

JEW'S AND JUDAISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus was a Jew. His whole ministry took place in a Jewish context. The Gospels will make more sense if you have a basic understanding of the Jewish world in which Jesus lived.

Politically, the Jews in Judea lived under Roman authority. When Jesus was born, Herod the Great, a puppet king, ruled Judea. Later on, Roman governors were appointed to oversee the civil affairs. The Jews resented Roman rule and ultimately rebelled against it. In A.D. 70 the Roman armies smashed what was left of the Jewish state and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

Religiously, the Jews in Judea looked to the temple as the focus of their worship. The people generally observed the law of Moses and offered the animal sacrifices required by the law. The *Sanhedrin* (or Council), a group of seventy religious leaders, governed the religious affairs of the Jews. Other important religious figures were the *high priest* (the most influential priest among all the priests who functioned in the temple) and *scribes* (scholars who devoted their lives to copying the text of the Old Testament). Jews living a distance away from the temple would gather for worship and instruction in a *synagogue*. No sacrifices could be offered in a synagogue, but prayers were said and the Hebrew Scriptures were read. Jews met for worship on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week.

Religious Jews usually identified with one of the sects within Judaism.

The *Pharisees* were committed to a strict keeping of every detail of the law of Moses. Members of this group often came into conflict with Jesus. They accused Jesus of breaking God's law, of associating too closely with nonreligious people, and of claiming a unique relationship with God.

The *Sadducees* were the Jewish aristocrats. They cooperated with the Roman rulers and held positions of authority among the Jews. The Sadducees were also more liberal in their view of God's demands. They accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture. They rejected any belief in life after death or a resurrection of the body. Most members of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees. They came into conflict with Jesus less often than the Pharisees but ultimately joined with them to condemn Jesus to death.

The *Zealots* opposed paying taxes to the Roman authorities and were intent on raising a rebellion against any outside rule over Judea.

The *Essenes* are not mentioned in the New Testament, but were the fourth major sect of the Jews. The Essenes lived in separate communities and meticulously observed the purity laws of the Old Testament. The community that copied and hid the Dead Sea Scrolls near Qumran was probably an Essene community. John the Baptist may have

had some association with the Essenes during his years in the wilderness.

Spiritually, the Jews were looking for a Deliverer who would usher in a golden age—a return to the glory of David's great kingdom. God had promised throughout the Old Testament that he would send a Messiah, or Deliverer, to rule for-

ever over his people. Roman tyranny over Palestine made that hope even stronger. The general expectation was that the Messiah would be a political/military leader who would overthrow the Romans. Jesus came offering a kingdom of truth and justice. Most of the Jews in Judea rejected his message.