

Introducing Jesus

Study 1: Jesus' World and Our World

Q: Name two things that you like people to know about you.

What is a Gospel?

The word “gospel” (*euangelion* in Greek) means simply, “good news”. In classical Greek, it referred to the reward given for good tidings. In the New Testament, it comes to refer to the good tidings themselves and, through the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it also begins to refer to a particular style or genre of writing.

The four gospels in the New Testament are not the only books we have about Jesus from the Early Church. Several other accounts exist about Jesus life and teachings (the Gospels of Thomas and Judas for example), Jesus younger years (such as the Protoevangelium of James and the History of Joseph the Carpenter) and a host of other writings, many of which are lost to us today. When church leaders came to decide which books to include in the official list (canon) of New Testament writings in the 4th Century, the criteria they applied were a) the book could be traced to one or more of the Apostles, b) the book was widely read throughout the Church and accepted as authentic, c) they decided to include more than one Gospel (this was because heretical sects tended to latch onto one Gospel and treat it with near-magical authority).

Gospels contain biographical information about Jesus, but they are not like the biographies with which we are familiar. They are not dispassionate accounts of Jesus' life nor do they have the character of journalistic or historical accounts of Jesus life as their first importance. The word “Gospel” originally referred to the Christian message itself and the written Gospels were then vehicles used to proclaim that message. In other words, the purpose of the writing is not to give us interesting or accurate biographical information about Jesus, but rather to use the “story” of Jesus' life, teachings and passion to convince us of the “message” or “good news” of Jesus.

Mark is the only book in the New Testament that calls itself a gospel (Mk 1:1) but the other three books (Matthew, Luke/Acts and John) are clearly written in a similar style. The writing is persuasive, it challenges the reader to make a response.

So the Gospel writers never plan to tell us everything there is to know about Jesus. Instead, their purpose is to bring us to a point of decision: Will we accept the Good News? John states explicitly that there is much more to be told,

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John 20:30-31

So, what is this “Good News”? In his book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, Brian McLaren draws a distinction between the message *about* Jesus and the message *of* Jesus. His point is that Christianity has often focused on the meaning of Jesus death

and resurrection without reflecting adequately on the message Jesus taught. Mark tells us what the message was that Jesus preached:

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Mark 1:14-15

NT Wright points out that the words “repent and believe in the gospel” may not mean exactly what we usually think they mean. He refers to a passage from the writings of Josephus, a 1st Century Jewish historian. On one occasion Josephus is sent on behalf of the Roman authorities to reason with a Jewish rebel. He says to the rebel, “repent and believe in me / show trust in me”. The word “repent” here means “change your mind” and the word “believe” means “put your trust in”. The exact same words are used by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel. So, instead of it meaning “confess your sins” (repent) and “give intellectual assent to” (believe) the Christian doctrine, Jesus’ message may mean something more along the lines of “Change your minds and trust that God’s kingdom is right here”.

The questions we should therefore ask when reading a Gospel are:

What is the author trying to persuade us to trust?

What information is the author giving us about Jesus to make the argument?

Q: Name two things you believe are important to know about Jesus.

Think Hebrew

If we want to get an accurate understanding of Jesus and the Biblical authors who wrote about him we need to think Hebrew. Even though the New Testament was written in Greek, all of its authors except Luke were Jewish. It is hard to overstate what a big impact Greek philosophical thought has had on Western civilization. Moreover, developments such as the Renaissance (1300s) and the Enlightenment (1700s) have pushed Western thought even further away from the worldview in which Jesus and his early followers operated. It is impossible in such a short study to go into all the nuances of how our worldview differs from that of the New Testament, but here is a quick guided tour through some of the key differences:

Abstract vs Concrete Language

Western language is often vague, woolly and imprecise because it is trying to express abstract concepts. Hebrew tended to speak in concrete terms often using examples or analogies. So we might say that God is compassionate and nurturing; Hebrews would say “The Lord is my shepherd”.

See for example the language in Psalm 1.

Scientific/Philosophic Pre-occupation vs Religious Truth

The primary concern of the Bible is to convey religious truth. It was born in and developed out of a pre-scientific age.

Take for example the Biblical idea that God is unchanging. In Western thought, this idea has led to profound discussions about God’s infinity (limitlessness), immutability (inability to change), impassibility (inability to be acted upon or to suffer). In turn, this has raised questions about the practice of prayer: If God cannot change, what is the point of prayer?

Hebrew thought never struggled with these dilemmas because for Hebrew thinkers the point of God’s unchanging nature was that God is always **faithful** to save. In other words, what doesn’t change about God is that God will always come through for us.

Dualism vs Integration

Following Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, Western thought imagines a dualist cosmology, the two realms usually being called the Natural and the Supernatural. In Western thought, these two realms are entirely distinct and separate. In the Natural realm exists everything that can be observed and measured by the senses, while the Supernatural realm contains mystery and spiritual reality. The two realms do not overlap at any point.

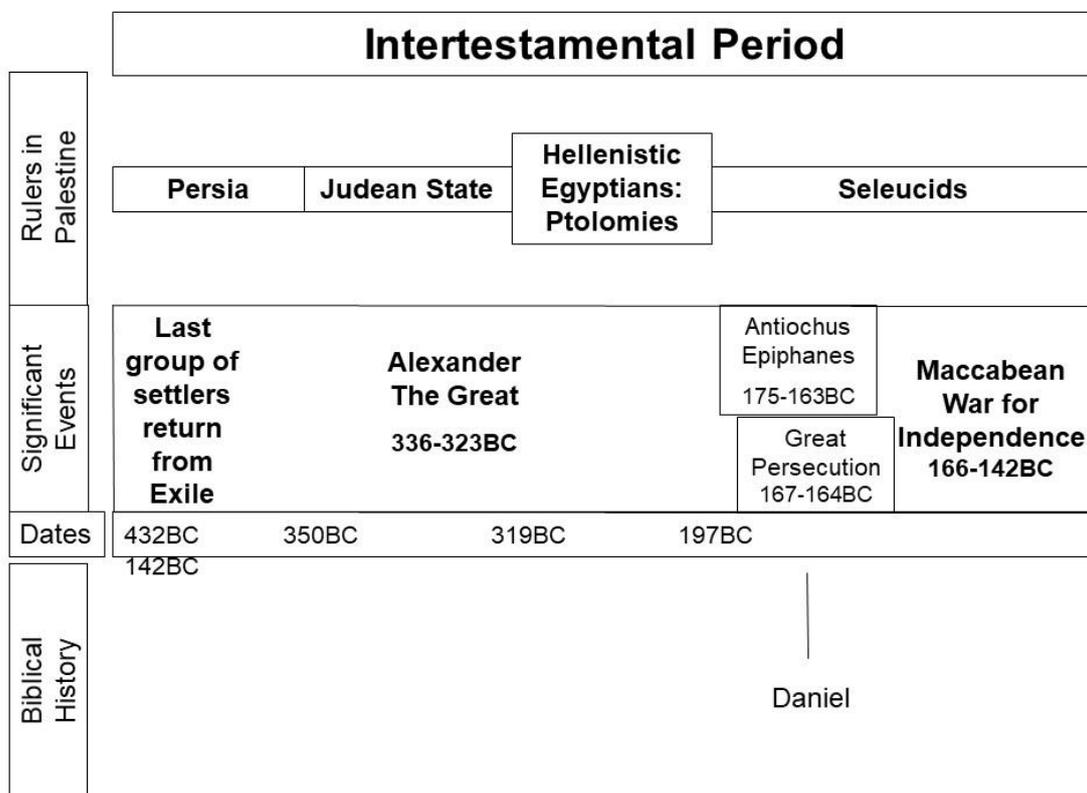
Within Hebrew thought the physical and spiritual exist side by side in an integrated reality.

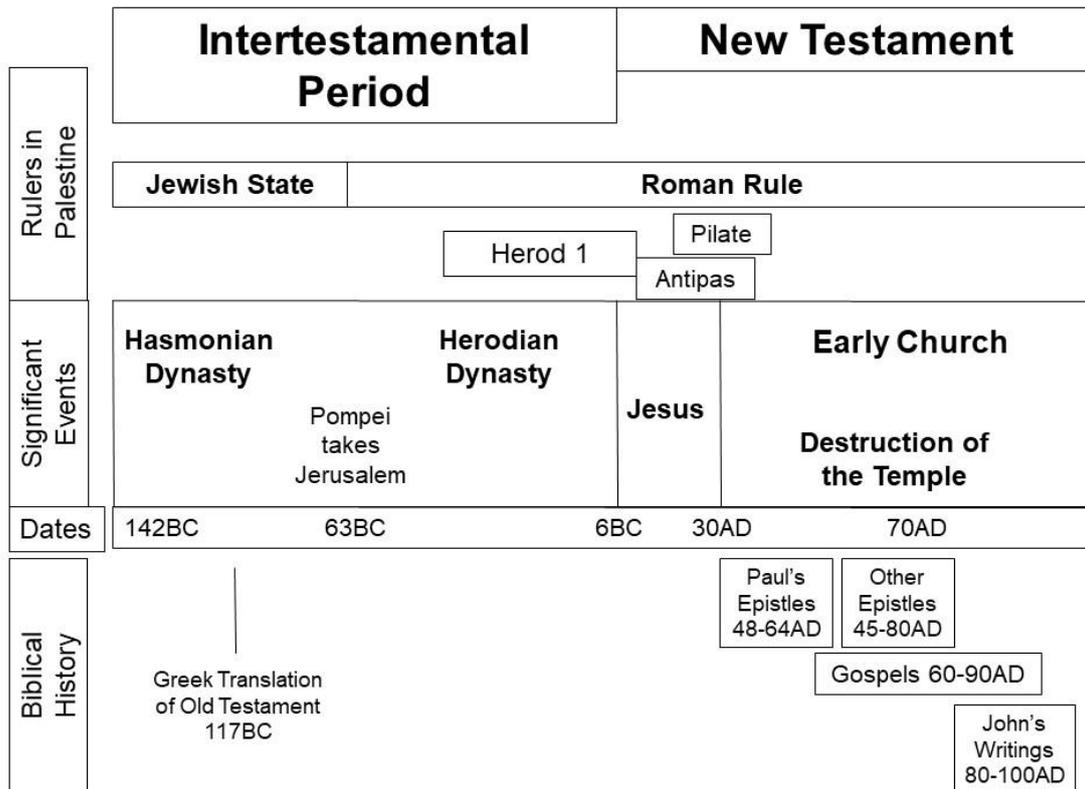
Individual vs Corporate

Western thought (especially since the Enlightenment) thinks almost exclusively in individualistic terms. In Hebrew thought people are always thought of in corporate terms. For example, God deals with families and nations. Communities are given responsibilities, receive blessings or suffer curses together. A son is seen as the full representation of his father’s household, name or authority.

Q. Thoughts, comments or questions.

The Political World of Jesus





Following the re-establishment of the Judean State after the Babylonian Exile and the return of many Jews from Persia, worship at the rebuilt (Second) Temple was restarted and the Jewish nation enjoyed a period of relative independence. Alexander the Great conquered most of the known world in the period from 336-323BC and bequeathed his empire to four generals. Judea first came under the control of the Egyptian Ptolemies whose rule was relatively benign. When control passed to the Seleucids in 197BC however, a period of persecution for the Jews ensued. The Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple and caused great suffering and oppression. A revolt erupted, led by the sons of the Hasmonean priest, Mattathias, especially his son Judas Maccabee (The Hammer).

The Maccabean Revolt threw off the shackles of Seleucid oppression, the Temple was cleansed and rededicated and from 142BC the Hasmonean Dynasty ruled an independent Jewish state. That was until the Roman general, Pompeii, was sent to place Jerusalem under Roman rule in 63BC.

The Romans set up Herod (Herod 1 or Herod the Great) as their puppet ruler over the whole of Judea from 37 – 4 BC. Herod was indirectly descended from the Hasmoneans. He conducted extensive renovations to the Temple and he was the Herod at the time of Jesus' birth.

When Herod died, the Romans divided his kingdom between his children. Herod Archelaus took charge of Judea, Samaria and Idumea, Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Philip became tetrarch of the areas to the north and east of the Jordan. Herod 1's sister was also given part of the kingdom.



The Herodian Dynasty was full of the kind of intrigue that would make the Kardashians look like a normal suburban family. Herod Archelaus was removed by the Romans in 6AD when Judea came under direct Roman rule through a series of governors – notably, Pontius Pilate from 26-36AD. Pilate and Herod Antipas were the two rulers who sat in judgement at the various trials of Jesus.

There was always an uneasy relationship between Rome and Jerusalem. In 66AD the first major Jewish Rebellion against Rome broke out, leading to the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. Further minor revolts ensued, notably the one led by Simon Bar Kochba in 132AD, but Jewish resistance had been crushed and Jews dispersed from Jerusalem and Palestine throughout the Roman Empire and further afield.

Q. What similarities and differences do you see between the political world of Jesus and our own world?

The Religious World of Jesus

Judaism in the time of Jesus is usually divided into four major groups, namely: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots. We will consider each group in turn but it is important to note that we should not think of them as highly organized distinct “denominations” like Church of England, Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, etc. but rather as broad religious trends or movements, like we would speak today of the evangelical movement, the contemplative movement or the Pentecostal movement.

Pharisees (Gk “separate/holy ones”)

The Pharisees were opposed to accommodation with Greek culture (Hellenization). They emphasized obedience to the Torah (Mosaic Law), especially the purity code and everyday holiness. In many respects, they were the group closest to the teachings of Jesus. Their adherence to the Torah and the teachings of Rabbis rather than the Temple and the administration of priests made their form of Judaism more mobile especially after the destruction of the Temple in AD70. It is largely Pharisaic Judaism which laid the foundation for later Rabbinic Judaism and which survives to this day.

Saul of Tarsus (later the Apostle Paul) is thought to have been a member of the Pharisees.

Sadducees (from the name Zadok, the family of High Priests)

Sadducees tended to be from the Hellenized upper classes in Jerusalem. They tended to control much of the Temple worship and supported the status quo, including Roman occupation. After the destruction of the Temple, the Sadducees ceased to have any real presence and most of what we know about them is from the writings of their opponents.

Essenes

The Essenes were a protest movement who withdrew from the world (often into the Judean wilderness). They are thought to have been an apocalyptic sect who expected God to intervene in the course of history through miraculous and spiritual means to bring the world to an end. They tended to live ascetic, spiritual lives. Communities around the Dead Sea such as the Qumran community are associated with the Essenes and John the Baptist may have been an example of this movement.

Zealots

As their name indicates these were the Jews zealous for independence from Rome. Their vision was for God to bring about political liberation through the leadership of the Messiah. They would coalesce into a clear group at the time of the Jewish Rebellion and were effectively crushed by the Romans in that and subsequent wars. One of Jesus' disciples, Simon, was associated with the Zealots although it is likely that others in his group may have held Zealot sympathies, at least initially.

Hillel and Shammai



Hillel the Elder



Shammai

Another way to think about the religious world of the Judaism into which Jesus came is through a consideration of the two main competing schools of rabbis at the time: the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai.

Hillel the Elder had been president of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish High Court) from 31BC until shortly before his death in 10AD. Shammai acted as vice-president until Hillel's death after which he took over as President. At this point, no vice-president was elected so that the House of Shammai gained complete ascendancy. Even after Hillel's grandson, Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3), took over as president in 30AD, the House of Shammai continued to dominate Jewish law until the destruction of the Temple in 70AD.

The two schools respected one another but differed fundamentally on several major issues of Jewish law, with Hillel being the more lenient and Shammai the stricter. Shammai's strict adherence to Jewish nationalism and rejection of any accommodation with Gentiles made him particularly popular among the Zealots. The story that is often told to demonstrate the difference between the two teachers is that a Gentile once approached Shammai to convert to Judaism "on one foot" i.e. on the basis of extreme brevity. Shammai drove him away saying such a conversion was impossible. The man thereafter approached Hillel with the same question. Hillel's response was "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the whole Torah. The rest is the explanation. Go and learn." The gentile subsequently converted. From this story, we see not only the relative approach to law by each school but also the connection between Jesus and the House of Hillel – Jesus teaching of the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12) is almost a direct quote from Hillel's teaching.

It is most likely that Jesus was educated in the House of Hillel (we know that this was the case for Saul / Paul Acts 22:3) and that his disputes with Jewish scholars were, in the first instance, with followers of the House of Shammai. By the times the first Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) were written, this distinction was lost and Jesus is said to have disputed with the Pharisees. When John came to write his Gospel even this distinction is lost and Jesus is simply in conflict with "the Jews".

Interestingly, later Rabbinic Judaism would come to reject the teachings of Shammai altogether and declare the teachings of Hillel to be orthodox. We might also note that although both Jesus and Paul may have been trained in the House of Hillel, their teachings – especially in terms of the universality of their message – went far beyond that of Hillel and would ultimately break with Rabbinic Judaism completely.

Q. What similarities and differences do you see between the religious world of Jesus and our own world?