

## Handout for “The Jewish Jesus Lesson Part 2”

What did “being a Jew” mean to Jesus? In Judaism today there are a number of different denominations: Orthodox, Hasidic, Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Progressive, Reconstructionist, etc. The thing they all share in common is that they are under the umbrella of Rabbinic Judaism, which didn’t exist at the time of Jesus.

Rabbinic Judaism is the Judaism of the rabbis and generally traces its roots back to the Pharisees and their Oral Law.

The Mishnah was the first great document of Rabbinic Judaism and it was written about 200 CE. Later, other commentaries were added to the Mishnah and it became the Talmud.

There were two other well-known sects around at the time of Jesus – the Sadducees & Essenes. The Sadducees controlled the Temple and the Essenes lived at Qumran. The Essenes lived in their own communes and avoided the towns and cities. The Pharisees remained within the common society, but remained separate in many ways.

The Sadducees and Pharisees disagreed on a number of things, especially the eternity of the soul. The Pharisees believed in the survival of the soul, the revival of the body, the Day of Judgment, and life in the world to come. The Sadducees found nothing in the Torah that supported such doctrines. The main body of priests and the wealthier men held the Sadducee position.

The Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes were secondary in importance to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the center of all Jewish activity and identity. Its importance to the Jewish followers of Jesus can easily be seen by the fact that for over thirty years after crucifixion of Jesus they continued to participate in its rites and frequented its courts. The destruction of the Temple in 70 CE by the Roman army brought things to an end.

The activity in and around the Temple was endless. Priests hurried to and fro, officiating at the sacrifices morning and evening, busying themselves through the day with the Temple needs. Levites assisted the visitors and were responsible for public liturgies that could be seen everywhere. In the outer courts Jews from all parts of the world, speaking many languages, exchanged their foreign money for Temple coin.

Outside, in the city beyond, artisans created the required vessels or repaired broken ones needed at the Temple. Incense makers mixed spices. Animal dealers selected the most perfect beasts for sacrifices. In the schools young priests were taught the ancient law, to which they would conform as had their ancestors before them, exactly as did their fathers that very day.

All the population was either directly or indirectly engaged in some way in the work of the Temple. The city lived for it, by it, and on its revenues. In modern terms, Jerusalem was a center of pilgrimage, and its economy was based upon tourism. More importantly, this was the gateway too heaven – the place where the abode of man and the abode of God touched.

Jews may have differed about matters of law and purity, the meaning of history, and when the Messiah would arrive, but most affirmed the holiness of Jerusalem.

Jews dreamed of being able to see the priests upon their platform, to hear the Levites in their great choir singing the songs of David, and most of all they longed to receive the Priestly Blessing of the Lord in the Temple courts in Jerusalem.