

New Testament Life and Times

The World of Jesus in the Early Church --

5. History from Persia to Rome
6. **The Jewish Context**
7. The Greco-Roman Context

Leander Church of Christ

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Notes available from <https://ClassNotes.LeanderChurch.org>

NTiiW - 6 Jewish Context of Early Church

Geography

In the first century, there was no single 'state' in that region with borders in the modern sense.

Judea itself was basically Jerusalem and the surrounding country, and there were several other cities in the region without Jewish influence.

Language / Literacy

Palestine was **tri-lingual** in the first century...

1. **Aramaic** (from Persia) was still the majority language. It persisted even through multiple Greek and Roman conquests.
2. **Hebrew**, relating to Aramaic rather as Chaucer's English relates to ours, was found in liturgical settings where scripture was read, but was also spoken by some, and used in writing and inscriptions.
3. **Greek**, too, was also spoken widely, particularly among merchants and the ruling class.

Language / Literacy (2)

- Different levels of literacy
 - Write one's name
 - Scribble out a business contract
 - Ability to read literary works
 - Able to compose literary works
- Assuming middle of the above range of competencies, “literacy” was probably around 10 – 15 percent of the population.

Economic Life

- Agrarian
- Tiers (more on this later)
- Slavery (nothing to do with ethnic background or skin color)

Cultural Values

- 1. Family / Kinship**
2. Honor / Shame
3. Purity / Pollution

Family/Kinship

- Modern/Western conceptions are more nuclear/individualistic
- First Century: male head, wife, children, dependents, freedmen, slaves.
- Head of the household: Ultimate source of power and identity, determined social, economic, and religious activities of the family.
- Kinship could also be created by devotion to a common set of ideals and shared way of life. This was called 'fictive kinship,' not in the sense of fake or pretend, but in the sense of being cultivated apart from biological or marital bonds.

Fictive Kinship

1. 'Truly I tell you,' Jesus replied, 'no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.'
2. Jesus once rebuffed the efforts of his own family to intervene in his mission, identifying his disciples as his true family, saying: 'Here are my mother and my brothers! **Whoever does God's will** is my brother and sister and mother.'
3. Paul conceived of his churches as a family, God's family, in which fictive kinship superseded other allegiances. He told the Ephesians: 'Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of **his household**.'
4. EXTRA CREDIT 1: in my father's house

Family / Kinship

- Extra Credit – in my father's house
- Extra Credit – Ben-Hur

Early Church Family

The early church was comprised of people with an ethnically mixed and socially diverse

fictive kinship,

devoted to Jesus and

united by a common concern to

love and support one another

as a ***single family***.

Cultural Values

1. Family / Kinship
- 2. Honor / Shame**
3. Purity / Pollution

Honor / Shame

- *FOUNDATIONAL* for Jewish, Greek, and Roman societies
- Honor
 - Inherited by noble birth
 - Product of one's gender or social rank
 - Acquired through social advancement in public accomplishments
 - Excelling over others.
- Shame
 - Lack or loss of honor due to one's social position
 - Accrued from actions that cause one to lose face.
- *ALL* groups used the honor/shame scorecard

Honor / Shame -- Jesus

- The gospels emphasize that Jesus is, in the world of his day, 'honorable' by virtue of
 - his prestigious genealogy
 - his miraculous birth
 - the sign of his divine sonship at his baptism
 - his teachings and prophetic works that received widespread acclaim.
- The NT goes to great lengths to remove the 'shame' (or stigma) of the cross in the minds of its readers.
 - Just one example of *many*: The author of Hebrews tries to undo the cultural script that equated crucifixion with shame when he declares that Jesus 'endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God'. For the author, Jesus' humiliation by the Romans was undone by his exaltation and enthronement with God the father.

Honor / Shame – Jesus (2)

- A significant feature in the gospels is that Jesus challenges the authority of the Pharisees, scribes, chief priests, and Herodians to speak for God.
 - Ex: Refer #.# --
 - In each confrontation with such people, Jesus out-performs them in wisdom and ability, and so **increases his own honor** while **shaming his opponents**.
 - This is why we are told that the Pharisees, chief priests, scribes, and Herodians plotted to kill him; that is what people do, as the ‘honorable’ course, if they have been shamed by a social inferior.

Honor / Shame – Jesus' Examples

- If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.
- When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.
- Then he asked them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?" And they had nothing to say.

Honor / Shame – Jesus (3)

The author of Hebrews tries to undo the ***cultural script that equated crucifixion with shame*** when he declares that Jesus ‘endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God’. For the author, Jesus’ humiliation by the Romans was undone by his exaltation and enthronement with God the father.

Honor / Shame (4) -- 2 Cor 2.14

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as
captives in

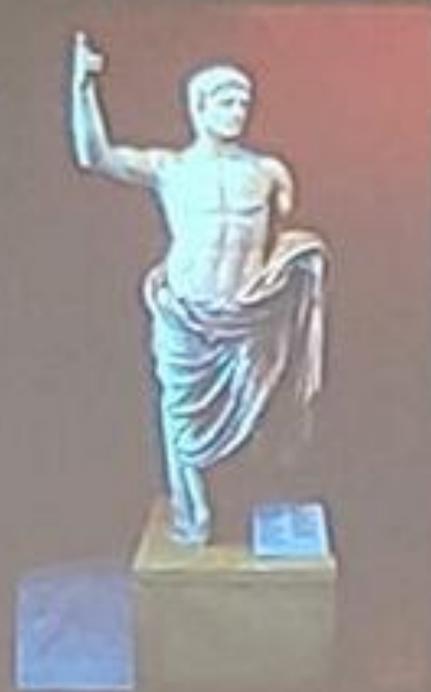
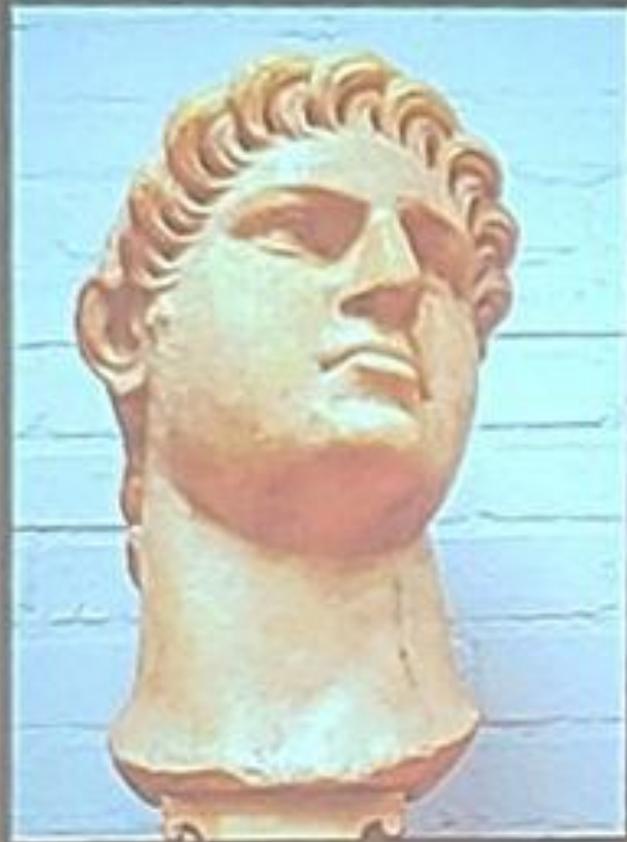
Christ's triumphal procession

and uses us to spread the aroma of the
knowledge of him everywhere.

Honor / Shame (5) -- The Gospel of Mark

- Intended Audience?
 - Mark's explanations of Jewish customs and his translations of Aramaic expressions suggest that he was writing for Gentile converts, probably especially for those converts living in Rome.
- Intended Purpose(s)?
 - Mark's Gospel stresses the deeds, strength, and determination of Jesus in overcoming evil forces and defying the power of imperial Rome.
 - It seeks to turn the Shame Of The Cross into a Triumph beyond the imagination of the emperors of Rome.

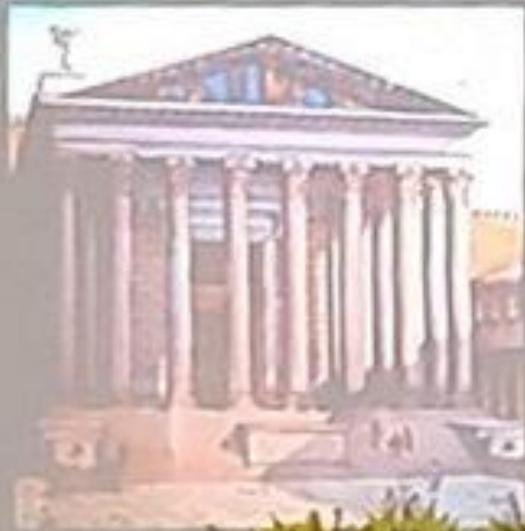
How did Emperors declare their deity?



Triumph



- Ancient Greek custom
- religious procession for god Dionysus
- Re-enact death and resurrection
 - Romans = Jupiter
 - Later Divine Emperor



1. Praetorian Guard
2. Purple Robe, Wreath
3. Acclaimed by Soldiers
4. Procession – death instrument
5. Capitoline Hill
6. Wine offered and refused
7. Sacrifice
8. Elevation of next in rank
9. Acclamation by crowd
10. Sign from the gods

Honor / Shame (9)

- Patron / Client
 - Example – [Video Moore](#) (7m21s)
 - Online Version [HERE](#)

Cultural Values

1. Family / Kinship
2. Honor / Shame
- 3. Purity / Pollution**

Purity / Pollution

- Purity codes are the attempt to put things in their proper place for their proper time. This is why, in Jewish and Christian writings, you can find references to people and things that are holy, pure, sanctified, unblemished, undefiled, and clean.
- Generally speaking, impurity and pollution were simply part of life; most people were unclean most of the time, and living in common places rather than in holy precincts. Impurity, obviously, was not the same thing as 'sin', though the effects might overlap.

Purity / Pollution

- Relationship between **ritual impurity** and moral **impurity** was robustly debated among ancient Jewish groups. The rabbis could distinguish the two without prioritizing one over the other, while those who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls could conflate the two, so that to be ritually impure was also to be morally impure. It appears that Jesus may have entered this debate in the parable of the Good Samaritan...
- Biblical writers did not abandon the language of purity and pollution. Rather, they *adopted* the language to describe the saving work of Jesus and the holiness of the Christian assemblies.
 - Peter, at the Jerusalem council
 - Paul's exhortations to the Corinthians
 - John: "If we walk in the light... his blood purifies us from all sins."

JEWISH SECTS

- The demise of the Hasmonean dynasty, and the advent of Roman rule, together spawned several mutually antagonistic Jewish groups, each with their own vision for Israel's future.

JEWISH SECTS -- Zealots

- Sicarii, **Masada** during the Roman/Jewish war.
- say your prayers...
- sharpen your swords...
- make yourselves holy to fight a holy war...
- ... and God will give you a military victory over the hordes of darkness

JEWISH SECTS -- Pharisees

- **Community Activists**
- The more strict a Pharisee you were, the more likely you might sympathize with the zealots, e.g., Saul of Tarsus.
- No political position; more like a pressure group.
- Their aim went like this: When ejected from the halls of power, start a grass-roots campaign to get your vision for Israel adopted by the masses, tell everyone to have their own ritual bath if they can, and have your bones buried in ossuary boxes waiting for resurrection. If we can be obedient enough, get pure enough, keep Torah precisely, then maybe the 'son of David' will come.

JEWISH SECTS -- Essenes

- Qumran
- ... separate yourself from the wicked world, say your prayers, and wait for God to do whatever God is going to do.

JEWISH SECTS -- Sadducees

- The compromise position
- ... keep the Temple going, offer sacrifices pleasing to God, maintain the peace, get along with your political bosses as well as you can, do as well out of it as you can, and hope that God will somehow validate it all.

REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS *(think Zealots)*

4 BC

- Herod the Great was dying
- Judean hotheads pulled down the ornamental eagle Herod had placed over the Temple gate. Suspected collusion by the high priest.
- MANY similar events happened over the next couple of decades. *Responses escalated on both sides.*

Meanwhile, two messianic movements were causing unrest.

- Simon, an ex-slave of Herod who was proclaimed king before being killed by the Romans
- Athronges, who gave himself royal airs and organized his followers into military groups before being captured.

REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS -- 2

40 AD

- Brief respite from continual provocation during reign of Herod Agrippa, a grandson of Herod the Great, whom the Romans allowed to rule from around 40 AD until his death in 44 AD.
- His apparent piety, and his care to avoid offending Jewish scruples, held revolutionary tendencies at bay.
- After his death we begin to see several renewed insurgencies, however.





Masada Never Again

Rome hailed it as a monument to death,
a sullen token of futility,
that subject peoples all might stare and say,
"Rome is our master; Empire is supreme."

E'en the name of that foreboding place,
standing stark hard by the sterile sea,
'Masada' conjures darkened memories
of those who stood to fight, then stayed to die.

"Jews must learn," a laurel-crowned Caesar said,
"to bow the knee beneath their sovereign's hand.
They have no power to stay the legions' might.
Pitiful people, kneel or feed the sword."

But tyrants often do more
than they know,

for from their follies
symbols tend to rise,
then stand like specters over
future days, and whisper,
as they pass their fitful
nights,

a people's firm resolve:

Masada—Never again!

PHARISEES

- Most important sect for study of the New Testament
 - Pharisees are depicted in the gospels as Jesus' primary adversaries.
 - The apostle Paul was once a zealous Pharisee.
 - (What would be different about his message had he been a Sadducee using same words?)
 - Pharisees dominated the Jewish world after Jerusalem's fall in 70 AD and the failure of the Bar-Kochba revolt in 135 AD.
- Only two Jewish groups survived the war with Rome
 - Pharisees
 - Christians
 - These two groups were now effectively competing to be the voice of the Jewish world in a post-Temple age.

PHARISEES-2

- Several thousand Pharisees in first century AD
- Marginalized politically during the Herodian period
- Mainly concerned with creating the conditions necessary for Israel's eschatological restoration through a strict regime of Torah observance.
 - They were not separatists, but were trying to draw all Israel into a state which would hasten its restoration and elevation over surrounding nations.
- Hugely significant were their concerns with 'purity.' This was not about personal cleanliness, but symbols for the purity and maintenance of the tribe, the family, or the race.

PHARISEES-3

The clash between Jesus and the Pharisees, therefore, must be seen in terms of two alternative agendas, generated by the alternative eschatological beliefs of two competing renewal movements.

Jesus was announcing the kingdom in a way that did not reinforce, but rather called into question, the agenda of revolutionary zeal that dominated the horizon of the leading group within Pharisaism.

The coming of the kingdom, as Jesus announced it, put before his Pharisaic contemporaries a challenge, an agenda: *give up your interpretation of your tradition, which is driving you towards ruin*. Embrace instead a very different interpretation of the tradition, one which, though it looks like the way of loss, is in fact the way to **true victory**, the way of the cross!

SADDUCEES (priests and aristocrats)

- The great majority of priests were not aristocrats and were not wealthy. They were dependent on tithing. Most lived outside of Jerusalem. They were the main teachers of the law.
- Believed in free will, but from a practical standpoint, not philosophical.
- Only concerned with Torah (the Pentateuch). Anti “traditions of the elders”, i.e., Pharisees. Conservative. Averse to innovation. Comfortably in power.
- Denied resurrection. (Broader than bodily resurrection; this had come to mean the total reconstitution of Israel – a serious worry for those supported in power by Roman might.)
- Footnote – The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N. T. Wright

The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N. T. Wright

N. T. Wright takes us on a fascinating journey through ancient beliefs about life after death, from the shadowy figures who inhabit Homer's Hades, through Plato's hope for a blessed immortality, to the first century, where the Greek and Roman world (apart from the Jews) consistently denied any possibility of resurrection.

We then examine ancient Jewish beliefs on the same subject, from the Bible to the Dead Sea Scrolls and beyond. This sets the scene for a full-scale examination of early Christian beliefs about resurrection in general and that of Jesus in particular, beginning with Paul and working through to the start of the third century.

Wright looks at all the evidence, and asks: **Why did Christians agree with Jewish resurrection belief while introducing into it—across the board—significant modifications?** To answer this question we come to the strange and evocative Easter stories in the gospels and asks whether they can have been late inventions. Wright seeks the best historical conclusions about the empty tomb and the belief that Jesus really did rise bodily from the dead, recognizing that it was this belief that caused early Christians to call Jesus "Son of God." In doing so, they posed a political challenge as well as a theological one. These challenges retain their power in the twenty-first century.

ESSENES

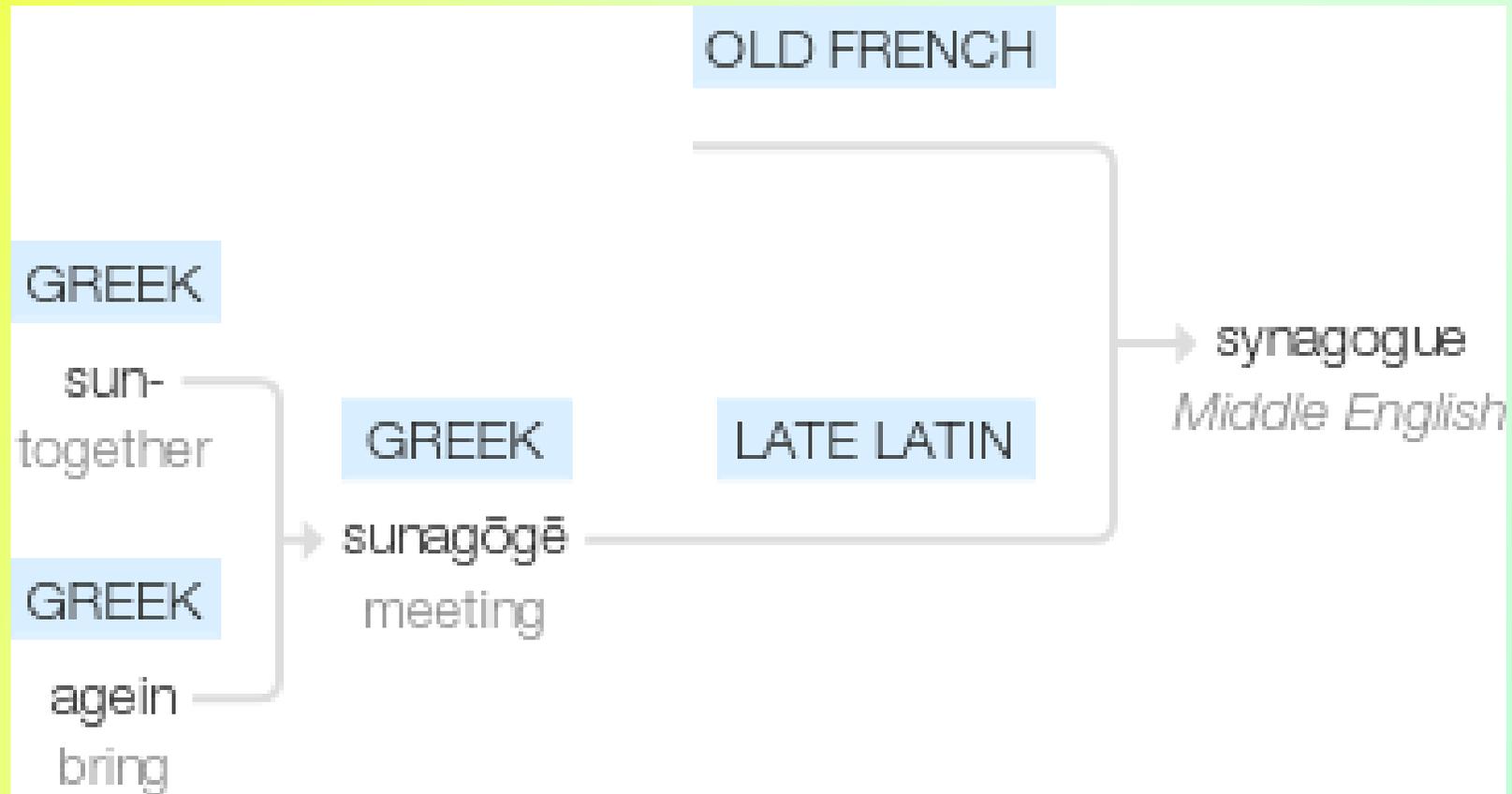
- Not mentioned in New Testament, but via
 - Josephus
 - Philo
 - Pliny
- Known for their ascetic way of life, concern for ritual purity, corporate reading of scripture, refusal to own slaves, sharing of property, and communal meals
- Qumran – “Teacher of Righteousness”
- The sect separated from other Jews and followed this teacher into the wilderness, where they were trying quite literally to ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’

ULTIMATE JEWISH BELIEFS

- *ONE GOD, ONE PEOPLE* (Monotheism and Election)
- It is this belief that sustained them through domination and enslavement by multiple pagan kingdoms.
- At their core is the conviction of the Jewish people that **their God was the creator God**, not a tribal god or a local deity, but ‘God Almighty’, the ‘maker of heaven and earth’. **He had called Israel to be his special possession**, the people of his pasture, a kingdom of priests, and a light to the nations. Though the world was ravaged with evil and savaged by dark powers, it would not always remain so. Many Jews cherished, and brought to various expression, the hope that this one true **God would deliver Israel** through his agents—prophets, priests, and kings—to bring about a new exodus. This would utterly transform Israel’s fortunes and future; and, **through this transformed Israel, God would one day transform the entire world.**

- What Questions may be asked by Spelling Bee contestants?
 - alternate pronunciations
 - a definition
 - a part of speech
 - language of origin
 - for the word to be used in a sentence
 - for the word to be pronounced again.
- **SYNAGOGUE**
 - Language of Origen
 - Greek
 - Why?

Deuteronomy 17:11



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NTiiW - 7 Greco-Roman Context of Early Church

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