The World That Shaped the New Testament

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Chapter 2

Forms of Religious Expression

The New Testament refers to various clusters of first-century religious expression almost casually. We are told that Paul was a Pharisee, that Jesus was crucified between two bandits, that John the Baptist baptized for the forgiveness of sins like the Essenes at Qumran, that the Jesus of the Gospels encountered Sadducees, priests, scribes, and Levites, and that he freely socialized with the "people of the land" (ʾam ha-aretz), sinners, tax collectors, the poor, the sick, the troubled.

This broad spectrum of Jewish piety informed the Christian kerygma (or proclamation) and provided the milieu in which the early church was rooted. Christianity was in the beginning a Jewish sect, after all, sharing but reinterpreting the hallowed precepts of Judaism. The church's messianism owed its own genesis to traditional Jewish hopes and expectations, but the proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah challenged long-existing symbol systems and provoked sharp clashes with established religious factions. Awareness of this group's debt to the Hebrew tradition and of their manner of departure from the religious conventions of the day will help us appreciate both the distinctiveness of the church's kerygma and the reasons for both its polemical tendencies and its appeal for Jews and Gentiles alike.

No portion of the Mediterranean world, including Palestine, was devoid of hellenistic influence. Moreover, the expansion of the church and the writings of that community reflect an ongoing dialogue with the hellenistic world. Hellenistic piety influenced many recipients of Paul's letters, and the vocabulary and outlook of this worldview are a part and parcel of the learning process evident in the writings themselves. Thus, in the discussion below we shall look at both Jewish and hellenistic forms of religious expression, for both together are a part of the context in which the New Testament's lively dialogue is intimately engaged.

Forms of Jewish Religious Expression

The Pharisees

The religious group most frequently mentioned in the New Testament is the Pharisees, and references to them are mixed. In Acts Luke speaks positively of Paul's Pharisaism. Going beyond what Paul reports in his letters, Luke suggests that the Apostle even remained a loyal Pharisee to the end. Furthermore, in Acts 5:34–39, Gamaliel, the Pharisee, argued for tolerance of the Christian sect within Judaism, and in 15:5 we are told a number of Pharisees were Christians. Paul discounts his considerable achievements as a Pharisee as "refuse" for the sake of the gospel; yet this statement should not be taken as a repudiation of his past, but as a revaluation of it in light of his belief in the messianic Jesus. In Philippians 3:5, 6 the Apostle refers to himself as "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee . . . as to righteousness under the law blameless" (emphasis added). But even where Paul does not explicitly mention his Pharisaism, its continuing influence on him, as we shall see later, is evident.

While some references to the Pharisees in Luke's Gospel are negative, positive allusions occur also. In 13:31, for instance, the Pharisees seek to warn Jesus of Herod's plan to kill him. But Luke's sometimes positive assessment differs dramatically with the almost uniformly unflattering treatment of the Pharisees in the Gospel of Matthew. Although they possess some redeeming qualities—they seek baptism (3:7) and fast (9:14), for instance—Matthew generally maligns the Pharisees in harshly negative terms. They appear as "vipers" (3:7; 12:34; 23:33), "hypocrites" (23:23–27), "blind guides" (23:16, 24), keepers of the law who neglect "justice and mercy and faith" (23:23), murderers of the prophets (23:31), and "whitewashed tombs" (23:27). In the Gospel of John the picture is equally critical. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, seeks a sign (3:1ff.) and assists in the burial of Jesus (19:39–42), but otherwise the statements about the Pharisees, as in the Gospel of Matthew, are sharply critical, mirroring the struggle between church and synagogue in a later period. They therefore should not be read as objective description. Let's briefly consider some of the findings of scholarly research on first-century Pharisaism, then, in order to help us better understand the New Testament's apparently prejudicial representation of this group.

Although this description by the Gospel writers and by Paul distorts historical reality somewhat, much that is historically reliable may nonetheless be learned from these accounts. In the customs of the Pharisees we find a strong emphasis on the observance of laws of purity. Following tradition they
would take a ritual bath after returning from the market place, after touching a corpse, or after having certain bodily discharges in order to lift up clean hands in prayer before their meals. They ritualistically cleansed, not merely washed, vessels, cups, and pots used either in food preparation or in consumption (Mark 7:3—4). They excluded “unclean” persons such as tax collectors, the ill, the physically handicapped, or the emotionally disturbed from table fellowship (e.g., Mark 2:16). They fasted (Mark 2:18), tithe “mint and rue and every herb” (Luke 11:42), occupied conspicuous places in the synagogue (Luke 11:43), and rigorously observed sabbath law.

Jacob Neusner holds that, except for fasting, this agenda comports rather well with that of the rabbinc traditions. The Gospels do tend to leave us with the impression that the Pharisees treated all of life as a ritual, and Neusner’s studies reveal how important this cultic aspect of Pharisaism really was. Unlike the priests in Leviticus who interpreted the laws concerning sacrifice and the consumption of food offerings as applying only to the temple, the Pharisees believed the “setting for law observance was the field and the kitchen, the bed and the street.” This sect took seriously if not literally the command in Exodus to become a “kingdom of priests,” thus treating all aspects of daily life as if it were a part of the temple service.

As important as was this intense preoccupation with the laws of purity, sabbath observance, the festivals, etc., Pharisaism doubtless embraced other emphases as well. Josephus mentions additional features in the following description:

...the Pharisees, who are considered the most accurate interpreters of the laws, and hold the position of the leading sect, attribute everything to Fate and to God; they hold that to act rightly or otherwise rests, indeed, for the most part with man, but that in each action Fate co-operates. Every soul, they maintain, is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone passes into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment (War 2:162—63).

Proud of his own Pharisaic connection, Josephus tells us that this “leading sect” which was so intent on applying the law to all aspects of life also affirmed a classical paradox—the belief that God fixes human destiny (Fate) and simultaneously requires responsible human behavior. The words of the Mishnah, though late, ap ply express this first-century view: “All is foreseen; but freedom of choice is given” (Aboth 3:16). A second-century rabbi, Akiba, held the similar opinion that though all is in the hands of heaven, the human is nevertheless free. Moreover, the value of every soul in Pharisaism was linked with the belief in the resurrection of the righteous which is to occur “at the great, final assise when God will vindicate his pious people and punish sinners.” Unlike the inhospitable Sadducees, the Pharisees, according to Josephus, “are affectionate to each other and cultivate harmonious relations with the community” (War 2:160). And, unlike the Essenes, who seek to live in isolation, the Pharisees dwell among townfolk and are intensely involved in the workaday world.

It is unclear if Josephus was unaware of the violent, abusive, and even fatal internecine confrontations between two groups of Pharisees, the Shammaite and Hillelites, or simply chose to ignore them. In his romanticized account, however, Josephus merely says the Pharisees live simply, avoid any pretense of luxury, and, because of the recognition of their strict observance of the religion, are “extremely influential among the townsfolk; and all prayers and sacred rites of divine worship are performed according to their exposition” (Jewish Antiquities 18:15).

In their respect for the teachings of the elders we see an openness to tradition and divine instruction which extends beyond the first five books of Hebrew Scriptures, the Pentateuch. Whether that tradition was oral (as Rivkin claims) or not (as Neusner argues) the Pharisees certainly ascribed authority to instruction outside the written Scriptures. They claimed a tradition that was both broad and inclusive, embracing the writings (the wisdom materials, the Psalms, etc.), the prophets, and the sayings of the sages. In their openness to sacred traditions beyond the Pentateuch, their belief in the resurrection, which originated perhaps as late as 167 B.C.E., and in their translation of the Levitical code into all aspects of daily life we see a remarkable openness to innovation.

The tendency of earlier scholars like Schuerer, Stack and Billerbeck, Bousset, Bulmann, Cohnzleman, Jeremias, and Loewe to accept uncritically the later rabbinc traditions as accurate descriptions of Pharisaism before 70 C.E. is no longer possible. Neusner argues that the concerns which the Gospel writers ascribe to the Pharisees conforms rather well with the emphasis isolated in early strands of the Mishnah, a written collection of Pharisaic traditions that took shape around 200 C.E. While these early traditions conflict somewhat with the description of the Pharisees given by Josephus, this hardly implies that Josephus’ observations are unhistorical. It is more likely that there was more diversity in first-century Pharisaism than we as yet acknowledge and that from one period to another the emphasis changed. Thus, the early political involvement of the sect gave way in the first century to a form of piety defined by tithing, fasting, sabbath and festival observance, oaths, keeping the laws of purity, etc.

While Neusner believes that Pharisaism in Jesus’ day was quietistic and apolitical, concerned primarily with matters of ritual, Rivkin takes the opposite view—that Pharisaism was revolutionary and concerned with a wide range of issues beyond ritual purity. The Pharisaic concern for the rites of cleanliness, Rivkin claims, was subordinated to Pharisaic concern for the two-fold law (i.e., oral and written) and a strenuous political effort to impose
that law on society. Rivkin maintains that the writings of Josephus, rabbinc traditions, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, and the New Testament all share a common view: the Pharisees were popular with the masses, served as a scholar class interpreting both oral and written traditions, believed in individual immortality, and promulgated new law.

From the time of the Maccabean revolt on, though, Rivkin thinks the Pharisees were the dominant political and religious force in Israel. Through a quiet revolution they replaced the priests and Jewish aristocracy as interpreters of the law and dictated policy to the Sadducees. Popular with the people and pursuing a moderate course, they accommodated themselves to Roman authority so long as their religious laws were not violated, and even after the revolt of 66-70 C.E. they participated in political negotiations with the Romans.

According to Rivkin the New Testament shares this basic image of Pharisaism as well. Paul, for example, recalls his Pharisaic past (Phil 3:5-6) when he was "so extremely zealous ... for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal 1:14). Matthew 23:2 speaks of the Pharisees as those who "sit on Moses' seat"—i.e., serve as authoritative interpreters of the law as a scholar class. Their power and prestige are acknowledged by the recognition they receive in the marketplace, the deference shown to them as "Rabbi," the seats of honor they occupy in the synagogue, the special imperative they have to persecute Christians (Acts 9:1-2). Mark notes their concern with ritual laws of purity (Mark 7:1-13), but also notes the position of authority from which they demand evidence or proofs of the authenticity of Jesus' message (8:11-13). Other references attest to their belief in life after death and angels (Acts 23:8).

Neusner may be criticized for his narrow, reductionistic view of Pharisaism and Rivkin, for his uncritical reading of Josephus' description of the Pharisees and his tendency to force all other evidence into the pattern outlined by Josephus. Rivkin's homogenization of historical evidence greatly oversimplifies the picture of the Pharisees in the first century. He passes over non-Pharisaic traditions (e.g., Jubilees and the Dead Sea Scrolls) that speak for an oral tradition elsewhere, and erroneously thinks that the Pharisees and the Scribes were one and the same. Yet Rivkin's thesis, as well as Neusner's, does find support in the New Testament. At this point more evidence is needed before agreement can be reached. What both Rivkin and Neusner do establish, however, is that a significant Pharisaic presence is taken for granted in the New Testament.

Although the Gospels contest Pharisaic views even when their debt is manifest, it is in the accounts of and by Paul that Pharisaic influence is most obvious. Paul, you will remember, was a zealous Pharisee before his apostolic call (Phil 3:5). In the defense which Luke places on the Apostle's lips in Acts 25:8, Paul appears as a loyal Pharisee even while confessing Jesus as the Christ: "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended at all" (emphasis added). Although Luke's account may go too far, Paul, as his letters prove, did share many Pharisaic beliefs even as an Apostle. His anticipation of the resurrection and judgment at the end of the age, the tie he secured between divine predestination and human responsibility, his acceptance of a broad range of traditions as scriptural, his methods of biblical interpretation, and perhaps even some of his intensity can all be traced to his Pharisaic roots.

At other points, however, Paul appears to reject his religious past. He freely consorts with Gentiles, ignores the laws of purity, and interprets the law as provisional, all of which separate him from his Pharisaic brothers. His acceptance of Jesus as Messiah—one who had befriended religious outcasts, was careless of the laws of purity, and had died a cursed death—would also pit Paul against many of the Pharisees. Paul certainly did compromise his Pharisaic tradition, but to suggest that he flatly and decisively repudiated it is going too far. It might be better to say Paul appraised those traditions in a fresh way in light of his understanding of the cross and resurrection of Jesus as God's action in history.9

The Sadducees

The New Testament rarely mentions the Sadducees,10 which hardly does justice to the impact this small "party" had on the Jewish social setting of the first century. Intimately associated with the temple, the most important religious symbol of Jesus' day, the Sadducees were a priestly aristocracy occupying the apex of the social pyramid. It is unlikely that all were actually priests, yet their position in the society was legitimized by their priestly heritage. Their history was rooted, it was thought, in the subsoil of Israel itself. Claiming to come from Zadok, a priest under David, and chief priest under Solomon (2 Sam. 15:27; 20:23; 1 Kings 2:35) their lineage (if their claim is true) preceded that of the temple. Although the genesis of the Sadducean "party" can be traced back only to the Maccabean period (167-142 B.C.E.), their authority, wealth, and privilege in first-century Palestine was already legendary. As late as the earlier part of the second century B.C.E. the author of Ecclesiasticus urges his readers to "give thanks unto him that chose the sons of Zadok to be the priests" (51:12). Their lofty position, however, and the compromises necessary to secure it earned them the dislike and even contempt of some groups, as we shall see later.

The description of the Sadducees by Josephus is far from flattering, but that is hardly surprising given his admitted Pharisaic bias. Unlike the Pharisees who showed "affection to one another and cultivate[d] harmonious relations with the community" (War 2:166), the Sadducees are, in his opinion,
“rather boorish . . . with their peers” and “rude . . . to aliens” (War 2:166).
Elsewhere Josephus accuses the Sadducees of being elitists who have “the confidence of the wealthy alone but no following among the populace,” unlike the Pharisees who “have the support of the masses” (Antiquities 13:298).

Although not all Sadducees were priests, the temple worship and administration were under the direction of this small circle. The Sadducees probably occupied the majority of the seats on Israel’s highest court, the Sanhedrin, although Pharisees held positions on the court as well. In any case Israel’s aristocracy—small, rich, well educated, and powerful—was made up almost entirely of the Sadducees. Bent on retaining their position of influence and privilege, the Sadducees were conservative both religiously and politically. Undeniably, many accommodated themselves to the Roman rule and collaborated with the Romans to implement policies of the Empire that benefited them. Yet is is inaccurate to call the Sadducees sycophants of Roman political interests.

In the last two decades before the War (66–70 C.E.) many influential Sadducees appealed to Rome to reverse decisions of the procurators appointed by Rome. In other cases Sadducees protested the incompetence of Roman officials and were instrumental in securing their removal from office. Other Sadducees were angered by the insensitivity and ineptness of many procurators. Sometimes they defied them, at other times they negotiated with them, and on occasion they even bribed them in order to effect change in the political process. Some of the Sadducees might even be termed courageous, losing their lives in support of moderate policies when moderation was unpopular. Most were political realists who were aware of the might of the Roman army and the capacity of Roman officials for arbitrary action.

Through political influence and compromise the majority sought to realize the art of the possible, steering a middle course between collaboration and revolt.

Concerning the beliefs of the Sadducees Josephus suggests that they “hold that only those regulations should be considered valid which were written down (in Scripture), and that those which had been handed down by former generations need not be observed” (Antiquities 13:297). However, this passage does not imply, as once was thought, a repudiation of the oral traditions of the fathers cherished by the Pharisees. As we saw above, the prominent position enjoyed by the oral tradition among the Pharisees may have come after 70 C.E.

The Sadducees did, however, follow a more conservative interpretation of Scripture than did the Pharisees. Their constructions were literal as far as practicable and they assigned the preeminent place on the scale of scriptural truth to the Pentateuch. The prophets and the writings, though still considered scriptural by them, were assigned a position of secondary importance.
fix on their role as protectors of the cult and the sanctity of the temple and its worship.

The occupation of positions associated with temple worship granted them a powerful role in the Roman provincial government and in important Jewish institutions such as the Sanhedrin. Their position of power and prestige, of privilege and opportunity, as well as their role as guardians of the sanctity of the temple and conservators of religious interpretation brought them into sharp conflict with other Jewish groups, including the Christians. The early Christians remembered Jesus’ rather casual attitude about the cult; they recalled his prophetic “cleansing” of the temple; they told stories critical of priests, some of whom were Sadducees, and of those in positions of wealth and power.

Doubtless such statements reflect some concerns of Jesus as well as the later period when the church was suffering reprisals for its harsh critique of a prevailing symbol system. It is fair to say, however, that the Sadducees sought to preserve the centrality of the temple, the law of the cult, and the sanctity of the land under trying circumstances. They worked to maintain the relative independence of Judea and the temple religion while at the same time maintaining good relations with Rome. This precarious balance was not easy to preserve. Their numbers were small, but their lofty and respected positions gave them enormous advantage in the institutions which framed the context of Jesus’ life and of the early church.

The Scribes (an appended note)

The Scribes (Hebrew sopher), literally one who can cipher (saphar) or write, were the professional scholars of the first century. They knew the Torah; they could copy or write sections of Scripture; they could offer authoritative interpretations of the sacred traditions; they even rendered judgments according to the Torah. Scribes occupied important seats in the halls of justice, especially the Sanhedrin, and like doctors of philosophy in our time, they rendered informed and authoritative interpretations of religious traditions. By virtue of their learning and function in the society they enjoyed the adulation and esteem of most Jewry. Both the Pharisees and Sadducees had scribes—i.e., specialists in law interpretation. Thus although strictly speaking the scribes were not a party within Judaism—but rather specialists within larger forms of religious expression—because of their prominence in the Gospel narrative a brief note on them here is apposite.

The scribal profession proudly traced its descent back to Ezra in the mid-fifth century B.C.E., who in the popular memory was the father of post-exilic Judaism. Ezra, we may recall, was the priest who returned from Babylonian captivity around 458 B.C.E., gathered the people before the “Water Gate” in Jerusalem, and read the “whole law” as a part of a covenant renewal ceremony. Ezra, so we are told, was a “scribe skilled in the law of Moses” (Ezra

Forms of Religious Expression

7:6; see also 7:11). However, even before the Exile (597–537 B.C.E.) scribes were associated with the temple, teaching priests and Levites who in turn taught laymen. Later in the Hellenistic period, from the third century B.C.E. on, when many scribes resisted the creeping influence of an alien culture, the need among laymen to take an active role to counter the allure of a great, cosmopolitan Greek culture pried the scribes loose from their traditionally intimate association with the temple priests. By the first century the Gospel of Mark refers explicitly to the “scribes of the Pharisees” (Mark 2:16; my translation) who were thus distinguished from scribes associated with the Sadducees.

Shortly before the Maccabean period (167–142 B.C.E.), the Wisdom of the scribe Jesus, the son of Sinach, was written and later translated into Greek by a grandson (around 132 B.C.E.). In this collection, Ecclesiasticus as it is known in Latin, we find a hymn which praises the scribe (38:24—39:11). A part of the hymn is sufficient to illustrate the importance of the scribe to pre-Christian Judaism:

he [the scribe] who devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High will seek out the wisdom of the ancients, and will be concerned with the prophecies; he will preserve the discourse of notable men and penetrate the subtleties of parables; he will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs and be at home with the obscurities of parables. He will serve among great men and appear before rulers, he will travel through the lands of foreign nations, for he tests the good and the evil among men. He will set his heart to rise early to seek the Lord who made him, and will make supplication before the Most High. . . . If the great Lord is willing, he will be filled with the Spirit of understanding; he will pour forth words of wisdom and give thanks to the Lord in prayer. . . . He will reveal instruction in his teaching, and will glory in the law of the Lord’s covenant. Many will praise his understanding, and it will never be blotted out. (39:1–9)

The esteem accorded this learned scribe in the second century B.C.E. was doubtless enjoyed by the first-century scribe as well. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus scorns the trappings associated with the scribal profession—the special garb that set them apart, the respectful greetings heaped on them in the marketplace, the seats of honor in the synagogues, and the special favor paid them at the feasts (Mark 12:38–39). Their association with Jerusalem in 3:22 lends their mission to question Jesus an official character. Mark repeatedly contrasts the “authority” of Jesus’ teaching and his ministry with the conven-
tional authority of the scribes—for example, 1:22. Such a juxtaposition makes sense only if the position of the scribes were a lofty, authoritative one.

References to the scribes in Mark’s Gospel are uniformly negative, reflecting disputes between the church and the synagogue over scriptural interpretation. Mark echoes the traditional charge that the scribes played a key role in the accusations against Jesus that led to his death.

Matthew shares Mark’s view with one exception. Ironically, in 13:52 many modern scholars see an autobiographical reference to the author himself: “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (my emphasis). The suspicion is that Matthew combines the new and old as a Christian scribe to frame his Gospel. And in Luke’s Acts we also find one positive allusion to the scribes. In 23:9 we are told that the “scribes of the Pharisees” defend the old Pharisee, Paul, finding him innocent of the charges against him.

More about the scribes in the first half of the first century is difficult to discover. It is inappropriate to attempt a reconstruction of the scribal function before 70 C.E. from traditions drawn from later Mishnaic materials. We learn little from Josephus about the scribes. We find that he studied and that by fourteen, he neither immodestly tells us, he had mastered the Torah, but we learn nothing about his scribal teachers. It does seem likely that scribes belonged to the Sanhedrin, the highest court of the land, and that some scribes were Pharisees and other Sadducees, but to say Sanhedrin members were exclusively scribes is conjectural. Whether “ordained” scribes were always called rabbi, a title of respect, is possible though not demonstrable.

In the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach we find that the scribe is expected to meditate on secrets of the tradition (59:7), but must we conclude that the scribes were guardians of an esoteric, Jewish mystical tradition? Again we are faced with uncertainty. We do know that they came from the ranks of both the Pharisees and Sadducees, of their intimate association with Torah, the treasure of Israel’s sacred story, and of the key role they played in scriptural interpretation and rendering judicial decisions based on Torah. It is these functions that figure prominently in the New Testament dialogue. A sensitivity to their importance for first-century Jewish life may help us appreciate the points at issue in the New Testament narrative.

The Essenes

In the spring of 1947, Muhammad ed Dib, the young son of a Bedouin, struck out looking for a lost sheep on the Northwest corner of the Dead Sea. Before he found the sheep he discovered a cave in which a large number of Hebrew scrolls had been placed in large clay jars over 1800 years earlier. Now we know they were hidden there by a priestly community bracing for the Roman onslaught in the war of 66–70 C.E. After the initial discovery, treasure hunters fanned out over the hills to find other caches of scrolls. Many complete manuscripts were found and portions or fragments of hundreds of other scrolls, both canonical and noncanonical, were collected.

Archaeologists later fully excavated the ruins nearby, establishing a solid link between the scrolls and the Qumran community (named after the Wadi Qumran). The layout of the ruins confirmed the picture sketched in the scrolls. The community, firmly ensconced on a plateau overlooking the Dead Sea, was built to support their isolated, independent lifestyle. A complex water system providing reservoirs and ritual baths formed the heart of the physical surroundings. But there was also a kitchen, a pottery, a scriptorium for copying sacred texts, a reefer, laundry, pantry, assembly hall, and even a stable. The lack of sleeping quarters suggests the sectarians slept elsewhere, perhaps in caves nearby. A cemetery lay just to the east of the settlement.

No discovery has so revolutionized our understanding of first-century Judaism or early Christianity as this one. Although few would see any direct borrowing from the Qumran Scrolls in the New Testament, the worldview of the Qumran sect was typical of a type of Jewish piety that at least indirectly influenced many New Testament writings.

What we earlier had learned from Josephus and Philo about the Essenes is now largely confirmed firsthand by the Scrolls themselves (see Philo, Every Good Man Is Free 75–91 and Josephus, War 2:119–61 and Antiquities 18:18–22). Philo, a first-century writer in Alexandria tells us that the Essenes lived in communes away from the noxious moral climate of the town, that the communities aimed to be self-supporting through their own craftsmanship and agriculture (76) and gave up their claim to private property upon entering the community (78), living from a common purse (80). Following the injunction of Isaiah 40:3, “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord,” they had to come to the wasteland to wait for the end. In the interim, according to Philo, they espoused pacifism, neither making nor using weapons of war (78). In the disciplined life of the community they learned the common rule, were instructed in the Scriptures, met for worship on the sabbath in their synagogue (shared meals and cared for the sick and aged 80–91).

Josephus goes beyond Philo in opening a window on the daily lives of the Essenes and the "virtues" they practiced. Rising to pray before dawn, dispersing to their crafts and agricultural tasks until the fifth hour (eleven A.M.), they then reconvened, ritually bathed, and donned sacred white garments for the communal meal. The common meal was liturgically ordered by prayers both before and after (War 2:128–131). As the Manual of Discipline says, “When they have set the table to eat, or (prepared) the wine to drink,
the priest shall first stretch out his hand to pronounce a blessing on the first-fruits of bread and wine” (1 QS 6:5–6).12 Although the meal may not have been sacramental, it certainly possessed a high religious significance. In the “love feasts” of the New Testament we may see a meal that functions in much the same manner for the church. In the community rule we also learn that each able bodied member of the sect was to stand watch “in common for a third of all the nights of the year, to read the Book and study the law and bless in common” (6:7–8). During the three watches of the night when a portion of the community was always on station, the law was recited and interpreted and prayers were said.

Membership in the community came in three stages. Initiation was followed by one year of probation. Then after the successful completion of a rigorous examination the initiate was a novice for two years, followed by a second examination and admission as a full member. As a sign of completion of the trial period the member was given the white linen robe and allowed to share in the common meal. Now the “brother” must keep himself in a holy state of readiness for the imminently Day of the Lord.

A strict ethic was prescribed to secure this state of purity. The sect eschewed slavery, and with few exceptions marriage. They devoted themselves to the simple life and observed the sabbath commandment strictly. Their rigorous observance of sabbath law precluded lighting a fire, food preparation, or even defecation on this holy day. All bodily functions were made subservient to the holy discipline, sleeping and waking, working and praying, eating and eliminating.

Josephus found their zeal amazing. They followed the injunction in Deuteronomy 23:12–14, so he says, when “they dig a hole one foot deep. . . . They squat there, covered by their mantles so as not to offend the rays of God. Then they push back the excavated soil into the hole. . . . However natural the evacuation of excrement, they are accustomed to wash themselves afterwards as though defiled” (War 2:147–149). The prohibitions against oaths, spitting or sleeping in the holy assembly, ridiculing laughter, lying about one’s possessions, and exposing one’s nakedness may sound overly scrupulous to us, but for those sectarians these holy habits were a necessary part of readying themselves for God’s final visitation.

This rigid, communal discipline was enforced by a priestly hierarchy. A priest in a position of supreme authority presided over all of the “camps.” Each camp contained ten persons directed also by a priest (the Damascus Document, hereafter CD 14:6–12).13 The community did contain laymem bers, and some of them held positions of authority and influence. The bursar who managed the community’s purse may have been a layman. Also a lay-Messiah, or Nasi, would, they expected, govern the community in the final days (The War Scroll, hereafter 1 QM, see 5:1). Unquestionably, though, the traditions, governance, and outlook were priestly in character. Priestly figures dictated the direction the community would take. Even the lay-Messiah was to be accompanied by a priestly Messiah.

Forms of Religious Expression

The Writings from Qumran

After the initial sensational discovery of the scrolls and the later finds of whole and fragmentary manuscripts, the task of matching fragments, publication, and translation became an ongoing task continuing into the present. Except for Esther, at least a portion of every canonical book in the Hebrew Scriptures was found at Qumran. In addition scrolls dealing with community discipline and worship, scriptural interpretation, apocalypses, the location of buried treasure, horoscopes, and many other subjects were recovered. A brief survey of the nature and content of some of these scrolls may help the reader appreciate the significance of these materials for New Testament study.

1. The Manual of Discipline (1 QS) was found preserved almost in its entirety. It contained the liturgy and rubrics for worship, for a covenant renewal ceremony, and for a service of initiation into the community. It also included rules for corporate and individual conduct. A penal code prescribed a limited expulsion from the community for anyone who, for instance, “answers his fellow disrespectfully, or speaks (to him) impatiently” (one year, 1 QS 6:26–27), “for whoever interrupts the words of another,” (10 days, 1 QS 7:10), and for “whoever laughs stupidly (and) loudly” (30 days, 6:14). The manual divides all human beings into two camps—good and evil. All people belong either to the “children of light” or the “children of darkness.” An unbridgeable chasm separates those loyal to the spirit of Truth from the disciples of the spirit of Falsehood (3:13–4:26).

2. The Damascus Document (CD) was first found in the Ezra Synagogue in Cairo in 1896. It was called the Damascus Document because the scroll locates the community in the land of Damascus. Portions of the document suggest that it almost certainly originated at Qumran. Essentially, it contains the story of the origin of the community, the conflict between the Teacher of Righteousness, the community’s founder, and the Wicked Priest, doubtless a high priest in Jerusalem against whom the Teacher rebelled.

3. The Hymn Scroll (1 QH), which contains moving Hebrew poetry similar to that of the Psalms, attempts to capture the whole range of human experience. This collection offered the members of the community an appropriate language of joy and sorrow, pain and delight, and of lamentation and joyous song.

4. The War Scroll (1 QM) gives an elaborate, detailed description of the final eschatological battle between the “sons of light” and the “sons of darkness” between God’s holy angel, Michael, and the agent of evil, Belial. The description of the military strategy to be employed is sketched in graphic detail. The battle formation, weapons, and even the standards for the final, decisive holy war are described exactly. The sect clearly expected that day
5. *The Peperim* (e.g., 1 QbHab) or commentaries on biblical texts abound at Qumran. Not only did the community meticulously copy and preserve the holy writings, they also wrote commentaries on the sacred texts. We think of modern commentaries as studies of a passage in its context. But, the Qumran community had little interest in the objective, historical study of Scripture. They read texts as if they anticipated the future of the community. Since the Scriptures were believed to embrace the future of the sect, a dynamic relationship was established between Israel's ancient, sacred story and the time of the sect. The past provided a window into the future, and the future provided a lens for viewing the writings of the past. The texts therefore were always resplendent with mystery and possibility. It was in this spirit that commentaries were written on Habakkuk, Nahum, Genesis, and Psalms, et al.

6. The *Temple Scroll* only recently has been published in English translation. Because of the initial conflict between the Teacher of Righteousness and the temple priesthood—the belief of the community that the corrupt temple cult must be replaced by a purified one—the community had to redefine its relationship to the temple. The *Temple Scroll* fulfills this function, offering instructions for ritualistic cleanliness, sacred festivals, the shape and function of the temple in the New Age, and a description of the eschatological king of Israel and his army.

In addition to these works fragments of other types of materials were also found. Portions of *Targums*—that is, loose renditions of biblical texts in Aramaic—came to light, as well as fragments of Greek texts. This broad array of texts when supplemented with the writings of Josephus and Philo provides sufficient information to make a quite detailed composite drawing of the Hebrew religion at Qumran.

**Theological Perspectives**

1. **Dualism**. The Qumran sectarians believed they were witnesses of a climactic, cosmic struggle between Michael’s angels and Beelzebub’s hosts, between God and the Evil One—between the forces of light and the powers of darkness. This universal, brutal conflict will penetrate the heart of the society as well as the soul of each individual. The angel of light will pit the Teacher of Righteousness against the Wicked Priest in Jerusalem. The “pure thing of the Many”—i.e., the community—will oppose the outside agents of corruption and impurity. The “children of light” will be locked in mortal struggle with the “children of darkness.” This radical dichotomy allows no middle ground and no compromise, accommodation, or negotiation with the forces of evil. Like the Christian Apocalypse which exhorts all to be either hot or cold, for the lukewarm will be spewed out, so these Scrolls allow no room for moderation. As the community rule so aptly says, “Dominion over all the sons of righteousness is in the hand of the Prince of light; they walk in the ways of light. All dominion over the sons of perversity is in the hand of the Angel of darkness; they walk in the ways of darkness” (1 QD 3:20–21). There is no mediating class of people between these two extremes.

According to the scrolls the “sons of light” will receive “perpetual life” (1 QD 4:7–8) while the “sons of darkness” will endure “the disgrace of destruction by the fire of the regions of darkness” (1 QD 4:12–13). Although the in-group out-group opposition reflects the cosmic struggle, the insiders are not exempt from first hand acquaintance with evil. For, as they put it, God “allotted unto man two Spirits that he should walk in them until the time of His Visitation; they are the Spirits of truth and perversity” (1 QD 4:18–19). The difference between the two camps, however, is that though the sons of light sometimes stumble, they finally rely on the “God of Israel and His Angel of truth” for succour and renewal. While the “sons of darkness,” true to their nature, are agents of evil perpetually out of blind necessity.

It is easy to detect New Testament parallels to the Qumran dualism. In Paul’s letters in particular we see how this fierce cosmic conflict is experienced in the heart of each believer as it was at Qumran. The struggle between God and “the ruler of this world” is matched by the matrimonial tussle between the Spirit and Flesh in bondage to evil. Moreover, in Paul’s letters as at Qumran there are two classes of people—“sons of light” and children “of darkness” (1 Thess. 5:5; see also John 12:36). In Paul’s Epistles as in the Dead Sea Scrolls the battle between the cosmic powers was viewed as a premonitory sign of the approaching end. Both Jesus and Paul, like the Qumran sect, believed they were living in the final days of the world. The tension and sense of urgency created by this imminent expectation had momentous implications for conduct and the interpretation of sacred tradition.

Integrated with the eschatological outlook of the community was the expectation of two Messiahs, a priestly Messiah of Aaron, and a royal Messiah of David (1 QD 9:11; Flav. 1:11:13). The sectarians expected this Davideic Messiah would humiliate all enemies of the community, both Jewish and Gentile. Drawing on Isaiah 11:1–5, the sectarians proclaim that the new David will “rule over all the nations and Magog […] and all the people his sword will judge (them).” His authority and style of rule shall be learned from the priests: “[…] as they teach him, so will he judge” (see the Commentary on Isaiah, 1 QpHab frag. D, vs. 4–7). That is, he will rule, counsel, and establish the righteous who are oppressed. The coming of a prophet was also expected to accompany the advent of the two Messiahs.
although his role, though important, was overshadowed by that of the Mes-
siates. These three figures, then, each reflective of some Jewish tradition of
expectation and hope, merge into one figure in the New Testament descrip-
tion of Jesus.

Paul and the author of the Gospel of Mark, like the sectarians, expected
imminent judgment. This “visitation” implied vindication for the righteous
and damnation for the wicked. In Matthew 19:28 and in 1 Corinthians 6:2
are reflected a belief similar to that of the Qumran community. It was
believed that the faithful would share in the judging function (see 1 QpHab
5:4, “God will judge all nations by the hand of His elect”). Punishments
reserved for the Jews who harassed God’s elect are especially severe. The
words of 1 QS 2:15 threaten the wicked Jerusalem priests and Levites with
eternal fire.

The accomplices of the Wicked Priest who committed outrages against the
“elect of God” will taste a fiery judgment (1 QpHab 10:13). Perverse Jews
who insulted the community were promised destruction and denied posterity
(1 QS 5:12). Qumran shares with the New Testament the concept of judg-
ment and the volatile language of the end—wrath, fire, a dismantling of
the world, etc., though such a common outlook and language hardly need sug-
gest a direct tie. That feverish expectation of the end was shared by many
fringe movements in first-century Jewish life.

2. The Righteousness of God. In the Qumran texts, as in Paul’s Epistles,
we see an emphasis on the righteousness of God. In first-century Jewish
piety, sedeq, the Hebrew word for righteousness, refers not to an inward
ethical quality but to a relationship established by God between himself and
his people. Moreover, righteousness in both Qumran and the letters of Paul
was eschatological in nature. Associated with God’s wondrous deeds at the
end of history, God’s righteous work toward his own was an act of mercy to
be gratefully appropriated by faith. Although the inhabitants of Qumran cul-
tivated a devotion to the law, they nevertheless understood their salvation to
depend on God’s grace, not on observance of this law. As the Manual of
Discipline says:

For to God belongs my justification,
and the perfection of my way,
and the uprightness of my heart are in his hand:
by his righteousness are my rebellions blotted out.
(1 QS 11:2-3)

Keenly aware of their own sin the sectarians, like Paul, appealed to God’s
mercy for their salvation:

Forms of Religious Expression

We have been sinful, we have rebelled,
We have sinned, we have been wicked.
But He extends his gracious mercy toward us
for ever and ever (1 QS 1:24-25; 2:1; see also the Hymn Scroll [1 QH] 4:35-

In this reliance on God’s mercy for their salvation, the covenanters stand
squarely in the Old Testament tradition. But, in light of many modern cari-
catures of Judaism as a legalistic religion, it is valuable to have this corrective
material contemporaneous with the birth of the New Testament.

3. Terms and Practices. In addition to the similarity of theological out-
look, the early church and the sectarians share some terminology and prac-
tices. The reference to “the poor” in both the New Testament and Qumran
makes an association between the humble, pious folk waiting empty handed
for God’s kingdom and God’s chosen (Matt. 5:2; 1 QM 13:14; CD 1:9). In
both, the insiders possess a secret wisdom unknown to the outsiders
(Mark 4:11; 1 QH 13:14; 12:13). The term “covenant” designated a faithful
relationship between God and his people for both. Discipline by exclusion
from the community was practiced by both the Dead Sea community and
the early church. In both holy meals were communal, and it is possible that
a voluntary, communal use of goods was practiced by both groups (Acts
preference for celibacy may share an understanding also known at Qumran.
Both expected the arrival of the end to be preceded by a period of great
trauma. In the face of the impending distress both may have foregone the
normal, wholesome domestic joys to devote themselves, like the soldier in
holy war, to the fierce struggle at hand.

The terminology and practices noted here were perhaps known to many
pious, Jewish groups of the first century. The Qumran usage, however, docu-
ments how such a constellation of terms, cultic action and communal be-
havior received expression in a specific Jewish community of the first
century. This collection is valuable because it illuminates the background of
many of the views expressed and many of the actions encouraged by the early
Christians.

While there are similarities in the End-expectation of the church and the
Essenes, the two do diverge at other points. The covenanters of Qumran
withdrew into the “wilderness” to prepare for the end; no such separation is
evident in the early church. A cultic purity was enforced in the community
in preparation for Yahweh’s final visitation. The church, however, displayed
a relaxed attitude toward the laws of purity. The priestly cult at Qumran quite
naturally expected that in the end a purified cult would replace the corrupted
order in a real, earthly temple; the church and its Galilean constituents
harbored no such expectation. (Although a spiritualized cult does appear in
THE WORLD THAT SHAPE THE NEW TESTAMENT

Paul's Romans 12.1, in Hebrews, and in parts of the book of Revelation, the imagery derived from the temple does not anticipate an association with an eschatological temple in the Jerusalem of the future.

The Qumran sectarians expected to be actively involved as soldiers in God's final battle for the world; the church on the other hand claimed no such physical participation in the coming apocalyptic warfare. At Qumran daily water lustrations cleansed the community for its purified life together; baptism for the church symbolized a cleansing also but its tie with the initiation into the community made it a singular event. A general resurrection finds no explicit reference in the Qumran texts but is a general feature of the New Testament expectation. The community is admonished to love the sons of light and hate the sons of darkness (1 Qb 10.5), whereas both the gospel tradition and Paul urge love of the insider and the outsider (enemy). (John 15:12, however, resembles the Qumran emphasis to love the insider.) True to its temple interests, the retarded, handicapped, crippled, diseased, blind, deaf, and women were excluded from the holy assembly. The New Testament tells us that Jesus welcomed those who would have been excluded from Qumran.

Although direct ties are difficult to establish between the Qumran sect and the New Testament, the scrolls are of great value in giving a description of a type of Jewish expression and piety in the first century that shared many features of belief and practice with the early church. An understanding of these background elements can help us better understand both the church's dependence on its mother faith and its departures from it.

Zealots and Sicarii

To repeat the account of the political struggles of the Zealots and Sicarii presented in chapter one is unnecessary. Yet since the engine that drove that revolt was powered by religious symbols and traditions, a brief summary of those elements is desirable.

The roots of the animating zeal for the Zealot movement are found in the Old Testament. The radical interpretation of the Shema—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4)—had historically been a part of Israel's self-experience. Zeal for Yahweh's holiness and honor led Moses to slay unrepentant worshipers of the golden calf (Exod. 32.25–29). The grandson of Aaron (Phinehas) zealously guarded the purity of the community and averted the wrath of Yahweh by killing a Jewish man and the Midianite woman he had taken as his consort (Num. 25.6–9). The Old Testament settlement traditions abound in references to holy war in which zeal for Yahweh dictated total destruction of the enemy and his property (e.g., Num. 31.13–20, where only young girls were spared).

The awareness that they were an elect people receiving the promised land as an act of grace was also a vital ingredient in the faith of those zealous for Yahweh. Since God gave Israel exclusive claim to the land, zealous Jews believed any occupation by the Romans or any other alien power violated Yahweh's design. The system of taxation imposed by the Emperor, no matter how progressive, was bound to stoke the smoldering fires of resentment. Since the land belonged to Israel and Israel alone, any tax, whatever its size, was transgressive deeply held religious convictions. Such zeal naturally inspired a venomous hatred against those who accommodated themselves to the foreign domination. Many held tax collectors, for example, in special contempt. The Pharisees in Mark roundly spurned Jesus for eating and consorting with tax collectors whom they lumped with sinners (2.15–17). Further, the fact that Matthew himself was recruited by Jesus from among this profession was reason enough for such Jews to look down on Jesus and his followers. Some disfavor would naturally attach to a group of disciples containing a tax collector.

The priests and Sadducees also were actively scorned by many. Their positions of leadership made compromise with the Romans necessary for an orderly state of civil affairs. Yet many zealous country folk, already burdened by the Roman taxes and resentful, counted as betrayal any act of accommodation. And the material profit the priests and Sadducees gained from their cooperation with the Romans only served to further inflame popular opinion against them.

Wherever the holiness of the law or the sanctity of the temple were threatened with defilement, the zealots were under an obligation to resist. And, since the temple was in the hands of an establishment obliged to the Romans, conflict was inevitable. The Romans controlled custody and use of the high priest's vestments, which enabled them to symbolically manage the sacred cult. The right to name or influence the appointment of a high priest friendly towards Rome gave the Emperor even greater power over this hagiarchy which unquestionably constituted a central feature of Israel's life.

The daily sacrifices offered by the priests on behalf of the Emperors gave religious support and legitimacy to the Roman occupation. In addition the permanent assignment of Roman troops to the citadel adjacent to the temple complex to "control the crowds" also rankled pious Jews. And the periodic insults and abuse heaped on pilgrims in Jerusalem for the festivals by insensitive or boorish Roman troops only further fanned the flames of revolt. Many zealous Jews felt the temple had been compromised, and it was their duty to defend and restore it sanctity, even if it cost them their lives.

Conditions were ripe for a prophetic or messianic figure who would mobilize this righteous indignation to "liberate" Jerusalem from the Romans, purge the temple of the pollution caused by a compromised ("unclean") priesthood, revoke the unholy taxes, and restore religious and political inde-
pendence to Israel. The memory of the heroic Maccabees, coupled with the holy war tradition and a rising apocalyptic fever, emboldened the zealots to join in an act of violent defense of their institutions and land. The dry tinder was sparked into a conflagration in 66 C.E. The temple was taken and "purged" and Jerusalem was reclaimed. But the revolt came to a chilling end in the year 70 when the Roman Legions broke through Jerusalem's defenses and put a torch to the city.

Martin Hengel has convincingly shown that Jesus was no revolutionary. But neither Jesus, his followers, nor the early church could be unaffected by the conditions behind the revolt—the festering resentments, the violent episodic protests, the humiliation and shame experienced by their countrymen, or the contempt held for the priests and Sadducees. The alert reader will see in the Gospels traces of Jewish rancor toward the Romans, and the animus of some Jews toward others who weakly accepted Roman domination. Though a minority movement, the impulses behind the rise of the Zealots, the conditions fostering such religious zeal, and the fanatical defense of Israel's sacred symbols touched all people in Israel as well as Jews in the Diaspora.

'Am ha-aretz

In spite of the powerful influence exerted on Israel's public and private piety by the forms of religious expression just noted, most Israelites professed no membership in any one of the "parties" above. The great majority of these folk were 'am ha-aretz, a Hebrew term for people of the land. They certainly did not deny Judaism or repudiate either the written or oral law, but they were called people of the land because they were not as scrupulous as others in observing some commandments (especially the laws of purity), and they were ignorant of much of the content of the Torah and shunned its study. The 'am ha-aretz tended to be farmers or a part of the peasant population, though theoretically any person from any socio-economic level could be of the 'am ha-aretz. They were the ordinary people, the masses, from both the city and the country. They were doubtless shunned and ridiculed by those who were scrupulous about the laws of purity, observing the tithing and the study of Torah, namely the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Later rabbinic tradition advised against permitting one's daughter to marry an 'am ha-aretz since he was considered nothing but a sexual animal—or worse yet, exactly like a Gentile! Rabbis Judah ha-Nasi, it is reported, once opened his storehouse of food to his countrymen in a time of famine, but barred the 'am ha-aretz from entering. It is likely that even in Jesus' day not only were the 'am ha-aretz considered inferior but ritually unclean, and therefore contaminating to a person in a state of religious purity.

The testimony of the Gospels is nearly unanimous in affirming that Jesus freely associated with and indeed found most of his followers among the "people of the land." He pitied them because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). Some of Jesus' disciples ate with unwashed hands—that is, ritually impure—in the manner of the 'am ha-aretz. Jesus clearly took the side of the 'am ha-aretz against the scribes and Pharisees (see Mark 7:1-23), and his association with the lepers, handicapped, and sinners suggests his concern for those outside the pale of traditional religious expression, or for those suffering exclusion and prejudice.

Hellenistic Piety

Though Jesus was a Jew, preached a Jewish gospel to other Jews, and though the earliest church was largely composed of Jewish Christians, the influence of the Greek world on New Testament writings was thoroughly pervasive. The language of the New Testament was Greek, the form of the Epistles follows the structure of the hellenistic letter, and many of the traditions found therein come from hellenistic circles. Vocabulary, concepts, metaphors, and cultic acts from the Greeks inform much of the New Testament. The mingling of these two cultures in this respect is widely recognized. Less widely acknowledged, however, is the influence of hellenistic piety on the world in which the New Testament evolved. Some authors of New Testament books as well as those they addressed were directly exposed to the influence of hellenistic religious values. Paul's addressees, Luke's readers, the churches of the Deutero-Pauline writings, all these would have known hellenistic piety first hand (see especially 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 10:14-22; 1 Thess. 1:9). Our consideration of the New Testament context therefore requires at least a brief survey of some of those religious options. Before Alexander's body was cold in the grave the empire he built was beginning to crumble. Even after a generation of civil war defined the major divisions of the empire, factional rivalries continued. Eventually the kingdoms carved out by Alexander's generals collapsed into hostile camps. The synthesis imposed on the Middle East from Egypt to India dissolved. City fought city. Democratic institutions languished. Military rule undermined the city-state. Courts became corrupt and impotent. A stubborn economic depression aggravated the agony brought on by hunger and starvation. Infanticide, widely practiced, accelerated the population decline. This vortex of upheaval exacerbated the growing skepticism about traditional religion and the ability of the gods to save humankind from its desperate plight. Vestiges of folk religion remained and forms of individualistic piety devoted to some minor deity survived, but traditional beliefs waned or became diluted. In the place of the Olympian gods, people sought the reassurance of impersonal, divine forces ordering the cosmos.
With this growing cynicism came a darkness of spirit that eclipsed the glorious achievements of earlier Greek philosophy and culture. The reverence for beauty and order and the celebration of the body in art and sculpture were dramatically altered by a depreciation of the world followed by a renunciation of the body as form. Coupled with this declining interest in the world came also a devaluation of hard rational thought and interest in science. The concept of oecumen, the dream of one world in which all people lived as kin, soured. Consequently the Greeks were thrown back on their resources of piety, visions, and private wisdom. To some of those forms of piety we now turn.

The Mystery Religions

The mystery religions promised liberation from a bleak landscape. Certain esoteric rites joined the initiate in an ecstatic union with the god, offering visions of another world and providing escape from a chaotic landscape. With the steady decline of public institutions and traditional religion, interest in the mysteries grew. Some mysteries, such as the Isis cult or the Dionysian rites, were imported versions of nature religions.

Isis was an Egyptian goddess and consort of Osiris, a dying and rising god linked to the rise and fall of the Nile, the fermentation of wine, the leavening of bread, and the abundance of harvests. Dionysus, a dying and rising god native to Asia Minor, likewise assured the fermentation of wines and the fertility of the earth. Those intoxicated with his ambrosial drink were transported into the divine realm and through his orgiastic rites many felt directly touched by the power and mystery of the god. Together these deities assured the fertility of the earth and the order of the world.

Rooted in an agricultural context, these mysteries celebrated the death and resurrection of the god in synchrony with seedtime and harvest. Through these and other secret rites the celebrant merged with the cosmic order. Transplanted to an urban setting, however, these mysteries functioned no longer to activate a dormant earth but to deliver those craving release from public disaster, private futility, and individual estrangement. In the ritualistic enactment of the death of the god the initiate died, and in the resurrection of the god the initiate rose up from a decaying world to share the mystery of life. Since for many the rites transposed despair into ecstasy, suffering to joy, and imprisonment to release, their success is understandable.

Stoicism

In the tumultuous cauldron of the third century B.C.E., Stoicism took shape. That period of historical terror flung insistent questions to the foreground of the religious thought of the times: if the gods exist and if they care, why, some asked, do they ignore human suffering so multiplied by war and famine? If they are just, why do the gods allow the poor to be robbed by the powerful, and good people to be brutalized by the evil ones? Although the traditional gods had no place in Stoic philosophy, a divine presence, if not a divine personality, was still affirmed. Instead of Zeus, for example, stood the divine principle Logos controlling the cosmos, permeating all that existed.

Since Logos was thought to control all destiny, all events, all fortune and misfortune, always serving some divine purpose, evil was necessarily viewed as good merely disguised. This view is best articulated by Cleanthes, an early Stoic from the third century B.C.E.: For nought is done on earth apart from thee, Nor in thy vault of heaven, nor in the sea, ... But skill to make the crooked straight is thine, To turn disorder to a fair design Ungnacious things are gracious in thy sight For ill and good thy power doth so combine.

Chrysippus, another Stoic from the same period, saw this Logos as sovereign over all. Affirmation that all things serve a divine purpose was a central tenet of Stoic belief. Droughts, plagues, earthquakes, storms, debilitating illness, crippling accidents, or tragic death all serve some purpose. According to Chrysippus, even bed bugs (and presumably flies and mosquitoes also) support the divine Logos by keeping the sluggish from sleeping too late and too long. And mice teach us to be careful where we put things.

The test of Stoic confidence in the fundamental rationality of the universe came in the ability to accept everything with equanimity (or apatheia). Unlike the weak resignation suggested in its English cognate, apathy, indicated a sense of self-sufficiency and autonomy for the preoccupations and anxious cares afflicting others. The conviction that Logos turned misfortune to a good end insulated the Stoic from the cruel adversity and historical terror of the third century. Admittedly this disassociation from upheaval, coupled with an interest in the harmony between the Logos in each individual and in cosmic reason, eliminated any possibility of an interest in history. The Stoics' association with the timeless Logos detached them from all time and made any involvement with history superfluous.

In the New Testament, and especially in the Pauline letters, the Stoic influence on both the Apostle and his readers is evident. The diatribe, a method of argumentation using questions posed by a hypothetical objector, appears in such questions as: 'Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?' (Romans 6:1); 'What shall we say then? That the law is sin?' (Romans 7:7); and 'Is there injustice on God's part?' (Romans 9:14).

The New Testament, however, unlike Stoicism is firmly anchored to his-
tory; it believes on a historical personage, draws from a rich past, and anticipates a historical future. Unlike the Stoics, who translate the concept of freedom into personal autonomy, Paul views freedom exclusively as salvation from the hostile powers of Sin and Death for obedience to Christ. Where the Stoic gains freedom through trust in Logos and apatheia, Paul finds freedom as an eschatological gift from God. Though some of his terminology and rhetorical style may come from the Stoics, Paul differs in important ways. His readers, however, especially in Corinth, may share the Stoic contempt for the body and detachment from history.

Neo-Pythagoreanism

Because of its ability to synthesize diverse philosophical and religious traditions, Pythagoreanism enjoyed broad popular appeal in the first century. Tracing its origin back to the distinguished philosopher Pythagoras of the sixth century b.c.e., the Neo-Pythagoreans cultivated a sensitivity to the divine element within the self. Convinced of the truth of the ancient Pythagorean maxim, "Like seeks like," the Neo-Pythagoreans believed the godly element in each person was constantly striving to return to its divine source. By renouncing the flesh they sought to move the spark within toward the great, cosmic fire above. Vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, and silence effected liberation from the body and affirmed the divine within and above the self. Recognizing that a portion of the divine known to humanity is also lodged in other living creatures, the Neo-Pythagoreans were protective of all life. Out of respect for the divine ether in other animate life, they wore no leather or wool clothing, and they abstained from meat.

Seeking attunement or harmony with the divine, Neo-Pythagoreans were deeply mystical. Soffused with the divine they called themselves Entheoi (those in whom god dwells) and Ekstaticoi (those standing outside themselves in the spirit). This enthusiasm, literally infused with God, broke through in miraculous deeds. In their view, mighty works gave proof of the divine power and presence, and authenticated the divine nature of the one performing them.11

This attunement to the divine element within sensitized the Neo-Pythagoreans to the divine element in the universe as well. They saw divine order in the regular motion of the planets and other heavenly bodies. This perception, not scientific curiosity, inspired their diligent study of astronomy. Believing the astral bodies were divine beings controlling all human destiny, the Neo-Pythagoreans observed their movements to learn the divine "as something at once beatific and comforting."12 And thus was each person conceived as a being cradled in a universal harmony.

The magical quality that Neo-Pythagoreans assigned to numbers may

Forms of Religious Expression

strike some as strange, but their interest in mathematics was related to the sense of proportionality they discovered in the musical scale, in geometry, and in the study of astronomy. Since the movements of the planets were reducible to numbers, the quantitative ciphers took on some of the sacred character of the harmony they described. The balance between finiteness and infinity, between singular and plural, between odd and even numbers partook of the divine reality which directed the course of the stars and the paths of life on earth.

With its emphasis on harmony, its resolution of opposites, and its kinship of the sacred spark in the self with the divine element in the heavens, Neo-Pythagoreanism offered an alternative to the nihilistic philosophy which had developed among the Greeks regarding cruel Fate (moros), blind Chance (cyclo), or dumb Necessity (ananke). To those trapped by mindless or careless forces amidst a swirl of war and upheaval, Neo-Pythagoreanism promised a way out. It offered a method of resolving human tragedy in a divine harmony, a way of overcoming alienation and loneliness with an emphasis on kinship with the divine, and a message of release from the tyranny of irrational and capricious forces. Given the broad popular appeal of this movement, the chances are it touched some of the communities the New Testament addresses, perhaps rather significantly.

Cynics

The Cynics proudly wore the epibet, "dog." (Greek kouros) contumaciously hung on them by their critics. Claiming freedom from the false values and cheap aspirations of the uncritical majority, the Cynics sought complete autonomy by stripping themselves of all concern for wealth, fashionable dress, sumptuous quarters, popularity, or family. Disdaining traditional learning, scornful of the deference shown the powerful and of the uncritical adulation of the great philosophers by their contemporaries, the Cynics aspired instead to the simple life.

Watching a child drink from cupped hands, Diogenes threw away his cup saying, "A child has beaten me in the plainness of living."13 Sustained by begging, wandering like an exile, sleeping on his cloak, the Cynic counted himself most blest. "All things," Diogenes said, "belong to the gods. The gods are friends to the wise, and friends share all property in common; therefore, all things are the property of the wise . . ."14 Alexander the Great is reported to have said to Diogenes, "Ask me any boon you like. To which he replied, 'Stand out of my light.'"15

Understandably many found the Cynic behavior and philosophy revolting. Seneca, writing in the middle of the first century, scoffs at their "repellent attire, unkempt hair, slovenly beard, open scorn of silver dishes, a couch
on the bare earth and . . . other perverted forms of self-display.”28 Whether these wandering critics directly influenced New Testament writings is disputed, but at least some indirect pressure is likely. A word of caution is necessary, however.

Conceptual parallels offer no proof of borrowing. Concerns similar to those of the Cynics do appear in the New Testament. Luke’s report that Jesus had “nowhere to lay his head,” (9:58), or Jesus’ command to the disciples in Mark to “take nothing for their journey . . . no bread, no bag, no money” (6:8), or the scorn heaped on those seeking public applause or security in “treasures” (Matt. 6:1–21), each superficially resembles Cynic concerns. But demonstrated links with distinctive language, peculiar phraseology, or unique actions, as well as geographical or cultural proximity, are required to make a case for borrowing. At points in the Pauline letters Cynic influence is demonstrable. Betz has shown Paul’s list of his hardships (2 Cor. 11:23–29) closely parallels a similar catalogue in the Cynic diatribes.29 Paul’s understanding of the radical character of his style of mission may also contain some Cynic patterns. In any case, the sight of wandering Cynic philosophers understandably colored the way common folk viewed all itinerant missionaries, including periastic Christian preachers.

Gnosticism

Though not an independent movement in the first century, a gnostic idiom and mythology was already forming in Jewish and Christian circles. The later development of the movement confirmed tendencies already evident within the New Testament itself. Whether Gnosticism30 came from Jewish or Hellenistic circles is unclear. The movement did, however, reflect the profound alienation of much Hellenistic piety and simultaneously produced a grotesque caricature of the Hebrew religion.

Most gnostic systems formed around a violent antagonism to this world. They held matter to be the evil work of an evil god. The Creator God of Genesis appears as a sinister being opposed to the true, high God. At the heart of gnosticism lay a radical dualism between the world above and the world below; between matter and spirit; between truth and falsehood; knowledge and ignorance, and light and darkness. This depreciation of the material world mightily influenced gnostic anthropology. Created by Yahweh—the evil god of this world—and drugged into a stupor blinding them to the divine spark within, the lost wandered aimlessly in perpetual ignorance. Except for the intervention of the high God who sent a Redeemer to awaken the lost from sleep, all creatures would have remained hopelessly lost. Once awakened, however, they recognized their heavenly citizenship; they knew their origin and destiny. The power of ignorance and the power of slavery were overcome by the power of the Redeemer. Liberated from their bondage by

**Forms of Religious Expression**

**gnosis**, the gnostics gave proof of this freedom by repudiating the physical body through ascetic vows, and showed their contempt for matter and their superiority over it by indulging the appetites. Sinning was one way of declaring one’s salvation, for by breaking the rules made by the lower god, the gnostic demonstrated a superiority over the god of this world.

Certain gnostic tendencies appear in the New Testament, albeit in a less extreme form (see 1 Cor., the fourth Gospel, Col., and the pastoral Epistles, i.e., 1 and 2 Tim. and Titus). In 1 Corinthians we learn Paul’s addresses claim to be wise, to possess knowledge, to be free, and to be already redeemed.31 They strive to live above sexual distinctions, and in their “saved” state to stand above the Apostles and Scripture.

Their sense of deliverance from this world, their claim to knowledge and freedom, and their boast of complete salvation in the present conformity with the dominant motifs of later gnostic myths. The dualism in the fourth Gospel between the world above and the world below, between light and darkness, and between truth and falsehood resembles the antagonistic division in Gnosticism. The author of Colossians combats a world-denying “heresy” bent on cosmic speculation some feel is gnostic.32 The author of the Pastoral defenses against a false teaching devoted to asceticism and speculation, to claiming a higher knowledge (gnosis), to encouraging libertine behavior, and to teaching a resurrection already experienced. The contours of this religious outlook also strongly resemble those of gnostic mythology.

**Hellenistic Jewish Piety**

Few Jews in the first century escaped the pull of Hellenistic culture. Yet, Diaspora Jews (i.e., those dispersed, living outside of Palestine) were more open to the ways and outlook of Hellenism than were Palestinian Jews in general. The active interchange between cultures set in motion by Alexander’s conquests made religious tolerance a political necessity—especially in the Greek cities scattered across the Middle East. Exclusive views gave way to ecumenism, and confrontation, to compromise. As stated so well by V. Tcherikover,

It was quite impossible, living among the Greeks and enjoying the splendid works of Greek literature, to be enclosed in a spiritual Ghettot and to be reckoned among the “barbarians.” It was a necessity to find a compromise, a synthesis, which would permit a Jew to remain a Jew and, at the same time, to belong to the elect society of the Greeks, the bearers of world culture.33

The influence of Hellenism touched Diaspora Judaism at many points. Even in the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, an emphasis on tolerance crept into the text. In Exodus 22:28 where the Hebrew Scriptures read “You shall not revile Elohim” (the personal name of God, plural),
the Greek has "You shall not revile the gods," thus encouraging tolerance of and respect for all forms of religious piety even when one did not subscribe to them. Similarly, the Letter of Aristæas, written by an Alexandrian Jew in the second century B.C.E., claims Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the same high God other peoples worship under different names. God, he says, "the Creator of all things, whom they (i.e., the Jews) worship is he, whom all men worship." 14

After the Babylonian Exile (597–537 B.C.E.), the essential feature of Israel's covenant with Yahweh was law observance. Strict observance of circumcision and purity laws defined Israel's distinctiveness as a people apart. In the Diaspora, however, as Jews sought accommodation with their Gentile neighbors, the emphasis shifted from strict observance of laws underscoring Israel's particularity to participation in the glorious history of the Jews. As J. J. Collins has shown, to be Jewish in the Diaspora is:

to belong to the same people as Abraham and Moses and the other heroes of the past. The exploits of these heroes show the preeminence of the Jews by outshining the heroes of the other peoples. At the same time the criteria for excellence are those commonly accepted in the Hellenistic world. The distinctly Jewish virtues of the Torah are thrust into the background. 15

Thus the gulf between Hebrew religion and Hellenism narrowed. Even where an ethnic pride remained the line between Gentile and Jew was blurred. More and more, hellenistic Judaism welcomed and even actively sought Gentiles as converts. Baron may be correct in saying that Jewish missionaries traveled from city to city contending for the loyalty of their hearers. 16 There is evidence of their success. Gentiles attended synagogues, observed the Jewish sabbath, studied Torah, and gave children Jewish names. Consequently, the exchange between Jew and Gentile was reciprocal, and this interaction encouraged tolerance, respect, and in some cases mutual admiration.

Elsewhere we also see an openness to hellenistic views in the way the concept of the ideal Jew conformed to the hellenistic vision. Aristæas took prudence, justice, and temperance, Stoic marks of the ideal man, as characteristic of the ideal Jew as well. The rational process valued by the philosophers was also highly prized by educated Diaspora Jews, and the results were not always salutary. The elevation of reason at the expense of the physical world drove a wedge between higher reason and lower flesh. This emerging split between mind and matter, and the corresponding rupture between heaven and earth, stood behind the growing tendency to view matter in harshly negative terms. In the writings of Philo, a first-century Alexandrian Jew, one can see tension building between the positive assessment of the material world in the Hebrew Scriptures and its devaluation in Hellenism. Some of the same tensions may be seen in Paul's letters.

Although there was an accommodation to Hellenism among Diaspora Jews, it would be incorrect to speak of a general assimilation. To be sure, Jews spoke the Greek language, attended the theater, took education in the Greek classics, and were loyal subjects in the hellenistic political system; yet they did so without fatally compromising their ancestral religion. While national or ethnic pride led many Jews to hold their heads high among the Greek custodians of a great, cosmopolitan culture, at the same time they sought to remain loyal to the Jewish heritage. When this delicate balance was struck one sees the successful synthesis of Judaism and Hellenism.

While each of the expressions of hellenistic piety surveyed herein is distinctive, they all reflect the disenchantment and alienation of their time. Each in some way responds to the confusion and excitement generated by the welter of new ideas flooding the hellenistic world. Each shares a sense of community, or sympathia, with the divine, and thus offers an expanded vision of the world. Most importantly, each devalues the material world, shares the same lack of confidence in the institutions of the day, and shows little interest in history.

Predictably, gnosticism radicalized these tendencies, imposing a terrifying rupture between flesh and spirit, and between the world above and the world below. Where the ancient Hebrews had rejoiced in the creation as God's handiwork and the world was seen as the natural home of all human life, the gnostics viewed this world as a mute, chill landscape, founded by accident and devoid of sense. "The starry sky . . . now stared man in the face with the fixed glare of alien power and necessity." 17