

# The New Testament Environment and the New Testament Canon

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Reading the New Testament today is risky business. Unless you have some understanding of the background as well as the environment that it was written in you can be misled and misinformed. In the Acts of the Apostles, Philip is commanded by an angel of the Lord to approach an Ethiopian who was reading the Old Testament prophet Isaiah and to ask him "do you understand what you are reading". To this question the Ethiopian replied "how can I, unless someone guides me?" The purpose of this discussion is draw on a number of strands that come together in the New Testament environment to give deeper meaning to the biblical text. Unless you appreciate the history of Israel you miss out on a lot of what Christ says and does in the New Testament. Let us not forget that Christ was also real person who lived in real time some 2000 years ago and, in his human form, was the product of his environment. In Luke 24:27 it is the resurrected Christ that sat down with his disciples "and beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." So, to Christ, understanding the Old Testament was very, very important.

I also propose to look at some aspects of the early Church and the formation of the New Testament Canon. A Canon is a standard or model established by the Church. I will touch upon why of all the many Christian writings our Church determined that the 27 books that form the New Testament were chosen. My aim is ambitious. However, I feel it so important that I want to embark upon this undertaking in the hope that your biblical reading experience will be enriched. I acknowledge that at best this discussion is superficial and selective, after all we are compressing several thousand years of history into one short essay. Notwithstanding that, I make this offering in the hope that it is of assistance to you.

## Sources

In order to prepare this paper I have relied on a number of secondary sources from a historic and archaeological perspective. However, the primary source of understanding is the Bible.

Prof Adam Zartal, the Chairman of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Haifa, the largest city in northern Israel puts it as follows:

"After years of research, I believe it is impossible to explore Israel's origins without the Bible. At the same time, the research should be objective as possible. The Bible should be used cautiously and critically. But, again and again, we have seen the historical value of the Bible. Again and again, we have seen that an accurate memory has been preserved in its transmuted narratives, waiting to be unearthed and exposed by archaeological fieldwork and critical mind work"

## **Geography**

The area that we are considering is very small. It is perhaps from Perth to Bunbury in length (North - South) and approximately from Perth to Northam wide. To get some understanding of the distances involved: Jerusalem was approximately 870 km away from Babylon, which in turn was approximately 80 km away from modern Baghdad. Assyria (northern Iraq) was located approximately 1,000 km to the north-east. Persia was approximately 1,500 km east, Greece approximately 1,200 km to the north-west and Rome approximately 2,400 km, and also to the north-west of the area.

Israel was significant in that it stood at the intersection of Europe, Africa and Asia and was a vital artery for trade routes. Accordingly, foreign powers would sweep over it periodically as it was considered to be a lucrative area to control.

The topography was varied. First there is the coastal plain which was fertile. It lacked natural harbours, so the Jews were never a maritime power. In the hinterland is the central hill country with Galilee to the North, Samaria in the middle and Judaea (including Jerusalem) in the south. Further east of this area is the Jordan Valley. The Jordan flows to the Dead Sea which is 388 meters below sea level. It is so salty that it cannot support marine life. Between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea lies the arid wilderness of Judaea. East of the Jordan lies a mountain region known as the Transjordan. In that area was the great trade route known as the "Kings Highway" which contributed greatly to the wealth and hence desirability to control the area.

The area of Israel at the time of Christ was divided into seven main political areas. Running down the centre of the country was the river Jordan flowing from the Sea of Galilee (also referred to as Lake Gennesaret and the sea of Tiberius) to the north and the Dead Sea (also known as Lake Asphaltites) to the south. West of the Jordan, going from north to south, were the areas known as Galilee, Samaria, Judaea and Idumea. To the east were the areas of Gaulanitis, the Decapolis (created by Pompey in 62 BC and being a loose confederation of 10 semi-independent Greek cities) and Perea.

### **Some Points to Remember**

We should not forget that the ancient world was vastly different to our modern world. Kingdoms were always in a state of flux. Wars were frequent and tributes demanded by the winner. There was no such thing as settled borders or countries as we understand them today. Travel was by foot or by beasts of burden and very risky. Travellers were subject to being robbed. There was no police force and the King's peace was difficult to enforce.

Jewish society was patriarchal. Rules as to how people would act towards one another were set out in the Old Testament. The usual age for a girl's betrothal was between 12 and 13. Betrothal was commonly to a relative as marriage within the tribe was desirable. The idea of marrying for love was unknown. The marriage of first and second cousins was common. Boys were betrothed later in life. Betrothal was the contract of marriage. Marriage occurred up to one year after betrothal. If a party died after betrothal and before marriage then the other party would be considered a widow or widower. After the wedding, the couple generally lived with the husband's family. The husband's duties were to support (including food, clothing and shelter), to fulfill his conjugal duties and to provide a funeral for his wife if she died. The wife's duties were all household duties, care of the children, spinning and weaving and to obey her husband as she would a master. Divorce generally initiated by men was available, however the wife could take her dowry with her. Stoning for adultery was a frequent occurrence.

People were generally divided between the very wealthy, who were few, and the very poor, who were many. Life expectancy was far shorter than it is today (approximately 25 years expectancy at birth), especially for the poor who found living very difficult. Slavery was acceptable. Childbirth, and surviving childbirth both for the child and mother, was a real problem. Education, mostly of a religious kind, was limited generally to males.

Consequently, sons were preferable to daughters as daughters were considered less valuable. Women did not inherit property. Their loyalty was to the husband's family. Further, they could not give witness in court, take part in any public duty at the Temple and their word was inferior to men's.

Things that we take for granted, such as clean drinking water, were also a problem. The connection between germs and illness had not been made, however, the Jewish law and its insistence on ritual purity assisted the Jews in maintaining some health. Their variety of food was limited. Fruit and vegetables such as tomatoes, potatoes, eggplants, capsicums and chillies, corn, pumpkins and squashes, peanuts, chocolate, tea and coffee were unheard of - let alone the exotic spices of the east. Flavouring was generally with herbs, vinegar and salt. Diet was based around seasonal vegetables such as beans, onions, lentils, leeks and cucumbers. Bread was made from wheat or barley and formed part of the staple diet. There were seasonal fruits together with some nuts, honey and cheese. Fish was the main protein with meat being a luxury and then generally as part of sacrifice to God. Watered-down wine was the preferred drink.

The rich could afford large houses and, after the influence of Alexander, in the Hellenistic style. Rooms grouped around a central courtyard surrounded by stone columns were normal. They were decorated with geometric or floral motifs in accordance with Jewish law. The well-to-do reclined on couches for dinner. Accordingly, Lazarus must have been wealthy as we are told of Christ reclining for dinner as Mary washed his feet with pure nard (Matthew 26:6 -13). The houses of the poor in comparison were tiny. Normally they consisted of one room which was

used for everything. Furniture in poor homes was almost non-existent with precious possessions being stored in chests in a corner of that one room. The roof was generally flat and utilised for a variety of purposes. This was not a solid roof, as attested by the men who could not get to Christ with the paralytic, who simply made an opening in the roof and lowered the paralytic down on his bed (Mark 2:4).

There was no such thing as communications as we know them and news spread by word of mouth. There was no electricity, no running water, no public utilities other than the public buildings and gymnasia introduced under Hellenistic influence. In short, life was very, very tough and people generally stayed around the places where they were born.

Although people spoke a variety of languages, the principal language of the common people at the time of Christ was Aramaic. After the conquest of Alexander the Great, Greek became the language of commerce and gradually the "lingua franca" or the overriding language common to the area. Later, with the conquest by Rome, Latin also began to be spoken. Hellenistic philosophical ideas began to be incorporated into Jewish thinking. This was seen by some Jews as being desirable. Other Jews saw it as destructive to their culture and religion and hence were violently opposed to the dominant Greek culture.

The area was not uniform in its belief in one God. Over significant times in its history the area dabbled with other gods. Indeed, the history of Israel is seen by the Jews themselves as one of rebellion and return towards God. When they have been good they saw themselves as being the chosen ones of God and as his children. When they turned away from the one true God they saw themselves as being punished for their rebelliousness against God. This tension with other religions has always been an underlying factor, sometimes more and sometimes less intense, but always existing amongst the Jewish people during this time.

## **The History of Israel**

For our purposes, I will start with the reign of King Solomon (10th century BC). Solomon built the great Temple in Jerusalem. It was a temple dedicated to God. The First Book of Kings tells us of the construction and dedication of the Temple. To maintain the Temple there was introduced a temple tax. The origins of such a tax are found in Exodus 30:11-16

Solomon was a great king but he suffered the weakness of loving many foreign women. The Lord told him "you shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods" (I Kings 11:2). Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. As he grew older his wives turned him towards their foreign gods and Solomon turned away from the one true God. The Lord, angered, told Solomon in his old age that he should tear all his kingdom out of his hands. However, for the sake of David his father, he would tear away only most of the kingdom from the hand of Solomon's son and successor and would give him one other tribe for the sake of Jerusalem which God had chosen as his city (11:12).

In due course this occurred. What David had previously put together as a nation was now torn apart and divided into two kingdoms - the North broke away with 10 tribes under the leadership of Jeroboam and they became known as Israelites. The South remained under Rehoboam and comprised of the house of Judah and house of Benjamin. They came to be known as Judaeans.

## **The Northern Kingdom**

The northern kingdom had Samaria (later known as Sebaste) as its capital. This town was approximately 75 km to the north of Jerusalem. The Samaritans set up their own places of worship in their own territory in Dan and Bethel and ignored the great Temple in Jerusalem. The northern kingdom began to lose its fervor for God. They began to worship different gods. They began to intermarry with foreign women. They began to assimilate with Assyrians and move away from God. The Old Testament records a number of prophets who attempted to

make the Israelites return back to their God by changing the ways of the people. These include Hosea, who in the 8th century BC prophesied against the evils of political, moral and religious laxity. He was particularly angry at the golden calves introduced into the sanctuaries of Bethel and Dan. He urged faith in God rather than human alliances if the Israelites were to be saved. He was ignored.

The prophet Jonah (mid 8th century BC) was sent to Nineveh the capital city of Assyria. He warned of pending destruction of the city. God saved those pagan people by showing His great mercy and compassion to those that were prepared to change their ways. This had a clear message to those in the northern kingdom, namely that it was never too late, even after falling into apostasy, to return back to God. Unfortunately, the northern kingdom also rejected the warning of this prophet by continuing to dabble in other gods.

Amos, a contemporary of Jonah, began his preaching in the northern kingdom in Bethel at a time of relative peace. He saw this peace as being destructive to the moral fibre of the northern kingdom. The poor were exploited, there was public corruption, the wealthy lived in their luxury and sold "the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes" (Amos 2:6). Religious observance was based on ritual rather than real piety. He urged the people to change, for unless they did "Israel would surely go into exile from its land" (Amos 7:11). Amos saw that God demanded moral purity and social justice rather than the rituals and sacrifices of organised religion. Amos was ignored.

In 722 BC Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians. A large number of people were taken captive. This became known as the Assyrian exile. Foreigners resettled with intermarriages occurring between the foreigners and Jewish remnants. The northern kingdom had failed and its failure led to the expression "the lost tribes of Israel". Those displaced Israelites began a tradition of living in the diaspora and establishing large colonies of Jewish influence in other countries.

## **The Southern Kingdom**

The Southern Kingdom fared little better. Although they loathed the Samaritans for their idolatry and for moving away from God's covenant, they too began to wander away from the word of God. This kingdom also had a number of prophets trying to make people change their ways. Again, these men of God were unsuccessful.

Isaiah, a prophet who lived in the second half of the 8th century BC in Judah, was one of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets. He fearlessly attacked the evils of men and acted as a moral conscience of the community. His prophecies cover over half a century and his life was bound up with his vision of Jerusalem. He believed that Judah's safety lay in faith in God. The enemy, Assyria, he saw as an instrument of God's will to punish the chosen people for their transgressions. In 701 BC the Assyrians were set to conquer Jerusalem, however Isaiah urged them to stay firm for God would save his city. A pestilence struck the camp of the Assyrians and they withdrew. Isaiah continued to berate his own people as a sinful nation "people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers" (Isaiah 1:4). Isaiah preached that what the Lord wanted were not rituals or prayers but for people to cease to do evil and to learn to do good. Isaiah foresaw great suffering but was comforted by the fact that it was not God's design that He utterly destroyed his people and that some would survive and return to righteousness.

Micah, an 8th century prophet from Judah, was a contemporary of Isaiah and came a little after the prophets Amos and Hosea in the northern kingdom. He disliked Samaria and Jerusalem which symbolised for him the corruption of the nation and the reason for God's anger. Therefore, he prophesied that "because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem should become a heap of ruins" (Micah 3:12). For Samaria, with its idols and sacred prostitutes he prophesied "I'll pour down her stones into the valley and uncover her foundations" (Micah 1:6) Micah believed that true faith came from the heart and not from formal sacrifices. He asked the question, "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten



thousands of rivers of oil? (Micah 6:7). His response was "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem in the 7th century BC and was in constant trouble with the authorities for his criticism of religious and moral laxity. He called for repentance and return back to God whilst there was still time. His message was that unless this was done Jerusalem would be destroyed and all its inhabitants carried off to Babylon. At that time, the might of Assyria was coming to an end. In 612 BC, their capital city of Nineveh was captured by the Babylonians also known as Chaldeans. In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish and became the new overlord of Judah and its neighbours. Jeremiah's call for repentance became more urgent. He was ignored and the city surrendered to the Babylonians. This saw the royal household and some 3000 leading citizens of the kingdom exiled to Babylon and vassal rule imposed. A few years later Jerusalem rebelled. In 587 BC Jerusalem was retaken by King Nebuchadnezzar. The city of Jerusalem was burnt. Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The strength of Judah, including the prophet Daniel, was taken into captivity and to Babylon. This became known as the Babylonian exile. We are all familiar with Psalm 137 which reminds us "by the waters of Babylon where we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion."

### **The Babylonian Exile**

The Babylonian exile was a difficult time, however unlike the Assyrian exile, the Judeans were kept together and they were able to forge a renewed sense of religious commitment and identity. In particular, they recognised that their exile was as a result of their apostasy. In 539 BC Babylon was captured by King Cyrus of Persia. In 538 BC, he issued a decree permitting the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild it. Some 40,000 Jews returned to Judah. The destroyed Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt in 516 BC.

It was during the time of the Babylonian exile that the idea of a synagogue as a place of worship was developed. As the Jews were denied their Temple they began to develop a

liturgical understanding of prayer as substitution for sacrifice. The idea of the synagogue grew and became a firm part of the Jewish religious cultus from that time on.

### **Post Babylonian Exile**

The prophet Ezra tells us of his efforts to return Judah back to restoring strict religious observance and reviving its ethnic identity. To Ezra, all the failings and persecution of his people were attributed to their apostasy. He tackled the most immediate problem of mixed marriages and broke those unions to restore the Judeans back to an exclusive race under God. Ezra, empowered by the Persian King Artaxerxes I, ordered all the men of Jerusalem to abandon their foreign wives. If not, they would be excluded from the community and have their property confiscated. He told them that they had transgressed the law by marrying foreign women and that they were to separate from them to re-establish purity. Ezra established religious law as the basis of daily life. He consolidated the religious and legal codes which became the foundation of Judaism both as a creed and a way of life. These codes had the backing of Persia so Jewish law effectively governed the internal affairs of Jerusalem and Judaea.

The focus of Judaea was now on maintaining purity for atonement from God. Anything that threatened that purity was to be avoided. As a result of their intermarriage and belief in false gods, Judeans did not consider the Samaritans as true Jews. Hence the Judeans separated themselves and had no dealing with them. This led to hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans.

### **Alexander the Great**

Hellenic thought, through the intervention of Alexander the Great, had significant influence on the Jewish nation. In 333 BC, at the Battle of Issus, Alexander conquered the Persian King Darius III on his way through to conquering Egypt by way of Syria and Judea. As the Jews submitted to the Greeks voluntarily, the rights that they possessed under Persian rule were preserved - hence they were permitted to continue practicing their faith without hindrance.

Alexander also gave permission for the Samaritans to build, for the first time, their own temple at Mount Gerizim which eased tensions between the Jews and the Samaritans, as Samaritans could now worship at their own temple (and collect their own temple tax) without having to be ostracised as foreigners in Jerusalem. Needless to say, the Judeans saw this as a running sore and provocation to them.

With Greek conquest came the Greek language. Anyone who did not speak Greek was considered a Barbarian. Trade was undertaken in Greek. Together with Greek language came Greek civilization and culture as well as Greek patterns of life. Greek buildings appeared, theatres and baths were established as well as gymnasia. Greek customs were adopted and the Jews by and large adapted to them. The attraction which many Jews felt for the superior civilization and culture of the Greeks increased to the extent that in the 2nd century BC there were Jews in Jerusalem who believed that Spartans were kinsman. 1 Maccabees (12:19-23) records a letter sent by Arius the king of Sparta to the high priest Onias which stated "it has been found in writing concerning the Spartans and the Jews that they are brethren and of the family of Abraham. And now that we have learnt this, please write us concerning your welfare; we on our part write to you that your cattle and your property belong to us and ours belong to you. We have therefore command that our envoys report to you accordingly".

### **The Seleucids**

Alexander the Great died in 323 BC. His empire was divided amongst his generals. Ptolemy ended up with Egypt, Judaea and part of Syria. He continued the policy of not interfering in the internal affairs of the Jewish community leaving the Sanhedrin responsible for daily affairs. Under Antiochus III (223 -187 BC) the Ptolemys lost Israel and it fell under Syrian control. Judaea switched sides and the Syrians carried on initially pretty much as before. The Seleucid dynasty however began to reinforce Hellenistic thought and culture upon the Jews. The vast majority of Jews were sympathetic.

In the year 175 BC Antiochus IV assumed the reign of Syria, and consequently the Middle East. In 169 BC Antiochus plundered the temple in Jerusalem and removed the precious furnishings, the altar of incense, the seven branched lamp stand and the table of shewbread. The Hellenisation of Judea and Jerusalem continued unabated. Attempts were made to convert the Jews into pagan ways. The Jews were forbidden under pain of death to keep the Sabbath or circumcise their male children. Owning the Torah was a capital offence. These laws were actively policed. In Jerusalem, in 167 BC, a pagan altar to the god Zeus was erected in the Temple of Jerusalem, on the site of the altar of burnt offering. Pigs were sacrificed. The Jews would have none of the Hellenistic idea that all cults ultimately lead to the one God. It looked as if the Jews might be consigned to history and the Jews were angry.

### **The Maccabean (or Hasmonean) Dynasty**

When the Inspector of the King went to a village called Modein to enforce pagan sacrifice, a Jew attempting sacrifice was killed. Thus began the Maccabean (meaning "Hammer") (164 BC-63 BC) uprising and dynasty which ultimately controlled Palestine and the Middle East. Generally, the rule of the Hasmoneans was marked by infighting, devotion to their religion and violence. The Hasmoneans ruled from 164 BC to 63 BC.

During this time in 128 BC the destruction of the Samaritan temple occurred and in 107 BC Samaria itself was conquered and destroyed by the Maccabees. The era was marked with intrigue and wars and it was only during the reign of Salome Alexandra (76 - 67BC) where peace prevailed. However, this peace was not to last.

### **Rome**

The emerging dominant power Rome, through Pompey, turned its attention to the Middle East. The Seleucid kingdom collapsed and was incorporated into the Roman realm as a province of Syria. Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC. The siege and conquest of Jerusalem were a disaster for the Hasmonean kingdom. Pompey reinstated Hyrcanus II, the last Hasmonean king, as High Priest but stripped him of his royal title, though Rome recognized him as an

ethnarch in 47 BC. Judaea remained autonomous but was obliged to pay tribute and became dependent on Roman administration from Syria. The kingdom of Judaea was dismembered; it was forced to relinquish the coastal plain, depriving it of access to the Mediterranean. Also, parts of Idumea and Samaria were granted Roman rule. In addition, a number of Hellenistic cities were granted autonomy to form the Hellenistic area known as Decapolis, leaving Judaea greatly diminished and resentful.

However, what Rome did was establish stability for the area so the Pax Romana at the time of Jesus contributed greatly to the ability of Jesus to move around relatively freely. It also brought with it a most cruel form of punishment, crucifixion, for dealing with the worst criminals.

### **The Samaritans**

After the destruction of their Temple at Mount Gerizim (some 70 km North of Jerusalem) by John Hyrcanus in 128 BC, the Samaritans, who believed only in the first five books of the Old Testament, otherwise known as the Pentateuch, developed hatred towards the Judaeans. As their law obliged them to attend the Temple in Jerusalem they had to suffer the behaviour of the Jews who shunned them by labelling them as ritually unclean. This led to bitter enmity between them. The relationship between them was so bad that Judeans travelling to and from Galilee to Judaea would generally take a long detour via the river Jordan to avoid Samaritan territory.

By the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another. Although the Samaritans referred to the patriarchs as their ancestors the Jews did not allow that claim. It was unthinkable for a Pharisee to have any interaction with "those of the lost tribe of Israel." To the Jews the Samaritans were an alien tribe. In Luke's Gospel at Chapter 17 we are told that Jesus cured 10 lepers. Only one, a Samaritan returned to Christ praising God. Jesus exclaims "were not 10 cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?". Further, in chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel Christ charged his disciples to go and administer and heal every disease and infirmity however they

were to "go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans". So as can be seen Samaritans were seen as foreigners and hence to be avoided. Accordingly Judeans would have been more than a little mystified to hear the parable the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-38) and would have asked themselves why Christ chose a Samaritan as example of the good neighbour - especially when the scene of the parable occurs on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho - both in Judaeen territory.

### **Christ and His Relationship with Women**

The conversation between Christ and the Samaritan woman in Chapter 4 of John's Gospel is highly illuminating. Being Samaritan as well as a woman made this woman doubly disadvantaged. Christ, by choosing to engage her, put all disputes between Jews and Samaritans to one side. No wonder his disciples marvelled when they found him talking to a woman - and a Samaritan at that. A woman, due to her inferior social status, was not the sort of person one would sensibly use as a messenger, yet it was a woman that Christ used to communicate his message to the Samaritans.

No one did more to change the role of women than what Christ did. Christ taught women - one only has to remember Mary and Martha. He treated men and women equally. He ignored ritual impurity laws - such as curing the woman with the flow of blood. He accepted women into his inner circle. He chose women to appear to first after his resurrection. In short women at the time of Christ were decidedly second-class citizens yet were used by Christ to expound the faith. It is little wonder that Christ was not popular with the authorities.

### **Society at the Time of Christ**

Not everybody in Judah saw their relationship with God in the same way. Jewish society at the time of Christ was pluralistic. There were numerous crosscurrents of thoughts and beliefs occupying the minds of the people. The Jewish historian Josephus in his writings of the times identified three kinds of philosophical schools that added to the social agitation of the times. These were the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes.

## **The Sadducees**

The Sadducees represented members of Jewish aristocracy and comprised predominantly of the holders of high priestly office and influential Jewish families. They were conservative in outlook and pragmatic in dealing with foreigners and conquerors. They held strictly to the letter of the law and refused to admit to equal rank the written texts post Pentateuch or the oral tradition which the Pharisees treasured. They did not believe in angels or demons and most certainly did not share the expectation that on the last day the dead would be raised. They were very strict in their interpretation of the law, especially of the Sabbath. Penalties were imposed in accordance with the law so that any death penalty pronounced by the Jewish court always was execution by stoning. Under Queen Salome Alexandra (Queen Regent 76 BC- 67 BC) a woman ruler of Judaea and a member of the Hasmonean family the power of the Sadducees in the Sanhedrin was significantly weakened as she allowed Pharisees to become members. The Sadducees were in conflict not only with the Pharisees but with the zealots as well. After the fall of Jerusalem to Rome under Pompey in 70 A.D. the Sadducees disappeared leaving only the Pharisees to carry on. The Sadducees opposed Christ because he threatened their position.

## **The Pharisees**

The Pharisees saw themselves as God's holy community and avoided contact with anyone or anything that could make them ritually unclean. Their origins date to the Maccabean (164 BC - 63 BC) times to defend Judaism against Hellenic influences. Their focus was zeal for the law. They were intent on pious living, prayer and fasting. Their prime concern was for ritualistic purity and obedience to the commandments concerning tithing. If they came into contact with anything unclean then they had to purify themselves and in some cases allow for a waiting period to elapse before they could resume their life in the community. In order to be obedient to the law the Pharisees not only gave to the temple a 10th of their produce but also a 10th of all they acquired, tithing even herbs and spices so nothing could be left out of this commandment. They believed in the tradition of the elders. This allowed them some flexibility

to shape some of the laws into more realistic ones such as rescuing a beast on the Sabbath (see Matthew 12:9-14). They also believed in the resurrection of the dead and cultivated a strong messianic hope. In order to maintain their purity they built a fence around the law so they developed, over time, 613 commandments that they had to follow so to ensure they did not break the law.

Pharisees fasted twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays to show penitence and to pray for the salvation of Israel. In Luke's gospel we are told of the Pharisee and publican or tax collector. That Pharisee was not boasting but merely reciting what he actually did "I fast twice in the week and give tithes of all that I acquire". To the Pharisee, his relationship with God meant that he set himself apart from others who did not lead a life according to the law as he did. So, Pharisees traded and interacted with fellow Pharisees. There is no way known that a Pharisee would associate with foreigners such as Samaritans or unclean people such as tax collectors as they were in the service of the pagan occupying power and had purchased their office only to gouge as much as they could from the people. They believed that a tax collector could not repent because he did not know how many people they had defrauded so therefore could not make proper restitution to them and hence to God. Prostitutes, fallen women and other people who made common cause with the pagans were also to be avoided at all costs as unclean. Christ, who came for all sinners and associated with them was seen as subversive and unclean.

### **The Essenes**

The Essenes were a secretive movement. No mention is made of them in the New Testament. However, Philo of Alexandria (a Hellenized Jewish philosopher and writer) and Josephus gives some account of them. Essenes strictly followed the law. Their members avoided women in order to prevent themselves becoming unclean. There were some members who married women purely for procreation. Their focus was on purity. After a one-year probationary period a candidate was admitted to washing, seen as a form of baptism into the sect. After a further



two years he was permitted to partake in common meals. All property belonged to the community. The morning began before sunrise with prayer, then work until midday when they washed, put on white robes and partook of a common meal. They then returned to work and in the evening regathered for fellowship at table. Only enough food to satisfy hunger was eaten. Silence ruled but speaking was occasionally allowed. They had strict observance of the law especially the Sabbath and forbade even relief from bodily functions on the Sabbath in order that the day may not be desecrated. They believed in the immortality of the soul that it came from heaven. They also believed the flesh as being a prison for the soul which was liberated after death with good souls going to heaven and the wicked to the place of punishment. They also believed in pre-determination.

Essenes fought against the Romans for the liberation of Israel's law and in so doing disappeared from history. For all that their ascetic obedience to the law was a great influence on ordinary Jews.

In addition, there were other groups that impacted upon Jewish thought.

### **The Scribes**

The Scribes, or lawyers, had great influence. Their responsibility was to apply Mosaic Law to the changing times. As the law of God required all areas of life to be controlled, not only theological questions but also legal questions were determined by them. The Scribe was part lawyer, part scholar, part preacher and part magistrate. Although they had no official financial payment they had great positions of power and no doubt would have been open to corruption. They tended to resist change and oppose reform. They opposed Christ because he resisted the law.

### **The Zealots**

The greatest institution in Judaea was the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin had its origins in the reign of Jehoshaphat, the fourth king of Judah (reigned 870 - 848 BC). It was intended to be

a judicial body and appointed its members from among the priests, the Levites and leading families. It changed in its scope over time. At the time of Jesus the chairman was the high priest and the majority members were the Sadducees. Herod promoted the Pharisees. There were 71 members of the Council and its authority was in Judah. That is why Jesus was safe in Galilee. The Sanhedrin had its own offices with power to arrest. This they exercised when Christ came to Jerusalem for the last time. Without consulting the Roman authorities they could prosecute and impose any sentence other than death. That is why the matter of Christ was referred to Pontius Pilate. The Sanhedrin was also a court of judiciary dealing with cases which provincial courts did not have the power to deal with as well as being the Court of Appeal. In 70 A.D. it was abolished by Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem.

### **The Herod Dynasty**

Political power at the time of the Romans was managed by the appointment of rulers who would ensure loyalty to Rome. Herod, in 40 BC managed to find favour with Rome. He was a survivor and ruthless in removing opposition. He was an Idumean and as such was intensely resented by the Judeans. Idumeans had their origins from Edom south of the Dead Sea. They traced their lineage from Esau who was tricked out of his birthright by Jacob and who was crowned King by their ageing father Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah.

Herod had the backing of Rome. As he grew older he became suspicious and paranoid as to his reign. The massacre of the infants in Matthew's Gospel is consistent with his personality. In his territory, which took in part of the northern kingdom, were numerous Gentiles. His view was that both Greeks and Jews had equal rights. At a personal level, he embraced Greek culture and way of life which upset the Jews further. Herod rebuilt on the destroyed city of Samaria and called it Sebaste (the exalted one) in honour of Augustus Caesar. The Jews continued to be extremely suspicious of Herod. It was towards the end of Herod's reign that St John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth were born.

After the death of Herod, his three children, Archelaus, Herod Antipas and Philip, with the help of Rome, divided the kingdom between them. Antipas (Mark 6, 26; Matthew 14:9) received Galilee and Perea (east of the Jordan), Philip the east of the Jordan in the northern part of the kingdom, and Archelaus Judaea, Samaria and Idumea. Archelaus was despised and very harsh in his rule (see Matthew 2: 22). In 6 A.D. he was relieved of office and the area placed under a Roman governor. Hence at the time of Jesus, Galilee in the northern part of the land east of the Jordan was under Herodian rule, while Samaria, Judaea and Idumea were ruled by a Roman governor (Luke 3:1). It was in Galilee where the beheading of John the Baptist occurred. Herod Antipas who ruled from 4 BC-39 A.D. divorced his first wife and married Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, which was forbidden by Jewish law (Lev 18:16). Herodias was the granddaughter of King Herod. They had a daughter Salome. John the Baptist, who criticized the marriage, was cast into prison and beheaded. In the Gospel accounts Herod, when he learned of the appearance of Jesus, thought that John had been resurrected and wanted to meet him. Jesus made his way to Jerusalem to continue his ministry to escape Herod. In 39 A.D. Herod was exiled when recalled by Caligula.

Herod Agrippa, a grandson of King Herod, found favour with Caligula and became king of the entire kingdom in 41 AD. In that same year Caligula was murdered and succeeded by Claudius. Agrippa appeared a Jew to the Jews and Gentile to the Gentiles. He humoured the Pharisees by persecuting the Christian community in Jerusalem. He had James the son of Zebedee executed and Peter thrown in prison. When Agrippa died the territory was for a time governed by Roman procurators and then returned to Agrippa II. He greatly displeased the people. The zealots saw themselves as wanting to overthrow the Romans. In 66 A.D. the Jews rose against the Romans and took over Jerusalem. Nero commissioned Vaspasian to conduct the war against the Jews. The Romans marched into battle and after a 47 day siege resistance collapsed. One such Jew, Josephus (previously mentioned), had his life spared and chronicled the histories of the Jewish war. In 67 A.D. all of Galilee once again was under Roman rule.

## **Pontius Pilate**

At the time of the public ministry of Jesus, Pontius Pilate held the office of Roman governor (A.D. 26-36). Philo of Alexandria records him as being corrupt, depraved and cruel. However, the Jews did not take everything from him lying down. On one occasion, he caused banners bearing the image of Caesar to be brought into Jerusalem. The Jews declared them to be a violation of their law and were prepared to fight to the death, causing him to withdraw them. Generally, however, he did as he liked. Luke reports in Chapter 13:1 a bloodbath of Galileans who wished to offer sacrifice in Jerusalem. Further, he ordered persons suspected of revolution to be arrested and killed. He was consistent in his cruelty when he condemned to death on the cross a Jew who the Sanhedrin had handed over to him as a political prisoner. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified outside the gates of Jerusalem and subjected by Pontius Pilate to the most shameful form of death.

## **The Significance of these Historical Aspects upon the Ministry of Christ**

The Gospel accounts of the public ministry of Christ are filled with references to the times that Christ found himself in. Each Gospel reading requires some historical insight to properly contextualize what is happening. To give an example from a few recent Sunday Gospel readings is enough to make the point:

We are currently in the cycle of Luke. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of October we heard of the man of many demons that Christ exorcised and sent into a herd of swine. Why would swine be found in a country that explicitly considers the animal unclean? Armed with our understanding we now know that the country of the Gerasenes was located in the Hellenic area known as the Decapolis. This area was pagan and pagan sacrifices utilized pigs. So, it makes more sense if one has the knowledge that Christ was effectively in another country.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, we had the Gospel reading of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, and of the woman with the loss of blood. Given that the ruler was a Pharisee he showed great courage and disregard for the law to approach Christ. We begin to better understand

something more about his faith. The woman with the flow of blood also presents insights into faith. Here was a woman ostracized by the law who ignored the law to touch Christ. By touching Christ she was healed - yet by touching Christ she not only broke the law but made Christ unclean, according to the same law. Christ, as the fulfilment of the law, disregards the old law and hence pointing the way to the new law.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November we had the Gospel reading of the rich man and Lazarus. There the emphasis is on the Old Testament represented by Moses and Abraham. The understanding is that Jews had failed to comprehend the law of God that had been given to them and would also have their eyes closed to someone rising from the dead - just as Christ had predicted for himself. In other words, they had closed their eyes and ears just as their fathers of old had done and not listened to the Scriptures to recognise the anointed one.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of November we had the Gospel reading of the Good Samaritan. Imagine the impact of Christ picking such an ungodly example to the Pharisees as the Samaritan to demonstrate to the Pharisees themselves what a neighbour was. It would have been totally unacceptable to the Pharisees who would have been further enraged by Christ and confirmed in their mind that Christ had to be put to death.

So in these few examples it is demonstrated that having an understanding of what is really going on in the Gospels gives far greater understanding as to the real message that Christ is seeking to give to us.

When Christ went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover he did so in the full knowledge that he was going to death and resurrection. When all the Gospel accounts are looked at, and the prophecies as contained in the Old Testament referred to, it is clear that Christ's passion rests upon the Old Testament and it gives fullness and new meaning to the Old Testament. It is as if history and prophecy have all converged together at the point of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

## **The New Christian Community**

After Pentecost the teachings of Christ began to take shape. In the book of Acts we are told how the early Church took its first hesitant steps. It is clear that as this new sect within Judaism began to establish itself, it found itself in conflict with the Jewish community in Jerusalem. Jerusalem itself continued to be a hotbed of dissension. The Jews resented their overlords in Rome. They began to talk rebellion. About this time the original Christian community, which did not participate in the uprising, probably left Jerusalem. In 69 A.D. Vaspasian became Caesar and his son Titus in 70 A.D. marched on Jerusalem. Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem rebuilt by Herod was destroyed. There were mass crucifixions and the Romans overthrew the rebellion. There were still pockets of resistance but even they fell - the last being the fortress of Masada which occurred in approximately 73 A.D. After that Judaea was made into an imperial province.

Within Judaism itself, the fight between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was resolved in favour of the Pharisees. The Sadducees disappeared together with the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed in 70 A.D. and the temple cultus as the Temple was destroyed. The worship of God thereafter continued only in the synagogues. A new Sanhedrin composed only of Scribes came together. The temple tax, previously paid by every Jew to ensure the costs of the temple were met, continued to be collected but was now paid to the Romans as tribute.

The Jews however did not lose hope of overthrowing Rome. In the second century Judaism tried once more to overthrow Roman rule. Under the leadership of Bar Kochba (A.D. 132 - 135), which occurred under the reign of Hadrian (A.D. 117 - 138), the Jews tried to rise once more against their oppressors. In approximately 130 A.D. Hadrian ordered a shrine for Jupiter to be erected on the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem and outlawed circumcision. This incensed Jews and they rose against Rome to no avail. In 135 CE Jerusalem was reduced to rubble. A new city known as Aelia Capitolina was erected. Jews were forbidden to set foot in what was once known as Jerusalem. Over the site of the temple built by Herod there was

erected a temple to Jupiter. In the fourth century A.D. Jews were allowed into Jerusalem one day a year on the ninth day of the month of Ab (ended July/beginning of August) to pray lamentations at the Wailing Wall, being the footings left standing from the Herodian temple.

### **Christianity and the Jews**

Christians had a hard time very early. Almost immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus mainstream Jews began to turn on them. They began to be forced out of the synagogues and were increasingly seen as a heretical sect inside Judaism and something to be excised. Orthodox Jews were obliged to pray by saying 18 prayers three times a day. Their twelfth benediction, or prayer to God, stated that "may there be no hope for the apostates, and may thou speedily uproot the insolent government (Rome) in our days. May the Nazarenes (Jewish Christians) and the Minim (Jewish heretics) die in a moment, may they be blotted out of the book of life and not be enrolled with the righteous. Praise be thou Lord who dost humble insolence".

From time to time Christians were also turned upon by the Roman authorities. In 64 A.D. Rome suffered a devastating fire and consequently Christians were persecuted. Christians then began to suffer persecution which lasted until the edict of Milan in 313 CE promulgated by St Constantine. These persecutions over the centuries were not constant or systematic but rather would flare up from time to time and would be enforced to a greater or lesser extent from time to time. To be a Christian was a capital offence.

By the end of the 1st century Jews had excluded from the synagogue all followers of Christ. This meant that Rome no longer recognised them as Jews able to freely practice their religion without interference from Rome. The Romans allowed the Jews the right to follow their religion as they had formerly been allies of Rome and through ancient usage. However, Christians found themselves as followers of a religion not recognized by Rome or by Jerusalem. Rome, who protected the Jewish faith, had little time for this strange religion that believed in mercy

and peace. Having now lost the protection afforded by Judaism, the Roman authorities expected Christians to comply with their civil obligations in a pagan world.

In the interim the Jews were doing everything they could to disassociate themselves with anything that smacked of Hellenism. In the 3rd century BC the Septuagint was written. This is the Old Testament of the Jews written in the Greek language for Jews in the Diaspora. There is an attractive legend that says King Ptolemy II (284 - 247 BC) commissioned a Greek translation of the laws of the Jews. Six scholars from each of the 12 tribes of Israel were engaged and after 72 days the work was completed. Whatever the origin, there is no doubt that the Septuagint was accepted by Jews of the Diaspora as their book of worship. Later, the rest of the Old Testament was translated into Greek. In addition, a number of other Old Testament books were translated into Greek. These works are now known as deuterocanonical, or sometimes mistakenly, apocryphal works. These deuterocanonical works that found their way in the Septuagint were no longer accepted by Jews.

Towards the end of the 1st century A.D. the Jews decided that only books written in Hebrew and ending with Ezra would be considered canonical by them. The word canon comes from the Greek word kanoni which means a measuring rod. Anything that is canonical passes the test of divine inspiration and authority as understood by the Church, or in this case, the synagogue. This decision of the Jews left out of number of books from the Old Testament Canon. The Greek Bible consequently contains nine more books in the Old Testament than the Jewish Bible. By approximately 130 A.D. the Jews had abandoned the Greek version of the Old Testament and had assumed a new Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible by Aquila which allowed the Jewish Diaspora in the Hellenistic world to come under the influence of the rabbis.

### **How Rome saw the Christians**

The Christians themselves presented an ongoing perplexing problem for the Roman authorities. They stood out from the rest of the groupings that made up the Roman Empire.



Christians were intolerant of other religions - it was not possible to be a Christian and a pagan at the same time. Their founder, Christ, who had been executed by the Romans by crucifixion, proclaimed a kingdom that was not of this earth. They refused military service and civil office. They refused to offer due worship to the genius of the Emperor. They proclaimed that the world was to be consumed by fire leading to accusations of arson. Their use of the Lord's body and of the Lord's blood left them open to accusations of cannibalism. They accorded women equality. They were accused of antisocial tendencies as they recognized both free and slave as brother. They held meetings behind closed doors; they called each other brother and sister which produced charges of sexual licence and incest. Cornelius Fronto, a famous orator, writing in the early 2nd century, slandered Christian behaviour by claiming that Christians would meet and after much feasting a dog that was tied to the lamp stand would be incited to leap about knocking over the lamp stand. Once the candle went out everybody would embrace one another in their unspeakable lust as chance bought their couplings together. In short, Rome perceived Christians as immoral and dangerous revolutionaries.

Their real crime, however, was of obstinacy in refusing to acknowledge the Emperor. Let us not underestimate this problem for the Empire. The Emperor was not only seen as divine by pagan society but in reality was the glue that held the Empire together, so proper homage to him was vital.

Pliny the Younger, the Governor of Bithynia-Pontus, had perhaps the best idea of Christianity. In approximately 112 CE he sent a letter to the Emperor Trajan and sought the Emperor's advice as to how to deal with these Christians. He declared that from his observation it appeared that:

"the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this; they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to God, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After the ceremony it had become their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary harmless kind".

The Emperor's advice was:

"though not to be searched for. If they are reported and convicted they must be punished, but if someone denies he's a Christian and proves by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned. Anonymous allegations were not to be accepted".

As Christianity required a person to be baptised before they could fully participate in the life of the Church, it is little wonder that the pagan rulers had little understanding of Christianity. The reason why Christians were misunderstood is because it was only during the 2nd century CE itself that Christians began to express and explain their faith in writing. Up until that time they were inward looking for the kingdom of heaven. Further, Christians themselves didn't all agree as to what it meant to be a Christian. Numerous heresies arose. No wonder the pagans were confused about the Christians.

By the early part of the second century when Pliny was living in Asia Minor, it is estimated that Christian groups could be found perhaps in 40 to 50 cities of the Roman Empire and it was estimated that there were approximately 50,000 Christians in a society comprising of some 60 million people. In comparison, the Jews were some four to five million - a large minority (Robert L Wilken, "The Christians as the Romans Saw Them"). So it can be seen that Christians were a small part of the overall population.

### **Persecution of the Church**

Episodic persecutions of the Church led to a number of martyrdoms because Christians were not prepared to forsake Christ. Some of the more celebrated Martyrologies include the martyrdom of St Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (died 155 CE). Whereupon being asked to take the oath to revile Christ and he would be set free, Polycarp replied "for six and 80 years I have been serving him, and he has done no wrong to me; how, then, dare I blaspheme my king who saved me!". This same Polycarp, upon his body being burnt, had his remains collected by Christians who picked up his bones and saw them as "more precious and costly than stones and more excellent than gold".

Another moving martyrdom is recorded in the martyrdoms of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas (died 202 CE). These two young women were implored to give up Christ. Perpetua's father said as he held her still to be weaned son, "perform the sacrifice - have pity on your baby!" Perpetua refused to deny Christ and preferred death to life. Such stories of courage in meeting death increased as persecutions increased.

The day of their martyrdom was seen by martyrs as their day of victory. The more they were persecuted the greater the number of martyrs and the more examples for other Christians to emulate. Hence grew the cult of saints.

### **How Christians Saw Themselves**

Christianity itself had problems as to how it perceived itself. Shortly after the death of Christ there arose a dispute as to whether or not Christians needed to be Jews first or not. The Church in Jerusalem advocated that male circumcision was a necessary part of Christianity. It was Paul who removed Christianity from the Jewish influence and made it a religion for the Gentiles. Paul, or Saul of Tarsus (a city in Asia Minor where he was born), changed the Christian paradigm, thus allowing Gentiles to be the new people of God. Paul transcended Judaism and Greek philosophy. Both Paul and his father were Roman citizens - a privilege of great importance to non-Romans. His ancestry was from the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Pharisee. He had been empowered by the Sanhedrin to persecute Christians. In both Acts and Galatians there is the story of his conversion at the age of approximately 31 years to Christianity. For the next 33 years and over four journeys Paul spread the word of Christ through the western world. Hence this new religion was given an order, direction and organization. Its teaching became more organized and based upon a social gospel emphasizing the responsibility of all people to one another directly answerable to God, with wealth being stewardship and not an absolute right. Paul's influence on Christianity was profound.

In the generation immediately following the death and resurrection of Christ, Christians were patiently awaiting the second coming. As they thought the last days were fast approaching they had no need to declare or write down their faith. They just believed. It was Paul who changed the Christian thinking. His second Epistle to the Thessalonians makes this clear. As the apostolic age came to an end there was a need to write down who this Christ was. Gradually, a number of Gospels appeared, including those of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Make no mistake, each of those four Gospels was written from a particular perspective and addressed to a particular class of people.

However, not everybody in the Church understood Scripture as they should. Many heresies arose. Marcion, for instance, drew a sharp distinction between the God of the Jewish Scriptures who was spiteful, vengeful, and malicious and the God of love as revealed in New Testament. Accordingly, he rejected all the Gospels apart from Luke and the letters of Paul and argued that we were two Gods - one of the Old Testament and one of the New Testament. Another challenge to the Canon of Scripture came from Gnosticism. There were many varieties of Gnosticism. Gnostics believed that only people with special knowledge about Christ would be saved. They believed in a god of evil and a god of good. They also believed that that the world was evil and the spirit that only existed in some people would survive. They read the Gospels to suit themselves. It was in that context that the Church began to emphasize apostolic succession, tightening of the church hierarchy and defining what was and was not Scripture for the Church that truly reflected the Church's understanding of Christ.

In the post-apostolic age consideration began to be given as to what it was to be a Christian. Hence people's experiences and recollections were written down. There were a number of pieces of literature circulating around the early churches. Some of these, although not now forming part of the Canon, have survived. These include the Epistles of Clement, Barnabas, Ignatius, and Polycarp, as well as the Didache (or teaching of the 12 Apostles). In the 2nd century it appears that the four Gospels and the Acts of Apostles as well as the 13 Epistles of

Paul have been recognised by Iraneaus and Tertullian as forming the New Testament Canon. Over time, consensus as to what should or shouldn't be included in the Canon was slowly resolved by the Church. For a time, the Shepherd of Hermas (a work comprising of five visions, twelve mandates, and ten parables), the Acts of Paul and Theda, the Acts of Peter and John, an Epistle of Paul to the Laodicians, amongst others, were considered but not accepted finally by the Church. Numerous Gospels such as the infancy Gospel of the Nativity of Mary, the Gospel of James, Thomas etc. were also rejected. These the Church considered non-canonical.

It was really only by the end of the second century that a recognizable New Testament came into use along with its appeal to apostolic tradition, apostolic succession, and the Canon or rule of faith. The earliest list which corresponds to the New Testament as we have it stems from Athanasius in his Easter letter of 367. The first major Council of the church to list the 27 books of New Testament was the Synod of Hippo in 393. So, in a very real sense it is the church that gave to the world the New Testament.

## **Conclusion**

By the end of the second century the various churches were coming to an understanding of what the canonicity of the Bible should be. To be sure there was a variety of texts that circulated at that time. In the wisdom of the Church, from amongst the various offerings of the individual authors, our Church finally settled on the canonicity of the Bible, and led by the spirit determined that these books making up the Old and the New Testament were accorded pride of place. Is there a difference between the Old and the New Testament in terms of its authority? Our church has determined that the Old Testament prefigures and points to the truth contained in the New Testament, which truth lay in the fullness of Christ. So, it is important when reading the Old Testament to have an understanding of the history of this small geographical area. It is by understanding what cross currents existed in such a pluralistic society, as it was at the time of Christ, that lets us better appreciate what the New Testament

is in effect saying to us. Just as the Orthodox Church does not practice Solas Scriptura (that is, the Bible only is the final authority, and tradition or the Church has no role to play in understanding of the Bible), it also certainly does not practice reading the New Testament in a historical vacuum. The New Testament speaks to us from some 2000 years of history. We ignore it at our peril and run the risk of importing into the Gospels our own meaning instead of understanding what the gospel is telling us.

### **Notes**

1. This is not intended to be an academic work but background information only. Consequently, there are no footnotes or bibliography.
2. The measurement of time has always been problematic in history. Consequently, any dates given are generally agreed dates by historians. However, although historians may differ as to the precise dates, the dating does provide a clear sequence of events.
3. The word "God "refers to the Christian Trinitarian God whereas "god" refers to other deities that the pagans believed in.
4. The purpose of this essay is to provide an understanding of the sorts of crosscurrents of events, including political, philosophical, and economical, together with faith and belief, that contributed to the unique New Testament environment. The emphasis upon the events of this essay represents the views as well as the understanding of the author.