

sume that Pharisees were significant power brokers throughout the Jewish world. The Sadducees, on the other hand, appear to work in concert with the leading priests against Jesus from a distance until Jesus reaches the environs of Jerusalem. The antagonism between Jesus and the Pharisees portrayed in the Gospels is thus in large part a result of not only their competing interpretation of Scripture but also the physical location of Jesus' ministry where Pharisees had carved out their primary spheres of influence.

Similarly, one can draw a broad distinction between urban and rural locations with respect to Hellenism. Village life is basically conservative, therefore biased against adopting Greek language and Greek ways. It is interesting, then, that Jesus' ministry — according to the Synoptic Gospels, primarily oriented toward village and peasant life — is never said to have embraced the Hellenistic cities of Tiberias and Sepphoris, in spite of their relative proximity. The city, on the other hand, is often seen as the locus of change, where new ideas could win a hearing and take hold. Worthy of note in this regard is the success of the Pauline mission in urban areas. Also meriting reflection is the process and rapidity with which the Christian message, first planted on rural, Palestinian soil, was transplanted and indeed blossomed in the cities of the larger empire.

2.2.4.1. The Life of the Peasant

Peasant societies typically evidence a general (though not absolute) polarity between the city — locus of power, wealth, and privilege — and the village or countryside. In a negative way, this polarity is implicitly embodied in a statement by Paul, where he records dangers in the city, wilderness, and sea (2 Cor 11:26). Dividing the world of his experience in this way, he leaves no room for interaction with the rural populace, village dwellers; outside the city there is only "wilderness." Paul thus presents himself as a man at home in the city. Peasants had their own biases, of course. Persons who lived outside the village were by definition not only outsiders but enemies. For this reason, urban leaders often dealt with peasants indirectly, through brokers of various kinds. The majority of the population of Palestine lived in villages and small towns, where they worked the land and fostered the central values of loyalty and kinship.

An old proverb portrays peasants as people standing permanently up to their necks in water, so that any disturbance in the water would be sufficient to cause drowning. This is not to say that peasants lived in constant worry or anger about their lot in life, but it is to point out the tenuousness of life at the subsistence level. Each year the harvest must be sufficient to produce enough seed for the following year's planting, for the household to eat and/or trade for other necessities like salt, and for the omnipresent and unrelenting claims of outsiders (like the Jewish temple and the empire). In addition, each household faced certain ceremonial or so-

cial obligations — wedding feasts, for example. Under these circumstances, even the partial failure of a crop might result in a loss of standing in the community, loss of relative independence as a family unit of production, or even loss of life through starvation. The notion of planning, for a peasant, would focus on the relative stability of one year's planting and harvest cycle followed by the next, not on the possibility of events in the more distant future. Against such a background, Jesus' feeding of the thousands, the question of his disciples' behavior in gleaning a field, his seed parables, and the like would have pointed meaning.

2.2.4.2. *Urban Elite and Urban Life*

Hellenistic-Roman cities are virtually absent in the Gospels, whose primary settings include villages and small towns, like Capernaum, which had a population of about 1700-2500. In Galilee, Tiberias and Sepphoris qualify as Hellenistic-Roman cities, and their populations can be estimated at 24,000 each. These urban centers would have stood as centers of consumption, with their needs leading to a form of agricultural industry quite unlike the family farms known to the peasantry. Beyond the industries necessary to provide food for their inhabitants (granaries, mills, olive presses, and the like), these cities spawned other markets as they served as centers of small businesses (e.g., pottery) and interregional commerce. Such cities were self-governing, each with its own council.

The city that looms the largest in the Gospels is, of course, Jerusalem, site of the Jewish Council or Sanhedrin, as well as of the holy temple. This made Jerusalem the center of the world of the Jewish people, its importance rooted in the intertwining of social, economic, political, and religious threads. In fact, geographically Jerusalem had little to commend its importance; it was not strategically located on a river or port, had no natural east-west passage for trade through the mountains, and had little in the way of natural defenses against invasion. Nor was it situated in an agriculturally rich area so that it could be easily supported. Hence, its importance was narrowly focused: within its walls was the abode of God, the sacred temple. The city survived and prospered on the revenues attracted by the temple.

The cities of the empire were normally located strategically on natural roadways and near water sources. They were centers of consumption but also of redistribution, their streets and marketplaces crowded with traders, peddlers, and the hubbub of barter. Under Hellenistic influence, many cities had a main street, with colonnades and a covered walkway, from the city gate to a public square. There one might find large public buildings — temples and the palace of the local leader. This public square or agora served as the marketplace and center of public discourse, whether for business and social intercourse or for formal and informal public meetings. Major cities had their own gymnasia, institutions for the educa-

tion of the children of those elite able to pay the required fees. This provided a chief form of socialization and inculturation in Hellenistic-Roman life. Higher education focused above all on training in rhetoric, the art and techniques of persuasion in public life.

Peasant life might be defined by its relationship to the working of the land. By comparison, the elite, the aristocracy of the city, distanced itself from physical labor. The development of character, of virtue, the exercise of self-sufficiency, and the pursuit of a satisfying life of leisure depended on freedom from manual work. The elite were thus at liberty to engage in civic leadership and public service. Not all wealth was equal, then. Wealth that brought with it high status was "old money" — that is, money tied to the ownership of real capital and gained through inheritance, not through work. Not all city dwellers were of the elite, of course. The agora and small workshops teemed with persons of a variety of professions — leather workers, grocers of various kinds, bakers, and the like. Rather than passing down their wealth from generation to generation, these people trained their children to take on the family business.

In addition to the central role of the family (see below), clubs were prevalent in the Roman cities. These were voluntary associations occasioned by any of a number of needs — religious identity and practices, business or trade, provision for the burial of club members, and so on. Cities, too, were the locus of religion, and various forms of public worship were central to the lives of urbanites. After all, religion was embedded in the political structure of Rome, with leaders often doing double duty as political authorities and priests of the state religion. The rule of the day provided for multiple forms of religious expression, with the state giving sanction to a range of official gods. Among these, the most distinctive would have been the imperial cult itself. Particularly in the East, under Augustus the cult of Rome (*Roma*) was easily transformed into a cult of *Roma* and the emperor, or simply replaced by the cult of the emperor. In this way official religion served to convey official ideology, focusing the loyalty of the provinces on the person of the emperor himself.

2.2.5. Conclusion

As promised, in this section we have been able to paint the picture of the NT world with broad strokes. We have focused thus far on *environmental conditions*, a macro-picture of the general cultural, political, and economic contours of the period. We have seen the degree to which the shape of that world had been determined by the massive, sweeping influence, first of Hellenism in the period following Alexander's conquest and then by the domination of the Roman Empire throughout the Mediterranean basin. As a renewal movement within Judaism,

Christianity took root in the midst of these upheavals, but its shape was also profoundly determined by Jewish commitments that could not simply be swept away by these cultural forces. The possibility of faithfulness to Yahweh and to the law of Moses within the context of these formative historical realities helped to determine the many faces of Judaism in the first century. Consequently, this helped to determine the contours of the Christian movement, which grew out of Second Temple Judaism.

2.3. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Having filled in the mural of the larger social-historical context of the NT period, we are now in a position to adjust our lens somewhat more narrowly. In this section we turn to an examination of important *institutional contexts* — that is, the fundamental patterns of behavior characteristic of the world of the NT, together with the organizations that propagated those patterns. By “institutions” we refer to patterns of expected behavior reinforced by social sanctions as well as to those organizational situations in which those behaviors and the discourse surrounding them found embodiment and propagation.²

In proposing to deal with “institutions,” we should recognize an immediate hurdle. Many people reared in the West are unaccustomed to accounting for the role of institutions in human life and behavior. An almost obligatory antagonism exists between our love affair with individualism and any suitable accounting for the role of institutions in our lives. “We think in the first place that the problem is probably with the individual; if not, then with the organization. This pattern of thinking hides from us the power of institutions and their great possibilities for good and for evil.”³ This pattern of thinking also keeps us from reflecting fully on how God’s intervention in the world might condemn or redeem social behavior patterns and their organizational forms — an issue of great consequence in our understanding of the message of the NT.

A second obstacle is our contemporary tendency to segregate life into discrete categories — the economic from the religious, the religious from the political, etc. Hence, we must remind ourselves that we are concerned with the world of the NT, and not our own. We are concerned with the social construction of the world of that time and place, and not with how we might understand the way the world works. How might Jews or Romans have constructed their understanding of the world in which they lived? Recent work, especially in the sociology of knowl-

2. Cf. Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse*, 5-17; Robert N. Bellah, et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991) 10-11.

3. Bellah, et al., *Good Society*, 11.

edge but also more broadly in cultural anthropology, has underscored the degree to which a people's experience of the world is socially determined, communicated, and conserved. Institutions such as the Roman Empire or the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem are not only built on and belong to that socially constructed understanding of the world, but also actively work to perpetuate that understanding or worldview. Institutions at the center of this "world" come to believe and, indeed, to foster the idea that the way things "are" is the way they are supposed to be, the way they were created to be. God (or the gods) made them this way. Things as they are are divinely legitimated. Political violations are by definition religious, then, just as religious transgressions are political. They upset the moral order, they disturb the proper and regular distribution of power, and they operate according to an alternative and competing understanding of "the world."

What are the fundamental patterns of behavior sanctioned in the world of the NT? What are the organizations that propagate those patterns? An introduction to the issues raised in these questions, with reference to the world of Roman antiquity, will provide a helpful stage for reflecting on how these institutions fare at the hands of the characters and writers of the NT materials.

2.3.1. Power and Sources of Legitimization

In order to illustrate the nexus between the religious and the political, the religious and the economic, the religious and the social, it will be helpful, first, to consider the question of legitimization in the world of the NT. Legitimization is the means by which the possession and exercise of power or the existence of superior status or privilege is justified or sanctioned in a society. It also refers to the boundaries within which power may be appropriately exercised. On what basis are people exercising authority or claiming a position of honor? How does one measure whether particular actions are legitimate? Here we will discuss briefly two examples, both drawn from Judaism and both having significance in the Christian struggle with self-identity *vis-à-vis* Judaism.

2.3.1.1. *The Temple: Holiness and Purity*

Within Judaism, holiness (as an attribute of God) and purity (without which one could not draw close to God) were interrelated and found their special focus in the Jerusalem temple. This symbolism of the temple and its function in society-at-large is formalized in a rabbinic text that describes degrees of holiness as concentric circles around the Holy of Holies: the land of Israel is more holy than other lands, the walled cities of Israel holier still, the city of Jerusalem holier still, the temple mount holier still, the rampart holier still, the Court of Women holier still,