

The Political and Religious Structure in Jesus' Time

In looking at the political and religious structure at the time of Jesus, we could explore countless topics. In this article we look at topics of the structure of the Jewish sects, the practice of taxation and tithing, and the exercising of crucifixion as a means of execution and control.

Jewish Sects

Just as Christianity today is divided into different groups (Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, nondenominational evangelical churches), so too ancient Jewish religion had distinct groups or sects. In Jesus' time in Palestine, three groups were particularly influential. Josephus identifies these groups (he calls them "philosophies"): the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes.

We should make clear from the start that only a small minority of people actually belonged to these sects, but their strong influence on Jewish society is undeniable. The Pharisees were the largest of the three, consisting of about six thousand members during the time of Herod the Great (out of a total population of perhaps one million people in Palestine). These groups can be compared not only to Christian denominations but also to modern political parties. In ancient Judaism there was no sharp distinction between religion and politics. All three groups were concerned not only with religious behavior but also with the political issues of their day.

Sadducees

The name Sadducees most likely comes from the name Zadok, a priest who anointed David's son Solomon as king (see 1 Kings 1:32–40). The descendants of Zadok, the Zadokites, were recognized as the only legitimate priests by Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 44:9–31) and the author of the Book of Chronicles. It's likely that the Sadducees were Zadokites who supported the Hasmonean (descendants of the Maccabees) kings and priests. The Sadducees were apparently of the elite, wealthy class, and were closely allied with the high priestly families. Josephus says the Sadducees had a following among the rich only, while the Pharisees had a greater following among the common people. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Sadducees are associated with the high priest and the Jerusalem Temple (see 4:1–2, 5:17). Josephus names the high priest Ananus as a Sadducee.

In New Testament times, the high priest was appointed by King Herod, the client king of the Romans, then by Herod's son Archelaus, and later directly by Roman rulers of Judea. With their connections with the high priestly families, the Sadducees were closely tied to Roman rule in Palestine.

Ancient Jews held a variety of different beliefs about the afterlife. Josephus says the Sadducees believed that the soul died along with the body; the Acts of the Apostles reports that "the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, while the Pharisees acknowledge all three" (23:8).

Members of the Sadducees tried to show that the belief in resurrection was not logical when they asked Jesus about a hypothetical case in which a woman had married seven men. In the life after resurrection, whose wife would she be? (see Mark 12:18–27). Jesus answered them, "When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven" (12:25). In other words, the normal standards of marriage do not apply in the resurrected life.

According to Josephus, the Pharisees and Sadducees were often in conflict. The Pharisees taught many religious rules that were not directly in the Torah; the Sadducees rejected all laws that were not



explicitly written in the Torah. Josephus also reports that the Sadducees were harsher in their legal judgments and punishments than were the Pharisees. The rabbinic literature often portrays the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreeing about matters of purity.

Pharisees

It appears that most members of the Pharisees were not priests. They had considerable influence in Israelite society—Josephus reports that at the beginning of the revolt against Rome in AD 66, the leading Pharisees met with the high priests and “men of power” in an attempt to resolve the crisis.

This political influence, however, was indirect. The Pharisees did not hold political offices but rather influenced such leaders as the Hasmonean Queen Salome Alexandra and later Herod the Great. Mark portrays the Pharisees as plotting with the “Herodians” to destroy Jesus (see Mark 3:6, 12:13). They did, however, serve on the council (“Sanhedrin”) that advised the high priest (see Acts of the Apostles 5:34, 23:6–9).

Origins of the Pharisees

Many scholars think the Pharisaic party evolved from a group known as the Hasideans, zealous supporters of the Torah who joined the Maccabean revolt: “Then they were joined by a group of Hasideans, valiant Israelites, all of them devout followers of the law” (1 Maccabees 2:42). The name Hasideans comes from the Hebrew *hasid*, meaning “pious” or “devout.”

Most scholars also believe the Pharisaic movement later developed into rabbinic Judaism. This Judaism, based on the Scriptures as interpreted by the Mishnah and Talmud, is the form of the Jewish faith that has survived into modern times. Thus careful study of early rabbinic documents, such as the Mishnah (ca. AD 200), allows us to gain some insights into the Pharisees' teaching at the time of Jesus.

The Pharisees are often portrayed in the Gospels as hypocritical, concerned more with outward show than with sincere faith, “for they preach but they do not practice” (Matthew 23:3; see also 23:4–5, 25–28). Jesus contrasts the prayers of a self-righteous Pharisee with a humble tax collector; it is the tax collector who goes away justified by God (see Luke 18:9–14). It is not surprising that the Gospel writers tended to focus on negative aspects of the Pharisaic movement, as early Christians and Pharisees were in serious conflict over basic issues, such as the observance of Torah.

Josephus's portrait is much more positive. He reports that the Pharisees avoided luxury and lived a simple lifestyle. In contrast to the Sadducees, they enjoyed support among the common people.

Pharisees and the Torah

The primary aim of the Pharisees was to apply the details of the Torah to everyday life. Many of the commandments of Torah are vague, and at times they are inconsistent or even contradictory. The Pharisees worked out practical methods to overcome these challenges.

They were well known for “traditions” that they taught as a supplement to, or as an interpretation of, the commandments of the Torah. The synoptic Gospels report that the Pharisees were meticulous about washing their hands and purifying themselves before eating (see Mark 7:3–4); they apparently applied some priestly purity laws to their own daily meals. Another tradition was the declaration of something as *qorban*—a dedication of a possession to the Temple that allowed a person to continue using it for himself and not sharing it with others (see 7:11).



Josephus reports that the Pharisees were lenient in their judgments about punishments, and we know that some of their traditions allowed Jews to observe the Torah in an easier and more practical manner. For example, strict biblical laws forbade carrying food from house to house on the Sabbath. The Pharasaic tradition of *'eruv* allowed the construction of doorposts and lintels so that several houses could be joined together as one, and families could thus socialize on the Sabbath. The tradition of the *prosbul* allowed a debt to be collected by a community council, even during the seventh year, when, according to biblical law (see Deuteronomy 15:2), all debts were to be forgiven. This practice made it easier for farmers or craftsmen to get loans when the seventh year was approaching.

Pharisees and Early Christians

Although the Gospels often portray Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees (see Mark 2:23–28, 3:1–6), the relationship between the Pharisees and the early Christian movement was more complex. Followers of Jesus and the Pharisees (in contrast to the Sadducees) shared a belief in the resurrection of the dead and punishment and rewards in the afterlife. The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee (see Philippians 3:5, Acts of the Apostles 23:6). Pharisees were also part of the first church community at Jerusalem (see Acts of the Apostles 15:5). Besides Paul, other notable first-century Pharisees were Gamaliel, an influential member of the Sanhedrin who was “respected by all the people” (5:34), and the priest, general, and historian Josephus.

Essenes

Many scholars identify at least one branch of the Essenes with the community that lived in the desert wilderness at Qumran (although other scholars reject this connection). Qumran is the site on the northwestern end of the Dead Sea at which the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls were found. The Qumran community was governed by a strict hierarchy headed by priests; the so-called Teacher of Righteousness (often mentioned in the scrolls) was apparently the founder of the community.

The community seems to have begun when a group of priests left Jerusalem because of a dispute with the Temple priesthood. They disagreed with the interpretation of Torah practiced by the Jerusalem priests, and especially with interpretation of laws of purity. It is likely that the Qumran community members, with their belief that only a Zadokite should be high priest, rejected the non-Zadokite Hasmonean high priests. The community further disagreed with the Hasmonean adoption of a solar calendar in place of the old lunar one. This dispute was important, as knowing the precise date was essential for keeping the festivals mandated in the Torah.

The Dead Sea Scrolls include many copies of biblical books, commentaries on Scripture, hymns, prayers, and rules for governing the community. One scroll, the “War Scroll,” describes a final battle at the end of history in which the Sons of Light (the Qumran community), aided by God, will destroy the powers of darkness (the forces of the community’s Jewish opponents as well as Gentiles).

With their withdrawal into the wilderness, their strict lifestyle, and their emphasis on God’s coming judgment, the members of the Qumran community are similar to John the Baptist, who preached his apocalyptic message of repentance in the Judean desert. Some scholars, in fact, speculate that John was once a member of the Qumran community.

The Gospel writers associate Isaiah’s prophecy “A voice of one crying out in the desert: / ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, / make straight his paths’” (Mark 1:3, see Isaiah 40:3) with John the Baptist; the Qumran community applied this same prophecy to their own group.

The Essenes thought of themselves as the only faithful remnant of Israel; they believed their community replaced the Temple as the site of the true, uncorrupted worship of God.



Samaritans

Samaritans are inhabitants of Samaria, a district in central Palestine, between Galilee and Judea. After the split of Israel into the northern and southern kingdoms after the death of King Solomon, Samaria formed part of the northern kingdom of Israel (see 1 Kings, chapters 11–12). Its capital was the city of Samaria, constructed by King Omri and his son Ahab in the ninth century (see 16:24). At this time the people were simply known as Israelites.

The city of Samaria was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 BC, and many of its leading citizens were deported. The Assyrian king settled colonists from Babylon and other cities in the region of Samaria (see 2 Kings 17:24). The religious rites of the colonists (including worship of the Babylonian god Marduk) were mixed with the worship of the Lord (see 17: 29–33). According to the biblical record, Samaritans in Jesus' time were descendants of these colonists. The Samaritans themselves, however, claimed direct descent from the Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. It is after the Babylonian Exile that the people are called Samaritans.

From the time of the return of the Judean exiles from the Babylonian Exile, tensions between Jews and Samaritans arose. The major dispute involved the proper worship of the Lord. The Samaritans were opposed to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple (see Ezra 4:1–4, Nehemiah 2:18–20), favoring their holy place built on Mount Gerizim in Samaria. The dispute is reflected in the words of the Samaritan woman to Jesus: “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain [Mount Gerizim]; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem” (John 4:20). In addition, Samaritans accepted only the first five books, the Pentateuch, of the Old Testament as their Scriptures. Their version of the Pentateuch differs slightly from other ancient Hebrew versions. The most striking difference is the addition of a commandment to build an altar at Mount Gerizim (see Exodus 20:17). Samaritans shared with Jews the expectations of a Messiah (see John 4:25); Samaritans focused especially on the prophecy that God would raise up another prophet like Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:18).

At times the conflict between Jews and Samaritans turned violent. The Hasmonean King John Hyrcanus destroyed the holy place at Gerizim in 128 BC; Samaritans massacred some Jewish pilgrims in AD 52.

Jews in the time of Jesus thus despised Samaritans as foreigners who worshipped the Lord in the wrong way. Jesus seemed to have had some wariness of the Samaritans as well. He warned his disciples, “Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town” (Matthew 10:5). Yet in other ways, Jesus, as a first-century Jew, had a remarkable openness to Samaritans. His Parable of the Good Samaritan contrasts a priest and Levite who ignore a man in need with a Samaritan who stops to help (see Luke 10:25–37, see also 17:11–19). This parable would have deeply offended Jesus' Jewish listeners. Most striking is Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well (see John 4:4–42).

The early followers of Jesus continued his openness. Philip (a member of the first church in Jerusalem), Peter, and John preached about Jesus in Samaria. As a result many Samaritans accepted the Gospel and were baptized (see Acts of the Apostles 8:5–25).

Taxes and Tithing

The old saying “The only sure things in life are death and taxes” held true for biblical societies also, where the populace was taxed by both government and religious authorities. Taxes were paid in three ways: as money, as a percentage of crops or animals, or as forced labor.



Taxes in Old Testament Times

In ancient Israel, government tax collection was unsystematic, varying from king to king. Taxes were levied in order to pay tribute to foreign kings (see 2 Kings 15:20, 23:35); Solomon employed forced labor in building the Temple and other building projects (see 1 Kings 5:27–32, 9:15–22). Samuel warned the people that a king would make them slaves and take 10 percent of their crops, vineyards, and flocks (see 8:15–17), but it is unclear to what extent the kings actually did these things. Taxes were also collected to maintain the priests and the Temple (see 2 Kings 12:5).

Taxes in First-Century Palestine

The exact percentage of income that was taken in taxes by the Roman government in Jesus' time is not clear. One scholarly estimate puts it at around 12.5 percent. We know that shortly after the Maccabean revolt, a Syrian king referred to his right to collect "the third of the grain and the half of the fruit of the trees" (1 Maccabees 10:30).

In addition to a tax on crops, the Herodian government also collected a "head tax." Every male over fourteen and every female over twelve in a family was assessed a tax of one *denarius* (approximately the daily wage of a laborer). A census would be taken in order to register each family for tax purposes (see Luke 2:1). This is the tax discussed by Jesus and the Pharisees when Jesus concluded, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (Mark 12:17).

Besides these direct taxes, the Romans charged many indirect taxes, such as road tolls and port fees. The Roman military stationed in Palestine also had the legal right to force the native population to help them carry supplies for up to one mile; this right is reflected in Jesus' teaching, "Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles" (Matthew 5:41). Roman soldiers exercised this right when they forced Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross when Jesus became too weak to carry it (see Mark 15:21).

The government regulated economic activity in other ways. Fishermen, for example, could not merely go out and fish in Palestinian lakes; rather, they had to obtain a contract from a tax collector, who might lend them money to buy boats and nets, in return for a percentage of their profits. This tax collector, in turn, had contracted with a chief tax collector who had been appointed by King Herod. Because his office was in the fishing village of Capernaum, Jesus' disciple Matthew was most likely a contractor of fishing rights (see Matthew 9:9, Mark 2:14).

Religious Taxes or Tithes

The tithes collected by Jewish religious leaders were also a kind of tax. Tithes were 10 percent of a worker's produce, including both crops and flocks (see Leviticus 27:30–33). There were two main tithes. One tithe was to be taken to Jerusalem during the festival times, or sold, and the money spent in Jerusalem (see Deuteronomy 14:22–29). Every third year, however, this tithe was put into a community storehouse, where people, including the "alien, orphan, and widow," could come and "eat their fill" (Deuteronomy 14:28–29). Another tithe was used to support the priests and Levites, who did not work their own land. This tithe was given to the Levites who, in turn, would give a tithe of this tithe to the priests (see Numbers 18:21–32). This seems to have been a tithe on crops, not on animals.

Additionally, the people gave a firstfruits offering from their crops or herds, which was brought either in kind or as a money payment to the Temple during the pilgrimage festivals (see Numbers 18:15–19). The Torah also requires other offerings, such as a wave offering (see 18:11) and a sin offering (see Leviticus 4:27–28). Tobit explains how he faithfully paid these various tithes and offerings (see 1:6–8).



The Torah does give options for a poor person's offering. If a person could not afford an animal, he could offer two birds; if he could not afford two birds, he could offer flour (see Leviticus 5:7–10; see also 12:8, 14:21–22).

Finally, the Temple tax, required annually of every adult Jewish male, was used for the general needs of the Temple. In Jesus' time the Temple tax was a half shekel (or two *drachmas*), approximately the cost of two days' wages for a laborer. Jesus refers to this tax in his discussion with Peter (see Matthew 17:24–27). This tax was collected not only in Palestine but also in Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora.

The Tax Collection System in Jesus' Time

Neither the Roman emperors nor the Hellenistic kings who ruled over Palestine collected taxes directly; rather, they operated through the client-patron system. Patrons were typically members of the elite class who had wealth or power and thus could offer protection or other benefits to a client in return for the client's loyalty, goods, or services. "Brokers" were people in the middle who would put patrons in touch with clients. Even rulers like King Herod were essentially clients of the Roman emperor, governing with the emperor's approval.

At the top of this patronage system, the Roman emperor demanded a certain amount of tribute tax from his client King Herod. Herod in turn contracted with members of the elite who were designated as "chief tax collectors." At times the high priest was also involved in guaranteeing the delivery of a certain amount of taxes to the Romans. These chief tax collectors, in turn, hired a number of local tax collectors (brokers) who brought in the actual revenue. The tax collectors mentioned in the Gospels are all local Jews (see Mark 2:15; Luke 18:10–14, 19:1–10).

The right to collect taxes in a certain area (village or district) was auctioned off to the highest bidder. The chief tax collector contracted with the local tax collectors to bring in a certain amount of money; anything over that amount was kept by the local tax collector.

The local tax collectors were among the most despised members of the Jewish communities for several reasons: (1) they earned money by collecting other people's money, which was considered dishonorable in itself; (2) they had a reputation for dishonesty (the tax collector Zacchaeus promises Jesus he will repay four times over anything he has extorted [see Luke 19:8]); (3) they were actively cooperating with the Romans who were occupying the land of Israel; and (4) they were grouped together with prostitutes (see Matthew 21:31) and sinners (see Mark 2:16) as the dregs of society.

Some farmers who were forced from their land by their inability to pay their debts formed gangs of outlaws who survived by raids on the wealthy elite. The "criminals" crucified on either side of Jesus (see Luke 23:33) and Barabbas, the prisoner who was released instead of Jesus (see 23:18–25), were possibly outlaws of this type. They were popular among the people as "Robin Hoods" who resisted Roman elites and their clients; this may have been one factor in the crowd's decision to release Barabbas instead of Jesus (see 23:25).

Jesus himself taught his followers to pay their taxes (see Matthew 17:25–27 [Temple tax], Mark 12:13–17 [Roman tax]), as did Paul (see Romans 13:6–7).



Crucifixion

Most people today associate crucifixion with Jesus' death. The cross on which Jesus died has become a major symbol of Christianity.

In the ancient world, however, crucifixion was used as a punishment in many societies. Living victims of this punishment were nailed or tied to crosses, trees, or stakes. Sometimes the dead bodies of criminals were treated in this way. The cruel practice was found among the Persians, Greeks, Romans, and other peoples. Jesus was just one of thousands of people killed by crucifixion in the ancient world.

In the Roman method of crucifixion, the victim was tied or nailed to a wooden cross. The victim often remained alive for several days, all the while enduring terrible pain. The actual cause of death was often asphyxiation; when the victim no longer had the strength to hold up his body, he would slump down and his breathing would be cut off. The Gospels report the Roman custom of breaking the victim's legs (ensuring that the victim could no longer hold up his body) in order to speed up death. Jesus' legs were not broken, as he was already dead when the Roman soldiers came (see John 19:31–33).

The purpose of crucifixion was twofold—to torture the victim as long as possible before death, as a cruel punishment, and to serve as a warning to others. Therefore crucifixions often took place in public places, such as the crossroads of busy highways, on hilltops, and even in theaters. Often rebels who revolted against a government were publicly crucified to deter others. Six thousand slaves were crucified along the Appian Way, a major highway leading into Rome, after the slave revolt led by Spartacus was crushed.

The Roman practice also shamed and humiliated the victim in every way. The victim was often tortured first and then stripped naked before crucifixion. The Gospels record how the Roman soldiers tortured Jesus, mocked him, and then stripped off his clothes before crucifying him (see Mark 15:15–20).

In Roman society, the penalty was reserved mainly for criminals, rebels, and slaves; the Roman statesman Cicero simply calls it the “slaves' punishment.” Cicero also writes that Roman citizens should not even spend time thinking about crucifixion, as it was such a degrading and unworthy way of dying.

Another Roman practice was to attach to the top of the cross a sign indicating the alleged crime of the victim. The inscription on Jesus' cross read, “Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews,” written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (John 19:19–20). This refers to the fact that Jesus was crucified as the Messiah, one who claimed to be the king sent by God to rule over the Jewish People. Today you might see “INRI” at the top of a crucifix: these letters represent the Latin translation of the inscription *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* (“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”).

Crucifixion in the Roman Empire was thus understood as a great source of shame, a punishment given only to the lowest criminals and slaves. So when the early Christians taught that their Lord and Savior had been crucified, most people must have thought the Christians were crazy for worshipping a man who had been shamed in this way. The Apostle Paul writes, “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). It was a stumbling block for most Jews, because a common Jewish expectation of the Messiah is that he would be a great king who would drive out the Roman oppressors—it was inconceivable that God's chosen Messiah would be crucified. The Gentiles too would have had a difficult time believing that any kind of savior or honored religious figure would be crucified.

The followers of Jesus, however, transformed the negative and shameful connotations of the cross into a life-giving teaching. Jesus himself insisted that his follower “must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:34–35). Thus the cross symbolizes the followers' willingness to accept the hardships involved in following Jesus, but this acceptance leads to saving one's life. Paul similarly taught that it is through death that our new life is attained: “We were indeed buried with him



through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

(Most of the content in this article has been adapted from the *Saint Mary's Press*[®] *Essential Quick Charts: Bible Basics* (2007), written by Gary Dreier.

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