

the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss" (Lk. 23:40,41). Then the centurion gave testimony to Jesus: "Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man" (v. 47). Finally, Joseph of Arimathea "went unto Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus" (v. 52). These all gave a public demonstration of what they thought about Jesus, speaking up in an adverse and hostile environment, surely a good exhortation to us.

Thank you for an excellent magazine with very thoughtful coverage of the Scripture text.

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Thank you for the recent Special Issue on Luke. It would seem that Luke draws particular attention to what may initially seem an unlikely source of exhortation, that is, the publicans. On each occasion they are mentioned we see an example of humility, coupled with a specific demonstration of spiritual insight. Thus we find them enquiring (3:12), following (5:27-30), obeying (7:29,34), hearing (15:1), praying (18:10-13) and seeking (19:1-3) with relation to the things of God. Sadly, this humility was matched by the contrasting pride demonstrated by the attendant Pharisees on nearly all of the above occasions.

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Which Jews?

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With normal careful reading, which should, of course, always be given to the Scriptures, the persons who are the subjects of the various writings are usually clearly defined. In parts of the New Testament, however, the phrase "the Jews" appears, but definition does not come without very careful study of the Scriptural and historical context.

THE JEWS in the time of Jesus' ministry were a deeply divided people. We will first consider the named groups, Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes, which together would make up only a small proportion of the population, before considering the common people and finally seeking to identify the 'Jews' who called for Jesus to be crucified.

The Sadducees

In the Roman era, the appointment of the high priest was made by Roman officers or by petty Jewish kings who were the clients of the Romans. The choice was made from a small group of families of the Sadducean aristocracy, as so succinctly stated in Acts 5:17: "Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees)". Annas, whose influence lasted well beyond the time he was actually high priest, was appointed by Quirinius (Cyrenius in the AV of Luke 2:2), the legate of Syria. Caiaphas, Annas' son-in-law, was appointed high priest by Gratus, who was governor before Pontius Pilate, and served in the years A.D. 18-26.

The Sadducean priests were hated by the people. The Jewish historian Josephus says of them, "They gain only the rich: they have not the people on their side". Josephus was a high-ranking soldier up to the siege of Jerusalem, at which time he defected to the Romans and wrote a

most important history of the Jews. His remarks about the Sadducees are confirmed in a number of Scriptural passages that say they feared the people (Mt. 21:26; 26:3-5; Mk. 11:32; Lk. 22:2; Acts 4:21; 5:26).

The Sadducees mostly lived on the western hill of Jerusalem in sumptuous houses, away from the crowded City of David on the narrow ridge south of the temple. Archaeologists have found remains of their mosaic floors in the Greek and Roman style. Arches have also been found which supported bridges across the Tyropoeon valley (much deeper then than now), by which the priests could cross directly from their homes to the temple without mixing with the crowd.

The Pharisees

The other party in the Sanhedrin was the Pharisees, who opposed the Sadducees for their Hellenistic tendencies and their religious views. Hellenism, or Macedonian Greek culture, was the legacy of the conquests by Alexander the Great and his empire in the Middle East. The fact that the New Testament was written in Greek is an

important part of that legacy. Hellenism had affected the rulers, and especially the Sadducees.

The basic difference was that the Sadducees were the priestly party, but did not believe in resurrection, while the Pharisees were a lay group, who did believe in resurrection. Paul shrewdly used their conflicting views when brought before the Sanhedrin, as described in Acts 23:6,7: "But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren . . . of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided".

The disdainful attitude of those Pharisees in power may be summed up by their question, "Have any of the rulers [that is, the Sadducees] or of the Pharisees believed on him [Jesus]? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed" (Jno. 7:48,49). Some Pharisees were influential, such as the Gamaliels, father and son, and Nicodemus; but many were quite poor and, along with the lower ranks of the priestly families, were badly treated by the aristocratic Sadducees. These poorer priests finally revolted; some followed the apostles—"a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7)—and some went the other way and joined extremist elements.

The Sadducees were naturally concentrated in Jerusalem near the temple. The Pharisees were more widespread. In the north they were to some extent inhibited by the presence of the Rechabites and Kenites and others who had ancient tribal roots there.

The scribes

The scribes, so often mentioned together with the Pharisees, were, like them, an educated lay group, skilled in copying Biblical scrolls and other documents, a skill which before the Exile was confined to the priests. Ezra had established strict rules for accurate copying of these vital documents. By the time of Jesus the scribes functioned as a civil service. Perhaps it was an occupational hazard to see the letter of the Law but to lose sight of its spirit.

The Essenes

The Essenes, if they were the group responsible for the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, were exclusive and kept themselves separate from the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and from the mass of the people.

The common people

What were the beliefs and attitudes of the people generally, those so despised by the priestly party? It was an era of religious excitement and great expectations, especially at the Passover season, which was the festival of freedom, originally freedom from slavery in Egypt. In the first century A.D. those expectations of freedom were transferred to freedom from domination by Rome.

A major difference in the time of Jesus was between the north and south of the land, giving rise to tensions between the Galileans and those of Jerusalem and Judea. In places in the New Testament the phrase 'the Jews' may have the narrower sense of Judeans. Northerners spoke with a different accent. When Peter followed Jesus to the courtyard of Caiaphas' palace, a young girl and other bystanders recognised him as a Galilean by his accent (Mt. 26:73; Mk. 14:70). The accent originated from the time after the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom and the replacement of the population by peoples from elsewhere.

This division gave rise in time to various groups, including the Rechabites, Kenites, and others, such as the Essenes. These regarded themselves as the elect of Israel of the latter days, and were fiercely independent. The Jerusalemites tended to refer to the northern regions as 'the Land of Damascus', and to say, inaccurately, "out of Galilee ariseth no prophet" (Jno. 7:52).

The Jews

Of all the groups mentioned in this short review, can we pick out one that is truly representative and could speak for the whole of Jewry? I think not. If we read or hear the phrase 'the Jews', should we not ask ourselves, Which Jews?, that is, To which Jews is reference being made?

In John's Gospel the term 'the Jews' occurs over fifty times, whereas it occurs only sixteen times in the Synoptic Gospels. Brother John Carter makes the point that "It is not used of the people as a whole, but of the authorities as representing the nation".¹

The Sanhedrin's concern

The festivals were worrying times for the Sanhedrin. Especially at Passover, the Festival of Freedom, there was excitement and heightened expectations among the people. On one occasion an Egyptian 'prophet' led a crowd to the Mount

1. *The Gospel of John*, p. 28.

The Passover festival

Passover, *Pesach* in Hebrew, is one of the three pilgrim festivals to be celebrated in Jerusalem by Jews at least once in their lifetime if possible. The other festivals are Pentecost (*Shavuot* in Hebrew, also known as Weeks or First Fruits), fifty days after Passover, and Tabernacles (from the Latin, *Sukkot* in Hebrew, also known as Booths), in September or October.

Passover starts on Nissan 14 of the Hebrew calendar, in March or April according to the Gregorian calendar, that is, spring in the northern hemisphere. When the temple was standing, Paschal lambs, one for the nation and one for each 'family' of ten, were slaughtered at the altar in the afternoon before the eve of Passover, Nissan 14, which started at dusk. The Passover meal was held that evening. Both the Passover and the weekly sabbath celebrations were and are very much family events.

Nowadays for the Passover meal a special plate, with five spaces for symbolic lamb and other symbolic foods, is placed at the head of the festive table, together with another plate or basket for unleavened bread (*matsah*, plural *matsot*). Naturally the unleavened wafers have to be broken. For the sabbath there is a special loaf (*challah*), which has to be cut. At both meals a small amount of wine is drunk by all participants, after the appropriate blessings and thanks. These start with the words, "Blessed art Thou O LORD our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the soil" over the bread or "the fruit of the vine" over the wine.

The Passover meal, held in the evening of the start of Nissan 15, may fall on any day of the week. For example, in 2006 the meal was held on a Wednesday evening, but in 2005 the meal was held on a Saturday evening following the end of the sabbath.

To clear up a point that may confuse attempts to date the Passover, in Jewish practice festivals are called sabbaths (that is, 'rests' on which no mundane work may be done), in addition to the weekly sabbath.



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of Olives and caused a riot, which was put down by the Romans with great loss of life, though the Egyptian escaped (mentioned in Acts 21:38 and by Josephus).

Barabbas and his accomplices were already in custody at the Passover when Jesus was crucified: "there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection" (Mk. 15:7). An important point emerges in John 18:40, which describes Barabbas as "a robber". The Greek word is *lēstēs* (Strong 3027). Josephus uses that word in the sense of 'man of violence'; perhaps nowadays we would use 'terrorist'.

From the Sanhedrin's point of view there was now this Jesus to deal with, a popular preacher from turbulent Galilee. Rumour about him and Lazarus was rife, and the Sanhedrin was alarmed that Jesus would prove to be another rabble-rouser. At a hastily convened meeting of the Sanhedrin they said, "What are we accomplishing? ... Here is this man performing many miraculous

signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place [the temple] and our nation". Caiaphas, the high priest, said in response, "You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (Jno. 11:47-49, NIV).

What was the actual accusation against Jesus? There had to be some semblance of legality. It was sedition; he was allegedly trying to make himself a king and overthrow the Roman power. Crucifixion was not the punishment for theft; we will consider the 'thieves' who were crucified with him shortly. Crucifixion was the Roman penalty for sedition, and was a cruel and very public lesson to all that it did not pay to revolt against the Romans. So the plan for a night-time arrest and a hurried trial was set in train, master-minded by the high priest. He needed someone who could recognise Jesus in the dim light. The treachery of Judas Iscariot was opportune.

The high priest's fears were soon confirmed. The disciples and crowds of followers of Jesus escorted him from Bethany to Jerusalem with all the signs of the Messiah: riding on a lowly ass, not a war horse; strewing his way with palm fronds and even their cloaks; singing psalms. They went straight to the temple.

When Jesus was arrested his question was, "Be ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and staves?" (Lk. 22:52). He used the word *lēstēs*, which, as explained above, means 'man of violence', which made the question more forceful than is apparent in AV. It also explains why the arresting party consisted not only of henchmen of the Sanhedrin but also of Roman troops led by a very senior officer, a *chiliarch*, "captain" in the AV (Jno. 18:12).

The accusation

When Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, Pilate at first saw him as a harmless religious crank, though he quickly recognised some of his quality. Pilate was inclined to dismiss him, especially as it would infuriate the priestly party. Pilate had to work with the Sadducean hierarchy, but he despised them, just as most of the people hated them. But their threat, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar" (Jno. 19:12, NIV), was their trump card. In Matthew 26:65 and Mark 14:64 the high priest uses the term "blasphemy". We tend nowadays to give it a solely religious meaning as rebellion against God. When the AV was written, and in earlier eras, the 'divine right' of kings and other rulers was strongly in force, and all opposition to them was blasphemy. Thus the high priest used the term in formulating the charge against Jesus.

The question arises, Why did the high priest try so frantically to release Barabbas? Why not simply add Jesus to the group for execution? One more would not matter to the Romans. The name 'Barabbas' may itself be a clue. It is Aramaic and means 'Son of the father'. The term 'father' was often used of the chief priest (as it also is for the pope). Perhaps a son of the high priest had been caught up, rightly or wrongly, in the arrests of seditionists. Jesus would be a convenient substitute. That would be a possible explanation of the extraordinary actions of Caiaphas, but it remains speculation.

Turning to the "thieves" (Mt. 27:38; Mk. 15:27), the usual Greek word for 'thief', *kleptēs* (from which we derive the word 'kleptomania', meaning 'a compulsion to steal'), is not used. Again it is the word *lēstēs*, 'man of violence'. Thus Jesus was crucified between two terrorists, not thieves. The image of the 'penitent thief' is well known, even by those not particularly well versed in the Scriptures, but it is based on a poor translation.

Which Jews called for Jesus' death?

Now it remains to ask some important questions. It is sometimes said that the Jews were fickle, first honouring Jesus and then condemning him to death. Is that view credible? It is based on the assumption that those who accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem with all the signs of the Messiah were the very same people who clamoured so soon afterwards for him to be crucified. Were they indeed the ordinary people who loved Jesus, or were they the self-serving appointees of the Romans? Are we to believe that the hated high priest could so easily change the allegiance of the people?

Who were they who in the course of the trial cried out, "We have no king but Caesar", and, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Jno. 19:15; Mt. 27:25)? Are we to believe that it was the ordinary people with their longings for independence and freedom? Or was it the high priest's party, anxious to display their loyalty to their masters and to keep their positions? The Sadducees needed to keep on side with the Romans to protect themselves from the people who hated them. The "multitude" that was stirred up to call for Jesus' execution was made up of the henchmen of the priestly party, an early example of 'rent-a-crowd'.

The Sadducees' oath was soon fulfilled. Their sect fell and served no further purpose after the fall of the temple in A.D. 70. The most bitter irony is that the legacy of the Medieval church is the widespread belief that the abject self-serving Sadducean priesthood was representative of all Jews of that era, and, worse still, even of all subsequent generations of Jews.

So, when we hear or read the phrase, "the Jews", we should ask ourselves, To which Jews is reference being made?

"Used by St John more than seventy times, ['the Jews'] is to be understood generally of the representatives of the nation, and of the inhabitants of Judea, and of these as opposed to the teaching and work of Christ". H. W. Watkins on John 1:19 in *Ellicott's Commentary*