

## The Jewish Sects in the Time of Christ

There were three major divisions of First Century Jewish leadership and the various sects that developed within them. Within the **Political Division** were the Herodians and the Zealots. The **Religious Division** consisted of four main groups: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Scribes and the Essenes. The **Judicial Division** was body of 70 men, plus the high priest, who formed the special council known as the Sanhedrin.

### 1. Political Leadership

#### The Herodians

The Herodians are mentioned twice in the four gospel accounts (Matt 22:16; Mk 12:13), and they are parallel passages describing the same event. A group of Pharisees had linked up with some Herodians in a joint effort to ensnare Jesus. The Herodians were not a religious group and were purely secularists. They were essentially a political party of Jews who supported the reign and dynasty of the Herod family. They came into prominence at the time of the Maccabees. They disappeared from the world scene after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Herodians denied the existence of spirits, as well as the resurrection and immortality of the human soul. Christ's early ministry demonstrated no support or sympathy to the cause of the Herodians: to befriend both the ruling Romans and the Herod family. He warned the people against following the teaching of the Herodians when He said, "*Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod*" (Mk 8:15). The Herodians, therefore, despised Jesus for turning the people against them. They were even willing to ally themselves with the Pharisees (political enemies) to discredit Him (Matt 22:15-17).

#### The Zealots

The Zealots were a radical party of Jews who were determined to throw off the yoke of Rome by force. Like the Herodians, the Zealots arose during the inter-testament period, rising to power under Judas Maccabee, the leader of the Maccabean Revolt. The Greeks, led by the wicked Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BC), had desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem. Jewish zealots led the Maccabean Revolt against Antiochus.

However, by the time of Christ, the Zealot's hatred was directed against their latest Gentile oppressors, the Romans, and their zeal was more political than spiritual. They were guerrilla fighters who made surprise attacks on Roman garrisons and patrols. A Zealot would sneak up on a lone Roman soldier, slit his neck with a dagger, then disappear into the night shadows. They hid in the hills outside Jerusalem until it was time to attack again. Josephus called them "dagger men" because of the way they assassinated Roman soldiers.

The Zealots were liked by the common people, who wanted to end Roman oppression, but were not willing to resort to murder. One of the original twelve Apostles had been a Zealot: "*Simon the Zealot*". Judas Iscariot may have been a Zealot, though he was more zealous about money than politics.

Barabbas was a Zealot who killed Romans, whereas Jesus obviously was not going to lead a military revolution against Rome. When Pontius Pilate gave the crowd outside his Praetorium a choice—"free Jesus or free Barabbas" according to the Passover custom, the crowd chose Barabbas. (Matt 27:20-22)

Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the last stand by Jewish Zealots took place at the fortress of Masada near the Dead Sea. They fought against the Romans for 7 months under the leadership of Eleazar, but then committed mass-suicide when the Romans breached the fortress gates. These men willingly took their own lives rather than submit themselves to Roman Rule. Such was the mindset of the Zealots of First Century Israel.

## 2. Religious Leadership

### The Sadducees

The Sadducees are difficult to categorize because they were as much political as they were religious. They were a priestly political party that took their name from a priest named Zadok, who lived during the reigns of King David and King Solomon.

The Torah was the only part of Scripture the Sadducees accepted as divinely inspired and authoritative. They denied the legalism and the traditions of the Pharisees. They cared even less about their religious doctrines. They denied the existence of the supernatural, which meant they denied the resurrection, and the existence of angels and demons (Acts 23:6-8).

Originally, the Sadducees were purely a political party. They became religious later in an effort to defend their position against the Pharisees. The Sadducees under the leadership of Annas controlled and profited from the Temple booth business. These were the money exchangers and the animal sellers who turned the Lord's House into a "*den of thieves*". The first attack by Jesus on the Sadducees was during the first Passover of His ministry when He drove the money changers from the Temple (Jn 2:14-16). The Pharisees were delighted! The Sadducees were corrupt and evil and the Pharisees were the champions of the people. The Sadducees were enraged! They feared more than anything the loss of influence, wealth, and power they had struggled so hard to maintain.

The Sadducees taught that God rewarded obedience with temporal wealth. This was in opposition to the Pharisees, who taught rewards for obedience to the Law were to be expected, not only in this life, but even more fully in the Future Life, which they called The Kingdom.

They were both wrong in that both groups placed their hope for reward in their own self-deluded sense of righteousness. Neither group had concern for inner spiritual life or the welfare of their fellow man. Jesus warned His disciples about "*the leaven*" of the Sadducees and the Pharisees: self-serving, self-righteous, hypocritical, dead externalism that had no inner reality. (Matt 16:6).

The Sadducees were extremely wealthy and because they descended from priestly origins, they had a strong influence in the Sanhedrin. This influence was further strengthened because the two reigning high priests, Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, were both Sadducees. Though the Sadducees were fewer in number, they held the reigns of political power. They also had the favor of the Roman rulers.

After Christ's resurrection the Sadducees, intensified in their hatred, rejected the claims of "the resurrection of this Nazarene" from the tomb. It was during this time they gained complete control in the Sanhedrin under the leadership of Annas. Their goal was to destroy this "new resurrection movement". They employed Paul, he himself a Pharisee, to persecute and kill the followers of this resurrected Jesus. But with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the

Sadducees disappeared totally from the world scene. They no longer had a home. The Temple was gone!

### **The Pharisees**

It is not clear how the religious sect of the Pharisees began. They may have developed from a group called "*the Hasidim*," which means "*the pious ones*". Hasidic Jews still exist today. The Hasidim, under the leadership of Judas Maccabee, were among the strongest supporters of the revolt against the Greeks in 165 BC.

"*Pharisee*" means "*separated one*". They separated themselves from having any contact with Gentiles, tax collectors or any Jew they considered a sinner. They looked down on the common people and so they would do ceremonial washings to purify themselves after being in the marketplace or in a large crowd of "common" Jews.

Admission to the sect of the Pharisees was very difficult. A new follower had to prove his knowledge of the Law, as well as the oral traditions. They to know and perform their rituals and their laws flawlessly for an entire year. It was not enough simply to know the Torah, they had to know what "it meant" according to the interpretation of the Rabbi that they followed.

They were the "fundamentalists". They believed in God's sovereignty and divine destiny, in the resurrection, in angels and demons, the supernatural, and the inspiration of the Scriptures. But their orthodoxy was spiritually barren. They were legalistic isolationists. They had no love or respect for outsiders. They believed they alone were the true Israel: super-spiritual men who, because of their strict adherence to the laws and traditions, would reap the greatest heavenly rewards.

Their loyalty was not to God, but to themselves and their man made traditions. They loved the influence, the prestige, the greetings of reverence and respect that came from the common people when the little bells on the bottom of their robes announced their presence. They also loved their special seats of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They taught a righteousness based on works and much of what they did was for human praise. They were the height of religious emptiness and hypocrisy.

Early in His ministry the attitude of the Pharisees toward Jesus was positive, especially after Jesus threw the money changers out of the Temple at the Passover early in His public ministry. However, as time went on, it became clear that Jesus rejected their interpretations of the Law, especially the Sabbath Law. He also rejected their manmade traditions. As Jesus He gained greater popularity with the people, the Pharisees became to resent Him and His followers. In a hatred born out of jealousy, they were willing to join forces with the Sadducees in order to eliminate Him. As much as they despised the Sadducees, they hated Jesus more. He had publicly put them to shame by exposing not only their hypocrisy, but their ignorance of Scripture. (Matt 22:15-46).

After the resurrection of Jesus, some Pharisees, like Nicodemus, became believers. And of course the most famous Pharisee of all became the great Apostle to the Gentiles. His name was Saul. We call him Paul.

### **The Scribes**

The scribes were the professional students of the Law who served both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They were a class of scholars who devoted themselves entirely to the study of the Old Testament Scriptures and were zealous defenders of the Law and teachers of the people. Scribes were referred to as "*doctors of the Law*" and "*lawyers*" (Matt 22:35).

The scribes were reprimanded by Jesus for imposing very strict laws on the people while ignoring those laws for themselves. They held themselves out as the "true interpreters" of the Law. This helped to assure their respect in the eyes of the people. It also made the people dependent on them for an understanding of the Torah.

Jesus accused the scribes and the Pharisees of taking pride in their attire, because they dressed so people would know who they were. They loved the salutations they received from the people as much as they loved the special seats of recognition they were given in the synagogues.

### **The Essenes**

The Essenes were a sect of Jews who lived mostly in isolated communities west of the Dead Sea in a monastic and separated lifestyle. The Essenes were wise enough to realize that Temple worship had become corrupt, so their solution was to remove themselves from it. They did not go to the Temple for the any of feasts. They did continue to send their tithes to the Temple.

At the time of Christ, there were approximately 4,000 Essenes. Most of them were unmarried, but they did adopt children from willing Jewish families and these adopted children were raised in the Essenes lifestyle. The Essenes spent their days copying and preserving the Scriptures. They believed these writings were the divinely inspired revelation from God. It is because of the Essenes we have the Dead Sea Scrolls. It was in the ancient community of Qumran, located on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, that an Arabic shepherd boy discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947.

## **3. Judicial Leadership**

### **The Sanhedrin**

The third main division of Jewish leadership was the Judicial Group, called the Sanhedrin. At the time of Christ, the Sanhedrin was called the High Jewish Tribunal. It consisted of the High Priest plus 70 men who were scribes, chief priests, Pharisees and Sadducees. The Sanhedrin controlled the government of Israel, particularly Judea. The Sanhedrin had the final authority on all religious matters.

When in session, its members sat in a semi-circle with the high priest in the center. Facing these men were two scribes, who served as clerks of the court. They recorded everything that was spoken. There were rows of seats behind the official members for special students who were permitted to observe the meetings.

The Sanhedrin had its own police force called the Temple Guard. It could order an arrest for a civil violation or for a criminal charge. It would rule on punishments, including the 39 lashes for serious crimes. Only the death penalty fell outside of the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin. The death penalty required a Roman administrator. This is an interesting detail of history because it

helped to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah would be crucified: “pierced” (Ps 22:16; Zech 12:10) and lifted up like “the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness” (Num 21:8, 9; Jn 3:14). If the Romans had allowed the Sanhedrin to have jurisdiction over the death penalty, Jesus would have been stoned to death according to the Jewish law of execution.

Tim Semple [bibletek.com](http://bibletek.com) 2019