

THE PHARISEES, SCRIBES, SADDUCEES, ESSENES, ZEALOTS, AND HERODIANS

The various sects of Judaism that one encounters in reading the gospel narratives about Jesus all have their roots in the Intertestamental Period. Jesus interacted with members of most of these groups, either in the synagogues, the temple, or the villages. Since none of the sects go back as far as the Old Testament, and since we have no literature directly from any of these groups, our sources for understanding them come from secondary references, such as, Josephus, the New Testament, rabbinic literature, Philo of Alexandria, and a handful of statements in Greco-Roman travelogues.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees were the scholars of the laws and traditions of Judaism. Their name means “separated ones,” and Josephus first mentions them in connection with Jonathan, the successor of Judas Maccabeus. Apparently, they emerged in distinction from the Sadducees, the party of the priests. About 100 BC, they engaged in a long struggle to remove the Jewish religion from the control of the priests, asserting that God could and should be worshipped when outside Jerusalem and when not at the temple. Hence, worship involved more than just sacrifice but also consisted of prayer and the study of God’s laws. Hence, their natural environment was the synagogue.

They believed the law of Moses was twofold, both written and oral. They emphasized the binding force of the Oral Torah, what in the New Testament gospels is called “the tradition of the elders” (Mk. 7:3-5), the belief that an oral

CLASS STRUCTURE

Social structure during the Hellenistic and Roman Periods, at least for the Jews in Palestine, falls into several categories. There was a small ruling class (for governing and protection), a large peasant class (for producing food), and virtually no mediating middle class. Smaller class subdivisions are:

Ruler *The emperor*

Governors *1-2% of the population made up of hereditary aristocrats and appointed bureaucrats*

Retainers *About 5% of the population, such as, soldiers, servants, lower officials, religious leaders, and educators. **Pharisees and scribes fit best in this category.***

Merchants *Low prestige and no direct power, but standing in a market relationship rather than an authority relationship to the upper classes.*

Priests *Generally wealthy but dependent upon the governing class. **Most Sadducees fit here.***

Peasants *The am ha'arets, the “people of the land,” the bulk of the population, heavily taxed (30-70% of the crop)*

Artisans *About 3-5% of the population, not usually productive enough to become wealthy*

Unclean *Not merely the diseased, but also those with despised trades (tanners, dung-collectors, miners)*

Expendables *About 5-10% of the population, landless, itinerant, minimal family life, high death rate, living on the fringe of society. **Zealots, rebels, and brigands fit here.***

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tradition originating from Moses had been handed down faithfully from generation to generation. (This oral tradition would later be codified in the *Mishnah* in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD.) They even advocated a “fence” (חומרה) around the Torah, which is to say, additional prohibitions that were more than the bare requirement so as to avoid violating the law even unintentionally. A good example is in the practice of corporeal punishment, where the Torah permits a maximum of 40 lashes (Dt. 25:1-3), but in practice, the number had been reduced to 39 to avoid a Torah violation by miscount (2 Co. 11:24; *Makkot* 3.10-15).

From Josephus, we discover that the Pharisees attributed everything to fate and to God, a predestinarian point-of-view long before Augustine and Calvin. They believed the soul to be imperishable, and hence, they believed in the resurrection of the dead (Ac. 23:8) with rewards and punishments after death. They were concerned with simplicity, ritual purity, tithing, and the finer points of legal observance (cf. Mt. 23:5-7, 16-22; Mk. 2:16; 7:1-4; Lk. 11:37-44). They advocated a punctilious following of purity laws, not merely when entering the Temple, but in all facets of life. Prayer was enjoined three times each day (morning, afternoon, evening), daily they recited the *Shema* (Dt. 6:4), and twice a week they fasted (Lk. 18:12). They displayed prominent phylacteries (Mt. 23:5).



A phylactery excavated at Qumran (based on Dt. 6:8). It contained four small passages of Scripture: Ex. 13:1-10; 13:11-16; Dt. 6:4-9; 11:13-21.

In general, the Pharisees were the most influential of the sects, more popular among the people than the Sadducees, since the latter were mostly from the aristocracy.

The Scribes

The four gospels frequently associate the scribes with Pharisees (Mt. 5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23:2, 13; Mk. 2:16; 7:5; Lk. 5:21, 30; 6:7; 11:53; 15:2; Jn. 8:3), and while Pharisees and scribes were not identical (though some scribes almost certainly were Pharisees, cf. Mk. 2:16), they had much in common. From their earlier role in recording keeping, going back to the time of David (2 Sa. 8:16; 1 Chr. 24:6), they had



Ancient drawing of a scribe

transitioned to become highly respected experts in the Torah, following the pattern of Ezra (Ezr. 7:6, 10). They were especially involved with the transmission and interpretation of the Torah. In Sirach, scribes are depicted as those “devoted to the study of the law” (Sir. 38:24—39:11). Hence, some New Testament Versions translate the word γραμματεὺς as “teacher/expert of the law” (so NIV, NIB, NLT, NET) as opposed to

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the traditional rendering of “scribe.” They were even influential in political negotiations (1 Mac. 7:12). In addition to their expertise in the Scriptures, they could draft legal documents, like marriage contracts, mortgages, the sale of land, and so forth. Most villages probably had at least one scribe. Luke uses the term “lawyer” on one occasion (Lk. 10:25; cf. 11:45-46), speaking of one who is an expert in the Torah, so this might be an alternative term for a scribe. In the gospels, scribes come in for their share of critique by Jesus and often serve as his opponents concerning how the law of Moses should be observed (Mk. 7:1-8; Lk. 6:6-11). Paul can refer to them as scholars alongside wise men and philosophers (1 Co. 1:20).

The Sadducees

The Sadducees (= the just ones) seem to have emerged from the religious elite during the early Hasmonean Period under rulers like John Hyrcanus I. One of their primary concerns was the maintenance of the 2nd Temple, which is natural enough, since many if not most of them were priests (cf. Ac. 4:1; 5:17). Being in the upper class, however, they also oversaw state affairs, including participation in the Great Sanhedrin, collection of taxes (including international tribute from the Diaspora), and serving as liaisons with the Romans. No texts exist from their own hand, and they disappeared after the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Both Christian texts but also Josephus treats them negatively. Josephus describes them as boorish and rude.

We do know that they differed from the Pharisees in some theologically significant ways. One of the most important differences was their rejection of any binding authority in the Oral Torah, preferring instead only the written Torah. Here, at least, they agreed with Jesus, who regularly used the phrase “it is written” and was outspoken in his rejection of the Oral Torah. Unlike the Pharisees, Sadducees rejected the idea of fate, believing in absolute free will. They did not believe in the immortality of the soul, there was no resurrection or afterlife, and there were no rewards or punishments after death. According to the New Testament, they also rejected the idea of angels and the spirit world (Mk. 12:18; Ac. 23:8).

The Essenes

Of the sects that Josephus describes, the Essenes are the one group not mentioned in the New Testament. This is hardly surprising, since many Essenes had withdrawn from the larger Jewish community and lived in communes in the desert. While there is some debate among scholars, most are of the opinion that the community at Qumran was Essene.

Excavations at Qumran, near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea.



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According to Josephus, the Essenes numbered about 4000. They strongly objected to current

4QMMT

An intriguing text reconstructed out of six separate manuscripts from Qumran (dated ca. 150 BC), probably Essene, describes some 22 precepts describing the works of the law that would be “reckoned as righteousness,” including food laws, purity laws, intermarriage laws, and bans on Gentile offerings. Currently, this is the only extant ancient text outside the writings of St. Paul to use the phrase “the works of the law” (4QMMT, 4Q394-399). However, whereas this text lists works of the law that would be reckoned as righteousness, Paul writes that no one will be reckoned righteous by observing the works of the law, but only by faith in Christ Jesus (Ro. 3:20, 28; Ga. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10).

temple practices, concluding that the priesthood was corrupt beyond recovery. Josephus locates them in the various towns of Jewish settlement, but Pliny the Elder located them in a settlement near the Dead Sea, which is one reason, among others, why many scholars link them with Qumran. While there is no certainty, some have speculated that perhaps John the Baptist may have had a link to the Essenes, since he grew up “in the desert” (Lk. 1:80).

In the several descriptions of Essenes in Greek and Latin texts, we glean that they were devoted to both the Torah and the Prophets. Like the Pharisees, they believed in fate, predestination, resurrection, and angels. If the Qumran community was Essene, they anticipated the coming of two Messiahs, one priestly and the other royal. They followed very rigorous purity codes, and some Essenes were celibate, while others married in order to have children so as to perpetuate the group. Full members held property in common. The Essenes would disappear from history after the 1st Jewish Revolt.

The Zealots

Historians use the term “zealots” to describe all the rebel groups that advocated armed resistance to Roman occupation. However, this was hardly an organized group in the sense of the Pharisees and Sadducees, for there was only marginal continuity between the various peasant rebellions described by Josephus that occurred over several decades. Josephus says zealots were much like the Pharisees except for their slogan “no ruler but God” and their violent resistance to Rome. In the New Testament, the term “zealot” is used for one of Jesus’ disciples (Mt. 10:4; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15).

JUDAS THE GALILEAN

In 4 BC, a Galilean named Judas ben Ezekias led a rebellion by raiding Sepphoris. The Syrian Legate responded by burning the city, selling the inhabitants into slavery, and crucifying some 2000 rebels. In AD 6, another Jewish leader named Judas (some suggest it was the same person) led a resistance movement due to the census imposed by the Syrian governor Quirinius (Ac. 5:37).

The Herodians

Not much is known of the Herodians mentioned in Mk. 3:6; 12:13; Mt. 22:16, and Josephus does not mention them. Apparently, they were supporters of the Herods, and they are mentioned in the New Testament alongside the Pharisees. Some scholars suggest they may have been Essenes, but this is unclear.