

Unity and Diversity within Late Second Temple Judaism

1. Introduction

Before 70 CE Judaism was largely a Temple-centred religion (importance of the priesthood), but, following the destruction of the Temple, there was an enhanced role for the synagogue and a Torah-centred religion. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai restructured Jewish religious life at Yavneh (= rabbinic Judaism). This was a major turning-point in Judaism.

However, the complex nature of Judaism before 70 CE must also be appreciated. It was a multi-layered religion with a core of beliefs/practices shared by all Jews, although the diversity within late Second Temple Judaism should not be ignored.

2. Main Features of Second Temple Judaism

What were the central features of 'common Judaism' (cf. E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*)?

- **The God of Judaism** Josephus notes that the recognition of the one God is common to all Jews (*Antiquities* 5:112). Cf. the Shema: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deut. 6:4). The Jews were distinctive for their exclusive monotheism.
- **The Covenant** A special covenantal relationship had been established by God with Israel, through Abraham, through acts of deliverance during the Exodus, and through Moses on Mount Sinai.
- **The Importance of the Torah** Obedience to the commandments (ethical and cultic). Israel is defined a 'holy nation' by her response to the terms set forth in the Torah.
- **Temple and Priesthood** The holiness of Jerusalem and its Temple its emphasized (hierarchy of holiness is suggested by its structure; cf. m. Kelim

1:6-9). This emphasis on holiness correlates with considerations of purity and the power of the high priesthood.

- **National Festivals and Fasts** Three annual pilgrim festivals (Tabernacles, Passover and Weeks), as well as other festivals and one major fast (Day of Atonement).
- **Eschatology** Expression of hope for an ideal future to replace the present age or world (eschatology = Greek: *eschatos*).

3. Diversity in Second Temple Judaism

Josephus describes three main groups or philosophies: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes. He also mentions a 'fourth philosophy', as well as the Samaritans, followers of John the Baptist, and the Jesus movement.

3.1 The Pharisees

According to Josephus there were Pharisees during the time of John Hyrcanus (135-105 BCE), and their aim was to apply the law more rigorously to everyday life. 'Pharisee' may derive from the verb 'to separate' (the separated ones, due possibly to issues of purity). They were influential in 'the popular assemblies'; all rites concerning prayers and sacred objects were performed according to their interpretation (*Ant.* 18:15). Josephus states that they possessed three key features:

- a) They followed a tradition of oral law ('the traditions of the fathers'; *Ant* 13:297-298; cf. Gal. 1:14) in addition to the written law (cf. Mark 2:15-17; 7:1-4).
- b) They believed in the resurrection of the dead (cf. *Ant* 18:14).
- c) They believed that human actions result from a combination of fate and free will.

3.2 The Sadducees

Josephus places them in a higher social class: 'first in the places of honour' (*Ant.* 18:17). They were based in Jerusalem and included leading priests and other elite citizens. The term 'Sadducee' is probably derived from Zadok. Josephus attributes three beliefs to them: humans are not compelled by fate but have free will; they

reject oral tradition; the soul does not survive death (cf. Mark 12:18 and Acts 23:8). While the Sadducees were able to persuade the wealthy, the Pharisees had the masses on their side (*Ant.* 18:17).

3.3 The Essenes

The Essenes stressed complete separation from Gentiles. 'Essene' may come from an Aramaic word meaning 'pious ones'; their emphasis on purity led them to separate themselves into their own communities. Josephus speaks of two divisions: celibate men in the wilderness and families in various towns. Their most distinctive feature was their sharing of property and strict Sabbath observance.

Many identify the Essenes with the group whose writings were discovered near the shores of the Dead Sea (DSS) between 1947 and 1956. The Roman geographer Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) states that a community of Essenes lived on the north-western shores of the Dead Sea in his day; some of the scrolls describe the beliefs and practices of a religious group corresponding to what is known about the Essenes from other sources (especially Josephus and Philo). Fragments of about 800 mss were discovered (in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek), dated to the last three centuries BCE and first century CE. The manuscripts appeared to be the library of the community based in Qumran and consist of biblical books, copies of other Jewish writings, and sectarian texts (for example, *The Community Rule*, *The War Scroll*).

According to the scrolls, community members studied the Law and awaited the new age; they regarded themselves as the people of the new covenant (cf. Jer. 31:31-34). They also expected two Messiahs according to some texts (one a priest and the other a king), and in the new age God would build a new Temple. The Romans destroyed the community in 68 CE.

3.4 The Fourth Philosophy

They agreed with the Pharisees, but 'have an unconquerable love of freedom, supposing that God alone is their ruler and master' (*Ant.* 18:23). Many sought to use military force to conquer the Romans and re-establish Jewish independence. Judas the Galilean in 6 CE declared that 'the taxation imposed nothing other than

outright slavery' and 'appealed to the nation to make a bid for independence' (*Ant* 18:4; cf. Acts 5:37). The *sicarii* ('dagger men') assassinated fellow Jews who collaborated with the Romans; some retreated to Masada until 74 CE. Another group known as the Zealots fought against the Romans in Jerusalem, remaining there until the final battle when most of them were killed.

3.5 The Samaritans

There is much debate about the origin of the Samaritans; one tradition claims that they were descendants of Israelites from the northern kingdom of Israel, another holds that they were non-Israelites whom the Assyrians settled in Samaria after they conquered the northern kingdom in 722 BCE. Their form of Judaism was not recognized by the Jewish authorities (cf. John 4:9). Two major differences can be noted. i) their acceptance of only the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (hence their belief in a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15-19) and their denial of resurrection); ii) temple on Mount Gerizim (cf. John 4:20), destroyed in 129 BCE by John Hyrcanus.

3.6 Disciples of John the Baptist

A Jewish preacher called John the Baptist urged people to repent of their sins; his followers were baptized in the Jordan river. Josephus mentions John (*Ant.* 18: 116-119) but does not associate him with Jesus. His movement continued after his death (cf. Mark 2:18; Luke 7:18; John 3:25; 4:1; Acts 19:1-7), with some apparently believing that John was the Messiah (cf. possibly John 1:1-18).

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