

Jewish Parties in the New Testament

Judaism in New Testament times was diverse. We read of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. One man is called a Zealot. From other sources we learn of Essenes and the Sicarii.

Pharisees

The Pharisees constituted the largest and most important group, Josephus stating that they numbered about six thousand. They appear in the Gospels as opponents of Jesus. Paul was a Pharisee (see Phil. 3:5). They controlled the synagogues and exercised great control over much of the population.

No surviving writing gives us information about the origin of the Pharisees. The earliest reference to them is in the time of Jonathan (160–143 B.C.), when Josephus refers to Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Their good relations with the rulers ended in the time of John Hyrcanus (134–104 B.C.). They came to power again when Salome Alexandra became the queen (76 B.C.).

The term *Pharisee* means *separated ones*. Perhaps it means they separated themselves from the masses or to the study and interpretation of the law. A common assumption is that the Pharisees developed from the Hasidim, the ultraorthodox, loyal freedom fighters in the time of Judas Maccabeus. They were apparently responsible for the transformation of Judaism from a religion of sacrifice to one of law. They were the developers of the oral tradition, the teachers of the twofold law: written and oral. They saw the way to God as being through obedience to the law. They were the progressives of the day, willing to adopt new ideas and adapt the law to new situations.

The Pharisees were strongly monotheistic. They accepted all of the Old Testament as authoritative. They affirmed the reality of angels and demons. They had a firm belief in life beyond the grave and a resurrection of the body. They were missionary, seeking the conversion of Gentiles (see Matt. 23:15). They believed God was concerned with a person's life without denying that the individual was responsible for the way he or she lived. They had little interest in politics. The Pharisees opposed Jesus because He refused to accept their interpretations of the oral law.

Sadducees

The Sadducees were aristocrats. They were the party of the wealthy and of the high priestly families. They were in charge of the temple, its services, and its concessions. They claimed to be descendants of Zadok, the high priest of Solomon. The true derivation of the term *Sadducees* is unknown. In all literature they stand in opposition to the Pharisees. They were social conservatives, seeking to preserve the practices of the past. They opposed the oral law, accepting the Pentateuch as the ultimate authority. The Sadducees were materialistic in their outlook. They did not believe in life after death or rewards or punishment beyond this life. They

denied the existence of angels and demons. They did not believe God was concerned with what people did. Rather, people were totally free. The Sadducees were politically oriented, supporters of ruling powers, whether Seleucids or Romans. They tolerated no threats to their position and wealth, so they strongly opposed Jesus.

Herodians

The Herodians are mentioned only three times in the New Testament (see Matt. 22:16; Mark 3:6; 12:13). In Mark they joined the Pharisees in a plot to kill Jesus. In the other references the Pharisees and Herodians together asked Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. The Herodians were Jews who supported Herod Antipas or sought to have a descendant of Herod the Great given authority over Palestine. At this time Judea and Samaria were under Roman governors.

Zealots

The Zealots are mentioned rarely in the New Testament. Simon, one of the disciples, is called Zealot (see Luke 6:15). John 18:40 uses a word for Barabbas that Josephus used for Zealot. Josephus said the Zealots began with Judas the Galilean's seeking to lead a revolt over a taxation census (A.D. 6). He did not use the name Zealot until referring to events in A.D. 66, the first Jewish revolt against Rome. The Zealots were the extreme wing of the Pharisees. In contrast with other Pharisees, they believed only God had the right to rule over the Jews. They were willing to fight and die for that belief. For them nationalistic patriotism and religion were inseparable.

Sicarii

Literally meaning *dagger men*, the Sicarii were the most extreme revolutionaries among the Jews of the first century. Committed to the overthrow of Roman power over Palestine, they used small, concealed daggers to assassinate their enemies, principally Roman officials. They were willing to die in killing their targets and did whatever they could to disrupt Roman political and military policy.

Essenes

We know of the Essenes through the writings of Josephus and Philo, a Jewish philosopher in Alexandria, Egypt. They are not mentioned in the New Testament. More information about the Essenes is known since the 1947 discovery of manuscripts from caves above the Dead Sea called the Dead Sea Scrolls. The common assumption is that the people of the scrolls were either Essenes or associated with them. They may have begun at about the same time as the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Essenes were an ascetic group, many of whom lived in the desert region of Qumran near the Dead Sea. An active Essene community was located in Jerusalem as well. The Essenes took vows of celibacy and perpetuated their community by adopting male children. However, some Essenes married. When someone joined the Essenes, he gave all of his possessions to the community. A three-year period of probation was required before full membership was granted. The Essenes devoted themselves to the study of the law. They went beyond the Pharisees in their rigid understanding of it. There is no hard evidence that either Jesus or John the

Baptist had any relation to Qumran. Jesus would have strongly opposed their understanding of the law.

The vast majority of the Jewish people were not members of any of these parties, although they were probably most influenced by the Pharisees.

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