The Inter-Testamental Period
Bruce Satterfield
Department of Religious Education,
Brigham Young University - Idaho

The Greek Period
In 334 B.C., the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great, conquered the Persian empire including Judea, the name given to the province where Jerusalem was located. In 323 B.C., Alexander died and his empire, which extended from Greece to India, was divided among his four generals. Judea came under the control of Ptolemy, who ruled Egypt and Palestine, while Syria and Babylon was ruled by Seleucus. However, in 198 B.C., Antiochus III, a Seleucid king, conquered Palestine, including Judea. Judea remained under Seleucian control until the Jews gained independence as a result of the Maccabean revolt which began in 167 B.C. This will be discussed later.

Hellenism
Understanding the Greek, or Hellenistic, period is important in the study of the New Testament. Though the Romans ruled the world of the New Testament, it was the Greek culture that predominated. Of this period, Frederick Murphy has written: “Alexander believed in the superiority of Greek culture, but was at the same time somewhat open to other cultures. . . Alexander wanted to put into practice the idea that all the world was a single city and all people inhabitants of that city. Alexander was pursuing a cosmopolitan ideal (from the Greek kosmos meaning ‘world’ and polis meaning ‘city’), but it was an ideal based on the conviction of the superiority of Greek views of the world and Greek institutions.” Under Alexander and his successors, Hellenism (the Greek way of life) was aggressively promoted.

As can be seen from Murphy’s comment, the main institution of Greek culture was the Greek city. These cities were ruled by the citizens (citizens were usually the land-owners). Common to all Greek cities was the agora, the marketplace. The agora was a large open square, often surrounded by porticoes (Greek: stoa), porches with open sides and a roof held up by rows of columns. The agora also served as a marketplace for ideas where philosophers could get a hearing. Religious missionaries could do likewise.” You could also find theaters and gymnasiums in a Greek city. “In the theater, plays immortalized Greek mythology and society was both praised and satirized. The gymnasium was much more than a place for sports, although sports were an important medium of social interaction and helped to substantiate the Greek idea of a sound mind in a strong body. Gymnasia also served varied social functions, from meeting places for political clubs, to a kind of high school for Greek boys. The high school taught the classics and trained the boys militarily. The gymnasium was a key vehicle for preserving, spreading, and transmitting Greek culture.” Temples were also a major part of the Greek city. “Worship of the city’s deities was a civic duty. Since there was no division between civic and religious life, shrines were found in gymnasia, theaters, and elsewhere.” The Greek city was the main instrument for the spread of Hellenism by Alexander and his successors. “They did so by building new cities, restructuring and chartering old cities of the Greek model, and organizing clusters of towns as a city.”

The Hellenization of Jerusalem
Jerusalem experienced some Hellenization after the Greek period began. However, when Jerusalem fell under the control of the Selucids during the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus III, the Hellenization of Jerusalem was greatly accelerated. During this time, the position of the high priest became appointed by the Seleucid king. This began when Jason, of the Oniad family and a descendent of Zadok, took the office of the high priest from his brother, Onias III, by bribing Antiochus III. Jason changed Jerusalem from a temple-state to a Greek city-state with a governing council called the Sanhedrin. Further, a gymnasium was also established in Jerusalem. He also renamed the city to Antioch.

Jason lost his position to Menelaus who offered a higher bribe to Antiochus III. Menelaus was not a descendent of Zadok. The Jews who were steeped in the law of Moses found all of this unacceptable. There appeared at this time a clear division between the Jews. The rich aristocracy, of whom the high priests always belonged whether they were descended from Zadok or not, favored Hellenism while those who clung the law of Moses opposed it.

The Maccabean Revolt
In 175 B.C., Antiochus Epiphanes became king of the Seleucid kingdom. He made even greater efforts to Hellenize Jerusalem. However in 168-167 B.C., resistance to these measures came to a head when Antiochus Epiphanes forbade Jewish rituals in the temple in Jerusalem and had an altar to Zeus placed atop of the altar of sacrifice. The resistance came from the family of
Hasmon and a group called the *hasidim* - a religious party within Judaism devoted wholly to the law of Moses. The revolution has become known as the Maccabean revolt, named for Judas Maccabaeus, the leader of the rebels.

Though the war went on for several years, by 165 B.C., Jerusalem had been freed of Selucid control and the temple was rededicated. Every year since then, Jews celebrate the rededication of the temple (known as the Feast of Dedication in the New Testament). This celebration is known as *Hanukkah*.

**The Hasmonean Dynasty**

In 128 B.C., the Jews finally won their independence and Judea became an independent state. Judea was ruled by the Hasmonean family, the leader of which became the high priest. However, the various successors to the position of the high priest became more and more Hellenistic themselves. During the rule of John Hyrcanus (128-104 B.C.), the spiritual descendants of the *Hasidim*, known as the Pharisees, began to openly oppose the Hasmonean high priesthood. John Hyrcanus switched his loyalty to the aristocratic Zadokites who had become known as the Sadducees. The Sadducees, who were opposed to the Pharisees, were mainly the wealthy priests and Jewish aristocracy. The Sadducees had control of the temple and from this time until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D., the High Priest was a Sadducee.

John Hyrcanus’ son, Aristobulus I, (104-103 B.C.), became the high priest and took upon himself the title of king, like other Hellenistic kings. During his days, he conquered “the Galilee of the Gentiles” and began to establish Jewish colonies in that region.

**The Roman Rule**

The Hasmonean rule continued until Judea was conquered by the Romans in 63 B.C. The Romans, however, made Hyrcanus II, who had been King of Judea, both the High Priest and the *ethnarch*, or “ruler of the people,” but withheld from him the title of king. Hyrcanus II was personally responsible to the Roman governor, to whom the Jews had to pay an annual tribute or tax. During the next several years, the Jews were unhappy about the government and especially Hyrcanus II as High Priest. Though there was much contention in Judea from both in and outside sources, Hyrcanus retained his position. However, in 48 B.C., Rome placed Hyrcanus and Judea under the procuratorship of the governor of Idumaea, Antipater. Idumaea was the area of land stretching from the southern hills of Judea to the northern part of the Negev. It had been annexed by the Hasmoneans in about 120 B.C. At that time, many of its inhabitants voluntarily converted to Judaism, including the father of Antipater, also named Antipater.

**Herod the Great**

In 39 B.C., the Roman Senate approved Antipater’s son, Herod, as King of Judea. However, Herod had to take possession of his new kingdom by force. In 37 B.C., Herod conquered Judea and Jerusalem.

In order to create a stable kingdom, Herod “chose dependency on Rome as the best strategy for assuring the welfare of the nation and of Judaism in general. This may have been his most important and successful decision. As future events seem to prove, Herod’s prudence in accepting the political realities of Rome’s dominance in the first century was a better alternative to the irresponsibility and impulsiveness of the political and religious zealots that brought Judea in direct and open conflict with Rome in A.D. 66. His commitment to Rome and to Judaism penetrated his policies in various degrees.”

He accomplished this stability through several means. First, Herod quickly moved to eliminate any opposition to his rule from within his kingdom. This was a policy which continued throughout his life and one for which he has become most noted. He was not above killing anyone, his wife and children included, who posed a threat, real or supposed, to his kingdom. In this way, he established law and order in the kingdom. Second, he reduced the power of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews, by making them like the privy councils of other Hellenistic kings. They were made up of friends, family, and others who were allied in their thinking with Herod. Third, Herod made several attempts to be fair and partial to non-Jewish subjects in his kingdom. Fourth, Herod’s fiscal policies and building projects brought economic prosperity and security to Judea.

It should be noted that Herod’s building projects are some of the grandest in ancient Palestine. He had several projects throughout Judea and in other areas including Antioch, Beirut, Damascus, and Rhodes. Though a complete listing is beyond the scope of this work, a few will be mentioned. He built several fortresses including the impressive Herodium (a virtual man made mountain where Herod eventually died), Machareus (where John the Baptist was imprisoned and killed), the Antonia Fortress (on the northwest corner of the temple), and Masada. He also built an impressive city with an artificial harbor that he named Caesarea (often called Caesarea Maritima to distinguish it from Caesarea Philippi built by Herod’s son, Philip). This became the city where the Roman governors were headquartered. But his most impressive building was the temple complex built to replace the edifice constructed by the returning Jews from Babylon. The temple complex was
the largest structure of its kind in the Roman world.

Herod the Great is often portrayed as a cruel, paranoid, vindictive tyrant. Yet it is hard to assess his inner motives. Much of our information regarding Herod comes from Josephus, a Jewish historian living several decades after Herod’s death. But it is apparent that Josephus had a strong bias against Herod that seems to have tainted his writings. However one assesses Herod’s life, it must be noted that he brought respect and security to the Jewish people during his reign, both in Judea and throughout the Roman empire. As already mentioned, this was brought about, in part, by eliminating those whose acts he considered subversive.

Beginning of the New Testament

It was in this context that Christ was born (see Matthew 2). Upon hearing the tale of the birth of “King of the Jews,” it appears that Herod moved quickly to eliminate another potential threat to the stability he worked so hard to achieve. But Joseph was warned in a dream of Herod’s intentions. Joseph took Mary and the babe and fled to Egypt for safety. 

When Herod died, Joseph returned to Judea. Apparently, Joseph and Mary were going to live in Bethlehem, but they found out the Herod’s son, Archelaus, was reigning in his father place, so they went back to Nazareth.

Succession to Herod’s Rule

It was several years after Christ was saved by divine intervention from the sword of Herod’s soldiers before He began his ministry. There had been much change in the political structure of Judea and regions round about. A brief review of these changes is necessary to help complete an understanding of the New Testament.

After Herod’s death in A.D. 4, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus divided Herod’s kingdom among three of Herod’s sons. The southern districts of Judea, Idumaea, and Samaria were given to Archelaus; the northeastern districts of Paneas (modern Banias), Batanea, and Gaulanitis were given to Philip; and the northwestern district of Galilee and the southeastern district of Perea were given to Antipas. None of these men were given the title of king: Archelaus was granted the title of ethnarch while the other two brothers were given the lower titles of tetrarchs.

It was clear that if the teenaged Archelaus proved himself an able ruler, he would later be made a full king. He was not. After nine years, Augustus banished him to Vienna where he died in A.D. 14. His region was made a Roman province governed by a Procurator, the most famous of which was Pontius Pilate before whom Christ was tried. 

Philip’s region contained a few Jewish subjects but was mostly gentile. He built his capital at Paneas, one of the sources of the Jordan river and a place where the Greek god, Pan, was worshiped. He called it Caesarea Philippi. There he built a temple to the god Pan. He died in A.D. 34 after thirty-eight years of quiet reign.

Antipas, whose reign resembled his father’s, was the ablest of Herod’s sons. Initially he reigned from Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee about 4 miles northwest of Nazareth. But tiring of the winters, he built a new capital on the southwestern shores of the sea of Galilee, naming it for the new emperor of Rome, Tiberius. He fell in love with the wife of his half-brother (named Philip, not the tetrarch) and married her, an obviously illegal action. This action was denounced by John the Baptist. In response, Antipas imprisoned John in Marchaeus and eventually had him killed. Eventually, Antipas was banished by the Emperor Caligula. He died in Gaul in A.D. 39.

Caligula gave Herod’s grandson, Agrippa, the region ruled by Philip. He was also given the title of king. He was also given Antipas’ region when he was deposed. Eventually, Caligula gave Judea, Idumaea, and Samaria to Agrippa. Therefore, Agrippa became ruler over all the kingdom his grandfather had governed. Upon the acquisition of Judea, Agrippa moved to Jerusalem where he attempted to prove his orthodoxy as a Jew. Called Herod the King in Acts 12, Agrippa began a persecution of the early Christians in which James of Peter, James and John was killed.

Acts 12 describes the gruesome death of Agrippa in A.D. 44. Because Agrippa’s son, Agrippa II, was only seventeen at the time of his death, Judea-Samaria was placed under the rule of a series of Roman governors. As in the former days of Roman governorship, these governors ruled from Caesarea Maritima. It was in the days of one of these governors, Felix, that Paul was arrested by Roman military and taken to Caesarea Maritima (Acts 23:24). Felix heard Paul’s case (Acts 24). Festus replaced Felix as governor and desired that Paul be tried by the Jews. But Paul, being a Roman, claimed his right to be tried by Caesar (Acts 25). At that time, Agrippa II, who had been given a small portion of his father’s kingdom to rule, came to Caesarea Maritima and desired to hear Paul (Acts 26). Paul’s impassioned defense of Christianity was so powerful, Agrippa II exclaimed, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” Paul replied, “I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am” (Acts 26:29).

As already seen, it is in this political setting of Herod’s successors that the New Testament takes place.
Religious/Political Parties

The following are selected statements from various New Testament scholars concerning the religious parties that existed within Judaism during the intertestamental or the second temple period.

Introduction

“The Judaism of the intertestamental period is a very complex system indeed comprising many religious and political groups (these two ideas can hardly be separated), and a multitude of ordinary Jews who belonged to no identifiable party. Three important parties mentioned by Josephus are the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes, to which he adds a fourth, later to be known as the Zealots, which made its appearance around the year A.D. 6.”

Sadducees

We know very little regarding the Sadducees. The reason being as Samuel Sandmel has written, “The Sadducees are known to us essentially from their portrayal by their critics or opponents, including bitter ones. If any Sadduce ever wrote anything, not a line has come down to us.” Consequently, our only knowledge of Sadducees come from their enemies. Not a good source! Nevertheless, the following scholars have gleaned the following concerning the Sadducees.

Frederick J. Murphy wrote: “Josephus, the New Testament, and rabbinic literature all speak of the Sadducees, but very little is really known about them. All three sources contrast the Sadducees and the Pharisees. In rabbinic literature, ritual purity and sabbath observance are debated by the two groups. The rabbis supply little information for reconstructing Sadducean organization or beliefs. The only two solidly established traits of the Sadducees are that they were members of the ruling class, and that they did not believe in resurrection.”

Stephen E. Robinson has given this view concerning the make up and political role and influence of the Sadducees: “The Sadducees were a small party of very wealthy and influential aristocrats. Most Sadducees were priests, and the high priestly families (those families from whom the high priests traditionally came) controlled the sect and its membership. The term Sadducee comes from the name of Zadok, who had been high priest at the time of King Solomon, and whose descendants had served in the office ever since, except for the time of the early Maccabean period. The name thus underscores the nature of the Sadducees as an exclusive circle of wealthy and influential high priestly families and their followers.

“The Sadducees controlled the Jerusalem Temple and derived their wealth, power, and influence from it. The temple generated tremendous revenues from the sacrifices and concession, and these riches were controlled by the Sadducees. The Sadducean high priest was also the head of the Sanhedrin (the governing council of the Jews), and therefore Sadducees were also very prominent in government. In any society, it is the aristocracy that resists changes in the status quo, since they benefit from things as they are. Thus, politically the Sadducees cooperated with the Romans in return for the continued exercise of their many privileges. But it also followed that the Sadducees exerted almost no moral influence on the common people, who resented them for their aristocratic attitudes and for their cooperation with Rome.”

Concerning this same topic D.S. Russell wrote, “We can picture them, then, as a small and select group of influential and wealthy men who exercised considerable power in the civic and religious life of the nation. The powerful priesthood was represented within this social aristocracy by the High Priest and his retinue and by other leading priestly officials. Not all the priests, however, were Sadducees; some indeed were members of the rival party of the Pharisees. Nor, as we have seen, were all Sadducees priests, for in the party were wealthy traders and high-ranking government officials. They were in fact a company of people, priestly and lay, who enjoyed the same social standing and were determined to maintain the existing state of society both in Church and State. They did not begin, therefore, as a religious party, but because of their close association with the Temple and the priesthood, and because politics and religion could not readily be separated from each other, theirs gradually assumed a religious character over against the party of the Pharisees.”

Russell continued his discussion of the Sadducean politics and religion in these words: “In politics and in religion they were conservative in outlook, determined at all costs to maintain the status quo in both State and Church. As conservatives in politics they stood for the Israelite ideal of a theocratic state under the leadership of the High Priest. For this reason they were suspicious of the popular eschatological faith in the coming of a Messiah: as such teaching was a menace to the existing social and political order and had to be handled with the greatest care. As conservative in religion they set themselves to preserve all that they believed to be best in the priestly tradition. In particular they championed the observance of the Temple ritual and the prerogative of the priests to interpret the Law, maintaining that their interpretations, together with priestly ordinances and usages arising out of them, were in themselves a sufficient guide for those who sought to obey the commands of God. From an early date their authority as interpreters of the
Law met a serious challenge from the Pharisees, who developed their own oral tradition of interpretive teaching (see below). The Sadducees rejected this tradition and stoutly defended the Torah as alone authoritative; it is unlikely, however, that they denied the sacredness of the Prophets and the Writings . . . "11 The Prophets and the Writings are all of the Old Testament aside from the Torah or five books of Moses.

The Pharisees

Russell introduced his discussion on the Pharisees in these words: “Over against the Sadducees stood the Pharisees, who in matters of religion were as progressive as their rivals were conservative. Although priests were to be found in their ranks, theirs was essentially a laymen’s movement, whose members, unlike the aristocratic Sadducees, were drawn largely from the middle class. Although they were first and foremost a religious party they were not averse to political power, and in the course of the years acquired for themselves an influential position in the state.”

Robinson has written: “In the first century, the most prominent of the Jewish sects was the Pharisees. The precise origin of the term Pharisee is unclear, but it seems most likely that it is derived from the Hebrew word parash and should be interpreted to mean something like ‘separatist.’ Certainly the Pharisees prided themselves on being ‘set apart’ or ‘separated’ from the rest of the Jews by their strict observance of the minutest requirements of the law of Moses. According to Josephus, there were approximately six thousand Pharisees in the first century. They were the party that was most popular with the masses, and their interpretation of the scriptures was the one most readily accepted, even by those who were not themselves Pharisees. They were the popular party, the religion of the great mass of Jews—even through their actual membership was small.

“Much of the Pharisees’ influence was due to their control of what is called the ‘oral law.’ The Pharisees claimed that Moses had received the law on Mount Sinai in two parts—one written and one oral. The written part of the law made up the five books of Moses, which were accepted by all Jews: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But according to the Pharisees, another part of the law had also been given to Moses orally and had been handed down and preserved by the Pharisees and their predecessors. This oral law, as interpreted and expanded by the Pharisees, was sometimes called ‘the tradition of the Fathers.’ Wherever the written scripture failed to give clear instructions, the Pharisees appealed to the oral law (which they alone controlled) for answers. . . .

“The Pharisees’ strength was in the local synagogues, which they controlled; and their religious leaders were called rabbis (meaning teachers or masters). In matters pertaining to national government or to the administration of the temple and its rituals, they recognized the authority of the Sadducean priesthood, for the Pharisees were generally scholars and preachers rather than priests.”

Concerning the “oral law,” Russell wrote: “It was a body of ‘decisions’ or ‘judgements’ in oral form, explanatory of the written Law and developing alongside it. It is generally referred to as ‘the tradition of the elders’ or . . . ‘the oral tradition’. It is possible that part of this tradition is to be traced back into pre-exilic times and represents older traditions and collections of laws which may have been lost or destroyed but were preserved in oral form by succeeding generations. Much of it, however, is based rather on custom and usage that grew up in relation to some particular command or ordinance in Scripture. Take as an example the command about doing work on the Sabbath day. The command itself was clear enough; but what was meant by ‘work’? The written law left this undefined. Where Scripture could not help, however, custom could. Certain things were ‘done’ and other things were ‘not done’. Thus custom was able to provide a well-defined code of its own as binding as the written Law, which took its place as oral tradition alongside the word of Scripture. Sometimes laws of this kind could find no real justification in the written Torah; nevertheless they could be justified as forming ‘a fence round the Torah’ (Pirke Aboth 1,1) i.e. they gave a danger signal, as it were, which halted a man before he came within reach of breaking the law. For the most part, however, the oral tradition consisted of authoritative regulations arising out of an exegesis of biblical laws of a civil or religious kind. This teaching was called Halakhah Hebrew halach, to walk) because it showed how men should walk in obedience to the Law of God in every detail.”

I. Epstein noted that “The earliest method of teaching the oral law was by means of a running commentary, Midrash, on the biblical text. When the exposition yielded a legal teaching, the result was Midrash Halachah; if nonlegal, ethical, or devotional teaching, it was Midrash Haggadah (‘narration’).” In the last half of the Second Temple period “a new method of teaching began to emerge as a rival to that of the Midrash—a method in which the oral law was taught without reference to the Holy Writ. This evidently represented a progressive method of teaching in that it enabled the teachers to put on the order of the day any such subjects as they desired without being tied to the sequence of biblical texts.” Without “the aid to memory which the Holy Writ could supply, the oral law could be imparted and retained chiefly
by means of repetition. Hence the name Mishna ('repetition') was given to the new method of teaching.

Epstein continues: “The adoption of the Mishna method did not, however, oust altogether the older Midrash form.” In fact, “Midrash and Mishna continued to exist side by side as media for teaching Halachah.” After the time of Christ at around 200 A.D., the oral law taught in the Mishna style was codified and written down by Rabbi Judah the Prince and became known as the Mishna. “Rabbi Judah’s Mishna soon gained wide recognition and became the authoritative canon of the oral law and the main basis of instruction and principal subject of study, investigation, and research for the schools, both in Palestine and in Babylon for several centuries. The Mishna of Rabbi Judah, however, contained only a minor fraction of the legal material current in the Palestine academies. There were many additional and rival collections that issued from contemporary authorities of Rabbi Judah . . . which preserved teachings which Rabbi Judah had for one reason or another thought fit to exclude and which often went counter to his teachings. These ‘external’ or ‘additional’ teachings . . . could not be ignored in the discussions of Rabbi Judah’s Mishna; nor could the oral traditions and teachings transmitted in Midrash form.” In two large gatherings held at different times by different sets of Jewish scholars, discussions were held concerning this matter. One group met in Babylon and the other in Palestine. “Their endeavor was to interpret the Mishna, explain its obscurities, discuss its contents, trace back its teachings to the Bible, and harmonize contradictions in oral traditions as emanating from different authorities or schools.” The product of these two groups has become known as the Gemara “which, together with the Mishna of Rabbi Judah, constitutes the Talmud.” Each group produced a differing Talmud. They have become known as the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud. Talmud forms the backbone of modern Judaism.

The Essenes

Concerning this religious party, Robinson wrote: “According to Josephus, the third major Jewish sect was the Essenes. It appears that there may have been more that one type of Essene, but those that are best known to us lived in a desert community on the shores of the Dead Sea. During the first Jewish revolt, when the Roman tenth legion scourcd the Jordan River valley, the Essenes of this community, now called Qumran, buried their religious books in nearby caves. In 1947, the caves were discovered, and many of the books have come to light as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Through the scrolls, we know a great deal about the Essenes of Qumran, although how they differed from other Essenes is still unclear.

“Basically, Essenes believed that the Sadducean Jerusalem priesthood was illegitimate and that all who associated with Sadducean priests were apostate. The Essenes withdrew into their own wilderness community to wait for the end of the world and their own vindication. They believed that they were living in the last days, that the end of the world was near at hand, and that the Messiah would soon come to establish his kingdom and restore legitimate priests (Essenes, of course) to serve in a renewed temple. In the meantime, they withdrew as much as possible from what they perceived to be an apostate Jewish society.

“Essenes were more strict and rigorous than even the Pharisees, whom they called ‘seekers after smooth things,’ that is, those who look for the easy way. Yet in their beliefs they were very close to the Pharisees, and it appears that the Essenes and the Pharisees were two branches of a single movement that had its beginnings in Maccabean times. Like the Pharisees, the Essenes believed in the validity of some kind of oral law. They believed in the existence of angels and demons, in the continued existence of the spirit after death, and in the resurrection of the body. Like the Pharisees, the Essenes were anti-Roman, and in the first Jewish revolt, Essenes were active in the fighting.”

The Zealots

With regards to the Zealots Robinson wrote: “Strictly speaking, the Zealots should probably be considered as a branch of Pharisaism, because their theology was basically that of Pharisees. However, the Zealots were rabid nationalists who actively resisted Roman rule of the Jews even to the point of armed insurrection.

“Zealots believed that if Jews would only rise up and fight, God would send them victory as he had in the days of Judah the Maccabee. The Zealots, as an article of faith, would recognize no authority in Palestine but that of God and his appointed servants, and they rejected and kind of compromise or accommodation with Rome. . . Toward the end of the first century A.D., the Zealot movement grew stronger as the excesses of the Roman governors grew increasingly intolerable. The militant wing of the Zealot movement, called the Sicarii (Latin for ‘the Daggers’), practiced political assassination and other acts of terrorism directed both at the Roman occupation government and at those Jews, primarily the chief priests and scribes, who collaborated with Rome. Finally, in A.D. 66, the Zealots were able to precipitate what they had long sought, a general revolt against Rome. The war lasted for seven years, and when it was over Jerusalem had been conquered, the temple had been destroyed, and thousands upon
thousands of Jews had lost their lives. Thousands of the survivors were sold into slavery and dispersed throughout the Roman world. Zealots, Essenes, and Sadducees were all gone forever; only the Pharisees remained to rebuild Judaism in their own image and create rabbinic or ‘orthodox’ Judaism, the Talmudic or classical Judaism of a later time.”

The ‘Am Ha-aretz

“The vast majority of the population in Jewish Palestine did not go to church, that is, they did not have an active affiliation with any of the Jewish sects. Most people accepted the views of the Pharisees on the interpretation of the law, but few actually became Pharisees. These nonaffiliated Jews were called the ‘am ha-aretz, the ‘people of the land,’ and they made up probably 90 percent of the crowds and multitudes to which John the Baptist and Jesus preached.”

The Scribes

Concerning the development of the occupational class known as scribes, Russell has given us this insight: “From an early stage in the development of the written Torah as sacred Scripture the need must have arisen for both definition and interpretation of its contents. For some considerable time after Ezra it was not always self-evident what exactly constituted the Law of God, nor was it clear how particular laws were to be applied in everyday life. To meet this need there emerged a body of men known as Sopherim or ‘scribes’, in succession to Ezra (described in Ezra 7:6 as ‘a ready scribe in the torah of Moses’), who gradually won for themselves an authoritative place within Judaism. . . Although they belonged to the priestly caste, being members of priestly or Levitic families (cf. 2 Chron. 34:13; Neh. 8:7-13), their interpretations of Scripture were not confined to cultic laws and regulations, but included ethical teaching. . . .

“Their influence continued throughout the Persian period, but shortly after the beginning of the Greek period it came to an end. The reason for this is no doubt to be found in the radically changed circumstances that now prevailed and for which their particular interpretations of Scripture were no longer adequate. The Greek culture brought with it a flood of new customs and new ideas with which the priestly scribes could not cope. At this point a development took place that was to have the greatest significance in years to come–there arose a class of scribes, chiefly lay, who applied themselves diligently to the task of interpreting and applying the Law in the light of the prevailing circumstances of their own day. This group of men, together with their adherents, exercised a great political and religious influence in subsequent years . . .”

C. L. Feinberg tells us: “The function of the scribes was threefold.

“1. They preserved the law. They were the professional students of the law and its defenders, especially in the Hellenistic period, when the priesthood had become corrupt. They transmitted unwritten legal decisions which had come into existence in their efforts to apply the Mosaic law to daily life. They claimed this oral law was more important than the written law (Mk. 7:5ff.). By their efforts religion was liable to be reduced to heartless formalism.

“2. They gathered around them many pupils to instruct them in the law. The pupils were expected to retain the material taught and to transmit it without variation. They lectured in the Temple (Lk. 2:46; Jn. 18:20). Their teaching was supposed to be free of charge (so Rabbi Zadok, Hillel and others) but they were probably paid (Mt. 10:10; 1 Cor. 9:3-18, for Paul’s statement of his right), and even took advantage of their honored status (Mt. 12:40; Lk. 20:47).

“3. They were referred to as ‘lawyers’ and ‘teachers of the law’, because they were entrusted with the administration of the law as judges in the Sanhedrin (cf. Mt. 22:35; Mk. 14:43, 53; Lk. 22:66; Acts 4:5; Jos., Ant. 18. 16f.). ‘Lawyer’ and ‘scribe’ are synonymous, and thus the two words are never joined in the N.T.”

After noting that scribes could come from any segment of Jewish society, or from any of the religious parties then extant, Joachim Jeremias notes that “It was knowledge alone which gave their power to the scribes. Anyone who wished to join the company of scribes by ordination had to pursue a regular course of study for several years.” It was only then could he “be received into the company of scribes as a member with full rights, and ‘ordained scholar’ (hakam). Henceforth he was authorized to make his own decisions on matters of religious legislation and of ritual (b. Sanh. 5a), to act as a judge in criminal proceedings (ibid. 3a), and to pass judgment in civil cases either as a member of the court or as an individual (ibid. 4b Bar.).”
References

9. Murphy, *The Religious World of Jesus*, pp. 239.