

# Teacher's Notes Film One

## *The Roots of Christianity*

### Background Notes

First century Judaism had reached a distinctive period in its history. The Jews had long been used to oppression – since returning from captivity in Babylon in 538 BC they had been under first Persian, then Greek and finally Roman rule. So, although generally tolerated by these foreign powers, Jewish culture had been under threat for a long time. Jews spread out in the Diaspora, in particular, had had to stand fast against assimilating into the religious culture of their hosts and there was a fine line to be trodden between being submerged and being open to new ideas and beliefs.

Then as now, Jews are monotheists believing in one God with whom they have a unique relationship. As people of the Covenant, they are duty bound to live according to the Law and the 613 commandments which marked their lives included dietary, work and sexual prohibitions. The Greek ideal of how to live was a challenge to Jews; for example, it was acceptable and even polite for coming of age boys to act as “*eromenos*” to an older man. For the Jews, homosexuality was ‘an abomination.’ The Greek Pantheon of gods were unruly, mischievous super heroes and the Greeks were condescending towards Jewish belief in one God who made huge demands on their loyalty and time. The seriousness of the Jewish faith was out of kilter with Greek times but political as well as religious concerns were at stake.

Long used to being a vassal state, the Jews nevertheless demanded the right to practice their customs and united in the supremely important person of High Priest was political as well as religious identity. Every year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies – or *Shekinah* - where God, hidden by a veil, had His Being. Sacrifices were made and the Covenant renewed on behalf of all the people for the coming year. It was a ceremony that celebrated cultural survival.

As each century passed, that survival became more difficult. Alexander the Great's huge empire stretched over half the known world from Greece to India. After his death and the division of that empire, Palestine was first ruled by the Ptolemies who had territory in Egypt. But peace was fleeting. For nearly a century the country then became a

battleground between the Ptolemies and their rivals the Seleucids who had charge of Turkey and Syria. Finally in 198 BC the Seleucid, Antiochus III overran Palestine and married his daughter Cleopatra to Ptolemy V engineering some further semblance of peace. It was during this time that the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek for the famous library at Alexandria and copies distributed among the thousands of Jews who were no longer fluent in Hebrew. Leading Jewish families gained and held position by maintaining contact with powerful foreign leaders so it was not all that surprising when the High Priest Jason (Hellenised form of Joshua) introduced the gym and games to Jerusalem. He could see the advantages of playing Greek.

Jewish culture was now really threatened and when the next priest, Menelaus, bribed his way into the role he went one step further. Antiochus' Seleucid army needed sustenance. Menelaus gave them access to the Temple which they plundered - to the horror of the orthodox. Jason saw his chance and raised a mob in protest. Full scale civil war was on the cards. Antiochus intervened; and intervened harshly, reversing his previous leniency, demanding that Jews abandon their laws and dishonour their temple. But he had underestimated Jewish passion. An old man, Matthias refused to be bullied, killed the Jew who had made a pagan sacrifice and killed the Greek official forcing him to do so. Matthias fled to the hills accompanied by his eight sons – the Maccabean uprising had begun.

The Maccabees were fierce. They opposed everyone who opposed them – Hellenised Jews as well as the Seleucid army. When Matthias died he was succeeded by his third son Jason – nicknamed the Hammer (*Maqqaba* is *hammer* in Aramaic) and it took exactly three years before the temple was re-consecrated and a period of peace returned. The Book of Daniel dates from this time and what is important for the purposes of understanding Christianity, is the near universal sense of calamity that it reflects. God's plan appeared to be thwarted. It had been for a very long time. The ancient Prophets had blamed previous calamities on the wickedness of the people, but now for the first time in the Jewish Apocryphal books such as Daniel, we gain access to an encroaching, foreign world view. What if twin cosmic forces, Good and Evil, were pitted against each other? What if a kind of dualism was abroad?

The Book of Daniel was written about 164 BC at the height of the Maccabean conflict. It is unashamedly apocalyptic and embraces the end of the world. Faced with the immanence of God's kingdom,

revelations should be made and the apocalyptic literature (Greek for 'revealed') made no secret of the coming of the End of Time. The title 'Son of Man' – later used by Jesus - has an important sense for Daniel. The title had been known previously – in Ezekiel it refers to 'all men' – with the aim of contrasting an impoverished humanity with a magnificent God. Now, in Daniel, 'one like the Son of Man' has become God's representative, come to claim the earth for Him. It will take the later books of Enoch and Solomon to conflate this being with the historic Jewish Messiah – a political, revolutionary King, descended from David with the power to kick out the Romans. For the Jews reading these apocryphal books, the Son of Man in these inter-testament years was a figure charged with imagery. Not yet fully cosmic – he was also far from merely human.

'Son of man' in Hebrew is the translation of '*Ben-Adam*' but in the Old Testament and indeed the Apocryphal writings it is always a general term - a son of man. Jesus himself appears to be the first to use this being as something personal and concrete – *the* son of man. To the Jewish ears that statement carried huge resonance, signifying a Being who was also pre-existent and sent by the Father. It was an enormous term to use. Scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann would say that it is a term inserted into Jesus' mouth by the Gospel writers with their desire to reinforce their own message of who Jesus was. Others disagree, saying that this title is Jesus' own – expressing succinctly and unapologetically who He believed Himself to be.

Such was the nature of the intertestamental writing that the so-called Apocryphal books have always been seen as different to the rest of the Bible, partly because they may have struck a discordant note with the main body of literature but also because they were not seen as having the same authority. Although they were included in the King James Version of 1611 the English Protestants of the civil war removed them and this trend has continued among Protestant circles who regard them as instructive but not part of the Canon. Catholic and Orthodox Bibles often include them in a section between the Testaments known as Deutrocanonical writing or Apocrypha. Other writings such as The Gospel of Thomas (discovered as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls), not only offers fascinating reading but attest to the many writings that were never included in any part of the Bible.

## Glossary

Basic Jewish beliefs included

- Monotheism: belief in one God. The first of The 10 Commandments handed to Moses: “*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*”. (Exodus 20:1)
- Belief in the Covenant God had made with his people, consisting of duties and commitments. God committed himself to treat Israel as His own people while the Jews promised to live in a way that spoke of that special status.
- Belief in the Book of this Covenant: the Law of God or the Torah.

**The Pharisees:** Pharisees often appear in the Gospels as the enemies of Jesus. The Pharisees were one Jewish group among many who placed emphasis on the Torah. There were different types of Pharisee and some seem to have been close to Jesus in their thinking; e.g. some of Jesus’ sayings resemble those of the Pharisee Rabbi Hillel and Paul had been a Pharisee. For this surprisingly egalitarian sect, holiness was for everyone. However, after Jesus’ death it was probably those Christians who had once been Pharisees who most objected to receiving uncircumcised Gentiles into the church.

**The Sadducees:** Not a great deal is known about this group other than they are supposed to have been a priestly group from the upper classes who denied resurrection and were open to assimilation.

**The Essenes:** The Essenes are not mentioned in the New Testament and our knowledge of them comes from the extraordinary archaeological discoveries made in 1947 on the shores of the Dead Sea. First century writers describe them as being a philosophic community. Withdrawing from the world, they saw themselves as the "Children of Light" and expected an imminent intervention in history by God.

**The Zealots:** Passionate and fanatical, the Zealots were a rebel organization who supported armed resistance to Rome with such bold slogans as "Destroy the Empire!" and "No King but God!" One of Jesus’ own disciples appears to be from this sect; Simon the Zealot.

**The Jewish Diaspora:** *Diaspora* means 'dispersion' and here refers to Jewish communities living outside Palestine. At the beginning of the Christian era there were Jews living right across the Roman Empire. Their strict monotheism and high moral standards attracted converts, although to do so meant circumcision for males and baptism for both men and women.

**Ordinary Jews:** Arguably the most important group of all are not the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots or Essenes, but the ordinary folk living their simple but tough lives and following the ways their parents and forebears had taught them. They observed the Sabbath, attended festivals, followed the food laws and the codes on sexual behaviour. They aimed to go on pilgrimage to the Temple, believed in one God and followed the Commandments. We get a glimpse of some of them – the fishermen and the farmers - in the pages of the New Testament.

**The Purity and Holiness Code:** Regulations concerning purity are found in many world religions to symbolise being in a state of preparedness or otherwise. People became ritually unclean by coming into contact with something that was also unclean. These could range from bodily secretions to touching a menstruating woman or eating food prepared in the wrong way. To be 'clean' meant to be ready for holiness.

**The Temple:** The Temple was the most important building in the world for the Jewish nation - a place where all the different aspects of their life came together. Having been built by King Solomon, destroyed by the Babylonians and then rebuilt by King Herod, the Temple in part symbolised the continuity of the Jewish nation. However not all Jews could get to the Temple and long periods had elapsed when there was no Temple, so the practice had developed of having Synagogues in towns and villages across the land for worship and teaching. The Temple traders against which Jesus railed were profiteers who charged interest when they changed people's money into Temple coinage – literally making a profit every time someone bought an animal for sacrifice. The Temple was destroyed in 70 AD and has never been rebuilt – all that remains is a small section known as the 'Wailing Wall'.

## Class Activities

### Time Codes & Questions

**01:04 – 02:07:** What common beliefs do Jews hold?

**02:10 - 03:04:** Explain the importance of the Temple to the Jews.

**03: 06 - 03:23:** What were the hopes of the Jewish people?

**03: 30 - 03:57:** Why, according to many, had '*disaster after disaster struck*'?

**04:00 - 05:22** What was Hellenisation and how might it have affected Jewish life?

**05:25 - 05:58:** In what ways was Yahweh a different type of God to those of the Greeks?

**05:58 - 07:24:** What happened in 175 BCE and what were the consequences for the Jewish people?

**07:26 – 07:59:** What happened in 168 BCE?

**08:00 – 08:40:** What tensions existed within Judaism.

**08:40 – 09:02:** What happened in 67 BCE and why was “*the scene set for a climax*”?

**09:06 - 10:24:** What was Apocryphal literature and why can it be called ‘dissident literature’?

**10:25 – 11:07:** Describe the hopes of a Messianic Kingdom.

**11:12 – 12:20:** What other type of Messiah was beginning to resurface in the Apocryphal writings.

**12:20 – 12:42:** Describe different interpretations of the ‘*Son of Man*’?

**Watch the film *The Roots of Christianity* and read through the Background Notes.**

1. Invite students to make a timeline of Jewish history to include the following:
  - a) Return from Babylon
  - b) Rule of Alexander the Great and subsequent Ptolemaic and Seleucid rulers
  - c) Maccabaeen uprising
  - d) Authorship of Book of Daniel
  
2. Look up the following Old Testament Prophecies and New Testament verses currently haphazardly arranged. Correlate the

prophecy with the fulfilment the New Testament writers wish to convey.

Jeremiah 23:5 (c. 600BCE) written circa. 600 B.C.E. John 1:26 – 27

Zechariah 11:13 (c. 487 BCE) Matthew 21:7

Psalms 22:16 (c.1000 BCE) Matthew 26:15

Psalms 22:18 (c.1000 BCE) Luke 3:23, 31

Zechariah 9:9 (c. 500 BCE) Luke 23:33

Malachi 3:1(c. 500 BCE) John 19:23-24

3. The rededication of the Temple is celebrated every year with a special festival.
  - a) What is the festival called?
  - b) What is the miracle associated with rededicating the Temple
  - c) Write a sentence of exactly 10 words defining what a miracle is. Compare sentences and vote on the most accurate.
  - d) 'Miracles were commonplace for Jesus but unheard of since.' Discuss
  
4. Headline....***Christianity didn't start with the birth of Jesus!***  
 Using the arguments below and any others you can think of, write a newspaper article to back up that claim. Give reasons for what you say. E.g.  
 The time was ripe  
 Jewish culture was under threat  
 Foreign influence put new ideas in the air  
 The End of Time was longed for  
 Hidden literature bred a sense of urgency  
 The Jews were still the Chosen People
  
5. Along with the title 'the Son of Man' Jesus called himself by other names. Research what these are and how commonly they occur in the gospels and list them in order of frequency.
  
6. If you were a Jew in 1<sup>st</sup> C Judaism what would you *most* want any Messiah to say or do?
  
7. Son of Man is a translation from *ben* (son) *Adam* (thing of dust). If men and women are ultimately just things of dust is God more or less like them and why?

8. Whether or not to include various books caused huge controversy when early editions of the Bible were being finalised. To some extent the debate still continues
- a) Imagine you are making a time travel box. As a group, come up with five modern texts that you think sum up the spirit of the age that must be included in your box.
  - b) Analyse what criteria you used when making your selection (eg they are the most widely read)
  - c) For the Church of England, scripture means the 66 'Canonical books' of the Bible (39 of Hebrew Old Testament and 27 of Greek New Testament) as established by the Early Church Fathers. What criteria do you think the Early Church Fathers might have used to establish that Canon (think of things like 'orthodoxy', known use among early Christians etc)

## ***The Roots of Christianity***

### **FILM SCRIPT**

If you think Christianity started in 1 AD – you can think again. Not only is the actual date of Jesus' birth a rough guess, but more importantly the Christianity that we know today grew over several centuries.

To start with, it grew out of Judaism but it was the Judaism of a particular time. To understand the world of the Gospels we have to go back to those roots.

Some things are taken as read. All Jews had in common a belief in the Torah as God's word, debated and explained in synagogues throughout Judaea. They believed that they were a people whom Yahweh had especially selected. This same Yahweh had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and had given them a law that He expected them to obey. First among the commandments was the demand to love him and not to worship any other gods.

For a Jewish person of the 1st century, the temple in Jerusalem was sacred. The office of High Priest was the most important religious and political position anyone could hold. Once a year he – and he alone – would enter the inner sanctum of the temple - the Holy of Holies.



Here, before the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets of the 10 commandments handed over to Moses, the divine radiance of God was felt to actually dwell. So sacred was the action of the High priest that under no circumstances could anyone join him and the practice developed of having a safety rope tied around his leg – in case he collapsed in the Presence of God, and could be then dragged back to safety.

As the people God had chosen to reveal Himself to the world, the Jews were ready. They would reveal Him as the one God, who would restore them to a golden, Promised Land where His law would finally rule.

But, disaster after disaster had struck and somehow prevented this plan. While many Jews thought it was sin and a failure to obey the commandments that was holding God back, others – influenced by Babylonian belief – wondered if two cosmic forces, good and evil, were battling it out– and evil was currently winning.

In the aftermath of the conquests of Alexander the Great in the late 4th century BCE Greek culture spread, in an empire that extended through Turkey and the Middle East all the way to India.

In a wave of cultural change known as Hellenisation towns and cities as far afield as Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria saw vast numbers of ordinary Jewish people living in a thoroughly Greek speaking world.

The sun drenched cities that had given birth to Plato, Aristotle and Helen of Troy had a truly pervasive influence. No longer able to remember their Hebrew, the Jews had to translate the Jewish Torah into Greek. And God's people became influenced by thought provoking Greek ideas. The Stoics of Greece had talked of the Logos or Reason as being the force that had created the universe. And the Greek way of worship was different. Their gods – for example, were an unruly lot - a collection of mischievous heroes who had to be brought back round.

Yahweh - the God of the Jews - was a very different kind of God who demanded that his people reflect in their living, the agreement or covenant they had. For a century or more the Greek rulers - the Seleucids - were prepared to put up with what they saw as strange Jewish beliefs, and plenty of Jews were happy to let their faith slip as they became more and more enchanted with the Greek way of life.

But, in 175 BCE, when a Jewish priest named Jason became the High Priest things changed, once again, for the worse. For a High Priest,

Jason was just too open to Greek ideas. He allowed a gymnasium to be built in Jerusalem and encouraged Jewish athletes to reverse their circumcisions and run naked round the track.

The orthodox were incensed. Riots followed and many Hellenised Jews were killed. It wasn't long before Antiochus – the Greek overlord - had his revenge. Waiting until the Sabbath when Jewish men would not fight, he attacked Jerusalem in a bloodbath of brutality. A powerful fortress was built as a permanent reminder of the inferiority of the Jewish cult. And Antiochus did not stop there. Overnight it became illegal to observe the Sabbath or circumcise baby boys, copies of the Torah were destroyed and on pain of death Jews were forced to desecrate their own holy places and offer sacrifices to idols and eat pork. Thousands of Jews were killed, others fled into the wilderness - no wonder they felt they had sinned.

In 168 BCE, after years of persecution, a band of Jewish brothers led an insurgency known as the Maccabean uprising. Harnessing a populist army and using guerrilla tactics they threw off the worst of the foreign oppression. They cleansed the Temple smashing the statue of Zeus and rededicated it in a ceremony of profound solemnity, making the Holy of Holies, sacred again.

For the next century Judaism became more orthodox and to a great extent more independent. But the same old tensions were never far away. It's in the years after the Maccabean uprising that we first hear of division between the two major Jewish religious sects, the Sadducees, who favoured Hellenization and the Pharisees who resisted it.

For a while Pharisees and Sadducees propelled different men into the coveted role of High Priest, usually accompanied by bloodshed until finally in 67 BCE the patience of the Roman authorities - who by then had taken over from the Greeks - ran out.

Installing a puppet line of kings - Herod and his son Herod Antipas of the gospels - the Romans governed the restless provinces of Galilee and Judaea with an iron fist. The people were unhappy. Jewish nationalism became a permanent feature of life. Travelling preachers toured the land promising an end to troubles. The scene was set for a climax.

During these dark days, secret books circulated. Apocrypha means 'revealing something hidden' and there was always the sense that these

books imparted a mystery – made known only to a few, for sharing *with* a few.

The book of Daniel is the only one of these apocryphal writings that made it into today's Bible but the original *King James' Version* of 1611 printed 13 others - including *Ecclesiastes* and *The Wisdom of Solomon*. This is dissident literature - written in times of trouble with the aim of giving hope.

The message is clear: this time of trouble will pass– salvation is just around the corner. In symbols that would reverberate in the later Gospel writings we read: “*The lamb will come into his temple*” or again “*After these years comes my son, the anointed one.*”

But exactly what that kingdom might be was a complex web of ideas. On the one hand the ancient hope of a messianic kingdom hadn't changed very much since the Prophets of the Old Testament had foretold it 500 years before. At the head of this kingdom would be a Messiah. But Messiah (in Greek *Christos*) merely means ‘anointed one. Kings were anointed, as were High Priests. It was a mark of special favour but it was nothing more, and the king that the Prophets spoke of was a direct descendent of King David – a warrior priest who would restore Israel, judge the surrounding nations and usher in a period of peace.

But the Apocryphal books are also beginning to speak about another, different kind of Messiah. Influenced by Persian Zoroastrianism, the being starting to emerge is fascinating.

This later Messiah is beginning to sound *more* than a human being, nearly divine: ‘*He himself will be pure from sin... He will shepherd the people of the Lord.*’ Although still, just, a human, he's gaining in mystery. King David, writing his psalms around 1000 years earlier, had used the Son of Man as a symbol for all men everywhere, but now, resurfacing in this Apocryphal literature it refers – as well - to a mystical being.

So, in the ‘*Similitudes of Enoch*’ the ‘Son of Man’ appears as a pre-existent being hidden by God and one who doesn't reveal his identity. When he does, he will herald the end – not of Jewish oppression – but of time and history itself.

This Son of Man is an eschatological figure – a Prince of the last days who will stand before God as a judge of heaven and earth. If the Son of Man in Psalms and even in Daniel is a symbol for you and me, by the

time of Jesus' birth, he's also standing for something very different indeed.



**Ethics Online**