

THE JOY OF SECTS



(99 PIVOTAL YEARS)

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INTRODUCTION

I'm writing this article, not because I'm a historian, or an expert in second temple Judaism (far from it, so please forgive the inevitable historical howlers), but because I think it's really important to grasp something – even just a little, of the context of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, if we are to make any sense of Christianity. This is not a 'quest for the historical Jesus' as such, rather it's part of a broader attempt to understand something of what was going on in what we now think of as Israel/Palestine in the latter years of the second temple. This article starts with a fight, and the defeat of a duplicitous and power-hungry ruler. It finishes 99 years later with another very similar scenario. But it is also about sects, and of the many sects which co-existed at the time of Jesus, only two now can be said to remain: the Nazarenes – the early Jesus movement – morphed until they eventually became what we now call Christians, while as we shall see, the Pharisee sect came to so dominate Judaism, that mainstream contemporary Judaism might be considered to be its present-day face. This article, which also tells a tale of kings and rulers, picks out some of the aspects of the sectarian divides of late second temple Israel, and in so doing, hopefully helps to show something of the world in which the Jesus movement came about.

JERUSALEM: 63 BCE

It was the Sabbath that was the weak point, and the canny Roman general Pompey knew it. Encamped around the temple in Jerusalem, the last 'hold out' against his invading army, he knew that the Jews were effectively hamstrung by their religious practises. If he actually attacked them on the Sabbath, they could fight back from the temple fortifications, and they were well able to do so, they had held out from their fortifications for three months. But now Pompey was ready, all his siege engines had arrived, and if he only used the sabbath to position his battering rams, there was nothing the Jews could do about it. On any normal day the they would have prevented the battering rams from becoming so well positioned, but not on the Sabbath. It was forbidden.

Pompey was a man used to success. He was also a cunning politician, who knew when compromise could win more than pure bloody mindedness. Known as Pompey Magnus – Pompey the great, he had come to Judea on the back of an array of military victories which had taken him all around the ancient world. Commanding troops against the scourge of piracy that had all but blocked up the Mediterranean, he had successfully wiped

out the threat and ceased the troubling practise of pirates kidnapping wealthy Romans for ransom. His campaign in Albania had been similarly successful, and he was ultimately only thwarted by his apparent great fear of snakes, well, everyone's frightened of something.

After turning back from Albania he had ended up, earlier that same year, in Syria where he took control of territory that had previously been under Seleucid rule, before eventually marching on Jerusalem. In Syria Pompey had met with Aristobulus, the younger of the two warring brothers who were both keen to take the throne as king of Judea. This civil war had begun after the death of their father Alexander, the Hasmonean king and High Priest, and the installation of Aristobulus' older brother Hyrcanus II as High Priest in Jerusalem, by his mother Salome, who ruled as monarch. When Aristobulus defeated his brother, capturing Jerusalem in the process, they eventually came to something of an arrangement. Hyrcanus renounced his claim on the throne, and the office of high priest, but kept the pay that the Priestly role should have afforded him.

But Pompey preferred the weaker, more amenable older brother, and when he rolled the juggernaut that was the Roman army in to Judea, he already had plans to depose Aristobulus who had secured the fortress of Alexandrium against the invaders. For all his attempts at defiance, he was no match for the battle-hardened Pompey. He eventually surrendered Alexandrium before returning to Jerusalem, promising to open the gates to the Romans. Whether it was him, or his supporters that were to blame is up for discussion, but somewhere the decision was made that the temple must not be surrendered to the Romans, and so after Pompey had made it all the way in to the city, he eventually found himself laying siege yet again: camped around the temple, being repelled at every turn by the besieged Jews. The path of least resistance, so to speak, became obvious, and it was all going to be down to timing. The Jews were compelled to observe the Sabbath, so this was the perfect opportunity for Pompey's soldiers to prepare their siege engines. They lined up the battering rams ready to attack, and the Jews could do nothing about it. The Sabbath came and went, and the perfectly positioned rams went in to action, crashing through the walls of the temple, the battle was all but over as the legionaries poured through the gaps, surging into the temple courts and slaughtering those who still tried to put up a fight. An ignominious final defeat for Aristobulus' remaining supporters.

Pompey, a veteran of many conflicts knew better than to let his troops run amok in the Temple, while it had certainly been defiled – he himself had entered the holy of holies, it

was not looted or irreparably destroyed. Instead Pompey reinstalled the feeble Hyrcanus as High Priest, partly because of his perceived weakness, but also because he seemed more inclined to support Rome than his more bellicose brother. The Romans then took charge of the country, until a couple of decades or so later, when Julius Caesar (Pompey's former friend turned rival) restored Hyrcanus as an Ethnarch, paving the way for further Jewish client kings to come.

LET'S TALK ABOUT SECTS

In all of the internecine conflict that characterised Judea in the latter part of the second temple period, it was important for whoever was jockeying for position and influence, to win the support of people. You can't have get much done without people, you certainly can't hope to hold out against an imperial army without the support of rather a lot of people: thousands gave their lives to defend the temple against Pompey. As society grew more fractured, groupings began to solidify which represented key views on how Judea and the surrounding countries should be run, by whom, and for what purpose. I describe these groups as 'sects' by which I mean a group with 'distinct religious views', but when we speak of this period in Israel, it is not really possible to cleanly separate religion from politics, Judaism being, primarily, a religion of deeds. So distinct religious views also means distinct political views, and that means individual sects were political entities as well as religious ones.

Of the sects which were to be found in the area at this time, the best known are surely the Pharisees, often presented as the principal targets for the ire of Jesus as he carried out his ministry, and now sometimes used as a shorthand for someone prone to legalism. Pharisees aren't presented as all bad in the Bible though, Paul in his pre-Christian persona of 'Saul' was a devout Pharisee (an 'over-zealous' one), and so were some New Testament 'goodies' such as Nicodemus and Gamaliel. There were thousands of them, they were the most populous of the major sects of the time, and that may be because unlike the Sadducees they weren't just of a particular lineage. Pharisees were intellectuals, or learned at least. So while many certainly did come from the upper echelons of society, not all did. Learning was more important than social class. It was this devotion to study, and particularly study of the Torah, which most characterised the sect, and it was that which carried them on beyond the destruction of the temple too, for the Pharisees would eventually go on to form the basis of the kind of Judaism which emerged after the eventual destruction of the second temple in 70

CE, as such, their legacy continues today. Jesus and John's critique of the Pharisees though, was that they represented an already corrupted version of Judaism, that they had moved away from the origins of the religion as something that represented a radical, neighbour-loving, enemy loving, movement. So when a Pharisee lawyer asked Jesus about the law, ending in the supposed trick question, 'but who is my neighbour?' Jesus demonstrated that the holier than thou legalism of the Priest and the scribe were foul in comparison with the love shown by the despised 'mud-blood' Samaritan who demonstrated genuine compassion, rather than a legalistic determination to remain 'pure' by avoiding contact with a potentially dead body.

The most influential historian of the period, Josephus, is also thought to have been a Pharisee, and it is he who helps us get a view of what the differences were between the Pharisees and their 'competitors' of the time. Comparing the four 'philosophic sects' of the time he wrote this about the Pharisees:

"They live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the contract of reason: and what that prescribes to them as good for them they do...And when they determine that all things are done by fate, they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit: since their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a temperament; whereby what he wills is done; but so that the will of man can act virtuously or viciously. They also believe that souls have an immortal vigour in them: and that under the earth there will be rewards, or punishments; according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life..." (Josephus, Antiquities)

One of the key differences then was the way in which they understood human agency: while their Sadducee counterparts believed that humans had free will, the Pharisees believed that this was true but tempered by the fact that God had foreknowledge of what choices they would make. It becomes a reasonably complex philosophical argument, but if it is true that God has such foreknowledge, then the extent to which free will is genuine is enormously questionable. Another doctrinal area where Pharisees were philosophically distinct was in their approach to life after death, something which would come to impact ordinary people's view of both Jesus and John. But it was their social teaching which perhaps more than anything else set them apart from their rivals. Similarly to the followers of John the Baptist, and the Jesus movement, they saw themselves as the heirs to the school of Moses, and their way of demonstrating this was to seek to encourage great personal purity

and holy living in day-to-day life, and it was here that they were set apart from the Sadducees, their principal rivals.

The influence of the Sadducees was much more short-lived than that of their opposite numbers. That's because the Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, were deeply, inextricably, tied to the temple. The Hasmonean high priests, such as Hyrcanus, were Sadducees, and for the sect the temple was particularly vital to what it meant to be Jewish. So when the Romans finally destroyed it in 70 CE, it effectively spelled the end of the Sadducees. Unlike the Pharisees, for whom the Mosaic laws were the most important thing, the Sadducees were deeply invested in the temple itself. They represented the conservative elite of Israel, styling themselves in the line of Zadok, the first High Priest of Solomon's temple, and emphasising their upper-class heritage. The Pharisees on the other hand were, if not more democratic, at least more meritocratic, even though they too largely represented a Priestly class. There were the other differences too, as Josephus notes: "The doctrine of the Sadducees is this; that souls die with the bodies." The belief in the mortality of the human, and the rejection of 'life after death' were just two of their notable characteristics – they were also staunch supporters of the patriarchal system of descent: they were traditionalists and conservatives of the highest order, and their principal social concern was safeguarding the establishment.

There is some suggestion that third best known sect, the Essenes may have been an offshoot of the Sadducees, if that is so, they managed to shoot off very effectively. Whereas the Sadducees were the establishment, the Essenes lived communally, refusing to marry or keep servants, and sharing all they had. Josephus says this:

"[They] will not suffer any thing to hinder them from having all things in common: so that a rich man enjoys no more of his own wealth, than he who hath nothing at all. There are about four thousand men that live in this way: and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants: as thinking the latter tempts men to be unjust; and the former gives the handle to [domestic] quarrels." (Ibid)

In truth, little is certain about them now, but they do seem to have had communities around Judea. Of their guiding philosophy Josephus adds:

“The doctrine of the [Essenes] is this; that all things are best ascribed to God. They teach the immortality of souls: and esteem that the rewards of righteousness are to be earnestly striven for.” (Ibid)

There have been attempts to claim that John the Baptist was an Essene, something I mentioned in my 2010 book ‘Totally Devoted’. I no longer think, as I did ten years ago, that this was the case, however. The Essenes wore white garments, while John wore camel hair garments; They lived in communities while there is no suggestion John did; A key link, I used to think, is the desert, for the Essenes or at least a subset of them had a desert base at Qumran where they studied and wrote, meanwhile John emerged from the desert at the start of his ministry. On reflection however, the language of the desert is too richly symbolic to be limited to a connection with one sect; The Essenes voluntary poverty is another similarly tenuous link, for John came from the desert wearing rough clothes and eating locusts and honey, and preaching an austere way of life. But in fact his eye catching eating habits would have fitted in to standard Jewish dietary laws concerning purity, and his preaching is reflective of his commitment to a return to the spirit of the Mosaic laws. Other similarities aren’t necessarily limited to the Essenes, his apocalyptic view of the world, and his central ritual of baptism were aspects which he shared with others too. His neighbour loving ideology was a direct reference back to the early Hebrew religio-political ideology. We will return to John shortly, after we first briefly consider the fourth main sect of the time, the Zealots.

“But of the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy, Judas the Galilean was the author. These men agree in all other things with the [Pharisaic] notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty; and say that God is to be their only ruler and lord. They also do not value dying any kinds of death; nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends: nor can any such fear make them call any man lord.” (Ibid)

Zealotry arose after the Romans sought to impose taxes on the Judeans, so they weren’t yet around when Pompey Magnus came a-knocking on the temple door. But the seeds were all there, although they wouldn’t grow to full height until the first Roman war which began in 66 CE and resulted in the destruction of the temple. Among Jesus’ named disciples was someone called ‘Simon the Zealot’ which is a reasonably clear indication that many who did object to Roman rule and taxation did self-describe as Zealots some years before the war, most importantly it demonstrates that this was a live undercurrent in the

complex social and political milieu of Israel in the first century of the common era. Another possible candidate for having been a Zealot is Judas Iscariot, whose name may mean that he was a Sicarii, a dagger man, a member of the most violent Zealot faction. This is disputed however. There have also been attempts to conceive of Jesus himself as a Zealot, and it certainly seems clear to me at least that Jesus preached a gospel of resistance to empire, but to consider him a Zealot is, I think, to go too far. Jesus' way was too rooted in non-violence and enemy love to be characterised as Zealotry.

There were many leaders who arose in Roman occupied Israel in this time period, Theudas who began his uprising in Judea, and Simon of Perea who was a former slave of Herod the great are perhaps the among best known besides Jesus and John. It's useful to understand that when John and Jesus began drawing people to them, this wasn't entirely unusual or unknown. There were various would-be Messiahs and prophets around, who had their own particular axes to grind. With each of these, a small sect, or perhaps more accurately a cult was formed, but none of them lasted very long. One of the particularly peculiar characteristics of the Jesus sect, was the way it continued, even after the execution of its founder.

MACHAERUS: APPROX. 32 CE

In the palace quarters of his hill top frontier fortress, looking over the dead sea on one side, and in to Arabia on the other, Herod Antipas called for more wine, and spared no thought for his prisoner. The rabble-rousing preacher John, known as the Baptist, had been seized by Antipas' troops a little further north about two years earlier, and had been imprisoned in the citadel ever since. Machaerus, which means something to do with 'sword', would have served as an important buffer fort, preventing invaders from the East from getting a free ride through to Jerusalem. Completed by Herod the Great some sixty years previously, on the foundations of a previous fortress, it was passed to Herod Antipas upon his father's death. Antipas was one of Herod the great's three children by his fourth wife, Malthace, a Samaritan. And now it was Antipas' birthday, and he was planning to have fun: He had been promised a special dance.

Contrary to the way in which he is often referred to, Herod Antipas was not a king. Rather he was a 'Tetrarch', given rule over Galilee and Perea, the areas north and east of Judea and Samaria, by Caesar Augustus. It was during one of his periodic trips to Rome,

where he stayed with his half-brother, that he made the decision that would prove immensely costly to him. It was on that trip that Herodias, who was both his niece, and the wife of that same half-brother, caught his eye. Antipas was already married, a strategic alliance with the Nabatean monarchy through Phasaelis, the daughter of King Aretas, but the forbidden Herodias was just too tempting, so he arranged to divorce Phasaelis, and marry Herodias instead. This behaviour was deeply scandalous, and caused outrage among many, in particular drawing the ire and condemnation of John, already a popular and charismatic preacher who was attracting large numbers of new followers via his river baptisms. Although he objected to the criticism, Antipas nevertheless seemed to respect, or at least have something of a superstitious soft spot for the Baptist who he recognised as a holy man, keeping him alive for something like two years of captivity. As well as knowing him to be a good man of course, he also preferred not to incite John's followers to riot, after all, it's important to keep the people on side.

From his jail cell in Antipas' citadel John heard news of the growing following that Jesus of Nazareth was attracting. John knew Jesus of old, they were in fact cousins, and at one point Jesus had even come to John for baptism, being immersed in the waters of the Jordan as a powerful symbol of ritual purification, setting him apart from those Jews who still kow-towed to the empire. The gospel accounts of the event include some crucial symbolism, the dove for instance which is the polar opposite to the Roman eagle. John was a Priest by descent, but not an ordinary one: accounts of his life include a key sign that he was an important person – a miracle birth. Very much a 'pay attention' signifier. Rather than linking John to the Essenes, it may be truer to say that he had much in common with the Pharisees. For all his criticism of them, he could be said to represent, in a way, a kind of reforming voice within that school of thought. Where he, like Jesus, differed from them, was in his back to basics approach. He wasn't in it for himself, his was the old love your neighbour ideology, hence the prophetic tone that he struck. The Pharisee type theology though, combined with the reforming preaching, may be why some of his followers, who had taken on board ideas about the immortality of the soul, felt that John may in fact be the prophet Elijah re-incarnated. (Elijah, according to legend had not died, but been 'transported' in to the heavens). To many at the time, Jesus and John, despite the differences in their rhetoric, were evidently quite hard to tell apart. Even Antipas, after John's death, found reports of Jesus' preaching alarming – was this, in fact, the Baptist come back to life

again? (Jesus for his part referred to the widely loathed Antipas as ‘that fox’). The call of John to the Jewish populous had been to ‘assemble’ – to come together. He brought people together for a common purpose: the formation of a new sect based on his back to basics Judaism. John’s baptism was effectively an initiation rite for the sect, a transformation of a person from ordinary Jew to member of a select group, the creation if you like, of the first Baptists.

But back to the palace, where for his birthday, Antipas was ready to celebrate with a massive banquet, and that special dance. It was performed by Salome, Herodias’ daughter by her previous marriage, and it seems to have left little to Antipas’ wine addled imagination. It gave him such a thrill that he promised her any reward she would like ‘up to half my kingdom’ – by which he meant to offer her a substantial financial gift. But Salome, after conferring with her mother who hated the imprisoned Baptist, asked for something more exotic: the head of John the Baptist. Grieved though he was, Herod dared not renege on his offer, and sent a soldier to retrieve the gift. John was summarily executed.

This calamitous decision, in a lifetime of poor choices, left Herod becoming increasingly paranoid, and ultimately this paranoia was for good reason. In 36 CE, 99 years after the Romans tore through the temple courts, Antipas too would come under attack, this time by Aretas IV, the slighted Nabatean king, father of Antipas’ first wife. The Nabatean army was bolstered by supporters of one of Herod’s half-brothers, his own duplicity had come back to haunt him twice over. Desperate, he called upon the Romans for help, but it was not to be, as yet again Antipas paid the price for his previous misdeeds. Although legions were dispatched, their commander had also previously been slighted by Antipas, and so he dragged his heels, marching his troops the long way round, until the soldiers were eventually recalled before ever reaching Antipas. The victory fell to the Nabateans: a result interpreted by many Jews as judgement for his wicked treatment of the Baptist. Antipas lived three more years, banished with Herodias to Gaul, where he could dwell on his mistakes until the end.

ENDNOTE

After his death, many of John the Baptist’s followers went on to join the Jesus sect, although by no means all. John himself had never become a disciple of Jesus, sending a message from captivity that betrayed his doubts about his cousin: ‘are you the one who was to come? Or are we to look for someone else?’ John and Jesus were certainly of the same

kind of school, but there were differences. Ultimately however, while the Jesus movement, known then as the Nazarenes, or 'The Way' would become the early church and would survive to be one of the great world religions, John's remaining followers died out or merged back in to mainstream Judaism. After John's death, Jesus and his disciples continued with the Baptism ministry, becoming even more successful than the Baptist himself. When the Pharisees got wind of Jesus's disciples baptising 'more people than John', Jesus set off for Galilee again, but rather than take the long way around and avoid the impure Samaritans, he took the route through Samaria. It was on this journey that he encountered a Samaritan woman at a well, and asked her for a drink, not something a Jewish man could do. This was a clear signal that he was returning to the old ways of being a Hebrew, welcoming all those who would 'cross over the water': the outcasts, the people from the other side of the tracks, the outsiders. Jesus welcomed all outsiders, even those on the inside.

Works Cited

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IMAGE

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