

APPENDIX A

Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Israel

Being Jewish is much more than a religion. It truly is a way of life. For the most part, people are Jewish because they are born Jewish. It is, in essence, a closed community joined primarily through birth. Jewish people take great pride in who they are as God's chosen people. Jewish people are committed to keeping the law as outlined by the Torah, or what we know as the first five books of the Old Testament, and to male circumcision as a sign of their being set apart. One of the early conflicts that confronts the new Christian church involves whether circumcision and the keeping of the law are requirements for becoming a follower of Jesus. (See Acts 15.)

The Jews: Throughout Acts, we will see that the main external source of opposition to the new Christian church comes from "the Jews," as Luke calls them. It is important to understand that not all Jews are involved in plotting against the church. After all, the first Christians are all Jewish, including the disciples and Jesus himself. When Luke uses the term "the Jews" in reference to the opposition, keep in mind that he is referring to a small but powerful minority within the Jewish religious establishment that oppose the Christian church.

Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes: During Jesus' time, there are several distinct groups of Judaism. Pharisees are the most well-known to us through scripture. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee. (See Acts 6:8.) They consider themselves "the keepers of the law," and because they are called on to interpret matters of the law, they often find themselves in conflict with Jesus. (See Matthew 5:20; 23:1-36; Luke 6:1-11; 7:36-47.) Sadducees differ from Pharisees in that they do not believe in the resurrection of the dead. (See Matthew

22:23-32; Acts 23:6-8.) Essenes are less well known to us through the Bible. They largely live away from the cities, in highly organized but separate communities. Scholars believe that the Dead Sea Scrolls were preserved by an Essene community.

Gentiles and Greeks: These words are used almost synonymously in the New Testament. In general, both terms refer to people who are not Jewish. Some English translations of the Bible occasionally refer to Gentiles as “pagans.”

Proselytes and God-fearers: These terms come up throughout our study of Acts. A Gentile can convert to Judaism by committing to keep the law and, for men, undergoing circumcision. The Gentile is then admitted into the Jewish community of faith as a proselyte. God-fearers are Gentiles sympathetic to aspects of Judaism, such as their belief in one true God (as opposed to the multiple gods many Gentiles worshiped) and their observance of some of the moral instructions of the law. God-fearers are not committed to the strict keeping of the law or the rite of circumcision.

Why can't Jews and Gentiles eat together? Jews and Gentiles maintain a social distance from each other. Because Jewish people observe a host of dietary laws prescribed by Jewish law, they do not eat with Gentiles. These food restrictions are part of what defines them as a nation and as individual faithful Jews. Eating with people who do not observe their laws is virtually impossible. There is always the chance they might touch or eat a restricted food. People who consume restricted foods are considered unclean, and touching an unclean person makes a Jewish person unclean. These restrictions expand to prohibit entering the home of a Gentile to avoid contact with something or someone unclean. While this type of cleanliness is only required for entering the Temple, it is of the utmost importance in Jerusalem because first-century Jews in Jerusalem likely are there to celebrate a holiday or to go to the Temple.