

THE INTER-TESTAMENT PERIOD ESSENES, HERODIANS, ZEALOTS, AND THE JUDEA OF OUR LORD'S DAY

THE ESSENES

The Essenes were a “super-spiritual” Jews who saw Moses as their primary authority. Yet, as with most mystics, their spiritualization of the written word completely distorted the plain meaning of God’s word.

They abstained from the temple sacrifices, stressing the spiritual meaning of the written word. Their focus was a holy mind, a spiritual religion, and self-humbling separation to God, by means of **monastic withdrawalment, ascetic discipline, and barest necessities of living.**

They were a community apart. They "lived by themselves in their own houses, working in the field or at useful crafts, but refused to trade with outsiders. Each meal was prepared by their own priests and partaken of as a sacrifice to God.

However, their monastic spirituality but **a slavish externalism** ! They kept the Sabbath so rigidly to the letter of the Law that they could neither light a fire nor prepare food. They counted it defilement even to eat food cooked by anyone outside their own group. If they were ever touched by an uncircumcised person they must at once physically cleanse themselves by religious ceremony.

Nevertheless, they exhibited godly virtues which lifted them much above the average Jew. Their motives were good; but their methods were mistaken. Their exclusivism, asceticism and mysticism were but mere disguised escapism. Their mystical liberty with the Written Word did not bring them spiritual liberty, instead it left them as slaves to their own rules.

THE HERODIANS

In Matthew 22:16, Mark 3:6 and 12:13 we find yet another Jewish group, namely, the **Herodians**. Who, then, were they? We do not know how they originally formed but their named describes their role in Jewish society. The Herodians were in no sense a religious group. They were political; and the leading aim of its adherents was to further the cause of the Herod government. The Herod rulers would readily cooperate with them.

THE ZEALOTS

In Matthew 10: 4 and Mark 3:18 a certain "Simon the Canaanite" figures among the twelve apostles. In Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13 he is "Simon Zelotes." The word "Canaanite" should be "Cananaean" (see R.V.), as it refers to a movement, not to the Canaanite race. "Zelotes" means "the Zealot." They were the radical Jewish nationalist party. It was the Zealots who eventually brought the Jews into a confrontation with Rome which resulted in utter ruin and the sack of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus in A. D. 70.

They began as a movement somewhere around 63 B.C., when the Maccabean independence period ended and Judea came under the control of Rome. The Jews were much larger in number then and markedly different in temper. Those seventy years of self-government under the Pharisee's influence had made them perhaps the most aggravating community which the Romans had to govern.

From the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the Jewish race the Jewish history is chiefly a record of the struggle of those who were zealous for the Law against the encroachments of Roman power and Hellenic culture."

THE JEWS IN OUR LORD'S TIME

And now let us get some sense of the the political and religious atmosphere during the time when our Lord Jesus lived in Palestine.

The Roman World

The civilized world of that day was co-extensive with the Roman empire. Rome kept order everywhere with iron hand. One common language, i.e. Greek, linked larger towns and educated men together in a world-wide interchange of thought never known before. One common culture, the Graeco-Roman, prevailed more or less through all lands. The famous Roman roads facilitated communications and became great highways of trade. The Mediterranean shipping routes connected the world and kept it at peace with each other. Commerce flourished by land and sea.

Palestine

At that time Palestine was in five sub-areas: Judaea, Samaria, Galilee, Peraea, Trachonitis. The first Herod had reigned over all five; but at his death (about the time our Lord was born) the kingdom had been partitioned to three of his sons, as directed in his will. To his eldest son, Archelaus (Matt.2:22), he bequeathed Judea and Samaria. To his son Herod Antipas he left Galilee and Peraea. To another son, Philip, he left Trachonitis. Ten years later Rome removed Archelaus of Judaea and Samaria because of misrule, and had appointed instead a procurator known as "Governor of Judaea." During our Lord's public ministry the fifth of these procurators was in charge, namely, **Pontius Pilate**. He was responsible to the Roman Legate over Syria, who exercised supervisory control of all Palestine, and who in turn was accountable to the emperor. The procurator's ordinary residence was not at Jerusalem but at Caesarea, which to the Romans was of greater political importance. At such times as the feast of the Passover, when Jerusalem was crowded, and the chance of another Jewish revolt was high, the procurator took up temporary residence in Jerusalem which explains Pilate's presence there during the uproar by the crowd who called for our Lord's crucifixion.

At that time, also, Herod Antipas ruled as Tetrarch over Galilee and Perxa. He was the son of Herod the Great and Malthace, a Samaritan woman. Half Idumean and half Samaritan, there was not a drop of Jewish blood in his veins ; and "Galilee of the Gentiles" seemed a fitting domain for such a prince. The Gospels indicate him to have been a superstitious, immoral and cruel man. He, too, was at Jerusalem when the demand for our Lord's crucifixion began. Pilate, therefore, on learning that Jesus was of Galilee, sent Him to Herod: but Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate.

The Jews of Judea

As for the religious scene at that time, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians all had their own agendas. The Pharisees had much influence with the people so Herod therefore treated them with a careful forbearance.

The power of the Sadducees had been greatly weakened by Herod's murdering forty-five of their leaders early in his reign. Herod had also abolished the hereditary high-priesthood which was another blow to the Sadducees. Nevertheless, the Sadducees remained influential in top circles. The Sadducees were still the native aristocracy of the land. In their higher ranks they were still motivated by political rather than spiritual aims. They had a powerful hold on the high-priesthood and the Sanhedrin.

The Herodians had no scruples against using spy-ring tactics, and always had a double-faced card to play. To Herod they were the determined devotees of that house. To the Roman "Governor" they were equally the loyal upholders of Roman domination, from which the authority of the Herod was derived.

They also had cynical scorn for the Messianic hope and thought that Jesus of Nazerath was dangerous, and should be handed over for the Governor to silence (Luke 20:20).

An Evil Triangle

The Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians were all in Judea at the time Jesus came to Jerusalem. They hated each other, yet all three groups became one in their murderous opposition to the this Man of Peace, Jesus."

THOSE JEWISH SECTS AND TODAY

It is remarkable how these same Jewish groups are with us today. Let us look at them to see how.

The Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians were always in active opposition to Jesus. The Pharisees were the old time **ritualists**. The Sadducees were the old-time **rationalists**. The Herodians were the old-time **secularists**.

The **Pharisee** or **the ritualist** was always adding to the word of God. He is not content with the written Word of God or with the plain truth of the Gospel. He must add his own ideas and rules, until religion and salvation are a highly complicated matter.

On the other hand, the **Sadducee** was **the rationalist**. He was always taking from the word of God. He could not accept the written Word of God in its entirety, nor the truth of the Gospel as it stands ; nor can he accept, without drastic deletions, the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Everything must be tried at the bar of human reason. Much in Scripture must be removed to make faith reasonable and tenable. They did not believe in angels or demons, nor in the resurrection of the dead or in other miracles.

As for the **Herodian**, he was the **secularist** for he cared neither for adding to nor taking from the Scripture. The written Word of God was far from his concern. His prime consideration was living life now. To him nothing mattered so long as his material interests were furthered?

While the **ritualist Pharisee** was busy adding to, and the **rationalist Sadducee** was sceptically taking from, the secularist **Herodian** was heedlessly ignoring the word of God.

THE THREE JEWISH GROUPS AND TODAY

We have these three groups with us today.

The Pharisee or ritualist is represented today by the Roman Catholic church and churches given to legalism. They are not content with the written Word of God. No, they must add to the word of God their traditions and legal requirements in order to maintain their relationship with God.

The Sadducee or the rationalist is the modern religious sceptic and/or liberal who cannot tell where his theology begins or ends. They are far happier telling you what they do not believe rather than declaring what they do believe. They will not accept even Christ Himself as being infallible. The miraculous and supernatural must be eliminated until the only miracle left is the miraculous infallibility of their own ability to reason.

As for **the Herodian**, he is the modern secularist who will degrade Biblical authority if it will mean modern progress. So in the name of "progressiveness" he would trample underfoot the sacredness of Biblical worship and pervert Christian holy days into religious holidays with Christ.

The Three Great Enemies

These three-the Pharisee, the Sadducee, the Herodian, alias the modern ritualist, rationalist, secularist-are the three great enemies of true, evangelical Christianity today.

With the ritualist the battle ground is the Lord's Table - is it a table or an altar?

With the rationalist the battle ground is the Bible - is it God's Word or only man's?

With the secularist the battle ground is the Sabbath - is it a holy day or only a holiday?

Perhaps the most despicable behavior of those long ago Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians was that, although they hated and plotted against each other, they all united in common cause against JESUS.

Is there anything more astonishing than to read, even early in our Lord's ministry as recorded in **Mark 3:6** which says, "The Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him". And again in **Matt.16:1** it says, "Then the Pharisees with the Sadducees came tempting Him"

These three groups greatly differ from each other; yet they will join together against evangelical Christianity who asks only that Christ Himself and the written Word of God be our sole authority to judge all matters of religion and practice.

THE SANHEDRIN

The Sanhedrin was the supreme civil and religious court of the Jewish nation. It is with this group that the real responsibility for the crucifying of Israel's Messiah, the incarnate Son of God must fall. Pontius Pilate was merely the "rubber stamp" of imperial Rome. Moreover, to do this, the Sanhedrin violated their own code of conduct. The word, Sanhedrin, means "council".

Origin

Jewish tradition says the Sanhedrin began with Moses' appointment of the seventy elders as magistrates (Num.11). After the Babylonian exile, it was reorganized by Ezra among the returned Remnant in Judaea. However, neither the historical nor the prophetic books of the Old Testament mention the Sanhedrin by name or by implication. Nor is it mentioned in the early post-exilic years.

The name, *Sunedrion*, suggests an origin after the Greek impact of 333 B.C. Moreover, a

supreme council such as the Sanhedrin could only have come into being during a time when considerable self-government was allowed the Jews, which again points to the first three Ptolemies (323-222 B.C.) favored such self-government.

Constitution

Most of the information herein comes from various parts of the Mishna and Gemara.

The **Sanhedrin** consisted of seventy-one members made up of: (

- (1) the high priest;
- (2) twenty-four "chief priests" who represented all twenty-four orders of the whole priesthood:(1 Chronicles 24: 4, 6;)
- (3) twenty-four "elders," who represented the laity, often called "elders of the people," (Matthew 21:23, 26:3;) and
- (4) twenty two "scribes," who were the expert interpreters of the Law in matters both religious and civil.

There was a president, who was public figurehead of the Sanhedrin ; a vice-president ("father of the house of judgment"), who supervised deliberations in the sessions ; and a chakam, or skilled referee, who pre-examined pending matters and then laid them before the house. The Sanhedrin elected its own president, vice-president, and chakam. Only the king was ineligible for the presidency, because it was forbidden by law to contradict him.

Operation

There were daily sittings; between morning and evening sacrifice, excepting sabbaths and festivals. The president occupied a raised seat, vice-president at his right hand, referee at his left, while the members sat on low cushions, Oriental fashion, in a half-moon, so that all could see

each and each see all. Before them sat three rows of disciples-future judges-also two notaries, one on the right hand, the other on the left. Twenty-three members were a quorum, which allowed two-thirds to be free at any given time for their own business concerns ; but no member must leave if thereby he would deplete the quorum.

Membership

The late Dr. C. D. Ginsburg says that the qualifications for membership were: "The applicant had to be morally and physically blameless. He had to be middle-aged, tall, good-looking, wealthy, learned both in the Divine Law and diverse branches of profane science such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, magic, idolatry, etc., in order that he might be able to judge in these matters. He was required to know several languages, so that the Sanhedrin might not be dependent on an interpreter in case any foreigner or foreign question came before them. Very old persons, proselytes and eunuchs were ineligible because of their idiosyncrasies, nor could such candidates be elected as had no children, because they could not sympathize with domestic affairs, nor those who could not prove that they were the legitimate offspring of a priest, Levite, or Israelite, who played dice, lent money on usury, or dealt in produce of the Sabbatical year. In addition to all these qualifications, a candidate for the Great Sanhedrin was required, first of all, to have been a judge in his native town, to have been transferred from there to the small Sanhedrin which sat at the entrance of the temple hall before he could be received as member of the seventy-one."

Jurisdiction

The main functions of the Sanhedrin are as follows:

- (1) Surveillance over the lineal and legal purity of the priesthood, including careful pedigree registers.
- (2) Adjudication in cases of alleged immorality among wives or daughters of priests.
- (3) Superintendence over the religious life of the nation, with special watchfulness against

any lapse into idol-worship.

(4) Apprehension and trial of false prophets or dangerous heretics.

(5) Watchfulness that neither king nor high priest should act contrary to the Divine Law.

(6) Decision whether any war contemplated by the king should be waged or not, and the giving of permission.

(7) Determination whether boundaries of the holy city or temple should at any time be enlarged, as only the Sanhedrin could pronounce ground consecrated.

(8) Appointment of smaller local sanhedria.

(9) Regulation of Jewish calendar and harmonizing of solar years with lunar by adding days to the calendar.

Administration

The general guideline in the administration of its duties according to was to attempt to clear the accused rather than to condemn him, especially in matters of life and death.

The Sanhedrin and Christ

We should have this in mind as we read of our Lord's life and death in the Gospels. Where Jesus was taken and how He was judged in less than the time required by the rules of the Sanhedrin was in complete violation of the requirements of the Sandhedrin.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 Jerusalem ceased to be the administrative center of the Jewish religion ; and the Sanhedrin, after several removals, eventually located itself at Tiberias. Its power gradually declined, until it died out about A.D. 425.