

*Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.*

## New Testament People Groups

### Jewish Groups

(a *Jew* is a person who can trace his ancestry to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob)

- 1. Pharisees** (Matt 5:20; Luke 6:2) – a strict religious group with its roots in the Hasidim who advocated obedience to the most minute portions of the Jewish law and the *traditions* (the oral commentary of the Jewish sages.) They were very influential in the synagogues. They respected the entire Old Testament (Ta'nach), believed in the resurrection of the dead, and were committed to obeying God's will. Their teaching was more ethical than theological. But, they rejected Jesus' claim to be Messiah because **He** did not follow all their traditions, and He associated with notoriously wicked people.
- 2. Sadducees** (Matt 3:7; Mark 12:18) – a wealthy, upper class Jewish priestly party. They emphasized the authority of the first 5 books of the Old Testament (the Torah – meaning “guide.”) By the time of Christ they had become quite secular and materialistic. They profited from business in the Temple and saw Jesus as a threat to their wealth. They denied the resurrection of the dead and the existence of angels and demons. They denied the authority of the oral tradition and interpreted Mosaic law more literally than did the Pharisees. They held the majority of the 72 seats on the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin.
- 3. Zealots** (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:14) – a fiercely dedicated group of Jewish patriots determined to end Roman rule in Israel. They believed that the Messiah must be a political leader who deliver Israel from Roman occupation.
- 4. Herodians** (Matt 22:16; Mark 3:6) – a Jewish political party of King Herod's supporters. They feared that Jesus was causing political instability and hurting their chances to regain some of their lost power from Rome.
- 5. Essenes** (Matt 5:43; John 12:36) – a Jewish monastic group who separated from the Pharisees. They followed a strict observance of the purity laws of the Torah, owned property communally, and emphasized justice, honesty, and commitment. They avoided marriage for reasons of purity. They are not named in the Scripture, but many of their beliefs are addressed by John the Baptist and Jesus. They wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls which were found in the caves at Qumran in 1948.

### Gentile Groups

(a *gentile* is any non-Jew)

- 1. Roman Citizens** – Roman citizenship is of special interest to the Bible student because of the apostle Paul's relation to it. It was one of his qualifications as the apostle to the Gentiles. Luke shows him in Acts as a Roman citizen, who, though a Jew and Christian receives, for the most part, justice and courtesy from the Roman officials, and more than once successfully claims its privileges. He himself declares that he was a citizen of Tarsus (Acts 21:39). He was not only born in that city but had a citizen's rights in it. But this citizenship in Tarsus did not of itself confer upon Paul the higher dignity of Roman citizenship. Had it done so, Claudius Lysias would not have ordered him to be scourged, as he did, after having learned that he was a citizen of Tarsus (Acts 21:39; compare 22:25). So, over and above this Tarsian citizenship, was the Roman one, which availed for him not in one city only, but throughout the Roman world and secured for him everywhere certain great immunities and rights. Precisely what all of these were we are not certain, but we know that, by the Valerian and Porcian laws, exemption from shameful punishments, such as scourging with rods or whips, and especially crucifixion, was secured to every Roman citizen; also the right of appeal to the emperor with certain limitations. This sanctity of person had become almost a part of their religion, so that any violation was esteemed a sacrilege. Cicero's oration against Verres indicates the almost fanatical extreme to which this feeling had been carried. Yet Paul had been thrice beaten with rods, and five times received from the Jews forty stripes save one (2 Cor 11:24-25). Perhaps it was as at Philippi before he made known his citizenship (Acts 16:22-23), or the Jews had the right to whip those who came before their own tribunals. Roman citizenship included also the right of appeal to the emperor in all cases, after sentence had been passed, and no needless impediment must

be interposed against a trial. Furthermore, the citizen had the right to be sent to Rome for trial before the emperor himself, when charged with capital offences (Acts 16:37; 22:25-29; 25:11). How then had Paul, a Jew, acquired this valued dignity? He himself tells us. In contrast to the parvenu citizenship of the chief captain, who seems to have thought that Paul also must have purchased it, though apparently too poor, Paul quietly, says, "But I was free born" (Acts 22:28). Thus, either Paul's father or some other ancestor had acquired the right and had transmitted it to the son.

**2. Greeks** - natives of Greece or people of Greek descent. In the New Testament, *Greek* is sometimes a general term for all who are not Jews. Historically, the Greeks descended from four separate groups—the Achaeans, Ionians, Aetolians, and Dorians—which immigrated into Greece and replaced the civilization that previously existed. Each group settled in different regions of Greece. Because these peoples did not mix very well, Greece developed into a group of city-states instead of a nation. They fought among one another for superiority, and even though they conquered isolated areas of the Mediterranean coastland, they were unable to establish a unified empire. Much later, Philip of Macedon conquered Greece, and his son, Alexander the Great, extended Greek culture throughout most of the Mediterranean world. When Alexander died, his generals continued this policy of forcing Greek culture upon the people of his empire. The way of life they enforced is known as "Hellenism."

**3. Barbarians** - a person who is different from the dominant class or group. Originally, this term (*barbaros*) had no negative connotation. The Greeks used it to describe anyone who did not speak the Greek language. Later, when Rome conquered Greece and absorbed its culture, the word *barbarian* signified those whose lives were not ordered by Greco-Roman culture. When the apostle Paul used the phrase "Greeks and barbarians" (Rom 1:14), he was speaking of all mankind. The "barbarians" (Acts 28:4, KJV) who aided the apostle Paul on the island of Melita do not appear to have been uncivilized. In this instance the word meant something very similar to the word *foreigner*. It is good to remember the apostle Paul's declaration that in Christ all human distinctions disappear (Gal 3:26-29).

**4. Samaritans** (Matt 10:5; John 4:9) - Sargon replaced the deported Israelites with foreign colonists (2 Kings 17:24). These newcomers intermarried among the Israelites who remained in Samaria. Later their numbers were increased when Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal (the biblical Osnapper; Ezra 4:10) sent more Assyrian colonists to the district of Samaria. These people took the name Samaritans from the territory and attempted to settle the land. However, "they did not fear the Lord, and the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them" (2 Kings 17:25). In despair they sent to Assyria for "one of the priests" who would "teach them the rituals of the God of the land" (2 Kings 17:27). Thereafter the Samaritans worshiped the God of Israel. But they also continued their idolatry, worshiping the pagan gods imported from foreign lands (2 Kings 17:29). So the Samaritans were a "mixed race" contaminated by foreign blood and false worship. The Jewish historian Josephus indicates that the Samaritans were also opportunists. When the Jews enjoyed prosperity, the Samaritans were quick to acknowledge their blood relationship. But when the Jews suffered hard times, the Samaritans disowned any such kinship, declaring that they were descendants of Assyrian immigrants.

## Christian Groups

**1. Jewish Christians (Messianic Jews)** (Acts 2:41; Acts 4:4) - A New Testament group that traces its ancestry back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but who embrace Jesus as the Messiah. Thousands of Jews responded to the Gospel in the early years of the Christian faith.

**2. Gentile Christians** - A group of Christ followers who have no Jewish roots. Cornelius and his family may have been the first Gentile converts to faith in Christ (Acts 10:30-48).

**3. Judaizers - (the party of the Pharisees; the party of the Circumcision)** (Acts 15:5) - Some Pharisees became Christians and brought their Judaic beliefs with them. They believed that Gentiles must first become converts to Judaism and be circumcised, and then they would be eligible to be saved by faith.

## Important New Testament Titles

**a. Teachers of the Law or Scribes** (Matt 7:29; Mark 2:6) – a group of professional interpreters of the law—who especially emphasize the *traditions* (this oral commentary on the Law was eventually recorded by Rabbi Judah haNasi in the Talmud around 200 AD.) Many of these teachers were Pharisees. When under Greek influence the Jewish priests of Jesus day, at least those of the higher strata, often applied themselves to

pagan culture and more or less neglected the law, the scribes appeared as the zealous guardians of the law. From this time on they were the teachers of the people, over whose life they bore complete sway. In NT times the scribes formed a finely compacted class, holding undisputed supremacy over the people. Everywhere they appear as the mouthpiece and representative of the people; the scribe pushes to the front, the crowd respectfully giving way and eagerly hanging on his utterances as those of a recognized authority. The great respect paid them is expressed by the title of honor bestowed upon them, "my master" (Heb. rabbi; Grk. hrabbi, Matt 23:7; etc.). From this respectful address the title rabbi was gradually formed; but its use cannot be proved before the time of Christ.

b. **Rabbis** - A respectful term applied by the Jews to their teachers and spiritual instructors (Matt 23:7-8; John 1:38; 3:26; 6:25). The terms rabbi and rabboni both mean simply "master" (John 1:38; 20:16). The use of the title rabbi cannot be substantiated before the time of Christ. Later Jewish schools had three grades of honor: 1) rab, "master," the lowest; 2) rabbi, "my master," the second; and 3) rabboni, "my lord, my master," the most elevated.

c. **Elders** - members of the Sanhedrin, consisting of the chief priests, "elders" and scribes, learned in Jewish law, e. g., Matt 16:21; 26:47; Synagogue leaders were also considered elders.

d. **Chief Priests** - By the New Testament period, the position of priests in the nation of Israel had changed considerably. The Temple functions were taken over by the "chief priests." Rank-and-file priests were also overshadowed by the SCRIBES and PHARISEES, two special groups that arose to present the Law and interpret its meaning for the people. But, in spite of the diminished role of priests, Jesus respected the office and called upon the priests to witness His healing of lepers in keeping with the Law of Moses (Mark 1:44; Luke 17:12-14). But the priests themselves were some of the most zealous opponents of Jesus. As leaders of the SANHEDRIN, the Jewish high court, they bore much of the responsibility for His crucifixion. They also led the opposition to the apostles and the early church.

e. **Synagogue Rulers** - The Ruler of the Synagogue (Grk. `archisunagogos) had the care of external order in public worship and the supervision of the concerns of the synagogue in general. This officer was found in the entire sphere of Judaism, not only in Palestine, but also in Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and the Roman Empire in general. The Heb. title ro'sh hakkeneset ( "the minister of the synagogue") was undoubtedly synonymous with the Gk. term. This office differed from that of an elder of the congregation, although the same person could fill the offices of both. The ruler of the synagogue was so called not as head of the community but as conductor of their assembly for public worship. Among his functions was that of appointing who should read the Scriptures and the prayer, of summoning fit persons to preach, of seeing that nothing improper took place in the synagogue (Luke 13:14); and of taking charge of the synagogue building. Although it was customary to have but one ruler for each synagogue, sometimes more are mentioned (Acts 13:15.)

f. **Apostles** - A special messenger of Jesus Christ; a person to whom Jesus delegated authority for certain tasks. The word apostle is used of those twelve disciples whom Jesus sent out, two by two, during His ministry in Galilee to expand His own ministry of preaching and healing. It was on that occasion, evidently, that they were first called "apostles" (Mark 3:14; 6:30). These same disciples, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, were recommissioned by Jesus after His resurrection to be His witnesses throughout the world (Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). After Jesus' ASCENSION, the apostles brought their number to twelve by choosing Matthias (Acts 1:23-26). The word apostle is sometimes used in the New Testament in a general sense of "messenger." For instance, when delegates of Christian communities were charged with conveying those churches' contributions to a charitable fund, they were described by Paul as "messengers [apostles] of the churches" (2 Cor 8:23). Jesus also used the word this way when He quoted the proverb, "A servant is not greater than his master, nor he who is sent [literally, "an apostle"] greater than he who sent him" (John 13:16). Jesus Himself is called "the Apostle... of our confession" (Heb 3:1), a reference to His function as God's special Messenger to the world.

g. **Disciples** - This term occurs in the OT as the rendering of Heb. limmud, one "instructed," Isa 8:16; 50:4; rendered "taught" in 54:13. In the NT it is the rendering of the Grk. mathetes, "learner," and occurs frequently. The meaning applies to one who professes to have learned certain principles from another and maintains them on that other's authority. It is applied principally to the followers of Jesus (Matt 5:1; 8:21; etc.); sometimes to those of John the Baptist (9:14) and of the Pharisees (22:16). It is used in a special manner to indicate the twelve (10:1; 11:1; 20:17).

