



uncommon
THE HOLY ONE OF GOD IS COMING

LESSONS:

1. Was Jesus just Common? (12/7)
2. He would be Compassionate and Holy (12/14)
3. His Birth would Announce His Kingdom (12/21)
4. His Childhood Among the Religious (12/28)
5. His Life Growing Up Among the Gentiles (1/4)
- 6. The Challenges of the Jewish Religion (1/11)**
7. The Challenges of Gentile Religions (1/25)
8. The Creator Among the Created (2/1)
9. The Lord Against the Deceiver (2/8)
10. The Priest Among the Worshippers (2/15)
11. The King Among the Citizens (2/22)
12. The Hope of the Nations (3/1)

Lesson 6 | The Challenges of the Jewish Religion (1/11)

Objective | If it was “**at the right time**, Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 6:6) and “**when the fulness of time came**, [that] God sent His Son.” (4:4), there is something helpful for us to understand the culture and the climate of the times in which Jesus lived. Of course, the most significant was the religious climate in which Jesus was born.

Louis Ginzberg wrote, ‘A famous doctor of the Synagogue, living in the third century remarked, “Israel went into exile only after it became divided into twenty-four sects.... There can be no doubt that at the downfall of the Jewish state, the time of the rise of Christianity, Israel was divided into many sects” (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43301988>).

At the time of Christ, political Palestine was a poorly-run, repressive Roman and run by a Roman-Jewish government under the Herods. About two million of the world’s five million or so Jews at that time lived in the Jerusalem area. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were puppets of the Roman government. A handful of merchants, high priests and leaders lived in luxury, while the vast majority of the population lived in poverty. The local government was corrupt; inflation and landlessness were high; and the poor were highly taxed by absentee landlords and corrupt Jewish priests.

At the time of Jesus, the Jews had been divided into a number of different often rival, mostly religious, sects. The countryside was filled with holy men who spoke in parables and guerilla leaders who claimed they were messiahs. When Jesus began preaching around 28 A.D. "shooting wars" were being fought in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem. The Dead Sea scrolls have offered many insights into what Palestine and Judaism was like in the time of Jesus. Much of what we know about the Holy Land around the time of Jesus is based on accounts by Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-100), the pro-Roman Jewish governor of Galilee, in his books *The Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities*. Josephus, born to an upper-class Jewish family, was governor of Galilee at the age of 31 in A.D. 68 and later led a Jewish liberation army against Rome. When in Rome, his statement that Roman general Vespasian would be a Jewish messiah and a future emperor of Rome spared him. When Vespasian did in fact become emperor, Josephus was given a generous pension and comfortable apartment and spent the rest of his life writing Jewish history.

Jewish Sects and Aristocracy

Over time the Jews divided into different sects such as the Essenes, an ascetic group that live in the desert; the Zadokites, the Hellenized group of priests that ruled the Temple (as identified in the Dead Sea Scrolls); and in the New Testament, there are three named: the Zealots, the militants who did their last stand at Masada with the Essenes; the Sadducees, a priestly group described by the Jewish historian Josephus; and the Pharisees, conservative ritualized group that was perhaps the largest sect; the.

The priestly class was not very sympathetic to concerns of ordinary Jews. A high ranking rabbi in the Jewish aristocracy referred to Jewish peasants as "unclean animals" who were so worthless and inferior that it was alright to kill them on holy days when the butchering of clean animals is forbidden. Another rabbi said that it was acceptable to "tear a common person to pieces like a fish." Another rabbi, recognizing that the Jewish peasantry was not fond of their the Jewish leaders either, said, "the enmity of the common person towards a scholar is even more intense than that of the heathen toward the Israelites."

So when Jesus came into the world to combat these groups – it would follow that there would be tension. A vastly different scenario than when He was 12 in the temple “amazing” those in the temple.

In Jesus' day, there were varying philosophies within the Jewish faith. While some Jews embraced the Roman rulers, others resisted with violence. And whereas some Jewish believers lived a simple, isolated lifestyle, others enjoyed a lifestyle of wealth and influence.

Three predominant religious groups are mentioned in Scripture: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots. During his ministry, Jesus' likely interacted with them all, touching the hearts of some, and sparking violent hatred among others.

The Essenes played a significant part in Jewish culture, and some have speculated that John the Baptizers' life had crisscrossed with influence from them as well. And while there is possibilities there, the call of preaching for repentance to John came from the Lord.

The **Pharisees** are to have descended from what were the Hasidim freedom fighters of the Maccabee era. They were mostly Middle-class merchants who some have said numbered in Jesus day about 6,000. They believed that the entire Old Testament was Divine Law for Israel; However, they also accepted oral interpretation of the Old Testament as authoritative and could be bound on the common man. They believed that study of Torah was the highest act of worship and that Yahweh's will was for his people to keep the law. In the afterlife, they believed in bodily resurrection and life after death. They supported the newly established synagogue system for Torah study and interpretation yet demanded a strict, detailed obedience to oral and written law. Politically, they accepted Rome as a necessary evil as long as they were allowed to practice their beliefs. Read the following passages and comment on how you see this plays out in their interactions with Jesus: **(Mark 7:1-13; Matthew 5:17-20; 6:1-4, 5-6, 16-18; John 7:40-52; 8:30-59; 9:13-41).**

The **Zealots** descended from the spirit of the Maccabean revolt of 167 BC. And it is Josephus that says they emerged as distinct group in a revolt during the Roman census in 6 A.D. that was led by Judas the Galilean, the usual "poster-boy" of the Zealots. His death is referred to by Gamaliel in Acts 5:37. They were extremists and often Pharisees. Most of them lived in Galilee. While they saw their existence promoted by religion, they were more a political action group and their theology resembled the Pharisees. However, they believed only God could rule and they opposed slavery and taxation. And so they existed to root out all paganism so that God could reign. They refused to pay Roman taxes. The name "Zealot" was first used by Josephus to describe them in the War of AD 66-70; he also called them "bandits" and ultimately placed the blame of Jerusalem's fall in AD 70 on them; He also refers to the Zealots as the "fourth Jewish philosophy" (including the Essences as the third). In the New Testament, the lestes ("bandits") are mentioned as the two who hung on either side of Jesus. They were robbers, plunderers, or a brigands; but the English translation of this term as "thieves" removes the political connotation of the activity. There is a disciple known as Simon the Zealot listed in **Luke 6:15** and **Acts 1:13**. Confusion surrounds this individual as there are several Simons in the gospels, often without distinction. In Mark and Matthew, we have Simon *the Canaanite* (Mark 3:18; Matthew 10:4). Their Greek word (*kananaios*) meant "zealous," but in Jerome's Latin translation, it became "Canaanite." But in either case, this Canaanite or Zealot was chosen by Jesus as an Apostle. What does that say about the order of things Jesus intended to change?

Three Main Jewish Sects			
	PHARISEES	SADDUCEES	ESSENES
General	in the world but not of the world	in the world and of the world	neither in the world nor of the world
Law	valued oral law, also accepted old written law	rejected oral law, accepted only old written law	wrote hidden law, accepted and gave interpretations to old law
Interpretation	accurate, precise	pragmatic, accommodating	creative, adaptive
God	participates in events of world	removed from the evil of world	Messiah will destroy the evil of world
Fate	Fate cooperates in human actions	rejected Fate, emphasized agency	accepted Fate
Society	kind to each other, lenient (Mt 5:46; Acts 5:39)	rude to each other, boorish, punitive (compare Acts 5:40)	great attachment to each other
Main Locations	rural villages and cities	urban centers	remote communes, separate quarters
Gentiles	partially accepted	openly accepted	mostly rejected
Property	lived simply	sought wealth	despised wealth, held goods in common
Pleasure			shunned pleasure
Souls	imperishable, good souls alone go on to another body, wicked souls suffer eternal punishment, believed in resurrection	no afterlife, no eternal rewards or punishments	bodies perishable, souls immortal, liberated upon death

The **Sadducees** were the elite who cared for the Temple. There is some question about who they came from by there is evidence of their connections with the priesthood, and connecting it to the Solomonic high priest, Zadok. Not all priests were Sadducean. However, the leaders of the Temple were. They were wealthy, aristocratic, and often Hellenistic (i.e. the Zadokites). They believed that the Pentateuch (i.e. Torah) was the only binding law from Yahweh and they rejected oral traditions as authoritative. They believed that life in the Temple was the only path to God and they did not believe in bodily resurrection. In practice, they ran the Temple and all its ceremonies; They dominated the Sanhedrin-the religious ruling council and most lived a Hellenistic, affluent lifestyle because of the Roman support they received. (Matthew 22:1-23-33; Luke 20:20-47)

The **Essenes**, thought unmentioned in Scripture and for that reason left off the chart above, were one who opposed the priestly cast in Jerusalem and lived outside of the people and the temple. They continued to believe the Maccabees' claim to the high priesthood since the Revolt. Some have suggested that they were dissident Sadducees or Pharisees who preferred isolation in the wilderness to the participation in Temple services led by corrupt priests. At least in practice, that was what they did. They believed true priests descended only from Zadok and should not be appointed by the Herods (as they had been in Jesus' day). They believed in a rigid adherence to the Law and believed that the imminent arrival of kingdom of God was at hand. They lived in isolated communities and shared property and communal meals; And almost "religiously" practiced ritual cleansing. No mention of them in Scripture.

Next Lesson: 7. The Challenges of Gentile Religions (1/18).
Read ahead: Matthew 6:7-8; Acts 17:10-34; 19:11-41.

"Compassionate Creator: Becoming Human For Me" by Bruce Morton; Chapter 6
 Sold on Amazon and 21st Century Christian or other Christian Bookstores.