



Intro to the New Testament:

New Testament Background

Session One, Part Three

Political and Social Background of Palestinian Judaism

- All authors of the 27 NT books were Jews (except, maybe, Luke)
- So, to understand NT we must know something of Palestinian Judaism during Christian century
- The political and social background is as important to understand as the cultural and religious settings

Political History of Palestine:

Alexander the Great to the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD

- The Seleucids believed themselves champions of Greek culture (Hellenism) and encouraged the adoption of Greek language and customs
- This group was called the Hasideans (the Pious) who resisted hellenism and considered those who abandoned the traditions as traitors to the time-honoured ways of their ancestors
- Observance of the sabbath, circumcision, and possession of Hebrew Scriptures became crimes punishable by death

Political History of Palestine:

Maccabean Revolt

- For several months the Hasideans suffered without retaliating, even allowing themselves to be slaughtered by the Syrians rather than break the sabbath by defending themselves
 - This led to a revolt led by an elderly priest, Mattathias, and his five sons resulted in the death of the king's commissioners and his guards
 - The Hasideans now had what they desired but Judas Maccabeus and his family seemed dissatisfied and undertook a career of conquest seeking the complete independence of the Jewish people
 - In 63 BC Rome under the leadership of Pompey took possession of Jerusalem.
- 04 The Jewish kingship was abolished and Judea was subjected to Rome

Political History of Palestine:

Roman Period and Herodian Dynasty

- Rome appointed Herod king in 40 BC but it took Herod 3 years to subjugate Judea and be recognized as king after his capture of Jerusalem in 37 BC
- Most of Jesus's life was spent within the area ruled by Herod Antipas which is why he figures prominently in the Gospels
- 2 years later Claudius added Judea and Samaria to Agrippa's dominions making Agrippa's dominions equal to those of his grandfather Herod the Great all of Palestine
- The book of Acts records Agrippa I persecuting the early church, killing James brother of John and arresting Peter (Acts 12:1–3)

Herod the Great

Matthew 2

Cleopatra
(of Jerusalem)

Philip (Ruler)
Luke 3

Mariamne
John Hyrcanus'
Granddaughter

Aristobulus

Herod Agrippa I (Ruler)
Acts 12

Herod Agrippa II (Ruler)
Acts 25

Herodias
Matthew 14

Bernice
Acts 25:13, 26–30

Drusilla
Acts 24:24

Mariamne
Daughter of Simon,
High Priest

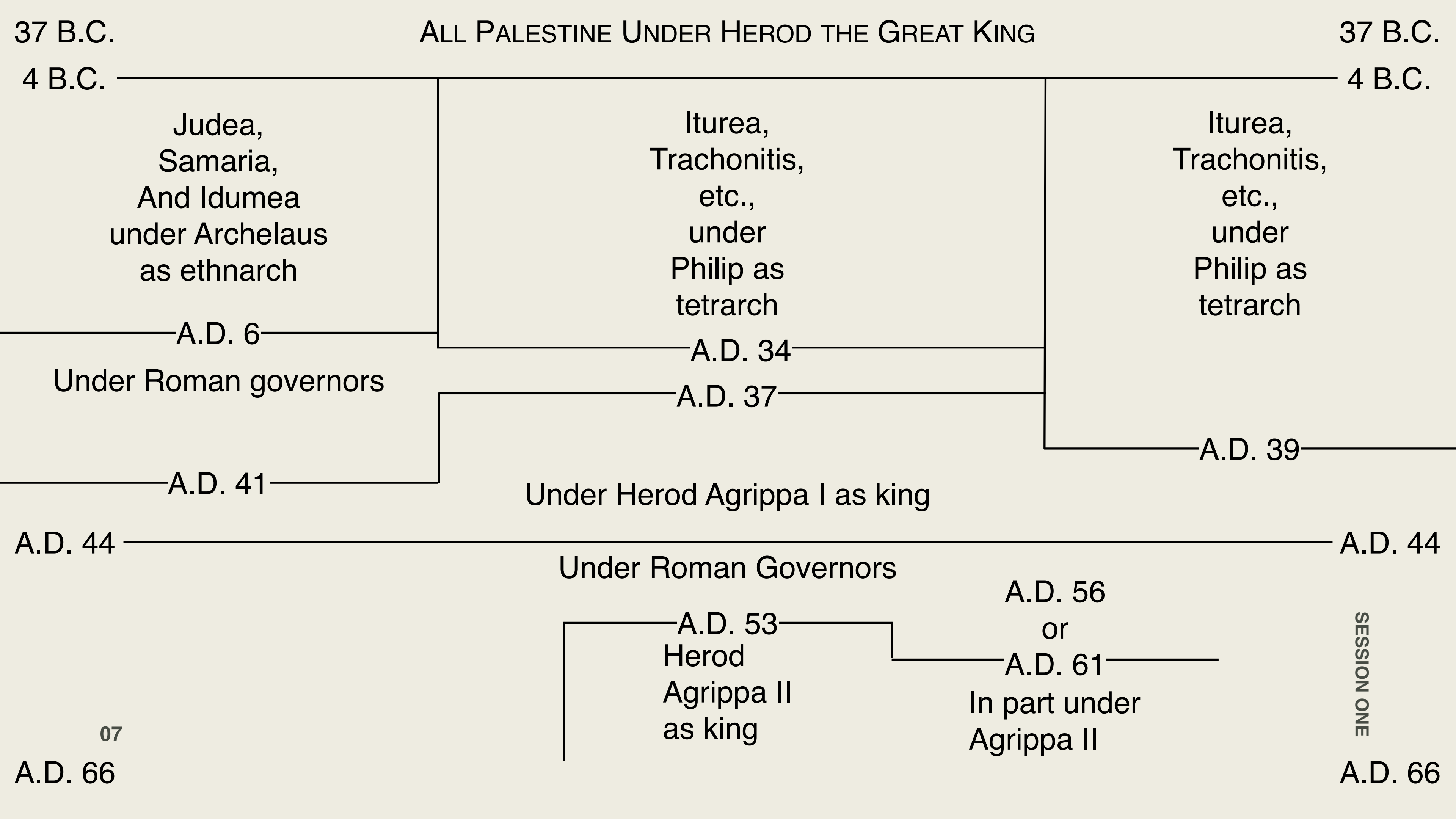
Philip
Matthew 14

Herod Antipas (Ruler)
Luke 3 etc.

Salome
Matthew 14

Malthace
(The Samaritan)

Archelaus (Ruler)
Matthew 2:22



Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judaism

Survey of Intertestamental Jewish Literature

- Time between OT and NT the Jews continued to write religious literature; much of these on a lower level than OT and not regarded by Palestinian Jews as possessing the same authority but they were widely read and exerted a lasting influence on religious life and thought
- These books were called apocryphal, meaning hidden and fall into several literary categories: a) historical (e.g. 1 & 2 Maccabees), b) legendary or novelistic (e.g. Tobit, Judith, Susana, Bel and the Dragon), c) didactic or wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus), and d) apocalyptic (2 Esdras, Enoch)

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judaism

Sects, Parties, and Classes in Palestinian Judaism

- Approximate population of Palestine in 1st century of Christian Era was half a million to 2 million; approximately 500–600k were Jews, the majority lived in Judea, in southern part of Palestine
- Jerusalem was the capital and had a Jewish population variously estimated between 25–95k
- Flavius Josephus (37–100 AD) tells us there were 3 main religious sects in Palestine: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judaism

Sects, Parties, and Classes in Palestinian Judaism

Pharisees	Sadducees
Foreordination consistent with free will	Denied history was controlled divinely, rather freedom to direct life and history
Immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body; individuals would be rewarded or punished in future life according to how they lived	Derided these beliefs
Highly developed view of angels and demons	Rejected doctrine of two kingdoms with hierarchies of good and evil spirits (cf Acts 23:8)
Highest authority Hebrew Scriptures and oral tradition of pronouncements by Jewish teachers throughout the generations	Only Scripture, rejecting beliefs and practices not taught in OT

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judaism

Pharisees

- During the time of Herod the Great the number of adult male Jews who belonged to Pharisees was slightly more than 6,000; most would live near Jerusalem
- We do not have records of the origins of the Pharisees but it is commonly surmised that they were the successors of the Hasideans (the Pious)
- Again, this group arose prior to the Maccabeans in response to the hellenizing process of the Seleucid rulers
- Arguably the name Pharisee is interpreted the separated ones
- From Josephus: *“The Pharisees are a group of Jews who have the reputation of excelling the rest of their nation in the observance of religion, and as exact exponents of the laws”* (Jewish War, I.v.2).

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judiasm

Sadducees

- Name likely comes from name Zadok which written in Greek is Saddouk; it is customary to trace Sadducees back to high priest Zadok who officiated David's reign (1 Chron. 16:39, 24:3, 31)
- In Jesus's day they were a small group but had large influence in religion and politics
- Josephus tells us they were educated men with mostly prominent positions
- Based on their rejection of the interpreted and expanded Mosaic Law they were theologically conservative, but politically liberal

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judaism

Essenes

- Not mentioned in the NT, but Philo, Josephus, and Pliny report they numbered about 4,000 and devoted themselves to a simple and abstemious life; The stricter refrained from marriage
- The main religious exercises were ritual washings and baptisms, standard periods of prayer beginning at sunrise, continuous reading and study of Hebrew Scriptures
- Mid-20th century ruins of a monastic-like community near Qumran were found with many manuscripts now called the Dead Sea scrolls

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judiasm

Herodians

- Neither a religious sect or a political party; rather, an attitude and outlook referring to Jews of influence and standing who supported the Herodian rule and by extension the Romans—definitely a minority in Palestine
- In the Gospels they are mentioned as enemies of Jesus, combining with the Pharisees to oppose Jesus

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judiasm

Zealots

- Josephus calls them the “fourth philosophy” among the Jews; they may have been founded by Judas the Galilean who stirred up rebellion against Rome in AD 6 (Acts 5:37)
- They opposed tribute by Israel to pagan emperors on the grounds that it was treason against God who was Israel’s true king
- Religiously they agreed with the Pharisees and in spirit they revived the zeal shown by Mattathias and sons during the Maccabean uprising

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judaism

Sects, Parties, and Classes in Palestinian Judaism

	Extremists	Moderates
In religion:	Pharisees	Sadducees
In politics:	Zealots	Herodians

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judiasm

Common People

- More than 90% of Palestinian Jews were unaffiliated with any sect or group; they were known as people of the land ('am ha-arets)
- In OT this term meant common people vs. rulers and aristocracy but after return from exile the phrase was sharpened to designate those Palestinians whose Judaism was mixed or suspect and with whom scrupulous Jews couldn't marry (Ezra 9:1–2; Neh. 10:30–31)
- In NT times came to mean those who through ignorance or indifference failed to observe the Mosaic Law and all its ramifications

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judiasm

Scribes and Rabbis

They concerned themselves with:

- More careful theoretical development of the Law itself (make 613 commandments explicit and particular; i.e. what constituted work on the sabbath?)
- Teaching of the Law to their pupils (every Israelite, or as many as possible should have professional acquaintance with the Law)
- Practical administration of the Law in pronouncing legal decisions (issuing authoritative judgments concerning cases brought to them, i.e. binding or loosing

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judaism

Temple and It's Rituals

- Temple in Jerusalem was focal point of Jewish worship of God
- Built by Solomon 1,000 years before Christian Era (1 Kings 6:1)
- Destroyed in 586 BC when Jews deported to Babylon
- After return from exile it was rebuilt in 515 BC
- Rebuilt on a grander scale by king Herod
- The temple complex stood within an area of approximately 26 acres called the court of the Gentiles and was open to Jews and Gentiles

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judiasm

Synagogue and It's Rituals

- Likely devout Jews far from their homeland needed places where they could meet for prayer especially on the sabbath; it would be natural for them to meet at the dwelling of a prophet for religious instruction (Ezek. 14:1; 20:1)
- Typical order of worship in NT times:
 - Invitation to prayer
 - The prayers (the lifting up of hands)
 - The liturgy and reading of the lesson from Mosaic Law and then a lesson from the Prophets and when available a exposition of the Scriptures by a competent person
 - Closed by Priest pronouncing priestly (Aaronic) benediction from Numbers 6:24–26 or prayer by layman if no priest

Cultural and Religious Background of Palestinian Judaism

Philosophical and Religious Background of Greco-Roman Paganism

- a. Platonism
- b. Epicureanism
- c. Stoicism
- d. Cynics
- e. Others

Mystery Religions in Greco-Roman World

Eleusinian Cult, Mithraic Cult, Isiac Cult, Dionysiac Cult, Cybele Cult