

The Jesus Experience

In order to give some context to the Gospels as we read them together, here is some background information that will help us to understand a little more about the world that Jesus lived in, and the people that He ministered to.

The Promised Messiah

When Adam and Eve first listened to Satan and disobeyed God, causing sin to enter the world, there were terrible consequences. Sinfulness cannot exist in the company of a perfect God, and so we were removed far from His presence. The consequences are laid out in Genesis chapter 3, and included this vast separation from God, a life of toil and struggle, and ultimately, death, as we had been separated from God, the Source of all life.

However, even in the midst of these horrible penalties, there was still a glimmer of hope.

On that same day, God informed the Devil, who had deceived His first two children, that one day a man, born of a woman, would crush Satan underneath His feet (Gen 3:15).

So we see that from the moment that sin and death entered into humanity's story, God immediately began to unveil His amazing and gracious plan to set things right again! This verse from Genesis is the very first reference to "the Messiah" – a Hebrew term which means, "the Anointed One" – a man who would come and be the Saviour of God's people.

The Greek word for "Messiah" is "Christ." When the authors of the Gospels wrote down their accounts of Jesus' life, they called Him "Jesus Christ", meaning, "Jesus the Messiah."

In the millennia between the fall of man and the birth of Jesus, dozens upon dozens of prophecies and references to the approaching Messiah were laid out in the Old Testament, talking about who He would be and what He would do, preparing God's people for the Saviour to come.

These prophecies spoke of a man, who be born in Bethlehem and minister in Galilee (Mic 5:2; Isa 9:1-2), who would be a great Prophet (Dt 18:15), who would speak in parables and work great miracles (Ps 78:2; Isa 35:5-6), who would suffer greatly, being oppressed and despised by His own people (Isa 53), but who would overcome that suffering to establish an everlasting kingdom over which He would rule forever (Isa 9:7; Dan 7:13-14).

These are but a few of the references in the Old Testament that pointed to the coming Messiah. Every Jewish person who was raised in the faith would have been well-educated in these predictions concerning the impending Saviour, and every good Jewish believer would be earnestly praying that God would send the Messiah soon. There was a great and passionate anticipation that the Messiah was coming imminently to restore God's people and to set them free.

When we read the Gospels, this is the culture of the people who lived at that time. The Jewish people have been fervently praying and waiting for centuries for their Messiah to appear. When Jesus arrives on the scene, His appearance launches a mixture of hope, excitement, controversy, and division, as a nation that has been patiently waiting for the Anointed One struggles to determine if Jesus is, in fact, the One whom they have been waiting for.

The Roman Empire

In the days of Jesus, the Roman Empire reigned over much of the civilized world. They conquered territories with their unrivaled military prowess and ruled with an iron fist, installing Roman governors and soldiers in each conquered province to keep the enslaved people in line, to gather taxes, and to manage local affairs.

In 64 BC, the Roman general Pompey had conquered Jerusalem and made Israel into a Roman territory. The Jewish people were forced to pay taxes to Rome and follow Roman law, with very little freedom. Many felt that when the Messiah came, He would spark a revolution that would rise up against the Roman oppressors.

Because of this, Rome was quick to violently crush any sign of rebellion. Jesus' enemies often attempted to trap Him by trying to get Him to make statements that could be perceived as a threat against Roman rule, such as when He was asked whether Jews were required to pay taxes to Rome or not (Mk 12:13-17). They were hoping that Jesus would say something that would provoke the Romans to bring their wrath down upon Jesus.

The Romans attempted to institute their practice of "Emperor worship" in Israel, where the reigning Roman king was praised and worshipped as a god. Because of this, as well as their brutal repression of the Jews, the Romans were universally despised by God's people in Jesus' time.

Holy Scripture

Jewish people in Jesus' time were devoted followers of written Scripture. The Bible that they used had no New Testament, as the New Testament had not yet been written. Instead, their book consisted of our current Old Testament, which at the time was referred to as "The Law and The Prophets. Whenever the phrase "The Law and The Prophets" arises in the Gospels, it is a poetic way of saying, "the Bible" or "Scripture."

The Law

This term is found throughout the Gospels and New Testament and refers to the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. The Hebrew word for this is the "Torah."

The Law includes the story of Creation, the promises given to Abraham and the patriarchs, the history of Israel's exodus from Egypt and journey to the Promised Land, and, most importantly for the Jewish people, the complete list of God's laws for mankind that were revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai.

The Law tells us what God's righteous standards are, what type of behavior pleases Him, and shows us what He considers to be sinful. It is the full revelation of His holiness.

Wanting to please God, the Jewish people were deeply devoted to understanding the Law and following its rules as closely as possible. Much of the drama surrounding Jesus' ministry stemmed from His own statements about what the Law truly meant, which often conflicted with the traditional interpretations that many Jews held to, particularly the Pharisees.

The New Testament makes clear that, because we are sinful by nature, there is no one who can fully obey the Law perfectly (other than Jesus), and that no one is saved because of their adherence to its rules (Rom 3:23; Ac 15:10; Gal 3:11). Rather, the Law was given to show God's perfect standard and thus reveal to us our sinfulness, so that we would understand our need for a Saviour, Jesus Christ (Gal 3:24). Where we deserve punishment because we have broken God's Law, Jesus has saved us from these penalties by personally taking the punishment that we deserved on the cross.

Even though we have been saved from its penalties, the Law is still important for us to understand, as it reveals God's holy standards, and shows us what His perfect expectations are. But if we fall short, we know that we are forgiven in the eyes of God because of what the Saviour has done for us!

The Prophets

In the context of the Gospels, a prophet was one who was inspired by the Holy Spirit to communicate God's will to Israel over the years. They wrote down these revelations, and this collection of writings became known as "The Prophets."

From the book of Isaiah to the book of Malachi, their words were and are considered divine revelation from God, and were taught weekly in the synagogues of Jesus' time.

Israel had a terrible habit of murdering God's prophets over the centuries, because they didn't like what these ministers had to say to them. Once martyred, however, these anointed people would be later honoured and their writings would be included as holy Scripture.

The Temple

The Temple was a large building in Jerusalem where worship, confession, offerings, and prayer were offered to God. It was the holiest site of the Jewish religion. Today, we take for granted that we can worship God anywhere; back then, God could only be worshipped properly at the Temple. Faithful Jews would travel to Jerusalem several times a year for a time of celebration and worship at the Temple (called "Feasts"), and to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of their sins.

It was a beautiful and ornate building, and because the Presence of God dwelled inside, it was greatly revered. To speak against the Temple was considered to be speaking against God Himself.

Jesus was ushering in a new era where the Temple would become obsolete, because God would dwell inside every believer instead of in one man-made building (Jn 14:23). This, however, was something that the people did not yet understand, which made some of Jesus' statements about the Temple very disconcerting to the religious people of the time.

The Kingdom of Heaven

When someone talks about "The Nation of Canada", they can be talking about who we are as a people, what our land is like, how our government functions, what our laws are, how we interact with other nations, what our culture is all about, and how we live every day, as Canadians.

Likewise, when Jesus talks about "The Kingdom of Heaven," He is talking about many things: who God is, what He expects, how His Lordship functions, how we are to treat each other, and overall, how God's kingdom works, and how we are to live in it, every day.

One of the sections of prophecy about the Messiah was that He would be born into the lineage of King David, and sit on David's kingly throne (Isa 9:6-7; 16:5).

Since David was a great warrior and a conqueror who greatly expanded the kingdom of Israel and ruled over it from Jerusalem, many felt that when the Messiah came, He too would come as a conquering warrior, who would defeat the Romans and set up an earthly kingdom similar to what David had done 1000 years earlier.

When Jesus came, He taught extensively on The Kingdom of Heaven, but not as the literal, earthly nation that many of His followers were expecting. Rather, He taught it as something that dwelled inside believers, where we submit to a spiritual kingdom that acknowledges of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and chooses to follow after Him and live His way. A literal kingdom on earth will be established later; in this time, walking in submission to God's Kingdom is a choice and a way of life.

Religious Denominations

There were several different variations of the Jewish faith in Jesus' time, not unlike how our Christian faith can be expressed in many different ways, such as Baptist, Anglican, Pentecostal, etc.

Each Jewish sect worshipped the LORD; however, each group had their own interpretations of Scripture and different beliefs and practices.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees are the most-mentioned group in the Gospels, and were often at odds with the teachings and actions of Jesus.

This group was a religious and political faction, holding strongly to Jewish traditions and fighting to maintain Jewish identity within the conquered Roman territory of Israel. They were fiercely committed to Scripture, and fiercely committed to their interpretation of it. Part of their reason for their doubt concerning Jesus stemmed from the fact that He did not act the way that they believed the Messiah would act, according to their personal interpretation of what Scripture said.

The Pharisees believed that "the Law and the Prophets" were to be considered the Word of God, but they also held just as strongly to their oral traditions – human interpretations of what they felt God's Word meant - which had been passed down from generation to generation.

Often these interpretations included piling on burdensome, man-made rules and regulations as religious requirements, which made following God more difficult. The Pharisees gave these oral traditions the same weight as Scripture, sometimes valuing them even more than Scripture, which often put them at odds with Jesus (*ex. Mt 23:1-4; Mk 7:8-9*).

The Pharisees were extremely popular and well-respected among the people because of their apparent piety, their knowledge of Scripture, and their commitment to the LORD. To be a member of the party of the Pharisees was considered an incredible honour.

Jesus often came into conflict with the Pharisees, regularly correcting them for their self-righteousness and false piety, and for their bad habit of understanding the words of Scripture but missing the true heart of God in their interpretation of it (*ex. Mt 12:1-14; Lk 7:36-50; Lk 10:25-37*).

The Pharisees' jealousy and fury towards Jesus would ultimately lead to them plotting against Him, arresting Him, and turning Him over to the Romans to be crucified (*Jn 11:57; 8:3*).

The Sadducees

The Sadducees were solidly upper class and aristocratic, and were responsible for overseeing the Temple, the holiest site of the Jewish faith, where all Jews came to worship. They controlled the office of the high priest and his council of chief priests (*Acts 5:17*), and so they wielded much power over the Jewish people.

They were a small group, but their wealth and their role in governing the Temple gave them great influence in religious and political affairs.

Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees believed that only "The Law" was God's Word, and did not believe that "The Prophets" were to be considered as Scripture. They also ignored the oral traditions of the Pharisees.

Because of this, these two factions were often in conflict with each other, and agreed on very little, other than the basics of the Jewish faith. They were, however, both distrustful of Jesus and sought to discredit Him whenever possible.

Samaritans

Samaritans are an ethnic and religious offshoot of the Jewish race, which still exists to this day. In the time of the Gospels, they lived in a region called Samaria, located in central Israel.

Centuries before Jesus was born, the Assyrian Empire had invaded Israel and captured most of the nation. They took the Jewish people living there and carried many of them off into captivity.

The Jewish people who remained in the land intermarried with the Assyrian conquerors, creating a new ethnic group which was a combination of the two races, which became the Samaritan people. Because of this, first-century Jews looked down on the Samaritans as inferior, because they were not “truly” descended from Abraham.

The Samaritans also worshipped very differently from the Jews, holding only to the Law and ignoring (and even mocking) most of the Jewish rules and regulations concerning following God. Overall, although believing in God, the Samaritans were known for their lax morality and lukewarm commitment to the LORD.

Far from being just a difference of opinion over religion, the rivalry between Jews and Samaritans was fierce and intense. They mutually loathed each other for their religious, cultural, political, and ethnic differences. Often, the tension between the two groups had erupted into violence and bloodshed, and so they had become bitter enemies who avoided each other at all costs.

Gentiles

The term “Gentile” simply means “a non-Jewish person.” Anyone who is not born into the ethnic Jewish race is a Gentile.

The Law warned Israel against being polluted by people from other nations who didn’t follow the LORD (Dt 7:3; 18:9), so most Jews avoided contact with Gentiles altogether, as they were considered spiritually corrupting (“unclean”). There were strict rules to stay separate from them.

Jesus would buck this trend on several occasions, opening the way for a time when Jews and Gentiles would worship God together, in accordance with God’s master plan. (Isa 42:6; 9:6)

The Authors of the Gospels

Matthew

Matthew was a tax-collector, which was a Jewish person who had agreed to work for the Romans and impose and gather taxes from other Jewish people. They were notoriously corrupt, known for “skimming off the top,” and were viewed by their fellow Jews as traitors who had partnered with the godless Roman oppressors, and who stole from their own people.

He was chosen to follow Jesus, and was one of the ones who wrote down the account of His life.

Matthew chose to write his Gospel as a way to help convince other Jewish people that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Because of this, he uses many terms, prophecies, and quotations from the Jewish Scriptures as a way to point to Jesus as the One that they have been waiting for.

Mark

Mark, also called “John Mark” in the New Testament, was not one of the original disciples who followed Jesus, but was a pillar in the early church. He was a close associate of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, and was active in bringing the Gospel around the world.

Mark was a Jewish man who likely wrote his version of the Gospel to a Gentile (non-Jewish) audience, as evidenced by his detailed explanation of Jewish customs and translations of Jewish words. Traditionally, it is held that he wrote it specifically to encourage the Christian church in Rome, which was undergoing great persecution at the time.

It is believed that Mark’s Gospel was the first Gospel account to be written down, likely as he was told the stories of Jesus by the apostle Peter, who was his mentor.

Luke

Luke was a doctor who became a Christ-follower and partnered with the apostles of the early church to help spread the Gospel. He also wrote the book of Acts.

We are unsure of Luke’s ethnicity; he may have been a Gentile. However, even if he was not, he was certainly writing for a Gentile audience, as evidenced by his introduction in Luke chapter 1.

To that end, part of his emphasis is on the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s kingdom, not just Jews. His medical background is also reflected in the writing, as he shows a keen interest in the healings and miracles of Jesus.

John

John was one of Jesus’ closest and most trusted followers; he refers to himself as “the disciple Jesus loved,” a term indicating a particularly close friendship (Jn 13:23; 20:2). He also wrote the books of 1, 2, & 3 John.

John’s Gospel is different in tone than the other three. While the others emphasize the teachings, parables, and miracles of Jesus, John also emphasizes the statements that Jesus made concerning Himself. He wrote in such a way that Jesus is clearly portrayed as God in the flesh, and as the Messiah, and there is much revealed about the nature of who Jesus is.