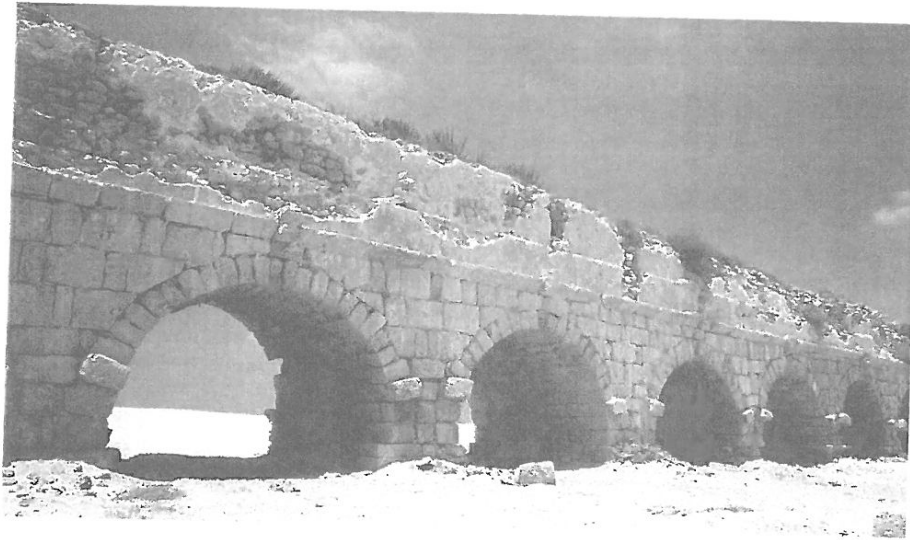




most deserving of public office and prestige in the community, so only the wealthy could enjoy the honor and advancement reserved for those who gave so “generously.”

A Roman aqueduct leading to Caesarea on the coast of Palestine

2.2.3. Jewish Identity

The onset of the series of changes among the Jewish people that set the stage for understanding the Judaism of the Roman period can be conveniently dated from 586 BCE. The fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the end of the Davidic monarchy, and the exile of Israel’s leading families under Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar profoundly shaped what would emerge in the centuries after the Exile as Judaism. Of course, the Israel of Persian, Hellenistic, Hasmonean, and Roman times was deeply rooted in the Yahwism known to us through Israel’s Scriptures, but it can also be distinguished by the fresh emphases required for a people living under foreign domination. In this case, these fresh emphases can be understood as characteristic marks of family resemblance, since one of the primary features of first-century Judaism was its diversity of expression. All Israel sought faithful responses to the cultural upheavals around them, but some Jews opposed the forms of response adopted by others. Hence, in spite of their common cause, some Jews found themselves aligned against other Jews.

The changes that resulted from the loss of land and political autonomy in the Babylonian invasion shaped Israel in decisive ways — so much so that Josephus observes that those returning from Babylonia should be called “Jews” rather than “Israelites” (*Ant.* 11.5.7 §173). Judaism, of course, saw itself as the continuation of preexilic Israelite religion or Yahwism, and shared with it the fundamental belief in one God, Yahweh, who created the world, chose Israel (the Jews) to be his people, delivered them from Egypt, and entered into a covenantal relationship with them. Moreover, even if they were ruled by foreign kings, Jews nonetheless maintained their sense of identity with the land of Israel and of the holiness of Jerusalem and its temple. On the other hand, with the Exile came the demolition of the ancient tribal structure of Israelite society. Jews that did return to the land did so as clans, and many Jews did not return but were dispersed throughout Babylonia and, in time, the entire Mediterranean world. Thus Judaism took on more a religious and less a national identity. Although the center point of this religion remained the temple — now the Second Temple, with restoration work and extensive renovations dating from the late sixth century BCE well into the first century CE — this was supplemented on a local level by the synagogues, whose activities supported the fresh emphasis on prayer and ongoing study of the Scriptures.

2.2.3.1. *Diverse Voices within Judaism*

In the centuries before the birth of Jesus and the beginning of the Christian movement, it became clear that, in spite of foreign rule, the Jewish people would not be

Josephus on the Pharisees

The Pharisees simplify their standard of living, making no concession to luxury. They follow the guidance of that which their doctrine has selected and transmitted as good, attaching the chief importance to the observance of those commandments which it has seen fit to dictate to them. They show respect and deference to their elders, nor do they rashly presume to contradict their proposals. Though they postulate that everything is brought about by fate [i.e., providence], still they do not deprive the human will of the pursuit of what is in human power. . . . They believe that souls have power to survive death and that there are rewards and punishments . . . : eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage into the next life. Because of these views they are . . . extremely influential among the townsfolk. . . . (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.3 §§12-15)

simply assimilated into the dominant culture around them. Full adaptation was not an option; instead, they would follow the law of Moses. The rejection of a merger into wider cultural currents raised the important question, How might the Jews remain faithful as God's people while under alien rule? After all, following the Mosaic law assumed some level of distinction between Jew and Gentile. Related to this was another issue, that of Jewish leadership. This was in part a question of who would be authorized to represent to the Jews God's just ways for constituting faithful life. In the early years of the postexilic era, scribes emerged in this role, but scribal dominance in religious discourse was soon challenged by priestly voices. In fact, the revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes was led by rural priests who were to become rulers of the new independent Jewish nation.

Josephus on the Sadducees

The Sadducees hold that the soul perishes along with the body. They own no observance of any sort apart from the [written] laws. . . . There are but few to whom this doctrine has been made known, but these are persons of the highest standing. . . . (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.4 §16-17)

Another alternative voice materialized during this era, however. This was the voice of apocalypticism, a sociohistorical movement whose primary spokespersons were seers and mystics. Often living far from the thresholds of power in this much-conflicted era, such groups placed little hope in the possibility of reform and instead anticipated a new order of reality that would soon overthrow and replace the present world. Among these people and in their literature developed sometimes wide-ranging speculation regarding the spiritual world. The failure of Israel's primary institutions, the prominence of evil, and the suffering of the righteous — such desperate times called for transcendent answers: resurrection as God's vindication of the faithful not from but through death, developed hierarchies of angels engaged in battle against God's foes, and so on.

Albeit in adapted form, apocalyptic themes (e.g., final judgment and resurrection) are present throughout the NT. More immediately obvious in its pages, and especially in the Gospels and Acts, are evidences of the diversity within Judaism that grew out of the sociohistorical exigencies we have outlined. Josephus refers to four parties within Judaism — the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the "Fourth Philosophy." Reference to these groups begins to suggest how in

Josephus on the Essenes

The doctrine of the Essenes is wont to leave everything in the hands of God. They regard the soul as immortal and believe that they ought to strive especially to draw near to righteousness. They send votive offerings to the temple, but perform their sacrifices employing a different ritual of purification. . . . They hold their possessions in common, and the wealthy receives no more enjoyment from property than the one who possesses nothing. . . . (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.5 §§18-22)

divergent ways Judaism addressed the questions of faithfulness to God and religious-political leadership in the Second Temple period.

Who were the Pharisees? Some were priests, but most were not. They accorded privilege to the Torah and regarded the ancestral traditions of interpretation as also binding. The latter resulted in an emphasis on the laws of purity — normally focused on priests and the activity of the temple but now also transferred to everyday life. And this led to a heightened emphasis on the table and table fellowship, what one ate and with whom. In fact, the Pharisees are often presented in the Gospels as concerned to monitor Jesus' behavior at table, for example, or on the Sabbath. Their struggles with Jesus typically revolved around faithful interpretation (and embodiment) of the law. Although Pharisees would not necessarily have enjoyed high status because of their economic or professional location in the larger world, as persons concerned with the interpretation and appropriation of the Scriptures they would have been influential in their own communities. This is especially true when it is remembered that Pharisees often lived in the villages and towns of Israel, away from the immediate influence of the urban elite, whose interpretations would have struck sometimes quite different chords. It is not easy to determine the typically Pharisaic stance toward Hellenism and the Roman Empire. This fact alone may be telling, however, for it suggests a certain ambivalence and lack of consensus toward these larger realities. Apparently, many Pharisees believed that everyday holiness before God was possible without addressing critically the status quo of Roman rule.

While Pharisees were located throughout the villages and cities of Israel, Sadducees were found in Jerusalem. They included the leading priests (the "chief priests" in the Gospels) and others of the urban elite for whom faithfulness to God was signaled above all by faithful maintenance of the temple cult. Consequently, cooperation with Rome was for them an acceptable compromise, for it ensured the ongoing, relatively independent functioning of the temple apparatus.

An opposite perspective is represented by the Essenes, for whom separation from Gentiles, Gentile influence, and even those Jews who trafficked with Gentiles was axiomatic. Their emphasis on purity led them to separate themselves into their own communities, whether within cities and towns or in isolated sites in the wilderness (e.g., Qumran). These sectarians held an apocalyptic form of eschatology, viewing themselves as the faithful, the "sons of light," who would join God in the final battle against the "sons of darkness."

The "Fourth Philosophy," as Josephus calls it, were largely Pharisaic in their beliefs, though with one important proviso — their "passion for freedom since they take God as their only leader and master" (*Ant.* 18.1.6 §23). How its members demonstrated their passion for freedom is not developed by Josephus, and it would be a mistake to identify the Fourth Philosophy too readily with the Zealots, revolutionaries who would appear in the 60s CE. No doubt there were various ways of expressing dissent in regard to Israel's enemies. Those of the Fourth Philosophy may have found their precursors in those faithful Jews who resisted the compromise of their faith in the face of their foes by giving up their lives in innocent suffering.

In any case, the groups Josephus mentions hardly tell the whole story of Second Temple Judaism. Most Jewish people belonged to no identifiable group at all, and the Gospels usually portray "the common people" as prospective believers in Jesus. At the turn of the era, numerous messianic movements and revolutionary prophets vied for attention and sought a following among the people. We should situate John and Jesus among those movements. Both men must have seemed to the Romans and to the Jewish people like one more in the line of those who proclaimed a message of renewal and sought a following. The presence of revolutionaries and renewal movements is itself a barometer of the level of unrest arising from the ongoing social pressures of Hellenistic influence and the constant economic and military reminders of Roman rule, as well as popular dissatisfaction with official Jewish responses to these alien intrusions.

Josephus on "the Fourth Philosophy"

As for the fourth of the philosophies, . . . this school agrees in all other respects with the opinions of the Pharisees, except that they have a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable, since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master. They think little of submitting to death in unusual forms and permitting vengeance to fall on kin and friends if only they may avoid calling any person master. (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.6 §§23-25)

2.2.3.2. *Common Judaism*

Thus far we have emphasized the diversity of Jewish responses to the realities of the Second Temple period. Can one speak of a "common Judaism" — that is, of a unity within this diversity? Archaeological discoveries in the twentieth century, together with increased familiarity with the extant literature of Second Temple Judaism, have underscored the many expressions of that Judaism. At the same time, it is possible by painting with broad strokes to portray those elements of faith and behavior that would have characterized most Jews during this period.

The foundation on which Second Temple Judaism was built accounts not only for the unity but also the diversity of Judaism in this period. The "Judaisms" of which some scholars have come to speak shared a common heritage, but each "Judaism" interpreted this heritage along divergent lines. Those central components of faith that bound them together, when set within the context of invasive Hellenism and Roman political dominion, would become the focal points of discord.

What were these shared elements? First and foremost, Jews of the Greco-Roman world clung to the fundamental conviction contained in the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4). Recitation of the *Shema* was required twice daily (Deut 6:7), and Josephus remarks that the recognition of the one God is common to all the Hebrew people (*Ant.* 5.1.27 §112). Such a confession stood in contrast to the Hellenistic approach to religious diversity as well as to the early Roman position, which were characterized by the very syncretism rejected in Judaism. Although Rome ceased to be so accommodating in its religious pluralism during the period of the empire, its new distaste for syncretism did not lead it to discard its basic polytheism. Hence, throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the Jews were extraordinary in the wider world for their exclusive monotheism. Some Jews could portray other figures as Yahweh's divine attendants or write of Yahweh's self-expression in personal ways (e.g., "Word/Logos" or "Wisdom"), but this need not have marked a substantive departure from Jewish monotheism.

Second, Judaism was grounded in the belief that Israel was God's people at God's own behest; they were the people chosen by God, and he had initiated a special covenant relationship with them. Of course, this conviction of divine election is deeply rooted in Israel's collective memory — in the divine promise to Abraham and in God's mighty acts of deliverance and leadership in the story of the Exodus. Israel was to be a "holy nation," and this required careful negotiation of the practical terms of Hellenistic reform and Roman presence.

Third, and as a corollary to these first two, God's people responded to God's gracious initiative in terms set forth in the Torah, God's law. Not only did Torah relate the story of God's election of Israel, it also set forth how that relationship

would be regulated. The early ascendancy of the scribal office in Jewish life following the Exile is testimony to the importance given to understanding and articulating the meaning of Torah among God's people. Later, priests would share in this function in local communities, and the reading of Torah became a cornerstone of piety for the Jew. The development and propagation of the synagogue as a house of prayer and scriptural exposition, too, suggest the central importance of Torah for Israel's self-understanding in the Greco-Roman world.

Jewish self-identity as the people of God, together with its covenantal ties to the Torah, came to focus in three practices that were generally shared across the lines of Jewish diversity. We have already mentioned the first in relationship to Pharisaic behavior — namely, consideration of food laws and table companions. The Book of Daniel, for example, narrates how Daniel was able to maintain Jewish identity while living under alien domination by concentrating on dietary concerns (Daniel 1). In the persecutions related to the reign of Antiochus IV, refusal to eat unclean food symbolized faithfulness to the covenant (e.g., 1 Macc 1:62-63). Diodorus Siculus observed that the Jews in the mid-first century BCE did not fellowship at the table with any other nation. In addition, remaining faithful to their heritage as God's people, the Jews practiced circumcision (Gen 17:9-14) and observed the Sabbath (Exod 20:8-11). These practices were characteristic of Jews across party lines and helped to mark the boundaries separating those who lived by Torah from those who were "without the law" or "outside the law" (*anomos*).

A fourth common element in Second Temple Judaism was the primacy of the temple itself. It is true that the Essenes (at least those at Qumran) withdrew from the temple, but this seems to be because they regarded the priesthood as hopelessly corrupt. Hence, they regarded themselves as the temple of God and looked forward to the rebuilding of the eschatological temple. It is also true that other temples had been constructed by Jewish communities, especially in Egypt, but these seem also to have resulted from criticism of the priesthood in Jerusalem by groups committed to the rival high-priestly dynasty of the Zadokites. Writing in the first century CE, though, Philo could argue that Israel's *one* temple unified Israel under *one* God (*Spec. Leg.* 1.12 §67). In this way, the ideology of the temple served to bind together Jewish monotheism and exclusivity.

2.2.4. The Peasant and Urban Life

A further way of taking account of the people of the world of the NT is to recall the general opposition of urban and rural life. In the Gospels, one thinks immediately, for example, of the presence of the Pharisees in the villages and towns of Galilee. There the Pharisees appear to wield considerable power, an impression that can skew our overall picture of first-century Judaism so that we might wrongly as-