

# **JEWISH AND GRECO-ROMAN CULTURE IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN WORLD**

## **Politics**

For millennia the Jews had been primarily under the rule of one foreign power or another – Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, Persia, Rome, Assyria – with only brief periods of independence. At the time of Jesus, and the establishment of the Christian Church, Palestine was under Roman rule. The Jewish government of the High Priest and Sanhedrin reported to the local Roman Government (King Herod and the Roman Governor). The latter reported to Rome.

- The Roman government practiced syncretism. It accepted that all religious beliefs, philosophical teachings and government systems were a reflection of the larger Roman system. In effect, they practiced a “one country, two systems” policy, giving all subject peoples freedom of religion, politics and thought yet maintaining strict overall control.
- The Jews were unwilling subjects of the Roman Empire, and resented the imposition of a King – Herod – to be their ruler under the direction of the Roman Governor.
- The Jews were dualists, dividing the world into two types of people – Jews and Gentiles, with whom they did their best to avoid relationship.
- The Jews had freedom in both their system of government and in maintaining their own traditions, albeit ever subject to Roman authority. They were, for example, under the authority of the Jewish Court System, the Sanhedrin, but certain findings – like the imposition of a death penalty – required ratification by the Roman governor.
- The Jewish political system revolved around two “parties”. The Sadducees were comprised of wealth and conservative Jews, including many priests, who rejected strict Jewish tradition in favour of cooperation with the Romans. The Pharisees were the ‘people’s party’; and taught strict observance of the law and traditions. In addition to these two groups, there were two others – the Essenes, a monastic sect – and the ‘Herodians’ about whom little is known. It would appear that neither took an overtly political role; although the latter may have done so surreptitiously, in support of King Herod.

## **Economy**

In first century Palestine, the economy was primarily agrarian, supplemented with large building projects – such as the Temple – sponsored by King Herod. Israel produced olives, figs, dates, grains and vineyard products. Trade was facilitated by its key location on the Mediterranean Sea.

- Jewish peasants depended on access to land for their well-being.
- In order to survive, they had to raise not just enough food to last until the next harvest. They needed extra grain for seed for next year's crop, food for their animals, enough to trade for necessities, extra food for the necessary rituals/celebrations throughout the year. Usually, peasants barely produced enough to meet these needs.

- Under the Roman occupation, peasants were expected to produce a surplus: This was taken from them by the ruling elite in the form of taxation, and used by that elite as a source of revenue to create wealth.
- Jews were obligated to pay a traditional tithe to the temple, which supported the priesthood. The Romans also required a tribute collected in the form of taxation. The total tax burden could consume as much as 40% of production. It was seen as robbery by the Jews, and tantamount to slavery.
- Families that did not have enough to live off of after paying the tribute were forced to borrow to survive. Continued borrowing would increase a family's indebtedness- eventually causing complete loss of land.
- Jews were often forced to become sharecroppers/tenant farmers on the very land that had belonged to their families for generations. As a result, large estates run by stewards/landlords (sometimes absentee) and worked by tenants were common.
- Local people were employed as tax collectors. For their pains they were considered to be traitors and outcasts.
- King Herod commissioned many public works (the Temple in Jerusalem, forts, palaces, ports and stadiums), thereby creating employment for many labourers
- There were three basic classes:
  - The upper class consisting of the temple priests and priestly aristocracy, including the Sadducees.
  - The middle class included traders, merchants, artisans, craftsmen, Pharisees, sages, scribes and teachers,
  - The lower class contained labourers and the unemployable, like lepers.
- There was great disparity in income between the rich and the poor.
- Itinerant teachers made their living traveling from town to town, and accepting gifts from those who came to hear them.
- The Temple courtyards had been turned into a market selling sacrificial animals and foodstuffs at vastly inflated prices.

### **Daily Life**

- Galilee was populated mostly by Jews, with some representation of Syrians, Greeks and Romans. Jerusalem was more cosmopolitan, and had much greater ethnic diversity.
- The common language in the Roman Empire was Greek. However, Jews also spoke Hebrew, Latin and Aramaic.
- The marketplace and shops was the hub of village life. The synagogue was the central meeting place and the seat of local government.
- Houses were 1 to 2 room square structures; with flat roofs, dirt floors and narrow doorways. Generally they were arranged around a courtyard where neighbours performed daily chores in each other's company (cooking, washing etcetera). Water was carried from a public well and stored in cisterns. Lighting was provided by oil lamp.
- People had few personal possessions
- A woman's daily job was to feed her family – to grind grain for flour, bake bread, cook, milk the animals, and make cheese. Most cooked foods were boiled or stewed.

- The husband was the spiritual and legal head of the household. His responsibilities were to feed, shelter and protect the family.
- Extended families often lived together
- Women were regarded as the husband's property.
- In Jewish society, the family/group was most important.
- Individuals did not survive on their own in antiquity- they survived by being connected to "networks" of people: family, friends, brokers, and patrons

### **Religion**

- Judaism was understood to be one of the religions of the Roman Empire
- Like other Greco-Roman religions, it included the belief in a higher realm in which there was a powerful deity who could benefit humans, and who showed special favour to those who worshipped him in prescribed ways. The principle cultic acts of this religion involved animal sacrifice and prayer.
- Judaism was a monotheistic religion. The Jewish God was invisible and could not be portrayed. However, the Jews did believe in immortal beings, somewhere between them and the true God, which included: angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim
- In contrast, the Greeks and Romans – and most other cultures of the time – were polytheistic, believing in many Gods.
- The Jewish tradition centred on the Sabbath; a day of rest and worship where all activities were done in honour of God.
- There was a strong interest in the supernatural. People believed in curses, and were controlled by superstitions.
- The major religious holiday was the Passover feast, celebrating the deliverance of the Jews from their slavery in Egypt.

### **Education**

- Jewish education emphasized law, ethics and history in the context of moral living.
- The Greco-Roman emphasis, in contrast, was on science, arts, linguistics and physical training.
- The major 'pagan' philosophies of the time were Cynicism and Stoicism.
- For the Jews, the Torah was the source of all learning.
- The synagogue was not only the place of worship, but also of education.
- Young boys started formal education at age 5, and learned to read and write. By age 10 they started to study Torah. Their education was generally complete at age 18. Girls were educated at home by their mothers and other women of the household.
- The young men were educated by a Rabbi from the synagogue
- Advanced education was available to those wishing to become a scribe or doctor of the law

Brian Bartley  
Trinity 662030885

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