, we need a better grasp of the first-century world of Peter and Paul, Priscilla and Phoebe, as well as of the years, movements, struggles, and literatures that gave the NT era its shape.”<sup>1</sup>

B. Understanding the first century Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds is tremendously helpful when studying the NT. It not only provides greater clarity on the NT’s message but additionally on the insurmountable grace and mercy extended to humanity through Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary. For instance, in 1 Cor. 8:1-13 Paul addresses the issue of eating meat that came from sacrifices made to idols. Since the first century expression of idol worship has vanished in the West, many are inclined to see these verses as irrelevant to modern times. Nonetheless, what this does is sidestep “the transcultural issue behind the cultural issue.”<sup>2</sup> As Craig S. Keener emphasizes,

“Understanding that the Bible does address issues and motives like those we face today is important. Far from making the Bible less relevant, understanding the situation helps us make it more relevant (sometimes even uncomfortably relevant). It forces us to see that the people with whom Paul dealt were not simply morally unstable troublemakers; they were real people with real agendas like ourselves. This recognition incites us to deal with how Paul’s words would challenge us as well.”<sup>3</sup>

C. To this end, it is important to see that Paul’s letter to the Corinthian community was just that—albeit inspired text, it is still Paul writing to the Corinthian Church. Thus, by listening in on the wisdom that God’s Spirit gave to Paul, we can learn from it by doing our best to hear what Corinthians would have. Some may argue that by emphasizing the need for this, I am making the Bible less accessible to the layperson. On the contrary, by doing this we root the text in concrete examples that were relevant enough to be considered God’s Word! God has given us “not just abstract principles that we should memorize without pondering how to apply them to our lives. If we wish to follow God’s example of being relevant, we need to understand what these teachings meant in their original culture before we try applying them to our own.”<sup>4</sup>

## II. The Jewish World<sup>5</sup>

A. To begin, it is worth noting that the Jewish world in Jesus’s day was radically different from the faith we are left with at the end of the OT. The Babylonian exile in 586 B.C. played a major role in reshaping the ancient faith of the Israelites and birthing the Judaism shown in the NT. The Diaspora (i.e., the Jews living outside the land of Israel; cf. John 7:35) was the direct result of the Assyrian destruction of Israel in 722 B.C. and, particularly in reference to the NT, the Babylonian siege of 586 B.C. when the Jewish people were exiled and dispersed from their homeland. It was this exilic period that produced two kinds of Jews:<sup>6</sup>

1. The **Hebraists** (or Hebrews) were more traditional in practice and doctrine and continued to speak in the Hebrew/Aramaic dialects, observe Jewish customs, and most lived in the geographical region of Israel.<sup>7</sup>
2. The second group is the **Hellenists**. The vast majority of Jews living in the ancient world fell into this category. They had to learn how to walk out a covenant keeping lifestyle while living amid Greco-Romanism. Many were absorbed into Greco-Roman culture, yet still clung to the basics of their faith. They usually adopted whatever cultural customs they found themselves in, including the language.

B. It was during this time that new religious practices, roles, and institutions began to emerge among the Jewish people.

### 1. Synagogue

- a. Prior to the exile, the expression of obedience had centered almost entirely around Jerusalem and the Temple. Although the Promised Land remained the longing of their hearts, the circumstances of the Babylonian Exile forced the Hebrew people to find a new expression of their faith.<sup>8</sup>
- b. It was during this time that the synagogue arose, which began simply as a local place of gathering for prayer and worship but then evolved into serving multiple communal purposes: (1) reading of God’s Word, (2) Sabbath activities, (3) social gatherings, and (4) political discussions.<sup>9</sup> As identified throughout the NT (the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, the epistles, and Revelation), the synagogue was central to the Jewish religion.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Sanhedrin

- a. In the NT, the term “Sanhedrin” chiefly refers to the Jewish governing body in Jerusalem or other local governing councils (e.g., Matt. 10:17; 26:59; Mark 13:9; 15:1; John 11:47; Acts 5:27).<sup>11</sup> Its roots are found after the Babylonian exile, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, when Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the last Davidic governor of Jerusalem were co-ruling (Hag. 1:1; Zech. 4:14; cf. 1 Chron. 3:19-24). Following the death of Zerubbabel, what would become known as the synedrion (syn, “together,” + hedra, “a seat”) was formed by an “aristocratic council (Neh. 2:16; 5:7) representing the people for negotiations with the Persian provincial governor... in the reconstruction of the temple (Ezra 5:5, 9; 6:7-8, 15).”<sup>12</sup>
- b. The void of a king upon the throne resulted in the high priest leading both religious and governmental affairs—i.e., he was the head of the Sanhedrin. Although the Sanhedrin’s level of authority fluctuated over the years, in the days of Jesus, they presided over the spiritual, legal, and political affairs of the Jewish people, provided that nothing infringed upon Roman law. It was composed of seventy people, plus the high priest, totaling seventy-one.<sup>13</sup>

## 3. Pharisees

- a. Arising during the time of the Maccabean Revolt (167 B.C.), the Hasidim, “pious ones,” eventually became known as the Pharisees, “separatists,” due to the degradation of the role of the high priest under the Hasmonean dynasty (ca. 140-37 B.C.). It would seem they had a great deal of influence in Israel during the days of Jesus. Josephus describes them as the leading sect, and they are mentioned far more than the Sadducees.<sup>14</sup> It was the Pharisees, together with the Scribes, who were the driving force behind the expressions of traditionalism and rabbinic Judaism.<sup>15</sup> They withdrew from any evil associations and desired to completely obey every word of the written and oral law. They believed in the supernatural, angels, spirits, the eschatological resurrection of the dead, as well as prayer, fasting and tithing.

## 4. Sadducees

- a. This group saw themselves as descendants of the Sons of Zadok, the priestly line. They were a smaller group, but the ones who held the power as the priestly class in Jerusalem. They possessed political and governing power under Herod the Great and had no use for oral traditions or the Prophets—only the Torah (Gen.-Deut.). They were pragmatic opportunists who did not believe in the supernatural or a resurrection from the dead and would become allies with whomever they needed to maintain their prestige and influence.

## 5. Essenes

- a. The Essenes can be identified as extreme contemplative hermits, from whom many writings are preserved in the form of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Their holiness and pietism went beyond the Pharisees. They are the only influential first-century group not directly mentioned in the NT.
- b. When the Hasmonean family made Jonathan high priest in 150 B.C., it was the last straw for many. Not only was Jonathan Hellenistic in his lifestyle, but also not of the line of Zadok, which was a requirement to be High Priest. The Hasidim had been the main supporters of the Maccabean revolt. They now became the major opponents of the descendants of Judah Maccabeus and his family. It is out of the Hasidim the two movements of the Pharisees and the Zealots emerge. While there is still some debate, scholars believe that the appointment of Jonathan as high priest was the moment when many godly priests decided the Temple was now defiled and the true worship of God had ended. A separatist movement formed, and they referred to themselves as the Essenes.<sup>16</sup>

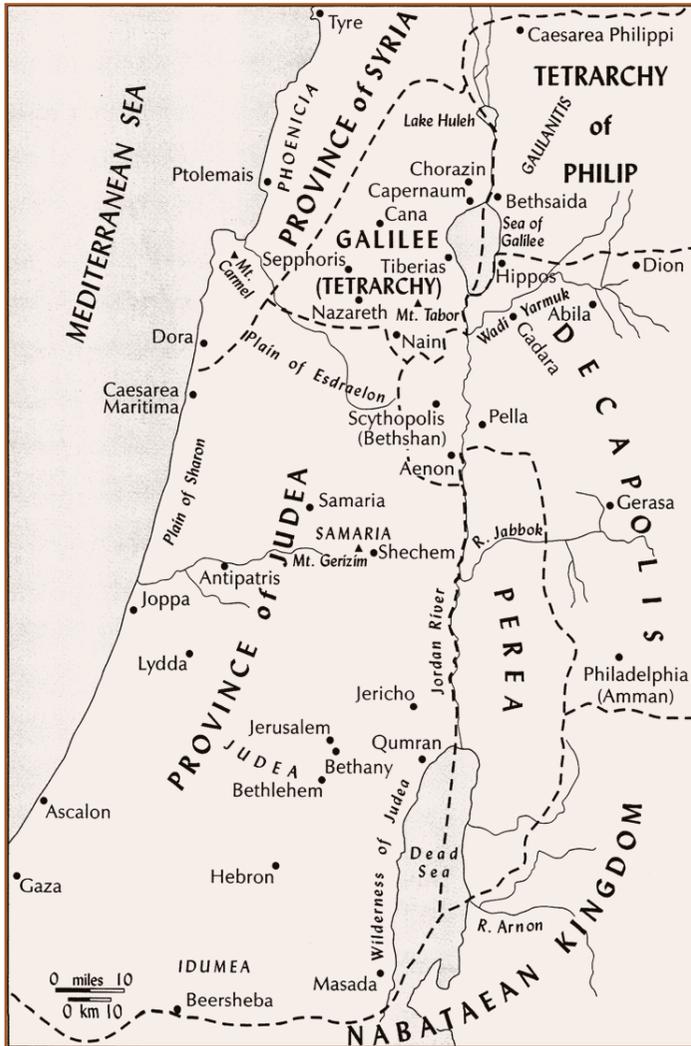
## 6. Zealots

- a. This was a class of nationalists who advocated violence as a means of liberating Judea from Rome. They believed you were to truly take the kingdom by force. They were revolutionaries and terrorists who modeled themselves after the “zealous” followers of Yahweh, from Phineas to Elijah to the Maccabees. Along with the Pharisees, they were well-known and influential within Judaism in the first century.<sup>17</sup>

## 7. Herodians

- a. Lovers of Rome and supporters of the Herods. Their headquarters was in Tiberius, which was built over a graveyard.
- C. All of that being said, the vast majority of Jews did not fall into an identifiable group. The common tenants that all believed and formed the foundation for Second Temple Judaism are as follows:
1. The Shema (Deut. 6:4-5) was central to those dwelling outside of Israel because it expressed the most fundamental of truths for the Hebrews—love the one God with all your being.
  2. They are God’s sovereignly chosen people who are to keep His covenant.
  3. The OT (Tanakh), especially the Pentateuch (Gen.-Deut.), was the cornerstone of Jewish piety.
  4. Finally, the temple was central to them as people.

**III. GEOGRAPHY**



1 Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald eds., *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2–3.

2 Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 26.

3 Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 27.

4 Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 32. He goes on to state in the next paragraph to emphatically state that, “Cultural background does not take the Bible out of people’s hands; it is when we ignore cultural context that we take the Bible out of people’s hands.”

5 For a thorough analysis on the NT world, see Bruce Chilton, Craig A. Evans and Jacob Neusner, *The Missing Jesus: Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament* (Boston: Brill Academic, 2002); and N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

6 It should also be noted the use of the two terms, “Hebraist” and “Hellenist,” in this section is only a generalization for the sake of simplicity

7 The term “Hebrews” (or צבריים, ivr'im, “Hebrews”) means, “someone who passes over to the other side” in context to Abraham, the first Hebrew being set apart or standing apart from the rest of humanity. See *Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the OT*, “צבריים,” 783.

8 As noted by Chilton and E. Yamauchi, although “a few scholars have stressed the preexilic roots of the synagogue, most would ascribe its rise to the postexilic period. Many would place this development in the Jewish exilic community in Mesopotamia” (“Synagogues,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], 1145). For other views on the origins of the synagogue, cf. Anders Runesson, “The Origins of the Synagogue in Past and Present Research” *Studia Theologica* 57 (2003): 60–76. Also see the excellent overview given by A. Runesson, “Synagogue,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 903–911.

9 For those interested, the following are primary, first-century sources that describe and refer to the synagogue and its practices: e.g., Josephus, *Ant.*, 2.235, 258, 259–61; J. W., 1.180, 277; Philo, *Legatio*, 156. Many of these can be accessed online for free. Cf. also, Kenneth D. Litwak, “Synagogue and Sanhedrin,” in *World of the New Testament*, 266.

10 Cf. y. Megillah, 3:1. Il.2.D–E in the Talmud which references four-hundred-eighty synagogues in Jerusalem prior to 70 A.D.

11 Cf. Josephus, *Ant.*, 14.167–180; *Life*, 62.

12 Graham H. Twelftree, “Sanhedrin,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 837. Note also that Ezra became the model for the office of the Scribe and Rabbinic Judaism—he “prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

13 The Gospels and Jewish sources suggest the chief priests, elders, and scribes who sat on the council were mostly Sadducees and formed its majority. The power of the council and high priest increased during the time of the Maccabean revolt (167 B.C.), becoming a more formal institution during the rule of John Hyrcanus (134–104 B.C.). Cf. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 68. At times they were cut from everything but ecclesiastical influence, while at other times they possessed near absolute authority (e.g., under the reign of Queen Alexandra [76–67 B.C.]). Under the rule of Herod the Great, the Sanhedrin was significantly restrained, having initially been exterminated when he assumed power in 37 B.C. before stacking it with those whom he could “entrust” with such ruling power (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.174). See also, Twelftree, “Sanhedrin,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 838.

14 They are mentioned ninety-nine times in the NT vs. the Sadducees’ fifteen times.

15 Cf. the brief summarization and history of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and the “Fourth Philosophy,” in Paul J. Achtemeir, et. al., *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 32–35.

16 Cf. Stephen Goranson, “Essenes,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 426.

17 Cf. Josephus’s comments on them in *Antiquities*, 18.1.6.23–25.

