

THE JESUS OF THE JESUS' OPPONENTS: PERSPECTIVES AND TENSIONS IN THE FIRST CENTURY¹

GIDEON Y. TAMBIYI
University of Jos

ABSTRACT

The questions to be addressed in this work are: Did the opponents of Jesus during his ministry have a different picture of Jesus, contrary to the opinions presented by close associates in the Gospels? Were the opposition's opinions in the formation of Jesus' narration really minor in that their voices could not be heard during the composition of the Gospels? This quest is rooted in Morton Smith's connotation, "Jesus of Jesus' Opponents," where he surveyed the various portraits of Jesus and insisted that the view of the opponents be re-echoed in the reconstruction of Jesus' life. Such an understanding becomes interesting because it challenges the pictures presented in the four canonical Gospels, which have been given wider coverage and attention as the authentic narration of Jesus, even though Smith's argument has not been given wider circulation. By examining the motivations, identities, and concerns of Jesus' adversaries, we gain deeper insight into the theological and sociopolitical challenges that shaped both his ministry and the emerging movement that would later bear his name. Through careful reading of historical sources and scriptural narratives, this study examines the nature of the opposition Jesus encountered and the underlying currents of fear, expectation, and hope that characterised first-century Judea. To analyse the opponents of Jesus in the first century, this study employs a historical-critical approach and textual analysis of passages to identify and categorise the different groups and individuals who opposed Jesus, paying particular attention to their motivations, strategies, and theological objections. This article seeks to explore the complex dynamics between Jesus of Nazareth and the various groups that opposed him during his lifetime. It also challenges existing understandings and insists on the systematic merger of the narrations about Jesus in search of the true picture of Jesus in Palestine, rather than the *modified* picture of Jesus presented by the pious and devoted early Christians in the Gospels.

KEYWORDS: Jesus, Jesus' Opponents, Sadducees, scribes, Rome, and Pharisees.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus of Nazareth is seen as one of the most influential figures of the first century, and his teachings and actions left a profound mark on history. His public

¹ This research was carried out during my research fellowship sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at Goethe Universität Frankfurt, Germany. I appreciate the sponsorship opportunity by the Foundation.

ministry, however, unfolded amid a variety of opponents—individuals and groups who challenged his message, authority, and, ultimately, his claim to divine sonship (Strobel 30). To fully understand the context of Jesus' life and the nature of the opposition he faced, it is necessary to consider the religious, political, and social landscape of first-century Judea.

This paper is situated in Morton Smith's *Jesus the Magician*, where he argued that Jesus is viewed through the lenses of his followers, and the views of the opposition were not considered (6). Within similar thought, Larry Hurtado argued that there was a plausible case where Jesus was seen within a "wider variety of views that included at one end a hope that Jesus was a messianic figure and at the other end the conviction that he was a bad example and perhaps even a false teacher, magician, and arrogantly dangerous agitator" (56). Such a Christological dichotomy in the first century sheds light on the Christological configuration of his opponents, not just his close associates, who reconstructed a high Christology in the first century (Witherington III 285-7; Tambiyi, "The Jesus I" 174-84). As a result, throughout the turbulent landscape of first-century Judea, tensions simmered between competing visions of faith, identity, and power. As different factions struggled to define the boundaries of religious practice and national destiny, debates over purity, authority, and collaboration with the Roman Empire grew fierce (Tripolitis 98). Against this intricate tapestry of conflict and aspiration, individuals and groups vied not only for influence over the populace but also for legitimacy in the eyes of God and Caesar.

Within this fraught environment, Jesus' ministry unfolded as both a challenge and a provocation to many entrenched interests. According to Harold W. Attridge, "Christians call Jesus 'Christ' usually as a focus for a large number of other epithets, and the call on Jesus Christ in prayer" (203-6). Within this, Attridge states that Jesus is identified as the anointed instrument by which God will cause a final righteous judgment, and he is the embodied agent of God who has entered history to do something for humankind, as well as Jesus as Christ, considering the liturgical acts that are bestowed upon him (206). Jesus' teachings, which emphasised inner transformation over ritual observance, and his acts of healing and forgiveness, often brought him into direct conflict with those who saw themselves as guardians of tradition (see Wright 91-92; Nolan 64-71).

Within this crucible of competing ideologies and shifting allegiances, Jesus emerged as both a unifying and polarising figure. His teachings, radical in their challenge to established norms, often placed him at odds with the powerful guardians of tradition as well as those who sought accommodation with imperial Rome. The people of Judea found themselves at a crossroads, their hopes and frustrations embodied in the charged encounters between Jesus and his adversaries.

Debates and confrontations unfolded not only in synagogues and open courtyards but also in the hearts of those longing for deliverance or fearing upheaval. Every word and sign attributed to Jesus reverberated through a society accustomed to debate but unprepared for the seismic shift he represented. It was within these circumstances that the conflicts between Jesus and his opponents took on

significance, not merely as personal quarrels, but as disputes over the very meaning of faith, law, and liberation.

The study seeks to explore the figure of Jesus as he appeared to his adversaries: who were the “opponents” of Jesus, how did they perceive him, and what motivates the various responses to his teachings and actions as represented in the Gospel accounts and in modern scholarship. Also, to assess the significance of these conflicts for understanding both the historical Jesus and the development of early Christian thought.

HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS OF THE FIRST-CENTURY CHRISTIANS

First-century Judea was a land of religious fervour, political unrest, and cultural diversity. The region was under Roman rule, administered by governors such as Pontius Pilate and influenced by the powerful Herodian dynasty. Jewish society, meanwhile, was fractured into various sects and movements, each with its interpretation of the Law and its vision for Israel’s future (Evans 118). Against this backdrop, Jesus preached a message of repentance, love, and the coming kingdom of God. While he attracted crowds of followers, his words and actions also provoked strong opposition from the established powers.

The religious and political frameworks of the era were characterised by a diversity of sects, whereby each interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures and the requirements of faith in distinct and sometimes conflicting ways. The most prominent groups included the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots, as well as a variety of priests, scribes, and local rulers. Roman occupation further complicated matters, introducing new layers of tension and compromise into Jewish society.

At the heart of the religious establishment were the Pharisees and Sadducees—two influential sects with divergent theological emphases and social bases. The Pharisees, largely consisting of lay scholars, advocated a rigorous application of the Law to everyday life and believed in resurrection, angels, and divine providence. In contrast, the Sadducees, drawn mostly from the priestly aristocracy, rejected many oral traditions and denied the resurrection, holding fast to the written Torah as the sole authority and often collaborating with Rome to maintain their privileged position within the Temple hierarchy (Ferguson 427-30; Blomberg 50).

This complex religious landscape was further shaped by the role of the scribes, who served as legal experts and interpreters of Scripture, and the Chief Priests, who presided over Temple rituals and wielded considerable influence both spiritually and politically. These leaders were not merely custodians of tradition—they were also gatekeepers of power, engaged in delicate negotiations with both the Jewish populace and the Roman authorities.

Political realities, meanwhile, loomed large over all aspects of public life. The Herodians, supporters of the Herodian dynasty installed by Rome, and other

Roman officials, acted as intermediaries and enforcers of imperial rule. The ever-present threat of unrest meant that any claimant to religious or messianic authority, such as Jesus, was closely watched—and, if necessary, opposed.

Amid this interplay of faith and power, Jesus' actions and teachings repeatedly intersected with the interests and anxieties of the ruling classes. His public ministry, marked by symbolic gestures and provocative proclamations, inevitably drew the scrutiny of these groups. Encounters between Jesus and his adversaries reveal not only personal animosities but also deep-seated ideological and theological disputes that reflected broader questions about identity, authority, and the future of Israel.

Contemporary scholars seek to avoid caricature and anti-Jewish sentiments that have, regrettably, characterised some readings of these texts. Instead, they examine Jesus within the diversity and vibrancy of Second Temple Judaism, seeing his opponents not as villains but as fellow Jews engaged in passionate debate about the future of their faith under Roman rule. Some modern interpretations suggest that Jesus' disputes with Pharisees and others were part of normal intra-Jewish debate, like discussions found elsewhere in Rabbinic literature. His actions and teachings challenged the boundaries of tradition but did not necessarily seek to create a new religion.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE OPPOSITION IN THE DAYS OF JESUS

It is important to recognise that the Gospel authors wrote with the benefit of hindsight, often after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and amid growing tensions between emerging Christian and Jewish communities. The portrayal of Jesus' opponents is sometimes sharpened to highlight his uniqueness or justify his crucifixion, reflecting the polemics of their own times as much as the events they describe. Modern historians and biblical scholars encourage careful distinction between the historical figures and the literary characters created by the Gospel narratives, and a lack of acquaintance with the history of the New Testament can lead to "misunderstanding and confusion" (Greenlee vii-viii). The "Jesus of his opponents" is in many ways a composite, shaped not only by actual confrontations but also by community memory (Bauckham 310-30) and theological concerns in the context of helplessness (see Tambiyi, "Jesus, the Helpless Jesus" 33-43).

The Gospels of the New Testament repeatedly refer to individuals and groups who opposed Jesus, often portrayed as authorities or representatives of existing religious or social structures. Jesus' opponents can be broadly categorised as follows: religious leadership that comprised the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, and Chief Priests; political authorities, which were the Herodians and Roman officials, as well as other social groups and individuals.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees were a prominent Jewish sect known for their strict adherence to the Torah and the oral traditions surrounding it. Ferguson sees that the Pharisees saw

the “Torah as a developing, dynamic social force,” and they “sought to keep the Law of Moses from becoming a dead ritual and to give it new meaning and life” (408). Within this understanding, “the Pharisees’ attitude was well defined: the pious must keep apart from those neglectful of the law, ceremonial cleanness, and payment of tithes, especially in their meals” (Ferguson 409). They believed in the resurrection of the dead and angels, and they sought to apply the Law to all aspects of daily life. The Pharisees were respected by the populace for their piety and learning, yet they often clashed with Jesus (see Hegel 85). To elaborate on this, Lester L. Grabbe stated:

The Pharisees are most familiar from the pages of the Gospels. Here they appear as opponents of Jesus and are criticized as excessively concerned about legal technicalities and picayune points of the ritual law (Matthew 23:23–28; Luke 11:37–44); they are especially labelled as hypocrites who want to be admired by others but who do not take on the burden of the law which they bind on their fellow Jews (Matthew 23:4). Much of the time they, along with the other groups, are simply a foil for Jesus – a chance for him to score points at their expense and give clever replies to leading questions. Thus, we cannot necessarily assume that every confrontation with Jesus really tells us anything about the ancient Pharisees (52).

Jesus’ criticisms of the Pharisees typically focused on what he saw as their hypocrisy, legalism, and emphasis on outward ritual rather than inner transformation (Patzia 38). He accused them of “straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel” and of neglecting “the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (see Matthew 23). For their part, the Pharisees often questioned Jesus on issues of Sabbath observance, purity laws, and other religious practices, seeking to discredit him or trap him in theological error.

Despite all these, “The Pharisees are represented in some of the Gospels as leading critics of Jesus, and they also formed one of the principal groups that created the Mishnah and hence founded the Judaism of the dual Torah. ...Some of the same authorities identified in the New Testament as Pharisees occur in the Mishnah as sages, notably, Gamaliel” (Neusner 39). These are reflected in Mark 6:56, 1:40–45, 14:12, 12:36, Luke 7:36ff, 11:37, 13:31–33, 14:1, Mark 12:28–34, and Matthew 23:1–2. As such, we find Jesus not just rejecting their emphasis on the ritual purity but also rejecting all forms of Pharisaic basis of authority (Ferguson 409; Awojobi and Malomo 47).

Also, to elaborate on the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees, Neusner went further to state that:

The issue between Jesus and the Pharisees was salvation versus sanctification. The Judaism defined by the system and method of the Pharisees (whom we met in the person of Yohanan ben Zakkai in connection with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70) addressed the issues of sanctification of Israel, whereas the Christianity as defined by the evangelists took up the questions of Israel’s salvation (39).

While the heart of the Christian message was salvation, emphasis was laid on the sanctification process, which haunted such Jewish opposition parties. Despite

moments of real antagonism, it is important to note that Jesus also shared some concerns with the Pharisees, such as belief in resurrection (see Craig 146-165; Blomberg *Making Sense* 68-70). Some, like Nicodemus, even showed sympathy toward Jesus, and as Jewish evidence reveals, “the Pharisees did not try to impose their special rule on others” (Esler 63), a statement to be taken seriously into consideration.

The Sadducees

The Sadducees formed another influential group. Unlike the Pharisees, they rejected oral tradition and accepted only the written Torah as authoritative (Ferguson 411; Blomberg 52). They denied the resurrection, angels, and spirits, focusing instead on the temple cult and the priestly system. The Sadducees’ power derived from their control of the Jerusalem Temple and their close ties with the ruling elite, including Roman authorities. Jesus’ popularity among the masses and his disruptive activities in the Temple—most notably the so-called “cleansing of the Temple”—threatened both their religious and economic interests. The Sadducees, more than any other group, were implicated in the decision to arrest and hand over Jesus to the Romans.

The Sadducees, unlike their Pharisaic counterparts, were closely linked to the priestly aristocracy and wielded considerable influence within the Sanhedrin, the ruling council (Ferguson 411). Their power was rooted in Jerusalem and the Temple's daily operations, giving them a vested interest in maintaining the established religious order and their favourable relationship with Roman authorities. Often portrayed as conservative, the Sadducees resisted innovations in doctrine and practice, focusing strictly on the written law. Their scepticism regarding resurrection and the supernatural set them apart (Ferguson 411), making debates with Jesus on topics such as the afterlife especially pointed. The Sadducees’ confrontations with Jesus usually centred on issues that touched their core interests—temple rituals, questions of authority, and the preservation of their status.

The Scribes

The scribes were experts in the Law, serving as scholars, teachers, and legal advisors who showed up during the Babylonian captivity according to Ezra 7:6 (Gromacki 36). Some scribes were Pharisees or Sadducees, but others operated independently. They are often depicted in the Gospels as disputants with Jesus, challenging his interpretations and questioning his authority to teach. The scribes, often associated with either the Pharisees or Sadducees, were experts in the law and the interpretation of Scripture (Schwartz 89-101; Grabbe 365-6). They played a crucial role in teaching the people and advising leaders on legal and theological matters (Awojobi and Malomo 44).

Many scribes held official positions as lawyers or recorders, and their influence permeated both religious and civil life (Davies 17). While some scribes approached Jesus with genuine curiosity or even admiration, the majority appeared threatened by his authority and the challenge he posed to their interpretations and

traditions. Their roles made them significant participants in the religious debates of the era, and their resistance to Jesus stemmed from concerns over both doctrinal authority and social order. Many scribes, perceiving Jesus' reinterpretation of the Law as subversive, allied themselves with other opponents in attempts to challenge his teachings and diminish his influence among the people.

Jesus, in turn, often criticised the scribes for their pride, their heavy burdens placed upon the people, and their tendency to seek public honour. Within the context of righteousness, Jesus said to enter heaven, one's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20) (Esler 8). Amid these intersecting circles of authority and influence, the landscape of first-century Judea was one of constant negotiation and tension. Religious and political identities were deeply entwined; lines between spiritual leadership and governance blurred beneath the shadow of Roman occupation. Rivalries between groups, each convinced of their own fidelity to God's will and the welfare of their people, shaped the public discourse in which Jesus preached and acted.

Jesus' message—announcing the coming kingdom of God—resonated with the longing for renewal but also unsettled the fragile balance of power. His radical inclusivity and reinterpretation of the Law threatened the established boundaries not only between ritual purity and defilement (Bock *Lost Gospel* 31-2), but also between insiders and outsiders. With parables and prophetic acts, he called both the privileged and the marginalised to repentance, presenting a vision of God's justice that transcended conventional allegiances.

Opposition to Jesus, then, was not limited to one sect or social class but emerged from a broad coalition of those who perceived his teachings as disruptive. Each group, whether motivated by religious conviction, social order, or fear of Roman reprisal, found reason to resist a movement that challenged their authority and upended familiar certainties.

The Chief Priests

The chief priests represented the temple hierarchy, including the high priest and his associates. Their role was both religious and political, mediating between the Jewish people and Roman authorities. Jesus' actions in the Temple, coupled with his messianic claims, drew the ire of the priestly establishment, who saw him as a potential instigator of unrest. The Gospels repeatedly note that it was the chief priests who conspired to arrest Jesus and presented him before Pontius Pilate, seeking his execution.

The Herodians

The Herodians were supporters of the Herodian dynasty, which ruled parts of Judea as client kings under Roman oversight. Politically motivated, the Herodians are mentioned in conjunction with the Pharisees as plotting against Jesus, particularly after he challenged the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus' stance toward political authority was nuanced, but his growing influence and the crowds he attracted alarmed those invested in the status quo.

Roman Authorities

Although not initially interested in Jesus' religious disputes, the Roman authorities, represented by figures such as Pontius Pilate, became involved when Jesus was presented as a potential rebel, a "king of the Jews." The charge of sedition, rather than blasphemy, ultimately led to his crucifixion—a punishment reserved for political criminals.

Other Opponents and Detractors

Beyond these major groups, Jesus also faced opposition from within his own community and even from among those who followed him. Many were scandalised by his association with tax collectors, sinners, and Samaritans. Some disciples left him when his teachings became too difficult. In Nazareth, his hometown, he was rejected.

Rival Teachers and Prophets

The Gospels and other ancient records indicate that Jesus was not the only charismatic teacher active in the period. Other prophets, miracle-workers, and would-be messiahs gathered followings, and competition among these figures could spark both rivalry and suspicion. These rival teachers and prophets, each with their own followings, often challenged Jesus' authority and the uniqueness of his message. Some accused him of breaking the Law or even of being possessed. The atmosphere in first-century Judea was crowded with charismatic figures proclaiming new interpretations or revelations, making competition for the hearts and minds of the people fierce.

Amid these swirling currents, Jesus' ministry unsettled many established expectations. His miracles and parables brought both awe and scepticism, and his repeated challenges to religious and social boundaries left few indifferent. The controversy surrounding his identity—prophet, teacher, troublemaker, or messiah—intensified as his public ministry progressed, setting the stage for growing confrontation.

This web of opposition—woven from political, religious, and social threads—ensured that Jesus' every action was observed and interpreted through multiple, often hostile, lenses. To some, his message was dangerously subversive; to others, it was dazzlingly liberating. The different factions, whether motivated by fear of Roman reprisal, loss of societal control, or sincere theological disagreement, found rare common cause in their unease toward his movement. As his influence expanded, so too did the stakes, with rumours and suspicions swirling through the towns and hillsides of Judea and Galilee (Freyne 21-25). The lines between curiosity, scepticism, and outright hostility blurred, turning simple encounters into flashpoints that could ignite broader controversy.

Against all odds, one can see the radicalism that prompted and caused the formation of opposition by the opponents of Jesus in the first century, by the Pharisees, Essenes, scribes, Sadducees, and priests, among others, as expressing the Jewish piety, a position they felt Jesus was presenting, contrasting teachings. As

Neusner states: “The radical claims of the holiness sects, such as Pharisees and Essenes, of professions such as the scribes, and of followers of messiahs -all expressed aspects of Israel’s common piety. Priest, scribe, messiah -all stood together with the Jewish people along the same continuum of faith and culture” (45). We now show the perceptions of Jesus’ opponents of the personality of Jesus.

THE JESUS OF HIS OPPONENTS: PERCEPTIONS

A Threat to Social and Religious Order

From the perspective of the religious and political authorities, Jesus posed a disruptive challenge. He attracted large crowds, critiqued established traditions, and associated with those deemed sinners or outsiders. The tension between Jesus and the religious leaders made Matthew write, “Against Jewish religious leaders and a Jewish people that have rejected Jesus the Messiah and, in the view of the author of Matthew, have brought upon themselves God’s wrath” (Evans 99). The religious leaders and opponents felt offended as being inadequately represented by the early Christians and stood against Jesus, which prompted several threats. His actions in the Temple—overturning tables and challenging commercial practices—could be interpreted as a direct threat to the temple economy and the authority of the priesthood.

This challenge is epitomised in Gospel passages such as Mark 11:18: “The chief priests and the scribes heard of the cleansing of the Temple and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching.” To Jesus’ adversaries, his actions risked provoking Roman attention, potentially leading to violence or suppression. Wright made it clear that “Jesus did not support the Jewish national resistance to Rome but rather opposed it” (Wright *Contemporary* 8), and his actions provoked his opponents. Additionally, Borg highlights Jewish resistance to Rome, which, in his context, is viewed as part of a larger conflict. He considers the social matrix and specific periods such as Herod’s reign, the 6 C.E. and the Census, Pilate, Caligula, Cumanus, the priest, and the resistance. This is seen among the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Zealots as Galilean militants (64; Tambiyi 30). All these revealed the resistance of the Jews to the Romans. Borg views Jesus in the context of this conflict about his reaction to the Sabbath, the Temple, and the future.

Controversies Over Law and Purity

Many confrontations between Jesus and his opponents revolved around the interpretation and application of Jewish law. This posed a challenge to the ‘mother tradition’ as opposed to the new movement within Judaism. Hurtado states that “there is clear evidence of a defence of Jesus’ status that included reinterpretation of traditional scripture texts (such as Psalms 8 and 110) and the appropriation for Jesus of traditional titles (“Lord”) and prerogatives most characteristically associated with God” (129). The Gospels record disputes over Sabbath observance, ritual purity, fasting, and dietary restrictions (Wright 390-7). For example, when Jesus and his

disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28), the Pharisees challenged this breach of tradition.

Patzia added that Sabbath observance was one area of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus was accused of breaking the Law by picking grain (Mt 12:1-8; Mk 2:23-28; Lk 6:1-5) and healing (Mt 12:9-14; Mk 3:1-6; Lk 6:6-11) (38). By healing on the Sabbath, redefining purity, and welcoming outsiders, Jesus subverted long-held customs, causing discomfort and anger among those for whom tradition was inseparable from identity. To them, such actions undermined the shared commitments that defined Jewish identity, especially in a time of foreign occupation and cultural pressure. The challenge Jesus posed to established interpretations of the Law unsettled priestly and scholarly elites, who saw in his teachings a threat to the structures that upheld their influence. Although Jesus supported the Jewish Laws, he was opposing a religious system that overemphasised the legal and ceremonial dimensions of the Torah at the expense of the moral” (38).

Accusations of Blasphemy and False Prophecy

Jesus’ interpretations of the Law and his authority to forgive sins (Strobel 30; Wright 268-74) threatened the established religious order. Jesus’ claims of authority to interpret Torah, to speak with divine insight, are seen as audacious or even blasphemous. Wright states that “Torah defined Israel: specifically, the works of Torah functioned as symbolic praxis, as the set of badges which demonstrated both to observant Jews and to their neighbours that they were indeed the people of the covenant” (432; see Bock *Lost Gospel* 7-11). Jesus attempting to offer fresh understanding offended the custodians. In John 10:33, Jesus is accused of making himself equal with God, as “the one who has the same divine power over nature as Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament” (Strobel 29). Hurtado in *One God, One Lord* states that “The Jewish concern for the uniqueness of God probably led many pious Jews to regard with suspicion aspects of the Jewish-Christian devotion to Jesus” (128; see Tambiyi “Devotional” 49-63). The charge of blasphemy was no trivial matter; it represented a fundamental threat to the religious framework of Second Temple Judaism.

Moreover, his healing acts and exorcisms prompted some to allege that he worked “by the power of Beelzebul” (Matthew 12:24), suggesting demonic collusion rather than divine endorsement. In this light, Jesus’ opponents saw him as more than a misguided teacher—they saw the possibility of a dangerously deceiving figure.

Political Subversion

Roman authorities and local rulers viewed any mass movement with suspicion. The Pharisees engaged Jesus and wanted to relate his activities in line with the Roman authorities. One can consider the Pharisees to be interested in the political involvement of the first century. Neusner writes:

The Pharisees appear as a political group by the first century in Josephus’ writings about Maccabean politics, the Gospels, and the rabbinic traditions concur that what made an Israelite a Pharisee was not exclusively or even

mainly politics. The Pharisees were characterized by their adherence to certain cultic rules. They were not a member of a family in any natural or supernatural sense. Their social affiliations in no way proved homologous (39-40).

As a result, we find that the Gospels note attempts to entrap Jesus in political controversy, such as the question about paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17). Borg shows the influence of the twentieth century's understanding of the eschatological connotation of the kingdom of God, in which Jesus was concerned about politics. This caused Borg to present an imminent eschatology (35). To this, Borg has used the Gospels to argue that conflict is within a context for interpreting the teaching of Jesus, and that once the context is established (41; Tambiyi 30). Also, the claims of messiahship and talk of a "kingdom of God" aroused fears of insurrection, drawing unwanted Roman attention, and were seen as a challenge to Roman sovereignty. The eventual charge leading to Jesus' crucifixion, as posted on the cross ("King of the Jews"), reflects this political anxiety.

The Problem of Popularity

Jesus' ability to draw crowds and connect with the marginalised people increased his perceived threat. The religious elite feared losing influence, while political leaders worried about unrest. The Gospel of John (11:48) captures this concern: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our place and our nation." Jones gives two reasons why we must believe in Jesus as "I just know Jesus is alive because I've felt his presence -that's the only proof I need," and that "the Bible is God's word; so, if the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it" (5). These became the driving force for the Jews against Roman attempts to destroy their traditions, which they saw in such traits in Jesus, despite Rome's effort to improve physical development in Jerusalem (Foster 5-6).

Considering these factors that prompted the opposition to Jesus, one can say that the charged atmosphere surrounding Jesus and his ministry fostered both fascination and fear. As his reputation spread, crowds flocked to hear him, drawn by the novelty of his teachings and the hope offered in his miracles, as Habermas puts it: Jesus' opponents and critics in the Gospels not only witnessed his healings and exorcism (Mark 2:1-12; 3:22; Luke 13:10-17), but they also knew about his nature miracles (Matt. 28:11-15; Mark 5:40-42; John 11:47-48) (129). Yet this same attention brought scrutiny. The religious authorities, skilled in debate and guardians of tradition, publicly questioned Jesus, seeking to expose inconsistencies or blasphemy. Scribes and Pharisees confronted him with pointed queries about taxes, purity, and the law, probing for missteps that could justify censure or worse.

Meanwhile, Jesus' constant movement between Galilee, Samaria, and Judea ensured that his message reached diverse audiences, but also spread anxiety among regional leaders. His growing acclaim among the common people threatened to incite unrest, particularly during festivals when Jerusalem swelled with visitors and the risk of revolt loomed large. Roman officials, charged with maintaining order,

watched these developments warily, alert for signs that Jesus' influence might translate into political agitation.

Despite attempts to trap him in his words, Jesus responded with a paradoxical mix of candour and mystery. His parables and actions challenged the self-assurance of his opponents, exposing the limitations of their authority while reframing the meaning of power itself. This dynamic tension—between faith and scepticism, hope and anxiety—underscored every encounter, propelling the narrative toward its climactic confrontation.

THE OUTCOME AND LEGACY

The efforts of Jesus' opponents resulted in his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Yet, rather than quash his movement, these events became the foundation for the rise of Christianity, as seen among the Jewish and pagan oppositions (Hegel 19). The early followers of Jesus interpreted his death and resurrection as the fulfilment of prophecy (Copenhaver 41-48; Craig 146-165), and the religious authorities' attempts to suppress the movement served only to spread its message more widely.

Faced with such multifaceted opposition, Jesus' response was both provocative and enigmatic. He engaged his critics with parables (stories layered with meaning), challenging their assumptions while offering new ways of understanding the divine, which relive the tension (Copenhaver 25). Rather than retreating in the face of hostility, he pressed further into the heart of controversy, overturning tables in the Temple, healing on the Sabbath, and dining with those deemed unworthy. These actions escalated tensions, but also drew greater numbers of followers, some drawn by hope, others by curiosity or scepticism.

The mounting resistance from religious leaders and political authorities eventually converged into a coordinated effort to neutralise Jesus' influence. Yet, even as betrayal and trial approached, the Gospels portray Jesus as unwavering, his commitment to his message undimmed by the mounting cost, and they remained the witness literature of the early church to the messiahship and Lordship of Jesus (Talabi 19). His fate—condemnation and crucifixion—was intended as a deterrent to would-be agitators, a spectacle of Roman power and religious conformity.

Yet, paradoxically, it was through this ordeal that the significance of his mission would come to be most keenly felt, both by those who mourned his loss and by those who opposed him. The shockwaves of his life and death set in motion a narrative that would reverberate far beyond the hills of Judea.

As the memory of Jesus' life and message began to coalesce into the earliest expressions of Christian faith, opposition remained a constant companion. Early believers faced suspicion, ostracism, and at times, outright violence from both religious and imperial authorities. It appears that some variety of Christianity did exist (Bock 32). However, this opposition did not stifle the movement; rather, it compelled its adherents to articulate their beliefs with greater clarity and courage. Through letters, testimonies, and communal practices, the fledgling church transformed persecution into a testament of faith, drawing strength from the very

forces that sought its dissolution. In this way, the story of Jesus' opposition resonates throughout subsequent generations, a testament to the enduring power of conviction and the paradoxical triumph of a movement born in adversity.

Despite that the opposition is seen from a coordinated angle of feud resonating from the relative decision by the early Christians, where Hurtado writes that, "ironically, opposition and criticism from other pious Jews probably played a significant role in the early Christian reflection upon the exalted Jesus and may have been a key factor in helping to shape a form of religious devotion that is best described as a mutation in Jewish monotheism" (129). And of course, Hurtado added,

the earliest Christians needed to see and show themselves faithful to one God. They also needed to find whatever justification they could within their inherited tradition for the striking and innovative attention they felt compelled to give to the risen Jesus. They did not always succeed in convincing other Jews of the legitimacy of their views and practices, but the need to try to do so or to have defences against Jewish critics is one important factor to reckon with in understanding the early development of Christian devotion" (129; Ferguson 426).

Hurtado is right for insisting that early Christology was not intended as a departure from the traditional concern for one God. In my view, however, Dunn resolves the problem of early Christology too easily, because he fails to do justice to the evidence presented here that shows the place of the exalted Christ in early Christian devotional life (303-36).

One still sees the Christians adopting various aspects of Jewish life and rooting their Christian spirituality in Jewish religiosity. Neusner elaborated:

The Christians carried forward one aspect of the Scriptures' doctrine of Israel, and the Pharisees another. The Hebrew scriptures represent Israel as one very large family, descended from a single set of ancestors. The Christians adopted that theory of Israel by linking themselves, first, to the family of Jesus and his adopted sons, the disciples, and secondly through him and them to his ancestry -to David and on backward to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the spiritualization of the familiar tie in the church as the body of Christ (40).

It then means that there is a binding nexus between Christian zeal and the Pharisaic zeal when it comes to realising the spiritual state of the people in the light of Israel and the church. Just that the dichotomy between the two sects can be seen as Neusner added:

Both Christians and Pharisees belonged to Israel but chose different definitions of the term. The Christians saw Israel as a family; the Pharisees saw it as a way of life. The Christians stressed their genealogy; the Pharisees, their ethos and ethics. The Christian family held things in common; the holy people held in common a way of life that satisfied them....Christians were a group composed of the family of Israel, talking about salvation; Pharisees were a group shaped by the holy way of life of Israel, talking about sanctification (40).

Amid the struggle with the Judaistic context of the first century, one sees the aftermath of Jesus' death being marked by turbulence and uncertainty, as his followers grappled with shock, loss, and the daunting question of how to carry forward his vision in the face of adversity, a struggle even among Christians today. Yet, the very crucible of persecution forged a resilient community, galvanised by accounts of resurrection and the conviction that Jesus' teachings were not silenced, but vindicated, though one does not see the oppositions' views fully expressed in the popular accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Stories spread through whispered gatherings and public proclamations alike, weaving together the threads of hope, memory, and expectation among diverse groups—Jews and Gentiles, the impoverished and the influential. The church will have to align facts and stories that were collected from memory and documented for its spirituality in search of the perfect life of Jesus from various lenses.

CONCLUSION

In composing the life of Jesus, it would be inappropriate to rely on pictures of Jesus from the disciples, ignoring the views of the opposition parties. The opponents of Jesus in the first century were many and varied, reflecting the complex interplay of religion, politics, and society in ancient Judea. Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, chief priests, Herodians, and Roman authorities all played a role in challenging Jesus' mission, and it becomes inappropriate to ignore them in the composition of the worldviews of Jesus. Their resistance, however, serves today as a lens through which to better understand the radical nature of Jesus' teachings and the world in which he lived. The conflict between Jesus and his adversaries remains a pivotal chapter not only in Christian history but in the broader story of the ancient world. In the decades that followed, diverse communities would wrestle with the implications of his teachings, shaping the contours of faith and identity across the Mediterranean world. The legacy of Jesus' opposition thus became a catalyst for theological innovation, communal resilience, and the forging of a spiritual movement that would reshape history. To view Jesus through the eyes of his opponents is to see a figure both magnetic and unsettling, whose words and deeds forced his contemporaries to confront profound questions about law, tradition, and authority. It is a perspective that reminds us of the complexities of religious innovation and how new ideas can both threaten and renew. By understanding the motives and anxieties of those who opposed Jesus, we gain a fuller picture of his historical context and the enduring significance of his message. A synthesis of the zealous beliefs of the Christians (salvation) and Pharisees (sanctification) and other opposition parties would create a unified atmosphere that gives us the true sense of the real children of God who find Jesus interesting and hope to inherit the Kingdom of God.

WORKS CITED

- Attridge, Harold W. "Calling Jesus Christ" in Eleonore Stump and Thomas P. Flint eds., *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993.
- Awojobi, Peter Olanrewaju, and Emmanuel Olumuyiwa Malomo. "Conspirational Politics in Jesus' Ministry and Its Implications for Christians in Politics" *Jos Journal of Religion and Philosophy* Vol. 6, No. 1, June 2025), pp. 37-54.
- Barnett, Paul. *The Truth about Jesus: The Challenge of Evidence*. Australia: Aquila Press, 2000.
- Bauckham, Richard ed. *The Gospels for all Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998.
- . *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Jesus and the Gospels*. Nottingham: Apollos, 2009.
- . *Making Sense of the New Testament: Three Crucial Questions*. Leicester: IVP, 2003.
- Bock, Darrell L. *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel: Reclaiming the Gospel as Good News*. Nashville, Tennessee: Academic, 2010.
- . *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2006.
- Borg, Marcus. *Conflict Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1984 and 1998.
- Bray, Gerald. *Creeds, Councils and Christ: Did the Early Christians Misrepresent Jesus?* Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2009.
- Bruce, F.F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Nottingham: IVP, 2009.
- , J. I. Parker, Philip Comfort, and Carl F. H. Henry. *The Origin of the Bible*. Illinois: Tyndale Publishers, 2012.
- Copenhaver, Martin B. *An Introduction to the Christian Faith*. Ohio: United Church Press, 1994.
- Craig, William Lane. "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?" In Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995.
- Davies, Philip R. *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.
- Dunn, J. D. G. "Was Christianity a Monotheistic Faith from the Beginning?" *SJT* 35 (1980): 303–36.
- Esler, Philip E. *The First Christians' Approaches to the New Testament Interpretation*. London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2003.
- Evans, Craig A. *Jesus and the Manuscripts: What We Can Learn from the Oldest Texts*. Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2020.
- Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987.

- Foster, John. *Church History 1: The First Advance AD 29-500*. Expanded by W. H. C. Frend. London: SPCK, 1991.
- Freyne, Sean. "Galilee and Judea: The Social World of Jesus" in Scott McKnight and Grant R. Osborne, eds., *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bakers, 2004.
- Grabbe, Lester L. "Scribes and Synagogues" in J. W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 362-371.
- . *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel and Jesus*. London: T&T Clark International, 2010.
- Greenlee, J. Harold. *Scribes, Scrolls, and Scriptures*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1985.
- Gromacki, Robert G. *New Testament Survey*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bakers, 1974.
- Habermas, Gary R. "Did Jesus perform Miracles? In Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995.
- Hegel, Martin. *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.
- Hurtado, Larry. *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004.
- . *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015.
- Jones, Timothy Paul. *Conspiracies and the Cross*. Lake Mary, Florida: Frontline, 2008.
- Luff, Rosemary Margaret. "Jewish Identities and the Distribution of Ethnic Indicators." In *The Impact of Jesus in First-Century Palestine*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- . "Discontent in Early First-Century Galilee and Judea." In *The Impact of Jesus in First-Century Palestine*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Neusner, Jacob. *The Way of Torah: An Introduction to Judaism*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997.
- Nolan, Albert. *Jesus before Christianity*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001.
- Patzia, Arthur G. *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text, and Canon*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1995.
- Riches, John. "The Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Context of First-Century Palestinian Judaism." In *The World of Jesus: First-Century Judaism in Crisis*. Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 10–29.
- Samuel, Vinay and Chris Sugden. *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983.
- Schwartz, D. R. *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992.
- Smith, Morton. *Jesus the Magician*. San Francisco: Harper and Collins, 1978.

- Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christ*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998.
- Talabi, Joseph Moyinoluwa. "The Relevance of the Synoptic Problem in the Critical Study of the Synoptic Gospels" in Olusola Igbari, ed. *The Study of New Testament in Contemporary Scholarship*. Ogun: Crowther Theological Publishers, 2019.
- Tambiyyi, Gideon Y. *The Historical Jesus and African Christianity*. Kaduna: Tubase, 2019.
- Tambiyyi, Gideon Ibn. "The Jesus I didn't Know: The Historical Jesus in an Unappreciated African Basket," *HUMANITY: Jos Journal of General Studies* Vol. 10, No.1 (2019), pp. 174-184.
- Tambiyyi, Gideon Y. "Devotional Moods behind *Nomina Sacra* in Judeo-Christian and Modern Thoughts," *Journal of Religion and Culture* Vol. 19, No. 1 (2019), pp. 49-63.
- Tambiyyi, Gideon Y. "Jesus, the Helpless Jew: A Forgotten Portrait of Jesus in the Third Quest," *Tropical Journal of Arts and Humanities* Vol. 7, No. 2 (2025), pp. 33-44. <https://credence-publishing.com/journal/uploads/archive/202517556880616960079245.pdf>
- Tripolitis, Antonia. *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Walsh, Robyn Faith. *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Witherington III, Ben. *What have they done to Jesus: Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History*. Oxford: Monarch Books, 2007.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. London: SPCK, 1996.
- . *The Contemporary Quest for Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.

