

## Son of David

TEXT: Acts 23:1-10

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on December 11, 2022*

The Christmas story tells us that Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to be taxed because that was the region once allocated to the tribe of Judah, which was the tribe that produced King David and ushered in what many considered Israel's golden age. The genealogies of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke are explicit in telling us that Jesus belongs to the tribe of Judah and is a descendant of King David. That's important for the gospel writers because a key Jewish expectation for the coming of the Messiah was that he would come from the house of David. While Jesus does not refer to himself as the "Son of David," other people do, which is a signal to anyone listening that they think Jesus is a contender for that Messiah title.

While we'll talk much more next week about Messianic expectations and how Jesus both did and didn't meet them, that is much harder to understand without first taking a look at the landscape of Judaism during Jesus' lifetime. Whatever else the Messiah was or wasn't, it was a Jewish expectation for a Jewish man, and almost nothing in the story of Jesus' life makes sense outside of the context of Jesus as a Jew raised in the first-century Roman colony of Palestine.

Jesus was born during a fractured and distressed period in Jewish history. Strategically located on the trade route across the Mediterranean, empires had been conquering Israel since the Assyrians wiped out the ten northern tribes of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. From about 740 BCE until the birth of Jesus, there had only been one brief period of barely 100 years when Israel was free from the control of other empires. That short time of independence was brought about by a revolt by a Jewish priest named Judas Maccabeus, who ousted the Greeks from Israel in 160 BCE. The Jewish festival of Hannukah commemorates that liberation and the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem from the Greek gods and goddesses.

But maintaining independence is hard when you haven't had to practice it for the better part of a thousand years; and when there was no longer a common enemy in the form of an occupying empire, divisions and rivalries within Israel itself began to surface. Competing heirs to the throne sought allies both inside and outside Israel to secure power for themselves. It's a very complex story, but those internal rivalries ended up opening the door voluntarily to Rome, initially with a power-sharing agreement, but ending up—as such things invariably do—with Rome taking full control less than 40 years before Jesus was born.

When Jesus comes on the scene, there still were people alive who remembered independence. The rivalries between the different factions of Judaism still simmered under the surface, as independence had not lasted long enough for any one of them to become dominant. The Pharisees and Sadducees still fought with each other. The Essenes and other ascetic factions went out to live in the wilderness, some in the caves surrounding Qumran, decrying the corruption of the elite priesthood in Jerusalem and baptizing people into their ranks.

New groups sprang up from those still enamored of Greek philosophy and culture, while more conservative voices sought to purge Israel of anything Greek. The Samaritans allowing a statue of Zeus to remain in their temple on Mt. Gerazim was particularly odious and added to the historic rancor and hostility between Samaritans and Jews. And with the heroic revolt of the Maccabees and the relatively quick loss of the independence it had brought still fresh in people's minds, many claimed to be God's anointed (which is what the word "Messiah" means in Hebrew), to repeat that effort.

There were also a number of revolutionary movements that sprang up, ready to serve as the special forces for that new Messiah and to cause trouble for Rome behind the scenes while they waited. One of Jesus' disciples is known to us as Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were one such revolutionary group, and about 30 years after Jesus' death, it was the Zealots who started the revolt that ended with Rome crushing Jerusalem and destroying the temple for the last time in the year 70. Another revolutionary leader of the time was Barabbas, the prisoner

the crowds wanted released instead of Jesus before his crucifixion. Two of Jesus' disciples were named Judas, in honor of the one who secured Israel's freedom by giving his life on the field of battle.

That's the backdrop for not just the life of Jesus, but for the entire New Testament. While the Old Testament covers millennia, all of the events described in the New Testament are from the first century, most of them from just the first half of the first century. The scene from Paul's life that we heard earlier in Acts 23 takes place roughly around the year 57, and that broader context remains unchanged—except for the addition of a new Jewish faction called The Way, comprised of those who believed in the resurrection of Jesus and who sought to follow his teaching.

With all of that as background, I want to use that Acts 23 passage to talk about some of the many Jewish factions in more detail and how that affected both Jesus and his followers. In the context of the book of Acts, chapter 23 marks the beginning of the end for Paul. In chapter 21 he returns to Jerusalem to bring an offering for the poor collected from the churches he had established throughout Asia Minor. We're not told what happened to the offering, but his initial reception in Jerusalem is warm. By the end of the chapter 21, however, Paul has been arrested by those who think his work with Gentiles is an affront to Jewish law.

Chapter 22 continues with a speech Paul gives to the people to tell his story in the hopes of calming their fears enough to gain his release. It doesn't work and the authorities are about to flog him when Paul tells them he's a natural-born Roman citizen. It was illegal to flog a Roman citizen without a trial, so they can't just beat him up and let him go. He has to have a trial.

That trial is where we start in chapter 23. Here Paul is telling his story to the Sanhedrin. So, let's make our first pit stop there. What is the Sanhedrin? For several centuries before the birth of Jesus, Israel had a ruling council of elders, although we don't know the exact makeup of the group. During Roman times the council became known as the Sanhedrin, which simply means "sitting together." While they were the sole judicial authority during Israel's brief period of independence in the second century BCE, in the first century CE they were sitting together under the watchful eye of Rome, a condition that they brought upon themselves, since the Sanhedrin was one of the groups that suggested reaching out for an alliance with Rome in the first place.

It was the Sanhedrin that presided over the trial of Jesus and they get Paul's case, too. The High Priest was the formal head of the body early on, but it's not clear when that shifted. He was, however, always one of the 71 members of the council and was present for both the trial of Jesus and this trial of Paul. We also know that Joseph of Arimathea, the man who gave his own tomb for Jesus' burial, was a member of the Sanhedrin and it seems likely that Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus under cover of night and initiates the "born again" debate in John 3, was a member of that body also.

There were lesser Sanhedrins of 23 judges in smaller regions, kind of like our district courts; but the one in Jerusalem was the greater Sanhedrin, and the New Testament mentions the body 22 times. The greater Sanhedrin was the only body that could put the king on trial, or extend the boundaries of either the Temple or Jerusalem. Like our Supreme Court, they also took on matters that could not be settled by the lesser courts.

But Rome did impose limits on their authority. The Sanhedrin could not impose the death penalty, for example. They could put the king on trial, but they could not execute him. And, as the ruling power over the colony, Rome could add to or subtract from the Sanhedrin's power at will. In the fourth century, the Sanhedrin was totally dissolved by imperial decree. So much for power sharing.

In practice, that relationship functioned in exactly the way you would think. To stay in power in the Sanhedrin, you had to do what Rome wanted. No independent branches of government here. If Rome had no interest in the matter—fine; do what you want. Otherwise, the very existence of the council, and certainly the power given to any of its members, depended on their usefulness to Rome. That dynamic was why Paul was a more difficult case for the Sanhedrin to deal with than Jesus. Paul, as a Roman citizen, had rights under Roman law that Jesus did not, which is why the remaining chapters of Acts show us Paul, as a prisoner, getting passed up the legal chain until he lands in Rome with an appeal of his case to Caesar.

We don't know the exact makeup of the greater Sanhedrin or how its members were chosen, but Acts 23 lets us know that there were significant numbers of both Pharisees and Sadducees in the body. Who were they?

Both the Pharisees and Sadducees arose as distinct groups about 150 BCE, right at the start of Israel's period of independence. While not all priests were Sadducees, most of them were. The High Priest was almost always a Sadducee. They were also generally wealthier, for reasons we'll look at shortly, and so the Sadducees became associated with the priestly and aristocratic classes.

The Pharisees were mostly lay people, and they were more popular with the masses. But the most important difference between the groups was in their belief system. Paul uses one key difference to his advantage in our passage from Acts 23. As a Pharisee himself, Paul well knew that there was a heated debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees when it came to belief about the afterlife. The Pharisees believed that the dead would be resurrected and believed in angels and spirits; the Sadducees didn't believe in any of that.

So, in a brilliant move, Paul tosses a bomb into the argument by saying, "I'm just in trouble because I believe in the resurrection of the dead." Whoa! Now the Pharisees and Sadducees are at each other's throats as Paul quietly exits the room, living to make his case another day. But that wasn't the only difference between the groups.

They also had significant differences on how to interpret the law, including what could be considered as part of the law in the first place. In our legal language, the Sadducees were originalists. The law was what was written down by Moses at Sinai—no more, no less. It wasn't to be adapted, added to, or modified for new situations. The Pharisees countered that while God gave Moses a written law, there was also a lot that God simply told Moses orally across the years in the wilderness, as Moses tried to interpret it and use it in the practical cases brought before him as a judge.

That oral law, or "tradition" as they called it, was just as important to the Pharisees as the written law and, over time, became the larger body of laws in later Judaism. In our legal parlance it was more like using case law and precedent to decide cases instead of just the language of the Constitution alone. The Pharisees were the progressive religious voices of the day. While the relationship isn't entirely clear, there's a good amount of evidence to suggest that the rabbis who taught in the synagogues came out of the ranks of the Pharisees, and it was the most liberal rabbi of the day, Gamaliel, who had been Paul's own teacher.

That more flexible approach of the Pharisees is exactly why Paul could see himself as still a strict Pharisee while making adaptations to the law for Gentile followers of Jesus. Ultimately, it's why Judaism itself could adapt itself to new situations and why the more rigid, priestly class of the Sadducees disappeared once the temple was destroyed by Rome in the year 70. Once Israel could no longer fulfill the letter of the law to sacrifice at the temple, the Sadducees could not adapt. They disappeared almost overnight.

But the Bible tells us about more groups than just Pharisees and Sadducees. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we have a priest and a Levite who both walk by the wounded man in the road. While priests tended to be Sadducees, there were priests who were Pharisees and some priests that were neither. Much as you would expect from our current use of the word, the job of the priests was to preside over the sacrifices, prayers, and other activities at the Temple in Jerusalem.

While the title of priest was limited to the person presiding, the term Levite was much broader and encompassed not only the priests, but everyone who provided any kind of service at the temple--from the musicians to craftsmen and builders to gatekeepers and more. In the days before the Temple in Jerusalem, the people who set up, took down, and carried the Tent of Meeting from place to place were also Levites.

The term "Levite" describes both a job and a people. They are all members of the tribe of Levi, so they are kin; and when Israel settled in the Promised Land after leaving Egypt, it was the tribe of Levi that was given the job of keeping the worship of God alive in Israel in perpetuity. They were the only one of the twelve tribes to be assigned a job. The other tribes were all given land. Which caused a problem. Since the Levites were working

full time tending to worship and had no land for crops or livestock, they couldn't farm or have other jobs to provide for themselves and their families.

The answer to that problem was establishing the tithe. The other eleven tribes were told to give 10% of their wealth, then measured most frequently in grain and livestock, to support the Levites. And to make it fair, the Levites in turn were to take 10% of those gifts and offer it as a burnt offering to God. Offerings for those in need were on top of the 10% for the Levites. But it wasn't long before there was a new problem. In time, the number of Levites grew well beyond the number of Temple jobs available.

In 1 Chronicles 23, we're told that King David assigned 38,000 Levites to serve in the Temple that his son, Solomon was building, and 24,000 of those were assigned to build it. Pretty much as soon as Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was finished, the problem of too many Levites was addressed by dividing them, priests included, into twenty-four shifts, so that each person served for one week twice a year. That system remained in place until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

We can see it in practice in the first chapter of Luke where Zechariah, the soon-to-be father of John the Baptist, is serving as a priest. Verses 8-9 read, "Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense." That's what the job looked like by Jesus' day. It's one of the two weeks per year that Zechariah's unit is on duty and even then, there are so many of them just in that one unit that they have to cast lots to see who gets to go in and offer incense.

Working just two weeks a year gave the Levites a LOT of time off. They were all still getting paid from the tithe so they didn't need to pick up another job. So how did they use their new-found leisure? They got an education, something that was only available to the aristocracy in most other cultures and which would, by Jesus' time, result in the priestly class of the Sadducees also being associated with society's elite.

Not many people in Israel in Jesus' day were literate. If they were, there was a far greater chance that a person could read than there was that they could both read and write. Levites had the time and means to learn both, which gave rise to yet another group Jesus encounters a lot—the Scribes. Likely most of the Scribes were Levites.

And what did the Scribes do? They copied and prepared manuscripts—some for religious purposes, others for business. In the Bible, the Scribes are often mentioned in the same breath as the Pharisees because the Scribes followed them around to write down the interpretations and debates about the law that the Pharisees were having. Since the Sadducees didn't believe in interpreting anything, it was the Pharisees who were developing the new content. And while many Pharisees could read, not nearly as many could write. The Scribes filled that function and both Judaism and Christianity would have taken very different turns without them.

But throughout Jesus lifetime and for the entire New Testament period, there was no Christianity as we would know it today. The New Testament is a story about Judaism in a time of upheaval, centered on a Jew named Jesus from the tribe of Judah and the house and lineage of King David. How did the Son of David come to be called the Son of God? How did a branch of Judaism become a new religion? Next Sunday. Amen.