

THE BACKGROUND TO JOHN 10:1-15

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In his ground-breaking work, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, Emil Schurer had these words to say in his introduction: "In the fulness of time the Christian religion sprang out of Judaism; as a fact, indeed, of divine revelation, but also inseparably joined by innumerable threads with the previous thousand years of Israel's history. No incident in the gospel story, no word in the preaching of Jesus Christ, is intelligible apart from its setting in Jewish history, and without a clear understanding of that world of thought-distinction of the Jewish people. Thus it becomes the bounden duty of Christian theologians to examine into and describe that realm of thought and history in which the universal religion of Christ grew up."

The historical background into the time in which Yeshua grew up and lived out his life is very important when studying the scriptures. Many of the issues he addressed were a reflection of the social-matrix of those turbulent times. The Jewish people, as with much of the known world were under Roman rule, hatred among the people in Israel towards the Romans was intense. The religious order of the day in regards to the office of the Priesthood had become corrupt and contemptible in the eyes of the people. Their hope in the coming of the promised Messiah that would deliver them and once again exalt Israel in the eyes of the pagan nations around them was at a peak. In Yeshuas day, just as in ours, there was an estimated 26 different sects, all of them having a diverse understanding of the eschatological times in which they lived.

The purpose of Yeshuas words here in John 10:1-15 can be more clearly understood not only from a historical perspective, but also from a biblical one as well. To do this we must first go to the book of Ezekiel 34, (also Ezekiel 44:10-15). From these passages we can see how the priests had corrupted themselves, and the effects of this upon the people, and what the Most High had to say concerning them. In Ezekiel a promise is given, Yahweh will gather his sheep and give them One Shepherd. An important verse to remember is Ezek. 34:23, "And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he will feed them, even my servant David; he will feed them, and he will be their shepherd."

A distinction between Priest proper and the Levites is found for the first time here in Ezekiel. Examine Ezekiel 44:15-30. This caused a rival in the ranks of the Levites, as now only the House of Zadok were allowed to stand before Yahweh and offer up the sacrifices. The Levites that were not of the House of Zadok now took a more subordinate position. Only now, they were to only assist the sons of Aaron, the order can be seen in 1Chron 23:3-5 & 6-24. For a further in-depth look at the priesthood and their functions see SCOURER, HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN THE TIME OF JESUS, VOL. One, DIV. 2 PP 195-306

Historical writings in 2nd Maccabees reveal a very corrupt and Hellenized priesthood in the year 175 B.C. The following is a passage taken from 2nd Macc 4:7 "But after the death of Seleucus, when Antiochus, called Epiphanes, took the kingdom, Jason the brother of Onias laboured underhand to be high priest, 4:8 Promising unto the king by intercession three hundred and threescore talents of silver, and of another revenue eighty talents:

4:9 Beside this, he promised to assign an hundred and fifty more, if he might have licence to set him up a place for exercise, and for the training up of youth in the fashions of the heathen, and to write them of Jerusalem by the name of Antiochians. **4:10** Which when the king had granted, and he had gotten into his hand the rule he forthwith brought his own nation to Greekish fashion. **4:11** And the royal privileges granted of special favour to the Jews by the means of John the father of Eupolemus, who went ambassador to Rome for amity and aid, he took away; and putting down the governments which were according to the law, he brought up new customs against the law: **4:12** For he built gladly a place of exercise under the tower itself, and brought the chief young men under his subjection, and made them wear a hat. (The winged hat of the god Mercury) **4:13** Now such was the height of Greek fashions, and increase of heathenish manners, through the exceeding profaneness of Jason, that ungodly wretch, and no high priest; **4:14** That the priests had no courage to serve any more at the altar, but despising the temple, and neglecting the sacrifices, hastened to be partakers of the unlawful allowance in the place of exercise, after the game of Discus called them forth; **4:15** Not setting by the honours of their fathers, but liking the glory of the Grecians best of all."

1Macc: **1:14** Whereupon they built a place of exercise at Jerusalem according to the customs of the heathen: **1:15** And made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy covenant, and joined themselves to the heathen, and were sold to do mischief.

After the destruction of the Hasmonaean dynasty, the principle of inheritance and life-time tenure was done away with. The High Priests were appointed and deposed at pleasure by Herod the Great (37 B.C- 4B.C.) and the Romans alike. In order to keep their coveted positions huge sums of money were offered. From the time of Herod to the destruction of the Temple in 70A.D. About 107 years, there were no less than 28 high priests. The Jewish historian Josephus has this to say about the priesthood:(**247**) Herod was then made king by the Romans, but did no longer appoint high priests out of the family of Asamoneus; but made certain men to be so that were of no eminent families, but barely of those that were priests, excepting that he gave that dignity to Aristobulus; (**248**) for when he had made this Aristobulus, the grandson of that Hyrcanus who was then taken by the Parthians, and had taken his sister Mariamne to wife, he thereby aimed to win the good will of the people, who had a kind remembrance of Hyrcanus [his grandfather]. Yet did he afterward, out of his fear lest they should all bend their inclinations to Aristobulus, put him to death, and that by contriving how to have him suffocated, as he was swimming at Jericho, as we have already related that matter; (**249**) but after this man, he never intrusted the high priesthood to the posterity of the sons of Asamoneus. Archelaus also, Herod's son, did like his father in the appointment of the high priests as did the Romans also, who took the government over the Jews into their hands afterward. (**250**) Accordingly the number of the high priests, from the days of Herod until the day when Titus took the temple and the city, and burnt them, were in all twenty-eight; the time also that belonged to them was a hundred and seven years. (**251**) Some of these were the political governors of the people under the reign of Herod, and under the reign of Archelaus his son, although, after their death, the government became an aristocracy, and the high priests were intrusted with a dominion over the nation. And thus much may suffice to be said concerning our high priests. (Antiq of the Jews, Book 20 ch10)

Finally, once again in the words of Josephus showing how disreputable the Priesthood had become he records this: "(180) And now arose a sedition between the high priests and the principal men of the multitude of Jerusalem; each of whom got them a company of the boldest sort of men, and of those that loved innovations, about them, and became leaders to them; and when they struggled together, they did it by casting reproachful words against one another, and by throwing stones also. And there was nobody to reprove them; but these disorders were done after a licentious manner in the city, as if it had no government over it. (181) And such was the impudence and boldness that had seized on the high priests, that they had the hardness to send their servants into the threshing floors, to take away those tithes that were due to the priests, insomuch that it so fell out that the poorer sort of the priests died for want. To this degree did the violence of the seditious prevail over all right and justice.(Antiq of the Jews, Book 20 ch 8)

By laying this foundation of history pertaining to the priesthood before and through the days of Yeshua it will be a lot clearer to whom he was addressing in John 10. It must also be kept in mind that Yeshua kept all of the commandments, including; Exod 22:28 "Thou shalt not revile the gods, nor curse the ruler of thy people." The word "gods" is in the plural and means judges, rulers, and the word "rulers" is Nasi' a lifted up one or chief, as in Chief Priest. Remember the words of Paul in Acts 23:4-5 "And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest? Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.

Yeshuas' figurative language and imagery here is not directed against the Pharisees, but the aristocratic Sadducees who had attained & controlled the high priesthood illegally. This is reflected in John 10:1 "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber." Yeshua then begins to draw from Ezekiel 34 referring to himself as the One and True Good Shepherd who was and is our Great High Priest, though this was not known at the time by his disciples, it was only later that they came to understand these things about their Messiah. In stark contrast to the corrupt priesthood Yeshua reveals the true character of the shepherd, John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." The true shepherd is self-sacrificing showing loving kindness towards his sheep as opposed to the hirelings. He goes on to say; John 10:8-10 "**All that ever came before me** are thieves and robbers. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." The chief priests only concern was for themselves, the political power they had as well as the religious authority they exercised over the people as they had gotten rich by fleecing the sheep. They did not represent Yahweh in their acts or in their hearts, in fact their hearts were far from him. The imagery Yeshua used reflects the kind of character they had.

The words of Yeshua were ad hoc against the high priests, yet all too often certain passages of scriptures are read with a preconceived interpretation or understanding. Most of this comes from the pulpits, it is to the fault of many preachers today who have a propensity to over spiritualize, and allegorize the scriptures, which can lead to limitation and loss. When the scriptures are wrenched out of their historical and social- matrix in which they were spoken a misrepresentation of the passage is all too often the result. The above text is often taught to reflect that Yeshuas words were directed towards Satan. That is a misrepresentation of the text as it has nothing at all to do with him. Everywhere that Yeshuas addresses Satan or something that

he does he mentions him by name. The *Peshat* (literal meaning of a passage of scripture) must be used first and foremost when reading the bible.