

The Life and Teachings Of Jesus

Part II: Religious Groups During His Time

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When Jesus of Nazareth walked the face of this earth almost 2,000 years ago, His was not a lone existence. He interacted with thousands of different people during His 33 years as a mortal man. If we are to understand the message of Jesus Christ, the words that He spoke, and the actions He performed, it would be helpful for us to understand the social environment in which He lived.

It would be most helpful if we possessed at least a minimal knowledge of the groups with which He interacted. Jesus came into contact with a number of groups: Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Priests, Essenes, and Samaritans. Of these, the Pharisees and the Samaritans are the most important in our study of the life and teachings of Jesus. They had the greatest impact on His message.

Who Were the Samaritans?

The use of the term Samaritan in our society today can be somewhat misleading. When one says Samaritan, we automatically think of a good person. The mere mention of the word reminds us of Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. The term Samaritan has evolved to the point where we do not need the word "good" in front of it to imply unselfishness and righteousness. Samaritan in our society has a positive connotation.

But in Jesus' day the term Samaritan had the complete OPPOSITE meaning! Why? Our answer begins at the death of King Solomon. After he died, the nation of Israel divided into two nations--Israel to the north and Judah to the south.

When reading Bible prophecies mentioning Israel, Jacob, or Samaria, we are almost always looking at the northern kingdom. Bible prophecies about Judah refer to the people of the southern kingdom. History and the Bible tell us that the Assyrians forced the northern nation into captivity around 721 B.C. The southern nation was taken captive by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Around 520 B.C., remnants of the southern kingdom of Judah were allowed to return to Jerusalem and build a temple. But those taken into captivity from the north were never

allowed to return to the area of Samaria. These captives continued their movement away from Palestine into Western Europe. History calls them the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

Then who were the inhabitants of Samaria during the time of Christ?

When the Assyrians took the northern tribes into captivity, they did not take them all. Naturally, a small group was able to hide and to remain after the conquerors left. This tiny group of Israelites intermarried with a much larger group of Gentile colonists which were sent to repopulate the area. The two groups intermingled to the point that the citizens of Samaria basically became a Gentile race.

Let's see what the Bible tells us about this people.

We learn from II Kings 17:24 that the king of Assyria brought Gentiles to inhabit the land which once belonged to the northern tribes of Israel.

"And so it was at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they feared not the Lord: therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which slew some of them.

"Wherefore they spake to the king of Assyria, saying, The nations which thou hast removed, and placed in the cities of Samaria, know not the manner of the God of the land: therefore he hath sent lions among them, and, behold, they slay them, because they know not the manner of the God of the land" (verses 26 and 27).

The king of Assyria then sent Israelite priests to teach these new people about the God of the Old Testament. But did the people accept all the teachings of the Old Testament?

"So they feared the Lord, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them priests of the high places, which sacrificed for them in the houses of the high places.

"They feared the Lord, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence" (verses 32 and 33).

What we now see dwelling in Samaria is not only racially speaking a Gentile people, but religiously speaking, a nation of pagans.

When Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem from Babylon with a group of Jews to rebuild the Temple, there was a new emphasis on religious purity in Judah. For religious reasons, the Jews put away their foreign wives. And they would have little to do with their pagan neighbors in Samaria. When the Samaritans offered to help build the temple, Ezra and Nehemiah turned them down. This rejection increased already-simmering hostilities between the two groups.

By the time of Christ, the Jews had developed a racial as well as religious hatred for the Samaritans. The Jews said to them, "You claim to worship the great Yahweh, but you also bow before idols. You claim to be descended from Abraham, but you are more Gentile than Hebrew. The only reason you even bother to observe some of our religious beliefs is because your fathers were being killed by lions. And if lions are your motivation for conversion, then we will call you lion converts."

This lion-convert label was quite an insult. It was as derogatory as the lowest racial slur you could dredge up today. Thus, in Jesus' society the term Samaritan had a completely different meaning than the one we have for it today.

The Pharisees

Now let's briefly leave the Samaritans and look at the influential religious group known as the Pharisees. Anyone who studies the Gospels should be aware of the antipathy

that Christ had for the teachings and actions of the Pharisees. He was continually butting heads with them--calling them hypocrites and sons of vipers. Calling a man a son of a viper during those days was analogous to calling someone a son of a female dog today. It was a rather harsh term and Jesus did not use it lightly.

The Pharisees were a minority party during Christ's time. Josephus says there were only about 6,000 of them in that century. But they wielded enormous religious power.

Now let's interject a very important distinction about the legalism of the Pharisees, because many churches do not understand this point.

When we talk about the Law in a religious sense, we are speaking of the Ten Commandments or the Decalogue. Or we may be referring to the first five books of the Bible. These books are also known by the Hebrew term TORAH or the Greek term PENTATEUCH. Or we mean Old Testament revelation in general.

A crucial area in understanding the teachings of the Pharisees is that the Torah is not the same as the Talmud. They are NOT synonymous! Always keep this distinction in mind because there are those who would have us believe they are one and the same. They are not.

At this point, perhaps you are asking, "What is the Talmud?" The Talmud is a collection of Jewish rabbinical writings dating from 200 A.D. to 500 A.D. The Talmud is not inspired Scripture--the Torah is. The Talmud was NOT written by God's prophets--the Torah was. The Talmud is NOT binding on any Christian today or ever--the Torah is. The Talmud attempts to interpret and apply the divine law found in the Torah to everyday situations. **The Talmud unnecessarily adds to God's Word.**

The Talmud did not exist at the time of Christ, but the mentality that created it did. Many of the interpretations which were later written in the Talmud were the half-baked ideas and accepted practices of the Pharisees during the time of Christ. In New Testament Scripture these ideas and practices are called "the traditions of the elders." These traditions were wrongly given the same authority as the Torah--God's inspired Word.

For example, the Pharisees during the time of Christ believed that the Law was like a fence which protected a beautiful garden--a garden which must not be trampled. And they were right that God's Law is not to be trampled on. But they felt that they needed to build a second fence around the first fence. It was a larger fence, covering much more ground. It was a higher fence, and it was much more restrictive.

In their efforts to please God, they added unneeded and even ridiculous restrictions to what God instructs us in the Old Testament. They felt that the Torah was not specific enough. They wanted to add to God's Word so that God's Laws could be strictly and properly observed. The result of their teachings was a difficult and unnecessary system of do's and don'ts.

These restrictions created severe racial problems for the Jews in their dealings with other peoples. Granted, the Old Testament gave some rules on interaction with Gentiles. But the Pharisees were not satisfied with those general guidelines. Naturally, they had to do God one better and came up with elaborate regulations for dealing with Gentiles. The Pharisees developed such bigoted rules that the end result was a degree of racism outdoing even that of some of America's worst segregationists!

You don't believe it? Let's look at some specifics.

In Alfred Edersheim's book, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, it is pointed out that "...contact with heathenism and all aid to its rites should have been forbidden...But Pharisaism went a great deal further than this. Three days before a heathen

festival, all transactions with Gentiles were forbidden so as not to afford them neither direct nor indirect help towards their rites."

What would this mean today? Suppose, for example, you had to operate under these conditions. Suppose you owned a small grocery store which was frequented by immigrants from a third-world country--immigrants who had pagan practices. Perhaps your immigrant neighbors were going to observe a pagan holiday on February 15. You would have to close your store on February 12, 13, 14 to ensure that you sold them nothing which would help them in their holiday.

According to Edersheim, you could not enter a Gentile's shop if it was festively decorated. A Jewess was not allowed to help a heathen woman who was about to give birth. Apparently, if you were the only person near a Gentile woman who was about to deliver a child, you could not assist her even if you were an experienced midwife.

"Milk drawn from a cow by heathen hands...might indeed be sold to strangers, but [it could not be] used by Israelites."

"If a heathen were invited to a Jewish house, he I should not be left alone in the room, else every article of food or drink on the table was henceforth to be regarded as unclean."

"If cooking utensils were bought of them, they had to be purified by fire or by water; knives to be ground anew, spits to be made red-hot before use, etc, etc."

If a group of Jews was about to have a banquet for a wedding or a high day, you could ruin the occasion very easily. Just have a Gentile come in and place his hand on the table where the food was laid out. He need not actually touch the food or the eating utensils, just a corner of the table and the party would be over. No devout Jew would eat a morsel of food from that table.

Were these Pharisees more racist than the notorious segregationists of the American south? Yes. Many times more so.

This overly-righteous mentality was carried on in every aspect of life.

The Sabbath in particular had a maze of rules and regulations because the Jews believed that, if everyone in Jerusalem kept the Sabbath perfectly for just one 24 hour period, the Messiah would come.

In Abraham Cohen's book entitled, *Everyman's Talmud*, we find that on the Sabbath the Jew is prohibited from such tasks as selecting, grinding, sifting, baking, bleaching, carding, warping, weaving two threads, separating two threads, knotting, unknotting, sewing two stitches, tearing for the purpose of sewing two stitches, writing two letters of the alphabet, erasing for the purpose of writing two letters, kindling a fire, extinguishing a fire, and transferring an object from one domain to another.

Is it any wonder that Christ condemned the Pharisees for binding heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and laying them on men's shoulders?

The Good Samaritan

We briefly discussed Luke 10 earlier. In verse 29 we read that Christ has just been asked the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Nearly everyone today who reads this parable says, "The message is that we must help ALL those in need." This view is correct.

But when you understand the racial animosity some Jews had toward the Samaritans at that time, this Scripture takes on a whole new meaning! Christ was showing the

Samaritan-hating Jewish leaders that, just because they had the blood of Abraham in their veins, they were no better than these pagans living north of them. Christ was teaching the Jews that, even though a person is a Gentile, he can still be pleasing in the sight of God.

Christ was also giving the Jews a warning that His Kingdom was not exclusively reserved for them. It was going to be open to **all** peoples of the earth, no matter what their race. Edersheim notes that "the most unexpected and unprepared-for revelation, from the Jewish point of view, was that of the breaking down of the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile." It took a long time for the apostles to learn this lesson. Peter had to be openly rebuked by Paul for his exercise in racism.

Ironically, Peter's vision was key to this new understanding. Contrary to what some would have you believe, this vision had absolutely nothing to do with making snakes and skunks and roaches edible for human consumption. Let's allow the Bible to interpret the Bible. Let's read Peter's own words about the meaning of this vision.

"And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

Notice that he used the word "unlawful." Unlawful to keep company with a Gentile? What Law? Whose law? Not God's Law. Not the Ten Commandments. Not the Torah. Not the Old Testament.

The Old Testament allowed interaction with Geniles. The Old Testament allowed Gentiles to become Israelites through conversion. Then what law is Peter talking about? It is the law of the Pharisees--**the traditions of the elders** which were later included in the Talmud. This is the law that Jesus taught against. It was not God who forbade the Jews to keep company with the Gentiles, but self-righteous leaders whose hatred was not of God.

In Peter's words, "But God hath shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean." God made it crystal clear to hard-headed Peter that salvation was for all men--even those disgusting "lion convert" Gentiles inhabiting the land of Samaria.

As pointed out earlier, if we can better understand the environment in which Jesus lived, we can better comprehend the Savior Himself. Jesus came with a unique message--one that cut across all racial lines. It's time for the world to take Jesus' message seriously.

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