

“Selected Studies in the Gospels” Introduction, Part 2

No century in the entire history of Judaism saw more revolutionary changes than the first century of the Common Era.

“In this relatively short period of time *two* great religions developed—Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. During this period the man Christians consider the son of God lived and was crucified. During this period his greatest apostle wrote the canonical epistles to struggling new churches. During this period the Jewish Temple was destroyed. With the destruction, major changes occurred in the role of the high priests. Apocalypticism, proselytism and sectarianism, all of which had flourished before the destruction of the Temple, drastically declined. This period also produced the two most outstanding Hellenistic Jewish writers—the philosopher Philo and the historian Josephus. Finally, this period laid the foundations for the Jewish academies that debated the Law and ultimately led to its codification in the greatest Jewish work since the Bible—the Talmud.”¹

The Political Situation in First Century Israel

1. *Pax Romana*.
2. Herod the Great ruled as “king” from 37 to 4 BCE.
3. Archelaus.
4. Frequent requests by the Jews for limited autonomy.

Economic conditions in the First Century Israel

1. Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE).
2. Josephus and the “fourth philosophy.”
3. The Temple collected vast sums of money.
4. Other considerations:

The Temple

1. The central focus of the Jewish religion was the Temple.

The High Priest

The Sanhedrin

1. From the Greek *synedrion*, “a sitting together,” or “session.”
2. The supreme political, religious and judicial body of the Jews.
3. Its jurisdiction.

The Synagogue

1. Long before the destruction of the Temple, the synagogue was an important religious institution.
2. The earliest references to synagogues in ancient Israel.
3. The number of ancient synagogues.
4. House of prayer, house of study, meeting house, guest house.
5. **Judaism could never have survived the destruction of the Temple—and the end of the sacrificial system—had the synagogue not already existed.**
6. **“Most historians look upon the rabbinic period as beginning in 70 and regard the shift from Second Temple Judaism (prior to the destruction of the Temple) to Rabbinic Judaism as a monumental change.”**²

Major Jewish sects

1. Hellenists
2. Chasidim—pious, kind, godly.
3. Sadducees
4. Pharisees
5. Essenes
6. Zealots
7. Samaritans

The “cultural context” of the Gospel

1. Yeshua and His disciples ministered within a cultural milieu that was shaped almost entirely by an established and respected Jewish religious tradition.
2. When Yeshua came—“Christianity” did not exist.
3. The early disciples were not only Jewish by birth, but Jewish by faith and practice (*cf.*, Acts 21:20).
4. Nothing that the *Nazarenes* believed was inconsistent with Judaism.

Who are we? What has the Lord called us to?

¹ Louis H. Feldman, “Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism in the First Century,” Hershel Shanks, Ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism* (Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992).

² *Ibid.*, p.11