

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN JESUS' GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

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In reading the Gospels and finding in them an itinerary of Jesus' redemptive mission as He journeyed from town to town preaching the Good News revealing the salvation of God, we recognize the importance of looking at the cultural background of each specific region. Today we, in the West, have grown accustomed to living in a thoroughly pluralistic culture surrounded by cultural and religious diversity. There existed such diversity as Jesus traveled with the Apostles preaching the Good News, but often with stronger delineations between cultural, ethnic, or religious groups. Even within Judaism itself there were divisions -- which coexisted, but not always peacefully. In order to better understand the preaching of Jesus as we read His words in the Gospels, it is important to understand the background of the audiences to which He addressed Himself as well as the divisions that often separated His audiences. Jesus, through His gestures and words, sought to overcome these boundaries and establish peace...the peace of which Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. not as the world gives do I give it to you."¹



Within Judaism itself, which was the dominant religion throughout the area of Jesus' ministry, there existed several divisions as mentioned in the Gospels themselves. There existed Pharisees (whom Jesus frequently confronted for their hypocrisy²), Sadducees³, Zealots⁴, Herodians⁵, and Essenes, along with other classifications according to ministry, leadership and education such as the scribes and high priests. The division among the different Jewish sects could be compared to the modern day division among the different Christian denominations, even represented in differing belief systems. For example, Sadducees did not believe in angels, spirits, or the resurrection of the dead⁶ as was apparent in their questioning of Jesus regarding marriage and the resurrection of the dead and in their accusations against St. Paul. The Pharisees were characterized by their stringent adherence to the Law, not only to the written Law but also to the traditions that they developed by "the elders". For this reason, Jesus condemned them of "tying up heavy burdens [hard to carry] and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them."⁷

It was for various and complex reasons that these groups separated while still maintaining unity through the main tenets of the covenantal relationship made between the people of Israel and Yahweh. The relationship between the Sadducees and Pharisees was often strained because of the connection between the Sadducees with the ruling class whom the Pharisees viewed as unfaithful because, especially at the time of Jesus, they cooperated with the imperial government of the Romans. "Sadducees have uniformly been identified with the wealthy, upper classes of the population. Because they were largely derived from the aristocracy, some have argued that they had little influence over the Jewish population. Indeed, the Pharisees' support among the common people acted as a check upon the Sadducees."⁸ This being said these two, being the most dominant of the sects within Judaism, bore the greatest influence on Jewish society at the time, each of them contributing in great part -- with the active collaboration of the high priests -- to the condemnation and execution of Jesus.

As Jesus' mission took him beyond the scope of Judaism, He encountered men and women of other cultures and faith backgrounds. Perhaps His encounters and parables about the Samaritans are most noteworthy. Who are the Samaritans and why were they outcast from Jewish society? "They were descendants of the Jewish nation. Their leaders were taken into captivity by the Assyrians. The Assyrians then brought foreigners to their country (2 Kgs 17:29)."⁹ The region had originally been part of the land settled by Israel, but after being conquered by Assyria with the deportation and resettlement that followed the exactitude of the Jewish faith and practice was lost. The Jewish roots of the region remained and were brought into a kind of religious syncretism with the pagan practices brought from Assyria. It is reminiscent of some of the practices found in contemporary cultures, e.g. santería in some Caribbean cultures.

Yet, the region did not lose all of its Jewish heritage. The people of Samaria maintained a monotheistic faith that was rooted in Moses and the Law as well as in a day of judgment and the return of Moses. All of these tenets maintained a close connection with the Jews, but they recognized only the Pentateuch as inspired text and rejected the rest of Hebrew scripture.¹⁰ In addition to this hugely significant difference from the Jews, many of the people who were resettled in the region after it was conquered by Assyria retained their pagan religions and their practices.

These differences, and the distortion of the Jewish faith, led to a great hostility between the two cultures. The Samaritans were not recognized as Jews and were not permitted to participate in events marking Jewish history, like the re-building of the Temple.¹¹ The attitude seemed to be mutual, however, since Samaritans seemed to avoid using stone vessels in their daily lives in order to distance themselves from an object that carried significance among Jews as indicative of a common Jewish identity.¹² This also explains the surprise of the Samaritan woman that Jesus encounters at the well when He speaks to her and asks her to bring Him water, and then even more so when He continues the conversation.¹³

Jesus was notorious for breaking cultural-social boundaries of His time: eating with sinners and tax collectors, speaking with women, Samaritans and others who have been marginalized. Another specific instance of this is His dialogue with the Greek, Syrophenician woman who intercedes with Him on behalf of her daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit. The exchange occurred in the region of Tyre, a Gentile region with pagan practices and with a troubled history with Israel.¹⁴ The region, although relatively close to Jerusalem (some 20 miles away), practiced polytheistic worship that included the worship of idols and sacrifice. Some recent archeological findings have discovered such things as amulets (in the form of a scarab) with bodies in tombs in the Tyre burial ground, revealing their belief in an afterlife, albeit a sad and somber one, and the need to be prepared for the journey to the place of rest.¹⁵

Perhaps one of the most famous biblical examples of the worship of the region of Tyre is seen in Jezebel and her influence on Ahab.¹⁶ The passage explains that Ahab "began to serve Baal, and worship him,"¹⁷ abandoning the Jewish faith and customs of his people. 'Baal' is the general name for any male Phoenician deity of which the people had many, but they also had female deities named, 'Asherah, Anat, and Ashtarte'.¹⁸ Associated with the worship in Tyre was the service and ministry of the kings and rulers at the time and "also included ecstatic prophets, diviners, and ritual prostitutes of both genders."¹⁹

In the context of the discussion of pagan rituals, it seems necessary to also speak of the worship practices of the Roman empire during their imperial governance over the people of Israel. One of the distinctive elements of the Roman state religion from Judaism or Christianity is that they are "religions of cult and were polytheistic as well as creedless."²⁰ This presents a shift in how we should consider religious practices since it differs so much from the dominant Judeo-Christian background of our society. As 'creedless', Roman worship was directed to other purposes and was not viewed as something intrinsic to the human person, as Christianity views worship today as naturally flowing from the fact that man was created by and for God. Rather, it is argued that in its early form, Roman worship was "suited to the needs of the peasants of the plain of Latium and its hills. These peasants seem to have regarded all the powers that might help, hinder or harm them, as they went about the business of keeping alive, as being in some sense divine...[but] were not in any way personified."²¹ Worship was regarded as necessary for the 'business of staying alive'.

Eventually this vision was adopted by the ruling class as a way of uniting the empire.²² This brought about the close union between the state and religion in ancient Rome, leading to the deification of the emperor whose cult "held the Roman Empire together, [and is] what constituted power in the empire."²³ As such a central part of the function of Roman society, it is logical that "temples in ... Rome were part and parcel of the public life of the city, the statues of the gods and all kinds of sculptures, paintings, and offerings accessible from the agora or forum."²⁴ Yet, at the same time, despite the strong religious environment because of its close relationship to the government of the empire, there were few rigid rituals. "While pagan priests fussed over the details of sacrificial procedure, they did not attempt to impose orthodoxy....Piety (*eusebeia*) was a matter of avoiding excess: between the poles of too little (atheism) and too much (superstition) lay acceptable religion."²⁵ The sacrificial procedure mentioned above rarely referred to brutality, but more often to animal sacrifice.²⁶

It was at the crossroads of these various religious groups that Jesus exercised His ministry and taught His Apostles to minister. An important lesson can be gleaned from this for the task of the New Evangelization in which the Church is called to go out to the margins of society and bring the Truth of Christ to the different creeds professed and practiced in our world. Jesus Himself lived amidst the reality of this kind of religious pluralism, so we must then learn from Him how to effectively bring the Good News to all men, speaking to their hearts through words and gestures in a way they will understand and be able to recognize the Truth presented to them.

¹ John 14:27

² Cf. Mt. 23:15; Lk 11: 37-53

³ Cf. Mt 22:23; Mk 12:18; Acts 23:8

⁴ Cf. Mt 10:4; Mk 3:18

⁵ Cf. Mt 22: 16; Mk 12:13

⁶ Felix Just, SJ. *Jewish Groups at the Time of Jesus*.

⁷ Cf. Mt. 23:4

⁸ Knight, Gregory R. "The Pharisees and the Sadducees: Rethinking their.." Brigham Young University Law

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⁹ Jabini, Franklin S. "Preaching Christ In A Pluralistic World: The Message And Method Of The Mission To Samaria In Acts 8." *Conspectus* (South African Theological Seminary) 9.(2010): 51. MainFile. Web. 22 Sept. 2013, p. 53.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ibid* Jabini, Franklin S. "Preaching Christ In A Pluralistic World: The Message And Method Of The Mission To Samaria In Acts 8." *Conspectus* (South African Theological Seminary) 9.(2010): 51. MainFile. Web. 22 Sept. 2013, p. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid*. p. 54

¹² Cf. Berlin, Andrea M. "Jewish Life Before The Revolt: The Archaeological Evidence." *Journal For The Study Of Judaism: In The Persian Hellenistic & Roman Period* 36.4 (2005): 417-470. Academic Search Premier. Web. 23 Sept. 2013, p. 433.

¹³ Cf. John 4

¹⁴ Cf. Amos 1:9; Joel 4:6

¹⁵ Cf. Aubet, María Eugenia. "The Phoenician Cemetery Of Tyre." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 73.2/3 (2010): 144-155. Academic Search Premier. Web. 23 Sept. 2013.

¹⁶ 1 Kings 16

¹⁷ 1 Kings 16:31

¹⁸ Berlyn, Patricia. "The Biblical View Of Tyre." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34.2 (2006): 73. MainFile. Web. 23 Sept. 2013.

¹⁹ *Ibid*. p. 74.

²⁰ Rexine, John E. "Religion In Greece And Rome." *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 5.2 (1959): 220-221. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 23 Sept. 2013, p. 220.

²¹ Watt, W Montgomery. "The Place Of Religion In The Islamic And Roman Empires." *Numen* 9.(1962): 110-127. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 23 Sept. 2013, p. 116.

²² Cf. *Ibid*. p. 117

²³ Horsley, Richard A. "Religion And Other Products Of Empire." *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion* 71.1 (2003): 13-44. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 23 Sept. 2013, p. 30.

²⁴ Horsley, Richard A. "Religion And Other Products Of Empire." *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion* 71.1 (2003): 13-44. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 23 Sept. 2013, p. 24.

²⁵ Frilingos, Christopher A. "It Moves Me To Wonder": Narrating Violence And Religion Under The Roman Empire." *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion* 77.4 (2009): 825-852. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 23 Sept. 2013, p. 826.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

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