

Intertestamental Period

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Session 3: Social, Religious, and Political Landscape

- Now that we have covered the breadth of history from the end of the Prophetic period all the way up to the beginning of the Apostolic period, I'd like to turn our attention to the social landscape in Israel in the first century of the Common Era.
- There were many different political and religious groups in Israel, each with their own desires and goals. It's important to remember that religion and politics were really not separated from each other during this time. People didn't see the lines of demarcation like that. Your political stance was your religious stance, and political groups were religious in nature.

Jews and Gentiles

- **[SLIDE]** The first two groups we should discuss are Jews and Gentiles.
- What is a Jew? To answer that question, we have to go all the way back to Genesis 12, when God made a covenant with Abraham. God selected Abraham from among all the other people of the earth, and made a covenant, a binding agreement, with him, promising to bless Abraham and his descendants.
- Abraham's grandson Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel, had 12 sons. The families of those 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel.
- After the death of Solomon, the 12 tribes were split into two different kingdoms: the southern kingdom of Judah, with two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, and the northern kingdom of Israel, with the remaining 10 tribes.
- The northern kingdom was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. A majority of the people were taken into exile and were resettled in various cities throughout the Assyrian Empire. However, some of the people were left in the land of Israel, and many of those people moved down and joined the southern kingdom, maintaining their tribal connections. One example of this is found in Luke 2:36: "And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher."
- The southern kingdom of Judah was defeated and taken into exile by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Many of these exiles returned to Judah in 538 BCE after being sent back to Cyrus the Great. These people kept their ancestral connections, as well, including keeping detailed genealogies. The descendants of King David were especially careful about this because of the need to trace the line of the kings, but even the apostle Saul knew he was from the tribe of Benjamin (and was named after the first king of Israel, who was also a Benjamite).
- By the time we get to the Roman period, the area formerly known as the Kingdom of Judah was being called by the Greek and Roman adaptation of that name, Judea, and the descendants of Israel were known as Ἰουδαῖοι (*Ioudaioi*) in Greek.
- That term was later anglicized into "Jews."
- In modern usage, the term Jew is used to describe anyone who is a descendant of Jacob under the terms of *halakha* (Jewish religious law), either as a result of clear family lineage on the maternal side or through a special legal process (based in the Biblical text) called conversion. Paul generally recommends against conversion for reasons we will explore in our study on his epistle to the Galatians, but he confirms that the process is valid and that someone who converts is actually considered to be Jewish, regardless of their ethnicity at birth.

- Meanwhile, the English term Gentile refers to anyone who is not Jewish. The word comes from the Latin word *gentilis*, meaning "of or belonging to the same people or nation." The word Gentile is not used in the Bible, which calls non-Jews by the Hebrew terms גוֹיִם (*goyim*, nations) or אַמִּיּוֹת (*ammim*, people) or by the Greek term ἔθνικὸς (*ethnikos*, nations). So, a Gentile would just be anyone from any of the other peoples or nations of the earth besides the children of Israel.

Roman Religious Laws

- **[SLIDE]** Another aspect of the Jewish/Gentile distinction was how the Roman religious system was set up and how laws about the practice of religion applied to those under the empire's control.
- Everything in Roman culture revolved around religious belief and practice. There was not, as we have today, a separation between everyday civil affairs and religious practice.
- The Roman pantheon was extensive, with major deities like Jupiter (god of the sky), Venus (god of sex), Neptune (god of the sea, earthquakes, and horses), and Mars (god of war), as well as thousands of other minor deities defined for pretty much everything. They even had a god named Robigus who was in charge of mold and rust, and to which they sacrificed a dog every year at a special festival, with the hope of avoiding disease in their crops.
- This expansive pantheon of gods was likely due to how the Romans approached pretty much everything: through assimilation. Instead of separating out religious worship of the nations they took over, Rome practiced something called *interpretatio Romana*—they just absorbed and integrated other people's gods into their core religious practice, expanding their pantheon as needed and equating those new gods with similar gods already in the pantheon.
- Romans worshipped their gods with the common rituals of prayer, sacrifice, and divination. These practices were part of the everyday life of a Roman citizen, and a mistake made in one of the rituals was taken very seriously, even requiring a complete re-do of the practice or festival.
- There was no separation between the civil and religious authorities, either. Roman senators served as priests in the four religious main groups, and the head of the state religion was the emperor, who was the chief priest (*pontifex maximus*). The emperor was not considered divine during his lifetime, but could be raised to that level after death, complete with a cultic following, sacrifices, hymns, and other honors.
- Due to the deeply embedded nature of the Roman cultic practices in everyday life, there was an intense amount of social pressure exerted on everyone in the empire to adhere to those practices. This was especially true for those who lived in large Roman cities (even those in Israel like Caesarea and the cities of the Decapolis), where these practices thrived.
- Roman religion was highly formalistic, and was not prone to fanaticism. They actually considered any religious beliefs that seemed baseless, emotional, or fanatical as "superstition" (*superstitio*).
- Beyond the practice of the Roman cultic religion, other groups, whether of a religious or a civil nature, were called *collegia* and were highly regulated by the state.
- We talked before about how Julius Caesar decreed that the Jews should be allowed to follow their own religious practices, build walls around Jerusalem, and not be taxed on sabbatical years.
 - This was actually part of a broader change that he instituted across the empire, dissolving all *collegia* and making them illegal unless they had a clearly ancient status. The Jewish religious system fit Caesar's definition of "ancient," so it was allowed to continue and was made an official *collegium*.
- Caesar Augustus affirmed similar protections for the Jews living in Asia Minor in a decree from around the year 1 BCE. Josephus tells us what the decree said:

- “It seemed good to me and my counsellours [sic.], according to the sentence and oath of the people of Rome, that the Jews have liberty to make use of their own customs, according to the law of their fathers...; and that their sacred money be not touched, but be sent to Jerusalem...; and that they be not obliged to go before any judge on the Sabbath-day, nor on the day of the preparation to it, after the ninth hour... And if any one transgress any part of what is above decreed, he shall be severely punished.” ([Antiquities 16.6.2](#))

Hasideans

- **[SLIDE]** In our study on the Maccabees, we discussed a Jewish religious sect known as the Hasideans.
- In Hebrew their name was חַסִּידִים, *hasidim*, “pious ones,” but scholars use the term Hasideans to differentiate them from the more recent Hasidic Jewish movement. We don’t know a lot about them, but they were apparently a militant religious group devoted to the strict observance of the Torah. They tried to fight against the Seleucid Greeks right before the time of the Maccabees, but were unsuccessful on their own. When the Maccabees launched their war against Antiochus Epiphanies, the Hasideans initially supported the Maccabean movement, but later they opposed it, regarding it as too political (see 1 Maccabees 7:12–18).
- Scholars debate who the Hasideans were and what became of them. Some believe that they were the predecessors of the Pharisees, while other believe that they were the predecessors of the Essenes, though there is a chance they were the predecessors of both. Either way, they were highly committed to the proper worship of the God of Israel.

The Men of the Great Assembly

- **[SLIDE] [TIMELINE]** At the end of the prophetic period, a group of leaders and scholars had a profound impact on the Jewish community. This group, known as the אֲנְשֵׁי בְּנֵי־הַגְּדוּלָּה (*Anshei Knesset HaGedolah*), “The Men of the Great Assembly”, were the religious leaders of the Jewish people as the people were coming back from exile in Babylon, and they heavily influenced the development of Judaism.
- Pirke Avot (Sayings of the Fathers), a collection of teachings that is part of the Mishnah, says,
 - Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples, and make a fence round the Torah. (m. Avot 1:1)
- The concept of making a fence around the Torah is important. Rambam, a rabbi from the Middle Ages, says that the “fence around the Torah” are “the decrees and ordinances that distance a man from sins.”
- The Men of the Great Assembly saw how the sins of the people of Israel had led to the Exile. As the Apostle Paul says, “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23); breaking God’s commandments leads to death. So, the Men of the Great Assembly said that putting a fence around the Torah, the commandments of God, ensures that we have more protection from actually breaking those commands,—more protection from sinning.
- Jesus erected fences around the Torah through his own teaching, as well. In Matthew 5:21-48 he uses this principle extensively. For example:
 - You have heard that it was said to the first ones, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to a court of law”? Yet I say to you that whoever is enraged against his brother baselessly is liable to a court of law, and whoever says to his brother, “*Reka*,” is liable to a *sanhedrin*, and whoever calls him a reprobate is make liable to the fire of *Geihinnom*. (Matthew 5:21-22, DHE)
- The commandment God gives us in the Torah is not to murder, but Jesus adds a fence around that command by telling us to control our anger, which can eventually lead to murder.

- The Men of the Great Assembly included a total of 120 sages of Israel, including the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi and the Jewish leaders Ezra and Nehemiah.
- This group instituted the Amidah, the Standing Prayer, which is the central set of petitions and blessings in the daily Jewish prayer services.
- They also enacted the holiday of Purim (the celebration of the salvation of the Jews during the time of Esther), and developed the laws that are summarized in the book of Nehemiah.
- They are also the ones who defined the earliest structure of the Biblical canon and included the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Esther, and the 12 minor prophets in it.

The Sanhedrin

- **[SLIDE]** Another important institution that was developed during this time was the Sanhedrin.
- The word *sanhedrin* is taken from the Greek word for “council” (Συνέδριον, *synedrion*). In the Torah, Moses created the first set of judicial courts in Israel, developing a tiered structure that is similar to the court structure in the US today. If someone had a complaint that a lower court could not handle, it was escalated up the chain.
- In the time of the Hasmoneans, when the Jewish people once again had control over their own land, this multi-tiered court structure was reinstated. However, since there was no Moses or a king to serve as the highest arbiter, a supreme court, the Great Sanhedrin, was instituted. Following the Biblical model found in Numbers 11:16–30, the Great Sanhedrin consisted of 70 men plus one leader, for a total of 71.
- **[SLIDE]** The Great Sanhedrin met on fixed occasions in the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the Temple. There were also two lower courts that met on the Temple Mount.
- The Sanhedrin was led by a president called the נָשִׂיא (*nasi*, “prince”) and a vice president called the אָב בֵּית דִּין (*av bet din*, “father of the court”). These two were called the זוגות (*zugot*, “pairs”). The other 69 sages sat in a semicircle facing the leaders. It is unclear whether the leaders included the high priest, but during the first century, with the influence of the Sadducees, it is likely that he was at least represented.
- The Sanhedrin served as a civil court during its early years, but from the beginning of Herod’s reign they were restricted to religious matters.

Pharisees

- To understand the New Testament, it is imperative that we understand the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These two groups were the most influential leaders of the First Century, and their interpretations of the Bible have a direct influence on our own theology today. These groups were both political and religious leaders, because in those days the distinction was not made between the two institutions, either in Judaism or in the pagan world.
- The Pharisees were poor or middle-class Jewish scholars who interpreted the Torah for the common people.
- “Pharisees” in Hebrew is פְּרוּשִׁים (*P’rushim*), a word that means “Separatists.” It is unclear exactly how they developed, but, as I mentioned before, many scholars point back to the Hasideans of the Maccabean period as a possible source.
- Because of their position as teachers of the common people, much of their concern was with agricultural matters. They were not the rich elites. They were not out-of-touch with the common man, and they were generally pious individuals who were trying their best to follow the commandments of the LORD.

- Josephus, a Jewish/Roman historian who lived in the middle of the first century CE and was himself a Pharisee in his younger days, says that the Pharisees were a relatively small group of about 6,000 men.
- Here is how Josephus describes them:
 - “The Pharisees live simply, rejecting indulgence in food and drink, and they follow the guidance of reason. Whatever reason dictates as good, they strive earnestly to practice. They show respect to the elderly and refrain from contradicting anything established by them. Although they believe that everything is determined by fate, they do not deny people's freedom to act according to their own will. They hold that God has created a balance, allowing His will to be fulfilled while still granting humans the choice to act virtuously or sinfully. The Pharisees also believe that souls possess an immortal strength and that there will be rewards or punishments after death, depending on how one has lived. The wicked will be confined to eternal punishment, while the righteous will have the power to be revived and live again. Because of these teachings, they have great influence over the people. Everything the people do in relation to Divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices is conducted according to their direction, and their virtuous behavior in both life and speech earns them high regard from the cities.” ([Antiquities 18.1.3](#), language updated by ChatGPT)
- The chief doctrine of the Pharisees was that the Oral Torah had been revealed to Moses at the same time as the Written Torah. The Oral Torah provides interpretation and explanation of the Written Torah.
 - Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explains in his *Handbook of Jewish Thought* (Moznaim, 1979):
 - “The Oral Torah was originally meant to be transmitted by word of mouth. It was transmitted from master to student in such a manner that if the student had any question, he would be able to ask, and thus avoid ambiguity. A written text, on the other hand, no matter how perfect, is always subject to misinterpretation.
 - Furthermore, the Oral Torah was meant to cover the infinitude of cases which would arise in the course of time. It could never have been written in its entirety. It is thus written (Ecclesiastes 12:12), "Of making many books there is no end." God therefore gave Moses a set of rules through which the Torah could be applied to every possible case.
 - If the entire Torah would have been given in writing, everyone would be able to interpret it as he desired. This would lead to division and discord among people who followed the Torah in different ways. The Oral Torah, on the other hand, would require a central authority to preserve it, thus assuring the unity of Israel...”
 - For example, the Pharisaic understanding of “an eye for an eye,” based on the Oral Torah passed down from Moses, was that the value of an eye was to be paid by the perpetrator. Meanwhile the Sadducees, who did not believe in the Oral Torah, used a more literal interpretation, in which the offender's eye should be removed.
- **[SLIDE]** In addition to the Oral Torah, the Pharisees taught some other important principles.
 - 1. They believed in the authority of the Prophets (נְבִיאִים, *Nevi'im*) and the Writings (כְּתוּבִים, *Ketuvim*), the rest of the תַּנְכּ"ךְ (*Tanakh*) or Old Testament, not just the Torah (Pentateuch).
 - 2. They believed in the eternal nature of the soul and in the resurrection of the dead.
 - 3. They believed in eternal punishment for the wicked and reward for the righteous.
 - 4. They believed in the coming of the Messiah as foretold in the prophets, and that he will initiate a new era of peace, the Messianic Kingdom.
 - 5. They believed in the existence of angels and other divine beings.

- The Pharisees also thought that cooperation with the Roman overlords was akin to cooperation with idolatry and assimilation.
- It may surprise many of you to hear that Jesus was a Pharisee. Not only did he agree with and teach these very same principles, he upheld the authority of the Pharisees as the teachers of truth.
 - **[SLIDE]** In Matthew 23:2-3a, Jesus tells his disciples, “The scholars and the Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses, so whatever they tell you, observe and do it.”
 - He goes on in the rest of chapter 23 to call out the Pharisees for hypocrisy and for not following their own teachings, but that does not undermine his command that his disciples follow their teachings.
 - Also, in verse 23, he upholds a specific teaching of the Oral Torah. The Written Torah only requires tithes to be given on grain, wine, and oil (Deuteronomy 14:22–23), but the Oral Torah (recorded in the Mishnah in [Maasrot 1:1](#)) expands that requirement to any plant that is used for food, including garden herbs. Jesus tells the other Pharisees that they should be diligent not only in that practice, but have the same diligence in what he calls “the weighty things in the Torah, justice, kindness, and faithfulness.”
- Paul was also a Pharisee—not just *before* he became a follower of the Messiah, but for his entire life.
 - As a child, his parents moved to Israel from their home city of Tarsus (in Asia Minor) so that he could study under Gamaliel, one of the leading Pharisees of the early first century, and the *nasi* of the Sanhedrin.
 - When Paul defended himself before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23 and before Herod Agrippa in Acts 26, he says “I **am** a Pharisee,” and even “a son of Pharisees.” In Philippians 3 he lists his Pharisaic *bona fides* as one of his most notable attributes.
- Among the Pharisees were smaller groups known as חֲבֵרִים (*haberim*, “companions” see [Tosefta, Demai 2:2ff](#)) who were particularly strict in their observance of additional rules. The *haberim* took on additional stringencies that were not specifically required for everyone. Many of these stringencies were connected to the laws of tithing and to the laws of ritual purity (which we will talk about later), extending the laws that applied only in the Temple into everyday life. These *haberim* appear to have been at least some of the Pharisees that Jesus interacted with.
- A major difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was the Pharisees’ defense against the assimilation of the Jewish people into Hellenistic culture. Were it not for the Pharisees, it’s debatable whether the Torah would have been followed at all by the Jewish people. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, it was the Pharisees who kept the faith of the Jewish people alive. Rabbinic Judaism today is the continuation of the Pharisaic tradition.

Scholars (Scribes)

- Another group that are related to the Pharisees are the סוֹפְרִים (*soferim*, “scribes” or “scholars”).
- The Soferim were an urban, middle-class group that were responsible for copying the Torah and passing along the Oral Tradition. They are not mentioned broadly in ancient literature, but they are mentioned in the Apocrypha ([1 Maccabees 7:12-13](#), [Sirach 39:1-11](#)) and in the New Testament.
- They appear to have agreed with the Pharisees in theological matters, but the lack of definition around this group makes them hard to nail down.
- **[SLIDE]** The Talmud ([Kiddushin 30a](#)) says of these scholars, “because they devoted so much time to the Bible, the first Sages were called: Those who count [*soferim*], because they would count all the letters in the Torah, as they would say that the letter *vav* in the word “belly [בֶּטֶן, *gaḥon*]” (Leviticus 11:42) is the midpoint of the letters in a Torah scroll.”

- This means that the scribes scrutinized and were extremely meticulous with the text of the Bible and its transmission.
- The interesting thing to note about the Scribes is that, unlike the Pharisees, they joined with the Sadducees in condemning Jesus. I suspect that their positions in the urban centers, especially in Jerusalem, gave them a closer affinity to the Sadducees on political matters.
- However, it is also relevant to remember Jesus' own words about the value of the scribes and their teachings. Not only did he include the scribes when he commanded his disciples in Matthew 23 to obey the teachings of the "scribes and the Pharisees," but he also expressed the value that they bring to the Kingdom of God when they accept his authority. In Matthew 13:52 he says, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure new things and old."

Sadducees

- **[SLIDE]** The Sadducees were arguably the most important group of leaders in Israel at this time.
- The actual origins of the Sadducees is unclear. Their name, צַדֻּקִים, *tzedûqîm*, either comes from the root word for righteous (צַדִּיק, *tzaddîq*) or from the name Zadok (צָדוֹק, *Tzadok*).
 - Zadok was the name of the righteous high priest during the reigns of King David and King Solomon, so it's possible that the Sadducees were attempting to provide a veneer of authenticity to their priestly positions, despite the fact that they were clearly not from the priestly line of Zadok.
 - Alternatively, if the source of the name was the word *tzaddîq*, it could have been chosen as a jibe at the Hasideans, known in Hebrew as חַסִּידִים, *hasidim*, "pious ones."
- The Sadducees arose during the time of the Hasmonean kingdom, and they collaborated with and were directly connected to the Hasmonean kings, who also held the position of High Priest. In a discussion on whether someone who is righteous can later become wicked, the Talmud ([b. Berakhot 29a](#)) says:
 - **[SLIDE]** "Didn't we learn in a mishna: Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die, as Yoḥanan the High Priest [John Hyrcanus I, who reigned from 134 to 104 BCE], who served in the High Priesthood for eighty years [that's likely a reference to his lifetime, not his actual time in the office of high priest] and ultimately became a Sadducee. Even one who is outstanding in his righteousness can become a heretic."
- So, from the time of John Hyrcanus the Sadducees generally held a higher position than the Pharisees and were favored by the Jewish rulers and the Romans.
- The Sadducees were also part of the upper class, rich landowners. They were allied with the Hellenists, so they didn't have any qualms about the adoption of Greek culture.
- After Herod the Great took control of Jerusalem as king in 37 BCE, he began the practice of choosing the high priest (instead of relying on the ancestral line of Aaron). The Sadducees controlled the temple process and, due to their close connection to the ruling elites, whether Roman or Herodian, they held the position of high priest for generations. According to one count, at least 20 of the 28 high priests in the century between 37 BCE and 66 CE were Sadducees.
- However, despite that fact, the vast majority of priests and Levites were not Sadducees. We see an example of that in Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.
- Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees did not leave any writings of their own, so their ideas are only known from other sources. Josephus tells us:

- “The doctrine of the Sadducees is that souls perish along with the bodies. They adhere strictly to what the law commands and disregard any other practices. They believe it is a virtue to argue with the philosophers they associate with, but this belief is held by only a few, though those few are of the highest status. However, the Sadducees have little power on their own. When they reluctantly take on roles as magistrates, they follow the ideas of the Pharisees, as the general population would not tolerate them otherwise.” ([Antiquities 18.1.4](#), language updated by ChatGPT)
- **[SLIDE]** So, the Sadducees were polar opposites from the Pharisees in many ways.
 - 1. They did not accept the canonical authority of the Prophets or the Writings.
 - 2. They rejected the idea of the Oral Torah.
 - 3. They did not believe in the eternal nature of the soul or in the resurrection of the dead.
 - 4. They did not believe in eternal punishment or reward.
 - 5. They did not believe in the coming of the Messiah or the Messianic Kingdom.
 - 6. They did not believe in the existence of angels or other divine beings.
- Their rejection of the Oral Torah does not mean that they didn’t know there was a need for interpretation of the Written Torah. Like other supposed literalists they came up with their own interpretations and traditions. [Megillat Ta'anit](#), an ancient Jewish book that describes special dates on the calendar, says that the Sadducees had a book called the Book of Decrees (סֵפֶר גְּזֵירוֹת, *sefer gezeirot*) that was used for deciding cases brought before them. The Book of Decrees is described as a very harsh legal code. Megillat Ta'anit also says that because the Book of Decrees was destroyed on the fourth of Tammuz (no year is provided), that day became a holiday in celebration.
- As for their personal practices, Josephus also notes: “The behavior of the Sadducees one towards another is in some degree wild, and their conversation with those that are of their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them.” ([War of the Jews, 2.8.14](#))
- The Sadducees stuck around after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE until at least the Second Jewish Revolt, also known as the Bar Kochba revolt, around 135 CE. When excavating the caves of the Judean desert, archaeologists found *tefillin* (phylacteries) that follow the Sadducean tradition alongside [the Bar Kokhba letters](#).

“People of the Land” (*amme ha-aretz*)

- **[SLIDE]** The Pharisees and the Sadducees and other political and religious groups in the first century were all relatively small, so what about the vast majority of the populace?
- The unlearned rural masses in Israel were known as the People of the Land (עַמֵּי הָאֶרֶץ, *amme ha-aretz*). That term is normally taken to mean an ignorant or boorish person, so it’s not exactly a compliment.
- The Talmud ([Berakhot 47b](#)) includes a discussion of the characteristics of the *amme ha-aretz*. The possible list includes:
 - They don’t eat non-sacred food in a state of ritual purity (remember the *haverim*?).
 - They don’t tithe on their produce (only on their main crops).
 - They don’t wear *tefillin* or *tzitzit*.
 - They don’t want to teach their children the Torah,

- Some sources split the *amme ha-aretz* into two types: the *הָאָרֶץ לְמִצְוֹת עַמִּי* (*amme ha'aretz le-mitzvot*), Jews who observed the Torah but did not do it well because they were not trained, and the *הָאָרֶץ לְתוֹרַה עַמִּי* (*amme ha'aretz la-Torah*), who were considered to be ignoramuses because they didn't study the Torah at all.
- The *amme ha-aretz* are not specifically associated with any of the political/religious groups, but they would have been the people that the Pharisees and the scholars were teaching and interacting with on a daily basis.

Judeans and Galileans

- **[SLIDE]** Somewhat related to this is the difference between Judeans and Galileans.
- **[SLIDE]** Judea is the area in the center and south of Israel, the land around Jerusalem and down to the coast. Galilee is the area to the north, by the Sea of Galilee.
- We talked before about the term *Ἰουδαῖοι* (*Ioudaioi*). This term is used throughout the New Testament, and most translations just translate it as “Jews.” However, that translation is somewhat anachronistic. In ancient literature, and thus in the New Testament, there is always a connection between the term *Ἰουδαῖοι* and the land of Judea.
- So, the best translation for the term *Ἰουδαῖοι* in the New Testament is “Judeans,” not “Jews.”
- That being said, the Galileans were not ethnically different from the Judeans.
- Dr. Markus Cromhout says,
 - “Galileans were people who lived out their Judean ethnic identity, of which ‘religion’ was a part, alongside others.” In other words, they considered themselves to be Judeans in the sense that they were ethnically from the same Israelite stock as those who lived in Judea proper, and they followed the Judaic religion, what we would call Judaism.
 - **[SLIDE]** However, while all Israelites in Israel in the first century adhered to a “common Judaism,” Galileans “had a different social, economic and political matrix than Jews living in Judea or the Diaspora.” (Cromhout, quoting J. L. Reed, [source](#))
- So, this “social, economic, and political matrix” distinguished the Galileans from the Judeans. The Galileans were seen as poor and uneducated (even though that was not really the case). They spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, but they had a different accent than the Judeans, as we see in Matthew 26:73.
- These social differences between the Judeans and the Galileans brought out some social tension between the people from the two areas. We see that tension throughout the scriptures and other ancient sources. This understanding of the differences and tensions between the Judeans and Galileans can help us better understand why the Galilean apostle John, a fisherman who grew up in Bethsaida on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee, calls out the “Judeans” (not the “Jews”) for opposing the Messiah’s teachings.
- In addition to the Judeans and the Galileans, there’s another group of Jews who are important to the context. That is the Diaspora, the communities of Jews who lived outside the land of Israel.
- Because these Jews were not living in the Holy Land, they tended to be more Hellenized, more influenced by Greek culture, than their counterparts in Israel.
- They usually didn’t speak Hebrew or Aramaic fluently, and they were more likely to engage in Greek cultural practices without seeing a problem with that syncretism.
- These Diaspora communities also tended to have more proselytes, people who converted to Judaism, than the communities in Israel.

- As we get into our study on the New Testament, we will find that these Diaspora communities are rich soil for the gospel, but they also present some major challenges to Paul as he attempts to help the native-born Jews, the Jewish proselytes, and the Gentiles understand what it means to follow the Messiah in community without undermining the unique gifts and calling of the Jewish people.

Samaritans

- **[SLIDE]** We've all heard the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, but you may not know as much about the Samaritans as you think.
- To understand the Samaritans, we have to go all the way back to the defeat of the Northern kingdom of Israel by Sargon II, king of Assyria, in 722 BCE.
- The records of Sargon II indicate that he only deported 27,290 inhabitants of Israel, but there just weren't a lot of people left in the northern nation of Israel after all of the other battles and sieges, and the multiple times in the years leading up to the destruction of Samaria that captives were taken by Assyria and other surrounding nations.
- After deporting the Israelites, Sargon imported captives from other places into the land of Israel and settled them there.
 - 2 Kings 17:24 — Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and settled them in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel.
- That was the common practice of the Assyrians as they spread their empire: mix the peoples so that they can't form a single national vision or identity, which cuts down on the opportunity for revolt.
- Those new peoples intermarried with the few remaining native Israelites, but they did not give up their own religious customs and practices. That led to heavy syncretism—a mixing of the Israelite religion with the religious beliefs of the other peoples.
- There were so few people living in the land of Israel that the wild animals started to take over. 2 Kings 17 tells us that the land was filled with lions, and it got so bad that the people wrote to Sargon asking him for help.
- Sargon attributed the lions to the fact that the God of the Land of Israel was unhappy, and figured the best way to fix the problem was to make sure the God of the Land was appeased. This idea that different lands have different gods was very common in the ancient world, and in the Bible.
- So he sent a priest who had been exiled in Assyria back to Israel to teach the imported peoples about the God of Israel.
- That priest moved to Bethel and tried to teach the people the ways of God. However, it didn't work.
 - 2 Kings 17:34 — To this day they act in accordance with the earlier customs: they do not fear the LORD, nor do they follow their statutes, their ordinances, the Law, or the commandments which the LORD commanded the sons of Jacob, whom He named Israel.
- **[SLIDE]** Ezra chapter 4 tells us that almost 200 years later, in 530 BCE, the people who lived in Samaria opposed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.
 - They describe themselves as “the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations which the great and honorable Ashurbanipal deported and settled in the city of Samaria” (Ezra 4:8-10). This deportation under Ashurbanipal happened some 60-80 years after the destruction of Samaria, telling us that the deportations of other peoples into the old area of the northern tribes was not a one-and-done thing, it was a progressive process.

- While these inhabitants of Samaria in the 500's BCE would not have been considered Samaritans in the same sense as we see in the New Testament, they were the progenitors of that people, and their opposition to Temple worship in Jerusalem is notable.
- Around 332 BCE, when Alexander the Great was conquering the Land of Israel, Josephus tells us that a renegade group of priests asked for permission to build a temple at Mount Gerizim near Shechem, a few kilometers east of Samaria, which Alexander allowed. The building of a temple on Mount Gerizim was viewed by the Jews as a sin just as egregious as the Northern Kingdom's establishment of temples in Bethel and Dan during the period of the divided monarchy.
- To top it all off, the Samaritans were much more open to Hellenistic influences. When the Seleucid Greek emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanies attacked Israel and converted both the Temple in Jerusalem and the spurious temple on Mount Gerizim into shrines to the Greek god Zeus, the Judeans responded with revolt under the Hasmoneans (the Maccabees), but the people in Samaria were unwilling to resist.
- In 128 BCE, John Hyrcanus, the Hasmonean king, expanded his territorial control over the region of Samaria and destroyed the temple on Mount Gerizim.
- Around this same time, the Samaritans re-wrote the Torah, creating their own version of the first five books of the Bible that is now called the Samaritan Pentateuch. There are hundreds of differences between the two texts, but the core difference is that the Samaritan Pentateuch claims that the LORD chose Shechem, the city closest to Mount Gerizim, as His holy city, not Jerusalem.
- Like the Sadducees, the Samaritans refused to recognize the validity of the Oral Torah. However, the conquest of Shechem by John Hyrcanus led to a break between the Sadducees and the Samaritans.
- This history led to a very tense relationship between the Samaritans and the Judeans. The Judeans considered the Samaritans to be foreigners, and called them "Cuthaeans" after Cuthah, the name of one of the cities listed in 2 Kings where the ancestors of the Samaritans had come from.
- The Samaritans never rebuilt their temple on Mount Gerizim, but they never lost the desire to do so. In 36 CE, about 6 years after the resurrection of Jesus, a man usually called the Samaritan Prophet gathered armed men and took over the top of Mount Gerizim. Pontius Pilate, still ruling as the governor of Judea, dispersed the crowd, but was soon recalled by the emperor Tiberius because of the excessive force he used in the conflict.

Essenes

- **[SLIDE]** Another important Jewish group that was well known in the Apostolic period was the Essenes. The Essenes were an insular, monastic sect, one of a few similar groups that emerged in this period. Most of our understanding of this group comes from Josephus (see [Antiquities 18.1.5](#)) and from Philo of Alexandria.
- The Essenes originally separated from the Temple during the Hasmonean period in protest of the Hasmonean control of the priesthood. Remember, the Hasmoneans, while priests, were not from the line of Aaron and should not have taken the role of High Priests.
- The Essenes agreed with the Pharisees in general terms, but had some more extreme approaches to their application of the Torah. For example, the Essenes have been termed "gnosticizing Pharisees" because of their belief, shared with the later Gnostics, that the world of matter is evil.
- The Essenes were ascetics who lived in the desert and disdained material goods and sensual gratification. **[SLIDE]** Most scholars think that Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, was an Essene town. This picture, taken from the village of Qumran, shows one of the many caves within which the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.
 - The people of Qumran were very concerned about ritual purity laws, **[SLIDE]** as evidenced by the multiple *mikvaot* (ritual baths) in the small community.

- They also spent their days maintaining and copying the scriptures and other religious books. The average age of the Dead Sea Scrolls was about 200 BCE, and every book in the Old Testament (the Tanakh) is represented except the book of Esther.
- **[SLIDE]** What's interesting is that the tefillin that were found at Qumran follow Sadducee rules; specifically, they have many more Biblical quotes in addition to the required verses (cf. Y. Yadin, *Tefillin from Qumran*, Jerusalem, 1978). Given that the Qumran community had priestly connections, it's possible that some of them followed or at least respected the Sadducean traditions.
- The Essenes were very interested in eschatology, and had strong apocalyptic views and anticipated the coming of the messiah. In addition to their focus on ritual purity, they spent much of their time in prayer, contemplation, and study.
- When we talk about John the Baptist in the class I teach on the Gospel of John in January, we'll dig into the question of whether or not he was an Essene.

Zealots

- **[SLIDE]** Josephus, writing after the Jewish revolt and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, lists the Zealots as “the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy.” Here is what he says about them:
 - Josephus: “The fourth sect of Jewish philosophy was founded by Judas the Galilean. These men share the beliefs of the Pharisees in most respects, but they are fiercely committed to liberty and proclaim that God alone should be their Ruler and Lord. They are indifferent to any form of death, and they do not fear the deaths of their relatives and friends. No fear can compel them to acknowledge any man as their lord. This steadfast resolve is so widely known that there is no need to elaborate further. I do not worry that anyone will doubt what I have said about them; rather, I fear that my words may not fully capture the strength of their resolve, especially when they endure suffering. It was during the time of Gessius Florus, our procurator, that this fervor began to drive the nation to madness. His misuse of power incited the Jews to rebel against the Romans.” ([Antiquities 18.1.6](#), language updated by ChatGPT)
- As Josephus says, the Zealots agreed with the Pharisees in matters of theology, but were much more nationalistic and aggressive against the Romans. Their eschatology was centered around the destruction of the Romans, which they thought would bring the Kingdom of God. In essence, they took their political playbook from the Maccabees, the shining exemplars of Jewish freedom fighters.
- The Zealot movement began in the city of Gamla in the year 6 CE. After Herod the Great's son Archelaus died in that year, the Romans decided not to install another son of Herod as king over Judea and Samaria, instead giving the job to an ever-changing list of Roman procurators. The Romans conducted a census, taken under the command of Quirinius, the governor of Syria, and installed Coponius as the governor over Judea.
- Judas the Galilean, like his namesake Judah the Maccabee, saw this as the usurpation of Jewish control over Judea. He gathered around himself a group of bandits, insurgents from Jerusalem, and priests, who advocated independence from Rome.
- He based this uprising, and the name of the group that joined him, on the call of Judah the Maccabee's father, which we find in 1 Maccabees 2:27:
 - Then Mattathias cried out in the city, “Let everyone who is zealous for the Torah and who stands by the covenant follow me!”
- Acts 5:37 tells us what happened: “Judas of Galilee appeared in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he also perished, and all those who followed him were scattered.”

- While Judas was defeated by the Romans, the Zealot movement was not defeated, it continued in other forms and with other leaders until the first Jewish Revolt in 66-70 CE.
- There was a specific group of Zealots called the Sicarii that arose around 54 CE during the time of the Roman governors Felix and Festus (whom Paul was imprisoned by). The Sicarii, so named because of the unique kind of knife they carried, were known for mingling with the crowds at festivals and quietly assassinating their opponents without anyone knowing.
- One of the 12 disciples of Jesus was a Zealot. Luke and Acts call him Simon the Zealot, while Matthew and Mark call him Simon the Cananaean, an attempt in Greek to transliterate the Hebrew קַנְיָי (qanai), which means zealot.

Hillel and Shammai

- **[SLIDE]** There are two more influential groups that I want to talk about: Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. At this time, the students or followers of a great rabbi were considered in many ways to be more important than his own family. So, the teacher was often called “father”, and the students (and the related “school of thought” or the actual teachings themselves) took on the name “Beit” (בֵּית) or “House.” That is why we call these two groups Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai.
- I mentioned before that during the time of the Hasmoneans, the Sanhedrin was instituted as the highest court in Israel.
- **[TIMELINE]** The Sanhedrin was led by a president called the נָשִׂיא (nasi, "prince") and a vice president called the אָב בֵּית דִּין (av bet din, "father of the court"). From around 170 BCE until about 30 CE, these זוגות (zugot, “pairs”) were the spiritual leaders of Israel.
- The last Zugot, and arguably the most famous, were Hillel and Shammai.
- Hillel was the *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin from around 31 BCE until around 9 CE. Shammai initially served as *Av Beit Din* under Hillel, then as the *Nasi* from 9 CE until 30 CE.
 - That’s important timing. It means that Shammai was one of the most important leaders of Israel throughout most of the life of Jesus.
- The teachings of Hillel and Shammai are not collected in one specific place in the ancient Jewish writings, they are spread around the Mishnah and Talmud in various locations. However, [Pirke Avot chapter 1](#) does pass down a few of their teachings:
 - “Hillel used to say: be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving mankind and drawing them close to the Torah.”
 - “He [also] used to say: one who makes his name great causes his name to be destroyed; one who does not add [to his knowledge] causes [it] to cease; one who does not study [the Torah] deserves death; one who makes [unworthy] use of the crown [of learning] shall pass away.”
 - “Shammai used to say: make your [study of the] Torah a fixed practice; speak little, but do much; and receive all men with a pleasant countenance.”
 - [Avot D'Rabbi Natan 13:4](#) questions how we can receive everyone with a pleasant countenance. “How so? This teaches that if a person gives his friend all the finest gifts in the world, but does so with a pained face, Scripture considers it as if he had given him nothing. But one who receives his friend with a smile, even if he gives him nothing, Scripture considers it as if he had given him all the finest gifts in the world.”

- Hillel and Shammai were quite different in their approach to the interpretation of the Torah. You could say that Hillel took a more compassionate or lenient approach, while Shammai took a stricter approach. The distinction is made clear in two stories told in the Talmud ([b. Shabbat 31a](#)):
 - The passage starts off by saying: “A person should always be patient like Hillel and not impatient like Shammai.”
 - Then, in the first story, two men made a bet with each other. They said, “Anyone who will go and aggravate Hillel to the point that he reprimands him, will take four-hundred zuz.” One of the men took on the challenge. He went to Hillel’s house on the eve of Sabbath while Hillel was busy washing his hair in preparation for the Sabbath day. The man came to the door and called out to Hillel in a harsh way, saying, “Who here is Hillel?”
 - Hillel put on some clothes and went out to greet the man. The man said, “I have a question to ask.” Hillel said to him, “Ask, my son, ask.” Then the man asked him, “Why are the heads of Babylonians oval?” He was attempting to insult Hillel, who had been born in Babylon. But Hillel said to him, “My son, you have asked a significant question. The reason is because they do not have clever midwives. They do not know how to shape the child’s head at birth.”
 - The man left Hillel, waited an hour, and came back again. This time he asked another stupid question, and Hillel again answered him gracefully.
 - Then he waited another hour and came back a third time with a stupid question. After Hillel answered him gracefully again, the man said to him, “I have many more questions to ask, but I am afraid lest you get angry.”
 - So, Hillel wrapped himself in a cloak, sat down, and said to him, “All of the questions that you have to ask, ask them.”
- The second story gives us an important picture of the differences between Hillel and Shammai. The Talmud says:
 - There was another incident involving one gentile who came before Shammai and said to Shammai: I will convert to Judaism on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai was a builder by trade, so he shoved the man away with the builder’s cubit in his hand. The same gentile came before Hillel and made the same request. Hillel had the man stand on one foot and said to him: That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study. (cf. [b. Shabbat 31a](#))
- Does that teaching sound familiar?
 - Jesus taught the very same thing, indicating his affinity to the teachings of Hillel. “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12)
 - As a matter of fact, in almost every circumstance, Jesus sides with the teachings of Beit Hillel, teaching a compassionate approach to the interpretation of the Torah.
- While the differences between Hillel and Shammai were pretty stark, and those differences did cause problems, it’s important to remember something that Pirke Avot tells us about their disagreement:
 - Which is an argument for the sake of Heaven? [In other words, what is an argument that was beneficial?] The argument between Hillel and Shammai. Which is an argument not for the sake of Heaven? The argument of Korach and his company. ([m. Avot 5:17](#))

- The main difficulties between these two schools of thought came after the death of Hillel in 9 CE (when Jesus was about 12 or 13 years old). Around that time, the rabbis from both groups met to discuss some important matters of Jewish Law (*halakha*). The Babylonian Talmud tells us what happened:
 - “It turned out that when the people expressing opinions were counted, the students of Beit Shammai outnumbered the students of Beit Hillel, and they issued decrees with regard to eighteen matters on that day in accordance with the opinion of Beit Shammai.” ([b. Shabbat 13b](#))
- The eighteen ordinances of Beit Shammai were detrimental to the development of Judaism until they were finally overturned. The Jerusalem Talmud ([y. Shabbat 1:4](#)) tells us that, “This day was hard for Israel like the day on which the Golden Calf was made.” It also paints a more violent picture of what happened.
 - “Rebbi Joshua from Ono stated: The students of the House of Shammai were standing downstairs and killing the students of the House of Hillel. It was stated, six of them went up; the rest were standing around them with swords and lances.”
 - The commentators debate whether the students of Shammai actually killed the students of Hillel or whether they just forced them at the point of a sword to stay out of the room until the enactments were made. However, regardless of what happened, these stricter teachings of Shammai were enacted and became the default standard in Jewish law until they were overturned after the destruction of the Temple.
- This is important because it shows how much control and influence the teachings of Beit Shammai had on the Pharisees during the ministry of Jesus. It also explains many of the debates he, as a Pharisee from the school of Hillel, had with the leading Pharisees of his day, who were from the school of Shammai, especially regarding ritual purity standards.
 - For example, one of the 18 ordinances dealt with ritual purity of one’s hands, saying that everyone must wash their hands in the ritual manner before eating common bread (not only before eating holy bread that was part of the Temple ritual practice). (cf. [b. Shabbat 14b](#) and [y. Shabbat 1:4](#))
 - Yeshua dealt with this decree directly in Matthew 15:1–2, which says, “Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ‘Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’”
- Additionally, some of these “18 ordinances” have a direct relationship to the main issue encountered by the Apostles in the decades after the ascension: the inclusion of Gentiles into the community of faith.
 - For example, Beit Shammai added a prohibition on eating bread that was baked by a Gentile, and consuming olive oil, wine, or cheese produced by Gentiles ([y. Shabbat 1:4](#)). This relates to some of the questions Paul responds to in his letters that deal with food that is sold in the marketplace.
 - More importantly, Beit Shammai ruled that even the air above Gentile lands was considered to be unclean, a ruling that made it even more difficult for Jews in the first century to enter the house of a Gentile. Thus, when Peter encounters the situation with Cornelius in Acts 10, he has to deal with both the prohibition on eating food with Gentiles and on the prohibition on entering Gentile spaces.
- In the end, while the disagreements between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai were “for the sake of heaven,” the rabbis after the destruction of the Temple understood that Shammai’s enactments were not the proper approach. Thus we are told, “A divine voice came and said: Both of them are the words of the Living God but practice follows the school of Hillel.” ([y. Berakhot 1:4](#)) So, the 18 ordinances of Beit Shammai were finally overturned, and Judaism today largely follows the teaching of Beit Hillel.

Conclusion

- I hope that this study has opened up your eyes to the broader context of the New Testament. We covered a bunch of history, culture, and other contextual details, and I'm sure your head is reeling from the sheer amount of detail provided.
- However, I encourage you to go back and listen to the recordings of these lessons, read the notes, and come join us for the continuation of our Through the Bible class.