

Jesus and the Gospels

AN INTRODUCTION

John T. Carroll

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PART I

Jesus and the Gospels

Context and Approach

1. *Contexts for Reading the Gospels*

After two millennia, Jesus remains as fascinating and compelling a figure as ever, not only for Christian communities but also for countless others. We gain primary access to his life, message, and activity through the four New Testament narratives called Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In this book I seek to offer clear and engaging interpretations of these narratives, highlighting the distinctive features of each story about Jesus. In a companion website, jesusandthegospels.wjkbooks.com, I provide learning tools for students and resources for teachers to facilitate their exploration of these texts.

In the field of New Testament studies within the last several decades, many new voices have joined the conversation about the meaning of these writings. Moreover, an array of new interpretive methods expand and deepen—and sometimes challenge—customary readings. Supplementing historical-critical approaches that dominated the field for two centuries, now literary and rhetorical analysis, empire studies, social-scientific criticism, and various ideologically oriented interpretations have generated new ways of viewing and understanding the Gospels. The readings of the Gospels presented in this book have been informed and energized by these new approaches, as pointers here and there indicate. Yet the primary interest in the chapters that follow is close, careful reading of each Gospel narrative, beginning with what is probably the earliest (Mark), and then proceeding to Matthew, Luke, and John. A concluding chapter selects a number of themes in the Gospels that have something important to say to the issues we face in the twenty-first century, whether as resource or challenge. First, though, it is crucial to place the Gospels in context. Chapter 1 situates Jesus and the Gospels that tell his story within the setting of first-century (CE) Judaism and the early Roman Empire. Chapter 2 then introduces two historical problems that affect how we approach the Gospels: the challenge of gaining reliable knowledge about the historical activity of Jesus; and the complexity involved in understanding the formation of the Gospels and the relationships among them.

Context Matters: The Gospels in the Setting of First- Century Judaism

Context matters—or, in reading the Gospels, multiple contexts matter.¹ Everything we encounter in the Gospels occurs within space dominated by the Roman Empire: how do these narratives and their earliest audiences both reflect and perhaps now and then articulate *against* empire? No less important, the specific setting of first-century-CE Palestine (both Galilee and Jerusalem-centered Judea), with the long history of experience (or historical memory) of Israel, is formative for each of the Gospels, whether they were composed within or outside that region. The situation of today’s readers is also important in shaping their response to these stories; that needs to be a matter of explicit awareness throughout the process of interpretation and will also receive more focused attention in chapter 7 of this book.

We begin with the context of the Gospels within early Judaism. Judaism is the mother religion of Christianity.² Jesus was a Jew who was born and raised in Palestine; *eretz Yisrael*, the “land of Israel,” was his homeland. The earliest followers of Jesus were Jews. The texts that nurtured their faith and practice were the ones that became the Jewish Bible: the sacred texts of Torah, Prophets, and Writings. The God they worshiped was the God of Israel. This cradle of the New Testament is fundamental to understanding the Gospels.

Jews within Greco- Roman Culture

How many Jews were there at the time of Jesus? Only educated guesses are possible, but a fair estimate is that between 5 and 10 percent of the population in the Roman Empire were Jews.³ The most important cities of the empire—notably Rome and Alexandria—had large Jewish populations. In a predominantly polytheistic society, Jews often stood apart; most people acknowledged many gods and goddesses and so had trouble understanding this vigorously monotheistic faith (honoring one God). The practice of male

1. See Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds., *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013); Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

2. Heated debate today centers on the meaning of “Judaism” and “Jewish religion” in relation to the Jewish people and their practices in the era of Jesus and the Gospels. See, e.g., Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Martha Himmelfarb, “Judaism in Antiquity: Ethno-Religion or National Identity,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99 (2009): 65–73. I acknowledge the importance of this debate and the complexities of Jewish identity, esp. alongside emerging distinctive identities for Jesus followers late in this period, extending well into the second century CE and beyond.

3. The 10 percent figure is the population estimate suggested, e.g., by Naomi Pasachoff and Robert J. Littman, *A Concise History of the Jewish People* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 67. It may, however, be high.

circumcision was regarded as strange by many persons in Roman society,⁴ as was the observance of a weekly holiday (the Sabbath—there was no such thing as a weekend in Roman culture), not to mention dietary scruples that were captured in the image of a people who would not eat pork.

Nevertheless, much about the community life and religious practices of Jews residing within Roman society was attractive. First, the antiquity of Jewish religion was often recognized; it possessed an ancient sacred text (Moses could rival Homer!). This was an advantage in a society that prized antiquity and found novelty suspect. Second, Jewish religious practice, while diverse, featured a rigorous moral code, embodied in the Torah (Law of Moses) and encapsulated in the memorable Decalogue (the Ten Commandments in Exod 20:1–17 and Deut 5:6–21). Third, Jews typically maintained a strong sense of community belonging, both within the Jewish homeland in Judea (and Galilee) and beyond, in the Jewish diaspora (the dispersion of Jews throughout the empire). Especially in the diaspora setting, where Jews faced the necessity of navigating foreign cultural space and social institutions, their shared communal life was crucial to sustaining their identity as a people.

Some non-Jews (Gentiles) became converts to Judaism, proselytes. They were usually circumcised (if male) and accepted the “yoke of Torah,” observance of the Law of Moses. Far more Gentiles attracted to Jewish religious life and practice did not become full converts (if male, not undergoing the ritual of circumcision) and remained Gentile God-fearers: worshipers of the God of Israel, associated in a positive way with the life and worship of the Jewish community, but not full Jews.⁵ What were the distinctive and defining features of this people and their religious practice?

Identity-Shaping Symbols

In the first century CE, the Jewish people were heirs to a shared legacy, including Israel’s historical experience, much of it expressed in the narratives and prophetic writings that were in the process of becoming sacred Scripture, as well as some writings that ultimately were not. In the latter category, for example, were the books called 1–4 Maccabees, which cultivated memory and perspective on the turbulent period of Israel’s history featuring the Maccabean revolt against Seleucid (Syrian) political domination (under the reign of Antiochus IV, ca. 175–164 BCE) and any accommodation to the Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) culture then being aggressively introduced in Palestine.⁶ Especially the Torah, the books of

4. If not repugnant. In the public baths or in athletic competition, the nude adult male would be embarrassed by the absence of the foreskin.

5. God-fearers, that is, of the kind Luke introduces in the book of Acts (e.g., 13:16, 26).

6. While not ultimately included within the Jewish Scriptures (the Tanakh), the books of the Maccabees and a number of other writings from late Second Temple Judaism (e.g., Tobit, Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach) were eventually incorporated within the canonical Scriptures of Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christianity.

Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy), provided the identity-forming symbol system for Jews navigating a world dominated by Roman political and military power and the Greek intellectual heritage.

Symbols Shaping Jewish Identity within Greco-Roman Culture

- **The Torah:** “instruction,” law of Moses
- **The Shema:** “Hear: God is one”
- **The land:** remembering the promise to Abraham
- **Sabbath:** holy day for rest
- **Circumcision of males:** sign of inclusion in the covenant people

Torah

The Jewish people were a people of the Torah. The word means “instruction” and refers to God’s instruction of the people, as embodied in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah tells the story of the Creator God’s gracious election of Israel to be a covenant people, who enjoy a special relationship with God. The human side of the covenant is obedience to the will of God, concretely in the form of obedience to the commandments recorded in the Torah. The Gospels depict Jesus, like other Jewish teachers of his day, engaged in vigorous debate about the interpretation and faithful practice of the Torah.

The Shema

At the heart of the Torah and of first-century Jewish life was the belief in one God, to the exclusion of all others (monotheism).⁷ This conviction finds classic expression in Deuteronomy 6:4–9, commonly called the Shema because that is the Hebrew word with which the passage begins (*Shema Yisrael . . .*):

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deut 6:4–5)

This is a core conviction for the Jewish people, one that the Gospels show Jesus fully embracing (e.g., Mark 12:28–31).

7. See, e.g., Let. Aris. 132–35; cf. the outsider’s view in the Roman historian Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4–5. Worship of one God and its corollary, renunciation of idolatrous worship, did not exclude acknowledgment of other emanations-expressions of the one God (e.g., Wisdom) or semidivine beings such as angels. For a radical reconceiving of the meaning of Jewish monotheism in Second Temple Judaism, see Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: New Press, 2012). Boyarin argues that before the emergence of Christianity, some Jews had already come to regard the Messiah as a divine being.

The Land

The Jewish people felt a special tie to the land—to a very particular piece of land. It was the land promised to father Abraham (e.g., Gen 12:1; 13:14–17). This connection to Palestine is deep and abiding, even if in Jesus' day far more Jews lived outside the constantly shifting borders of Judea, in the diaspora.

Sabbath

Jews observed a day of rest, the Sabbath—from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday. They refrained from work, preparation of meals, and journeys.⁸ The Torah commanded, “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy” (Exod 20:8; cf. Deut 5:12), amplifying that “you shall not do any work” on this seventh day (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14). The developing rabbinic tradition elaborated, showing one *how*, in practical terms, to keep the Sabbath holy; it eventually crystallized thirty-nine kinds of work that were forbidden (in the Mishnah tractate Shabbat, consolidating oral interpretive traditions of the early rabbis and codified perhaps mid-second century CE). The Gospels show Jesus embroiled in sometimes heated debate about faithful observance of the Sabbath commandment (e.g., Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 13:10–17; 14:1–6), but also as a regular participant in synagogue services on the Sabbath (e.g., Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16).

Circumcision

Jewish males were ordinarily circumcised on the eighth day. This act had sociocultural and religious meaning and motivation. It was an identity marker for the Jewish male; during the Roman period, it set Jews apart from other people, and it was performed in obedience to the covenant requirement given to Abraham (Gen 17:22–27). Male Gentiles (non-Jews) who converted to Judaism (proselytes) often received circumcision. For the first groups of Jesus followers, circumcision became a matter of intense debate, at least in the apostle Paul's mission. When Gentiles became members of the Christian community, should they receive circumcision and accept the “yoke of the Torah” (e.g., Acts 15:1–21; Gal 2:1–10)? The Gospel of Luke indicates that Jesus was circumcised as an infant (2:21), as was John the baptizing prophet (1:59). The families of Jesus and John are thus portrayed as Torah-keeping Jews.

Social Institutions in Judea

Several social institutions important for first-century Jews also figure in significant ways in the Gospels. Three will receive attention here: temple, synagogue, and Sanhedrin.

8. Sabbath keeping thus made service in the Roman army problematic for Torah-observant Jews, who would not be able to take advantage of one of the few avenues to upward social mobility available in the Roman world.

Important Social Institutions in Judea
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temple in Jerusalem: the Second Temple, destroyed in 70 CE • Sanhedrin: council convened by the high priest in Jerusalem • Synagogue: house of prayer

Temple

The temple at Jerusalem was a unifying symbol for most Jews throughout the empire. They paid a yearly tax of one-half shekel (Exod 30:11–16; Josephus, *J.W.* 7.6.6) to support the temple system, the worship housed there, and the priests.⁹ This was the Second Temple; the first had been destroyed by the Babylonians around 587 BCE. The Second Temple was built some seventy years later. A decade or so before Jesus' birth, Herod the Great launched an ambitious and expensive temple restoration project that continued until 64 CE. Ironically, just six years later, the temple would lie in ruins (70 CE), the tragic result of the Jewish War against Rome (66–73/74 CE). The Gospels present Jesus as predicting the temple's destruction (Mark 13:1–2 and parr.).

During Jesus' day, however, the Jerusalem temple was an impressive building complex and also the center of enormous economic and political power. Here the priests carried out the worship prescribed in the Torah. Daily sacrifices, special sacrifices (such as that offered by Jesus' parents after his birth, according to Luke 2:22–24), and the annual ritual of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) were observed (see Exod 30:10; Lev 16:1–34; 23:26–28)—ritual expressions of God's abiding presence and of the gracious provision of forgiveness and renewal for God's covenant people. These sacrifices were a constant reminder that the God of Israel was a holy God who called the people to be holy. Animals to be slaughtered in sacrificial rites were to be without blemish, so worshipers purchased the animals in the temple precincts. Often exchange in coinage was involved to facilitate these transactions. Needless to say, this was a zone of flourishing commerce. According to the Gospels, Jesus subjected these practices to critique (Mark 11:15–18 and parr.). His opposition to such practices within the temple system was likely a major factor contributing to his arrest and eventual execution. Considerable power and wealth came to be concentrated in the circles of the temple-based

9. A text from the Dead Sea Scrolls interprets the Torah's directive to pay a half-shekel temple tax not as an annual but as a once-in-a-lifetime obligation (4QOrdinances^a = 4Q159 1 II, 6–7). Josephus gives the value (in weight) of the (silver) shekel coin as the equivalent of four Athenian *drachma* (*Ant.* 3.8.2). On the temple tax, see Fabian E. Udoh, *To Caesar What Is Caesar's: Tribute, Taxes, and Imperial Administration in Roman Palestine (63 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)*, Brown Judaic Studies 343 (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2006), 90. The Jerusalem temple was not the only Jewish temple in existence; one was constructed at Leontopolis in Egypt ca. 170 BCE (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.1.1; 7.10.2), and the Samaritans' cultic center was Mount Gerizim, where a sanctuary was erected in the 5th c. BCE and destroyed in the 2nd c. BCE (see Josephus, *Ant.* 11.8.1–7; 12.5.5; 13:255–56; *J.W.* 1.2.6–7).

priestly elite, though the majority of priests lived at some distance from Jerusalem and possessed limited economic resources.

Three times each year, great pilgrimage festivals were held, and many Jews from Palestine and some from the diaspora flocked to Jerusalem and to the temple. (1) *Passover*, a festival commemorating the Moses-led liberation from slavery in Egypt, opened the seven-day festival of Unleavened Bread (Exod 23:15; Lev 23:5–8; Deut 16:16). At one Passover Jesus was arrested and executed. John's Gospel differs from the other three in picturing Jesus' ministry as spanning three Passovers; Luke's Gospel adds a Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem by Jesus' family when he was age twelve (2:41–52). (2) The Festival of Weeks (*Shavu'ot*, Shabuoth), or *Pentecost* (so-called because it comes on the fiftieth day after Passover), was linked to the offering of the first fruits of the harvest and eventually, in rabbinic tradition, also to the memory of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. On one such Pentecost, Luke reports, Jesus' followers were first Spirit-empowered to preach, and their mission was launched (Acts 2). (3) The Festival of *Booths* or *Tabernacles* (*Sukkot*) marked the end of the harvest of grapes and other fruit, in the fall (Exod 34:22); Leviticus 23:42–43 also tied the festival to memory of the exodus.

Primary Annual Jewish Festivals	
• <i>Yom Kippur</i> : Day of Atonement	• <i>Shavu'ot</i> : Weeks (Pentecost)
• Unleavened Bread and Passover	• <i>Sukkot</i> : Booths or Tabernacles

Sanhedrin

The leading priests, headed by the high priest, figured prominently in the Sanhedrin, the highest council of the Jews at Jerusalem, which exercised oversight of judicial and financial concerns in Jerusalem, though subject to the Roman administrator, the prefect; other towns had their own councils, but naturally Jerusalem's was the most significant in Judea. The high priest presided over this body, which in addition to elite priests evidently also included lay scribes, who among other, more mundane tasks were trained as interpreters of the Torah.¹⁰ In the time of Jesus, the high priest was appointed by the Roman governor, painful reminder of the fact of Roman occupation. Throughout Jesus' adult life, Caiaphas served as high priest (18–36 CE),

10. On the history of the high priesthood in Second Temple Judaism, see James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). For discussion of the diverse roles of scribes, see Samuel L. Adams, "The Social Location of the Scribe in the Second Temple Period," in *Sybil, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy*, ed. Joel Baden, Hindy Najman, and Eibert Tigchelaar, JSJ Supplements (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

while Pontius Pilate filled the role of prefect (26–36 CE). The lengthy tenures of these two men, overlapping for a full decade, indicate a period of relative stability in Jerusalem and its environs, as well as alignment of the political interests of the Roman official and the Jewish high priest. Jesus, and after him many of his followers (e.g., Paul in Acts), would come face-to-face with the Sanhedrin.

Synagogue

A social institution that played an increasingly important role in shaping Jewish identity in the first and second centuries CE was the synagogue, also called a *proseuchē* ([house of] prayer).¹¹ The term *synagogue* referred to a gathering or assembly and also to a meeting place or building where the gathering was held (whether large private homes or separate buildings dedicated to this use; Luke 7:5 mentions the generous benefaction of a Roman army officer who funded the construction of a village's synagogue). The synagogue was especially important among Jews in diaspora, but by the late Second Temple period, Jerusalem alone may have had dozens or more synagogues. Through participation in the life and worship of the synagogue, Jewish identity was nourished; here Jewish children (mostly boys) learned the Torah, and here the community gathered each Sabbath to hear the Torah read and to pray. Luke tells us that it was Jesus' custom to participate regularly in synagogue worship on the Sabbath (4:16).

Since many first-century Jews were unable to read the Hebrew of biblical writings (particularly the Torah and Prophets), the reading from the Hebrew scroll was typically followed by a translation with interpretation in Aramaic (called a *Targum*). This was the primary language of Jesus; sayings of Jesus that we encounter in the Gospels were therefore at some point in their preservation and transmission translated from the language in which he originally spoke them into the *Koinē* (Koine, common) Greek that we encounter in the Gospels.

Thus far, the discussion has focused on some of the significant symbols and institutions that shaped Jewish identity as one people of God. But not all Jews thought, believed, and behaved alike. A number of issues divided first-century Jewish people into distinct groups. For all that they shared in common, Jews in the time of Jesus differed widely on fundamental questions. What did it mean to live as a Jew in the midst of Hellenistic (Greek) culture? What did it mean to live as a Jew under Roman rule? Jesus' own home turf is an interesting case study in cultural hybridity. Within rural Galilee, Jesus' small home village of Nazareth was just a stone's throw (5 kilometers, or 3 miles) from the city of Sepphoris, a thriving commercial center and the site of vigorous building activity after its destruction by Roman armies

11. For detailed discussion of the emergence, character, and activity of synagogues, see Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Eric M. Meyers, "Synagogue," *ABD* 6:251–60.

in 4 BCE, in reprisal for Jewish rebellion after the death of Herod the Great. Farther east, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, Tiberias was a newly established capital city built by the tetrarch Herod Antipas and named in honor of the emperor Tiberius. Greek and Roman presence and, to a degree, culture were very much in evidence in Jesus’ own backyard. Jews, as well as Gentiles also living in Galilee, negotiated these realities in a variety of ways, depending on a number of variables, including socioeconomic position, social status, and access to education and to literacy (few were literate in the first century).

Diversity within Early Judaism

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus, whose extensive writings include histories of the Jewish people (*Jewish Antiquities*) and *Jewish War*, as well as an apologetic treatise defending Jewish people, culture, and religion (*Against Apion*), identified four distinct groups or social movements within the Judaism of his time: *Pharisees* (with whom Josephus most closely identified), *Sadducees*, *Essenes*, and *Zealots* (or the Fourth Philosophy). While Josephus is by no means a neutral, unbiased source, he does provide a wealth of information about Jewish political history and about the diverse perspectives and practices in the period of Jesus and the Gospels.

Important Groups in Early Judaism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essenes and community at Qumran: separatist group pursuing deep piety and rigorous fidelity to Torah • Pharisees: advocates of a Torah-keeping life of holiness for everyone, even away from temple • Sadducees: elite priestly circle • Freedom fighters (with Zealots of the Jewish War): practiced active resistance to Roman occupation, esp. Judean elite who collaborated with Roman rule • Samaritans: remnant of the old northern kingdom, also adhered to their version of the Mosaic Torah • Jesus followers, for whom he was the Messiah sent to Israel

Essenes

The *Essenes* protested against the temple establishment in Jerusalem and pursued a separatist agenda, regarding Judean society and its leadership as corrupt. The settlement at Qumran near the Dead Sea was probably the creation of a priestly group associated with what Josephus calls Essenes. (The Essenes are also mentioned by the eminent Jewish philosopher and statesman Philo in Alexandria, and by Pliny the Elder.) This group pursued a vision of holiness: theirs would be a holy community pleasing to God. The

Dead Sea community's voice, in particular, survives today in a set of manuscripts discovered in the mid-1940s near the Qumran settlement's ruins, in caves of the Judean desert cliffs just west of the Dead Sea: these writings are called the *Dead Sea Scrolls*.

At Qumran, in isolation, these Jews of priestly pedigree sought to live a holy life as Israel's righteous remnant, tutored in a life of deep piety and rigorous fidelity to the Torah by the Teacher of Righteousness (identity unknown). The Qumran community maintained a strict community discipline: minor lapses brought a one- or two-year probation period; weightier offenses led to expulsion from the community. This group regarded the temple system in Jerusalem as illegitimate. Problematic for them were the procedures for appointing the high priest, the calendar by which holy days were determined (not the solar calendar adopted by the Dead Sea community), and the consolidation of power and wealth in the temple.

The Qumran group was an "eschatological" community; several passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls present the belief that the group lived in the *last days*, when God was about to prevail over the forces of darkness.¹² Thus the ideology of the group was both separatist and dualistic; the people of Qumran were the children of light and would triumph with God in the final victory. The Dead Sea community was destroyed during the Jewish War, but many of its writings, most in fragmentary form, were hidden in nearby caves and preserved in the extremely arid climate of the region.¹³ Probably some Essene sectarians lived in settlements elsewhere than Qumran and would have survived the Roman army's destruction of the Dead Sea settlement.

Pharisees

The *Pharisees*, unlike the priestly community at Qumran, were primarily a lay movement. Like the Essenes, however, the Pharisees had a passion for holiness. Here is the real point of difference: while the group at Qumran had largely given up on a sinful nation as beyond hope, the Pharisees became teachers of the common person, modeling the holiness that every life and the whole community should display. Holiness was not just for the temple, not just for the priests; it was for the whole community. In giving shape to that vision, Pharisees sought to make the ancient Torah alive and relevant for everyday life in the present. So the Pharisees were interpreters of the sacred texts, and they constructed a practical bridge between the Torah and first-century life, in the form of an authoritative oral tradition ("the tradition

12. Examples of intensified eschatological expectation appear in many of the scrolls: IQM (War Scroll); 4Q174 (= 4QFlor: Florilegium); 4Q521 (Messianic Apocalypse); 11Q13 (= 11QMelch: Melchizedek).

13. For helpful orientation to the Dead Sea Scrolls and community, see James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010). The scrolls in ET are conveniently available in Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

of the elders,” Mark 7:5). This oral Torah and interpretive tradition eventually led to the rabbinic tradition, consolidated in the second century CE and onward, particularly in the Mishnah, the Babylonian Talmud, and the Jerusalem Talmud.

The Gospels show Jesus often in conflict with Pharisees. He criticizes their oral tradition (e.g., Mark 7:1–13). It seems likely, moreover, that his Torah interpretation and praxis viewed sin and purity or holiness differently than Pharisees did, and in social relations Jesus expressed these values concretely in a manner that drew their critique.¹⁴ Pharisees advocated holiness through separation from sin and rigorous maintenance of ritual purity, while Jesus spoke of a holy God who embraces sinners and shows casual disregard for purity concerns in relation to meals and the like.

One last and crucial point about the Pharisees: after the Jewish War, Pharisees worked to invigorate and mold the Judaism that would survive the war. These rabbis (teachers), whose oral interpretations of the Torah eventually were compiled in the rabbinic literature (beginning with the Mishnah), played a key role in defining the future shape of Judaism. It would not be a Judaism that honored Jesus as Messiah. And that means that bitter conflict lies just ahead, conflict between the early Jewish followers of Jesus and the Pharisaic movement. The Gospels again and again reflect this struggle, sometimes portraying intense conflict.

Sadducees

Often at odds with the Pharisees were the *Sadducees*, an elite (Judean) circle of priestly descent. The Sadducees were religiously and politically conservative. They seem to have regarded only the Torah, not the Prophets, as authoritative for legal and doctrinal matters, and they rejected innovations of the Pharisees, such as the (oral) tradition of the elders and the belief in resurrection (e.g., Mark 12:18–27 and parr.). After 70 CE and the temple’s destruction, the Sadducees—so heavily invested in the political and religious system revolving around the temple—soon disappeared from history.

Freedom Fighters

On the other end of the social and political spectrum were *freedom fighters or insurrectionists*. Josephus’s account, which disparages Jewish revolutionaries and lays at their feet blame for the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, brands this group *Zealots*. However, social banditry and other small-scale

14. Certainly the Gospels paint such a picture; see, e.g., Luke 7:36–50. Marcus Borg characterizes the core conflict as concerning the “politics of holiness” (e.g., *Jesus: A New Vision* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], 86–93). The phrase is apt, although Borg differentiates the positions of Jesus and Pharisees too neatly; Amy-Jill Levine provides important corrective to the exaggerated importance placed by Borg, among others, on matters of ritual impurity in the Gospels. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 144–49, 172–77.

popular resistance movements—opposing the economic exploitation as well as military-political domination of the Roman occupation of Palestine—were a factor throughout the period leading up to the Jewish rebellion.¹⁵

Samaritans and Followers of Jesus

Wedged between Judea and Jesus' home region of Galilee was Samaria, site of the ancient northern kingdom of Israel (in the era of the divided monarchies of Judah and Israel, until Assyria's conquest of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE).¹⁶ The Samaritan Pentateuch offered an alternative edition of the Torah, and the community's eschatological expectations revolved around the figure of Moses. Judeans viewed Samaritans as outsiders, not faithful Israelites, and mutual distrust and disrespect, centuries in the making, continued to simmer in the first century CE (animosity reflected in Luke 9:51–55; cf. John 4:9, 20). Yet another group arose among the Jewish people in the course of the first century, a group that came to believe that Jesus from Nazareth was God's Messiah. Both John 4 and Acts 8 suggest that in at least some circles, this emerging group of Jesus followers within first-century Judaism welcomed Samaritans into its ranks.

The above sketch, simplified as it is, should suffice to demonstrate that there were diverse expressions of Jewish identity in the first century CE. Moreover, most Jewish people in the first century were not affiliated with any of the groups profiled here, but their voices are not heard in the texts that survive. In the time of Jesus, Israel was God's covenant people, to be sure, but it was far from unified. Jesus and his earliest followers experienced Jewish life and culture, however, within the larger reality of the Roman Empire and its occupation of Palestine, of which the discussion so far has taken only passing notice. We need to attend more closely to the fact of empire as the context for the life of Jesus and the emergence of the Gospel tradition that tells his story.

Context Matters: The Gospels within the Early Roman Empire

Jesus and his fellow Jews lived under Roman rule. That was nothing new: for all but about 80 of the previous 600 years, Jews residing in Palestine had lived under imperial domination by a succession of alien powers: Babylonia, Persia, Greece, the Hellenistic dynasties centered in Syria (Seleucid) and Egypt (Ptolemaic), and then Rome. Yet the Jewish sacred texts promised a land to

15. See esp. Richard A. Horsley, with John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988; orig., Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985).

16. For helpful introduction to the Samaritans and their history, see most recently Gary N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Reinhard Pummer, *The Samaritans: A Profile* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015).

Abraham's descendants (e.g., Gen 12:1; 13:14–17) and a secure, flourishing royal dynasty descending from David (e.g., 2 Sam 7:10–17). This dissonance between the hopes of Israel and the political facts required both adjustment and explanation. Not all Jews came to terms with this conflict in the same way. Some, like the tax farmers and the local governing elite in Jerusalem, collaborated deeply with Rome. At the other extreme some, the Zealots of the Jewish War of 66–70 CE (freedom fighters or terrorists, depending on one's point of view), advocated violent resistance—to the Romans but also to the Judean elite who benefited most from the Roman occupation and who served Roman imperial interests. Most Jews fell somewhere between these two extremes.

It would be inaccurate to say that most Jews at the time of Jesus were expecting a messiah to deliver Israel from Roman rule. This was one form that Jewish hope could take,¹⁷ but it was only one among many. Some Jews expected a prophet (an Elijah or a Moses). Some texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls corpus indicate that at least one group of Jews looked for a messiah of Aaron (a priestly messiah) *and* a messiah of Israel (a royal messiah).¹⁸ A public figure such as Jesus, with a band of followers and considerable crowd appeal, would be perceived in relation to these kinds of hopes, and in relation to the reality of Roman rule. The fact that Jesus was executed by order of the Roman governor as a pretender to kingship has significant bearing on the historical reconstruction of his career.

Some thirty-five years after Pilate sentenced Jesus to death, Zealots (freedom fighters) gained the upper hand at Jerusalem and in Galilee, and a bloody revolt against Rome was launched (66 CE). When the decision was made to cease the daily sacrifices offered in the temple for Rome and for the emperor (not *to* his image—a Roman concession to Jewish sensibilities), this gesture amounted to a declaration of war against the empire. As the detailed account by the Jewish historian Josephus chronicles, the war resulted in catastrophic defeat for the Jewish revolutionary forces. After a lengthy siege, the city walls were breached, and the temple was destroyed in 70 CE. About sixty years later (132–135 CE), another rebellion against Roman occupation had even more devastating results. Now Jerusalem officially became a non-Jewish city, and Jews were indefinitely banned from their holiest site. The Second Temple, destroyed in 70 CE, was never rebuilt. Reading the New Testament Gospels, one discovers that the conflict with Rome and the disaster of the Jewish rebellion have left an indelible stamp on the memory of the early followers of Jesus.

There were more options for response to the bitter, dignity-depriving reality of Roman domination of Palestine than quiet acquiescence or active

17. E.g., note the vivid expression of such hopes in Psalms of Solomon 17–18.

18. See, e.g., 1QS IX, 11; cf. CD VII, 18–21; XX, 1; 1QSa II, 14, 20. Messianic expectations of a priest-king descended from Judah appear in T. Levi 8, and an eschatological priesthood is pictured in T. Levi 18.

collaboration, on the one hand, and violent resistance or rebellion, on the other. Drawing upon cross-cultural anthropological research, James Scott has argued that resistance to domination can take many forms, some of them quiet and hidden.¹⁹ He offers the notion of a hidden transcript, by which an oppressed group can express its protest against the powers in ways that are concealed from public view, and that can therefore escape reprisal. From the Gospels, a good example is Jesus' reply to an attempt to trap him into public advocacy of disobedience to Rome. "Tell us, Teacher: should we pay the tribute tax to the Roman emperor?" (Mark 12:13–17 and parr., AT). Talk about a lose-lose proposition! If Jesus says "Yes," the people who chafe under Roman repression will be unhappy. But if he says "No," the Romans will charge him with sedition! But Jesus knows how to evade entrapment. His (paraphrased) response—"Show me a coin. Whose image is on it? Well then, pay to Caesar what belongs to him; and to God what belongs to God"—hints at the operation of a hidden transcript. "Pay to Caesar . . . and to God" sounds one way in public, within the temple complex, while the Roman governor is in Jerusalem for the approaching Passover Festival: the two obligations may seem to be harmonious. But out of Roman earshot, offstage, persons who know how to "read the code" will hear the words quite differently, guided by recognition of the overriding priority of allegiance and obedience to God.

Life within the Empire

In addition to Scott's anthropological research on hidden and subtle forms of resistance to domination by empire, the work of Lenski and Kautsky on agrarian empires has informed recent studies on the Roman imperial setting of Jesus and the Gospels.²⁰ This early Roman Empire

19. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). Among NT scholars who have drawn upon Scott's work are Warren Carter, Richard A. Horsley, Amanda C. Miller, and Neil Elliott. See, e.g., Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 11–13, 16–26, 129–36; Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, SemeiaSt 48 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004); Miller, *Rumors of Resistance: Status Reversals and Hidden Transcripts in the Gospel of Luke* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

20. Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); John H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). A helpful, concise synthesis of this research for purposes of aiding analysis of NT literature is provided by Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*. The sketch in this section is indebted to Carter's summary of this enormous body of research (esp. 1–13).

- was geographically expansive and ethnically diverse, encompassing the lands, peoples, and cultures surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, and extending northwestward as far as Britain.
- was marked by wide economic disparity between the few high-status wealthy and the majority of the population, and by limited social mobility.
- concentrated power, wealth, and public leadership in the hands of very few elite persons and families, who numbered no more than 3 percent of the empire's population.
- exerted control over the majority of the population by coercion, especially through the “peacekeeping” force of the Roman army; a system of patronage and benefaction, while often reciprocal in relational structure, perpetuated disparities in wealth and status between wealthy, high-status patrons and their lower-status clients.²¹
- was agrarian: agriculture was the primary basis for the economy, and ownership of land was an important factor in economic viability, though small landholding farmers were always at risk due to unfavorable climate conditions (esp. drought) beyond their control.

Beginning with the transformation of the Roman system of governance under Octavian (Augustus), the concentration of power in the person of the emperor was enormous. Augustus's lengthy reign extended from 31 BCE to his death in 14 CE (he accumulated titles of leadership and honor, with the Roman Senate conferring the title of *imperator* [emperor] in 27 CE). Luke 2:1 and 3:1 name the two Roman emperors who reigned during Jesus' lifetime, Augustus and Tiberius (reign, 14–37 CE, after two years of transitional coregency with Augustus [12–14 CE]). Luke's narrative sequel (Acts) ends with Paul awaiting his hearing before a third emperor, Nero, though he is not named (reign, 54–68 CE). Luke's narrative acknowledges the supremacy of Rome, embodied in the person of the emperor (Caesar), but does so with considerable irony. In Luke 2, Augustus issues the decrees and calls the shots, and people fall into line. Luke knows that is how the world works. But in the process, a counter-ruler is born in the city of David: “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:11). The titles and powers ordinarily given to Rome's emperor (Lord [*Kyrios*] and Savior [*Sōtēr*]) have been co-opted for another ruler, one born among the animals, his royal court a band of socially marginal shepherds.

Twenty-first-century readers (in the United States and in much of Europe, though not in many other regions) tend to think of politics and religion as separate spheres. This notion does not square with the world of Jesus and the Gospels. Politics, economics, and religion were all bound up together. Consider two examples: the political and religious roles and significance of

21. On the patronage system, see, e.g., Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

the Roman emperor; and the economic, political, and religious functions of the Jerusalem temple.

In *the Roman imperial ideology*, the emperor was acclaimed as savior and a “son of god” and celebrated as such on coinage as well as in sanctuaries of the imperial cult, especially prominent in the Roman province of Asia. Many cities there competed for the rights to host an official temple for the cult of the imperial family. Even in the Jerusalem temple, prayers and sacrifices were offered for (though not to) the emperor.²²

The Jerusalem temple was the locus of immense economic power; its high priest and his elite priestly associates wielded considerable local power in service of Roman interests: peace, stability, and security—and of course a steady flow of tax revenue. Pilate’s decade-long tenure as Roman governor (prefect), from 26 to 36 CE, coincided with the even longer tenure of the high priest Caiaphas, from 18 to 36 CE. This suggests a close collaboration and convergence of interests between the Roman prefect and the temple-based local elite headed by the high priest.

The work of Lenski on agrarian empires helps us to visualize the extent of social stratification in Jesus’ social world.²³ Land, wealth, and influence were concentrated in a very small number of persons and families, and the majority of the population throughout the empire, including Judea and Galilee, lived at or below subsistence level. Many landowning farmers lived one bad crop away from debt that potentially meant loss of their land. Urban dwellers—including artisans and merchants who managed through skill and industry to acquire economic resources beyond the peasant status that was the lot of most people—endured perpetual conditions of crowding, poor sanitation, and disease. Life expectancy was short: roughly half of the population did not live past age eighteen (many died in infancy). The Gospels present many scenes featuring what Lenski terms society’s “expendables,” persons with disability, impoverished beggars, and others who lacked means and skills to sustain economic viability and who often lived beyond the fringes of the cities. In the Gospel narratives, Jesus consistently refuses to consign such persons to a place beyond the community’s margins.

Given the precariousness of ordinary living conditions and the elusiveness of good health, it is unsurprising that literary works, inscriptions, and building ruins attest the importance of charismatic healers and of social

22. On the imperial cult and the divine standing of the emperor, see, e.g., Carter, *Roman Empire and the New Testament*, 83–99; Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, Philological Monographs (Middletown, CT: American Philological Association, 1931; repr., Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1975); Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and the Roman Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

23. On the economy of the early Roman Empire, see Peter Garnsey and Richard P. Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); and most recently, with a focus on Judea in the Second Temple period, Samuel L. Adams, *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

institutions that promised restoration of health. Jesus was not the only figure in the first century to whom persons turned in a quest for healing. The Gospels more than once hint at the activity of other Jewish healers and exorcists (e.g., Luke 9:49–50; 11:19). More broadly in the Roman Empire, persons seeking cures flocked to impressive sanctuaries that fostered hope of healing and promoted the cult of Asclepius in many cities. Other deities could attract interest—and followers and worship—if they appeared to provide help to persons suffering from disease and disability (e.g., one striking inscription pictures an ear and thanks the goddess Isis for having listened to a petition for healing). In such a world, one who has the reputation of being able and willing to offer the benefaction of healing will not find it difficult to attract attention and interest: so the crowds flock to Jesus in the Gospel accounts.

The period of the Gospels and the emergence of the Christian movement witnessed the publication of literary works that celebrated the magnificent achievements and benefactions of the Roman Empire and of its emperors—and Rome’s divinely sponsored, universal dominion.²⁴ Architectural, transportation, legal, and cultural achievements of the empire were indeed remarkable, and on a scale not previously seen. The other side of the (figurative) coin stamped with these images of Rome’s gift of peace and prosperity to the world was the harsh reality of military conquest and military-police-enforced stability, especially challenging on the borders of the empire—Palestine at its eastern end (buffering the Parthians further east) being a parade example.²⁵ Much of this imperial résumé, of course, was constructed on the backs of many poor people, including a work force composed to a large degree of slaves and extracting revenue through the imposition of a heavy burden of tribute and taxation. Viewed from the underside, the economics of empire was not attractive. Of this reality, the Gospels give many vivid glimpses. It is time, though, to narrow the focus to the Gospels and the historical figure of Jesus to whom they introduce us.

24. See, e.g., Virgil, *Eclogae* 4; the *Roman Antiquities* by Dionysius of Halicarnassus; and the *Library of History* by Diodorus of Sicily.

25. Cf. Tacitus, *Agricola* 30–31, recording a speech by Calgacus of Britain: “To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace” (trans. William Peterson, LCL).

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