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Jesus Christ, the Last Supper and Passover

The story of the Holy Grail begins in the Levant and in particular in the Middle Eastern kingdom of Judea. Archaeological evidence gives us a reasonably accurate picture of this society at the time of Jesus. It suggests that there was a strong Hellenistic (mid-ancient Greek) influence among the elite, although this did not trickle down to the masses. This was particularly true of Galilee, homeland of the Messiah,² which retained a predominantly Judaic culture despite contact with Greco-Roman culture in the nearby Decapolis.³

The historical evidence gleaned from excavations and particularly from numismatics (the study of currency), suggests that the Galileans were Jewish descendants.⁴ In the Hasmonean period, the ruling dynasty of Judea between *c.*140 BCE and *c.*116 BCE in the area now known as the West Bank of Israel, religious markers and close links with Jerusalem and its monarchy can be deduced from abandoned settlements, coins and annual tax records. These show that, economically and politically, Galilee belonged to territories ruled by the Macabees' royal descendants.

Galilean culture from the Herodian dynasty (*c.*37–4 BCE) reveals significant similarities to that of Judea;⁵ above all, in Hebraic religious indicators such as not eating pork,⁶ the use of limestone pots and pans⁷ and ritual swimming pools,⁸ and performing secondary burials in ossuaries in loculi tombs (where the remains of the dead are reburied in containers in separate chambers of a tomb).⁹ In settlements traditionally thought of as

Gentile (non-Jewish), such as the Decapolis, the absence of such indicators supports the Gospels' report of respectful coexistence between the two religious practices and ways of life in Judea and Galilee.¹⁰ Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, is a good example of such a mutually tolerant community.¹¹

These details become important when we consider the close association that Jesus had with Capernaum, as described by Matthew,¹² Mark,¹³ Luke¹⁴ and John.¹⁵ The city is widely held to have been Jesus' home, from where he began to teach and which figured in key episodes of his life.¹⁶

Shared Judaic and Galilean religious practices are representative of a model of behaviour also found in Jerusalem, and Judea as a whole. According to the Jewish historian Titus Flavius Josephus (*d.*100 CE), Judaic life at the time was divided into four great schools of religious doctrine and practice: the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.¹⁷

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the two major groups. The Pharisees showed exemplary piety. They commanded extraordinary respect and their most distinguished teachers were given the title 'Rabbi'. The Pharisees' Hasidic roots and their precise interpretation of tradition and law earned them high esteem among the citizens of Judea.

There was a significant connection between this group and the disciples of Jesus. Indeed, Paul declared himself a Pharisee and a son of Pharisees before the Sanhedrin (a small judiciary appointed in every Judaic city), when defending his belief in the resurrection of the dead, a belief rooted in this sect of Judaism.¹⁸

The Sadducees were more numerous among the aristocratic elite. They did not refrain from ostentatious displays of luxury goods such as jewels and silverware, which reflected their adoption of certain Hellenistic and subsequently Roman social models. As they did not believe in resurrection, the Sadducees were only concerned with earthly wellbeing and, given their

preeminent status, regarded themselves as blessed by God. They were devotees of the Pentateuch, or Torah, and favoured written laws over tradition. The Sadducees also questioned, or even flatly disregarded, other biblical texts, which brought them into direct confrontation with the Pharisees. According to the Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book of the New Testament, the primary opponents to the teachings of Jesus and his followers were Sadducees.¹⁹

Josephus also tells us that the Essenes²⁰ can be traced from the second century BCE to the first century CE. Clothed in white habits and strictly disciplined in community life and moral rectitude, they practised purity through ritual baths and celibacy and awaited a priestly Messiah from the House of David. Thanks to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, we know about Essenic practices of solitude, sacrifice and prayer. We also know that John the Baptist's preaching in the desert and even his relationship to Christ were both closely linked to this ascetic sect.

The Zealots²¹ came into being at the end of Herod the Great's reign, in 4 BCE. Their spokesman Judas of Gamala, also known as Judas of Galilee, together with the Pharisee Zadok founded a sect based on the staunch defence of freedom and the absolute nature of divine sovereignty. Essentially an Israeli nationalist political movement, they could be considered one of history's first terrorist groups and included a radical splinter group known as the Sicarii (named after the little daggers they carried under their cloaks in order to attack Romans and their sympathizers). Their radical anti-Roman stance would prove a spectacular failure that resulted in the mass suicide of Sicarii at Masada, although the heroic record of their three-year resistance can still be found there.²²

Jesus' lifetime was turbulent, marked by a latent conflict with Rome that would eventually erupt in open rebellion. This, however, is not the place to reiterate the full story of Christ or his preachings, which are already so well known. Of Christ's

final moments, which were destined to change the history of the world, we instead need to focus our attention on the Last Supper, Passion and Resurrection. If the first of these was the foundation upon which the central sacrament of the Christian liturgy, the Eucharist, was built, the latter was a pivotal moment for his followers that would lead to the growth of the faith among Jews and Gentiles alike. Ultimately, this led to Christianity becoming the only official religion of the Roman Empire under the Hispanic Emperor Theodosius I, at the end of the fourth century CE.

A full account of the history of Christianity would detract from our central theme; namely, the Holy Chalice, the cup used by Christ on the day that he brought the Apostles together to dine shortly before being arrested, tried and executed. It is therefore essential to examine this event's links with Hebraic rituals from the time of Jesus, because this will yield vital clues as to how and why Jesus' cup originally took on such holy significance.

A host of questions surround the Last Supper: was it a celebration of Passover according to the Judaic liturgy of the time (that is, a dinner for Christ and his intimate acquaintances, whether or not he knew of his coming end, on an important date for Hebrew people that commemorates the liberation of the people of Israel from Egyptian rule)? Why do the Gospels differ slightly on the timing of the Last Supper? Are they reliable? Was Saint Paul, the only apostle who was absent from the feast, really so central to the Christian conception of the Eucharist? Does the Eucharist hold traces of the influence of Mithraic mysteries? These questions and many others have occupied researchers for centuries, and even today remain controversial.