

Background of the New Testament

Religious and Philosophical Movements

Lecture

I. Introduction

1. If you lived in the 1st century AD, what would have attracted you to the gospel of Jesus Christ? That is an interesting question because it forces you to put yourself back into the shoes of people who lived a long time ago. We know that in the early years of the church, many, many people believed in Jesus and accepted him as Messiah, Savior, and Lord. Why were they open to the message about Jesus? What was it about their beliefs, hopes, and dreams that made them receptive to the gospel?

II. Religious movements in the Jewish World

- Religious Movements (not just religious)
- Diverse at the time of 1st century
- Some “members”
- Most – affinity toward one group or another
- 1st Two – most influential

1. The Pharisees or “separated ones” - oral traditions of the rabbis

- Grew out of the Hasidim
- Mostly middle class
- strict observance of Law and oral traditions
- Later written down in Mishnah, Talmud
- Rebuked by Jesus for focusing on minutia and neglecting weightier matters (Matthew 23:23-24, 27-28.)

Application – keeping the law, neglecting God (and more important matters)

2. Scribes

- often group with Pharisees
- teachers of the OT law

3. The Sadducees

- only accepted the authority of the law of Moses, rejected supernatural ideas

- second major group
- Grew out of Hasmonian leaders
- Upper/priestly class – control of temple/priesthood
- Powerful, but not popular (Sanhedrin, led by high priest)
- Disappeared with destruction of the temple

Key views:

- “only accepted the authority of the law of Moses”
- “rejected supernatural ideas” (i.e. angels, resurrection)

Jesus and the Sadducees

- Challenged Jesus on the issue of the resurrection (7 brothers)
- Participated in trial (likely fearful of losing power)

4. The Essenes

- Like Pharisees, but removed selves from society and temple worship
- Not mentioned in NT
- Produced the Dead Sea Scrolls (likely)
- Appears to come to an end in AD 70

5. The Zealots

- Jewish revolutionaries attempt to overthrow Roman rule
- Willing to use violence
- Simon the “zealot” (likely not member of party)

6. The Samaritans

- Ethnically/religiously mixed descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel
- Distinctive beliefs
 - Their own version of the Pentateuch
 - Would not worship in the temple in Jerusalem
 - temple on Mt. Gerizim; destroyed during Hasmonian times
 - Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another in Jesus' day.
 - Still about 300 living in Israel

7. The people of the land

- Majority – no affiliation (93% or so)
- Pharisees – look down on
- Jesus – compassion

8. The Jews of the diaspora

- The majority of Jews lived outside the land of Israel
- Some – maintain distinct Jewish faith and culture; some more Hellenistic
- Chief example: Philo of Alexandria
- Some persecution
- Importance of synagogue (cf. Acts)

III. Jewish world: General observations

1. The Jewish people were devoted to one God and to His law.
 - Key Issues leading to exile:
 - Idolatry
 - Breaking of Mosaic Law
 - Post-exile: strong monotheism and centrality of law
2. Many Jews longed for a Messiah.
 - Political oppression/incompetence → messiah (often with political overtones)
 - Religious impurity → priestly messiah
3. Most Jews were influenced by Greek culture.
 - Varying degrees, but influence of and reaction to
4. Before the destruction of the temple, Judaism was diverse.
 - Variety of viewpoints
 - Certain unifying practices – food laws, circumcision, monotheism, law
 - Only two surviving groups – Pharisees (Rabbinic Judaism) and Christians

IV. Religious and philosophical movements in the Gentile world

- NT – not just a Jewish context!
 - Influence of Greco-Roman thought in Israel
 - Spread of gospel to the Gentiles/Roman empire
1. The old gods
 - Old gods (i.e. Zeus, Mars) and demi-gods (i.e. Hercules) part of the religious landscape
 - Temples, festivals, iconography
 - Real devotion?

2. Mystery religions
 - Popular before/after time of Christ
 - Variety of forms: Eleusinian, Dionysiac, Osiris and Isis, Demeter
 - Key features – basic myth, public festival, secret initiation rites

3. Asclepius
 - god of healing
 - son of Apollo
 - Popular in 1st century
 - Healing (faith not required) → gift to temple in response
 - Number of major and minor temples

4. Emperor worship
 - Part of religious life (gods and power)
 - Christian refusal → persecution
 - Revelation and emperor worship

5. Philosophy
 - Variety of philosophical movements in the first century
 - Gentile world – value wisdom/wisdom teachers
 - Paul in 1 Corinthians 1-4
 - ["Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:22-24)]

Key Philosophical Movements:

- a. Epicureanism

[Epicureanism taught that there is nothing beyond the material world and no life after death. Therefore, pleasure (that is, the absence of pain) is the chief good in life. (Circle the word "pleasure." Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die)]

- b. Stoicism

[Stoicism taught that the chief good in life is the dutiful acceptance of one's fate as it is determined by the impersonal reason that controls the universe. (Circle the word "fate." According to Acts 17, Paul ran into Epicurean and Stoic philosophers when he was preaching in Athens).]

c. Cynicism

[Cynicism emphasized personal freedom and ridiculed those who felt bound to common social behaviors and standards. (Circle personal freedom).]

d. Skepticism

[Skepticism refused to accept the idea of universal truth . Each individual has his own experience and his own individual truth that works for him. (Circle individual truth). (Some of these ideas sound familiar don't they, like you could easily find people who held to these ideas today? As believers, we turn our backs on such ideas and instead cling to Christ who is the power of God and the wisdom of God).]

e. Gnosticism

Late 1st century movement(s)

Dualism

Material – bad

Spiritual – good

Escape through knowledge

Physical desires – asceticism or indulgence?

Addressed in NT?

Not likely; perhaps proto-gnostic thought

6. Gentile proselytes and God-fearers

Diaspora – spread of Jewish teachings and beliefs in Gentile world

Gentile proselytes were full converts

God-fearers – practiced law but not full converts (circumcision or parts of law)

Attractive moral teaching in the face of Gentile immorality

Review questions:

Who taught that the highest good was to accept fate?

The highest good was pleasure?

The highest good was personal freedom?

Who taught that there was no universal truth?

What was the difference between Jewish proselytes and god-fearers?

What types of religions had secret initiations which offered a personal relationship with a god?

Who was the god of healing?

Who taught that the material world is evil and we must plan to make an escape from it?

V. The Gentile world: General observations

1. People were ready for change.
Signs of disillusion with traditional gods and immorality of world
2. People cared about their personal destiny.
Some indications of concern with life beyond this life – i.e. Gnosticism
3. People were becoming less ethnic and more universal in their religious beliefs.
Wide variety of gods worshipped throughout empire
“foreign” gods incorporated into the gods of the city
4. People saw little need to be devoted to just one god.
Syncretism – incorporate a variety of gods
Christian monotheism viewed as “atheism” due to exclusive devotion to Jesus

As we did after considering the Jews, let me ask you to jot down some thoughts on the question:
If you lived in the 1st century AD what would have attracted you to the gospel of Jesus Christ?
Now, how would you answer that question from the perspective of a Gentile person?