

# Jewish Sects During the Time of Jesus

## **Sadducees:**

**Politically:** Priestly aristocracy descended from Zadok (high priest during the reigns of King David and Solomon). Held both political and religious power and were the ruling party and ran the Temple; favored cooperation with Rome and other Gentile political entities.

**Religiously:** They only accepted the authority of the Torah (written law); they believed it was enough to follow the basic commands of the Law in scripture; did not believe in adding complex regulations to the Law re: customs to every day life; they were conservatives and minimalists re: the Law; they believe in theological ideas they were developing over time such as:

- Resurrection of the dead
- Judgment
- Eternal life
- Angels and Demons

(Caiaphas was a Sadducee) Matthew 22:23-33 (Jesus' response to Sadducees' Theological misunderstandings)

## **Pharisees** (separate ones)

**Politically:** Originated during the Maccabean period; sought separation from Gentile customs and the process of Hellenization, especially during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B. C.

**Religiously:** Laymen most zealous for keeping the law; advocated strict adherence to the oral and written Law; accepted other writings besides the Torah (Mishnah); scrupulously observed over 600 practices dictating how live everyday life: purification rites, tithing, Sabbath; believed in:

- Resurrection of the dead
- Final Judgment
- Life in the age to come
- Angels and Demons

It is believed that Jesus, St. Paul, (and possibly St. Martha) were more aligned with the Pharisees. Jesus, however, frequently criticizes their self-righteous legalist interpretation of the Law and religious observances.

- Jesus – Matthew 25: 31-46 (separation of sheep and goats)
- St. Martha – John 11: 21-24 (at the raising of Lazarus)
- St. Paul – Acts 23: 6-9 (Paul defends his belief as a Pharisee)

## **Essenes:**

**Politically:** - withdrew from the influences of ordinary society

The sect began during the period of the Maccabees in protest against corruption of the Temple and priesthood in the Hellenization of the culture; built many communities away from cities; established a monastery near the Dead Sea called Qumran. (where the Dead Sea scrolls were found)

**Religiously:** - they lived very ascetical and celibate lives;

Purist who tried to live a perfectly spiritual existence in the desert; believed most ardently in the coming of the Messianic kingdom (more than any other sect); very much influenced by Jewish apocalyptic thought and saw themselves as “the Sons of light” preparing for the final cataclysmic battle against Satan (The Sons of Darkness). Eventually the Essenes came to believe that the Romans were the Sons of Darkness so they went to war against them; many of the Essenes were killed or taken captive. They were zealous in the study and application of the Law; practiced ritual ablutions/baptisms (non-sacramental) as a purification rite upon repentance of personal sin (possibly an archetype of Baptism sacramental). They also observed a Messianic meal similar to the Christian Lord’s Supper and their communities were structured similarly to the Jerusalem community as described in the Acts of the Apostles.

Their Community Organization:

- Top: Council of Twelve including 3 priests
- Middle: Presbyters or priests
- Bottom; “the many”

It is believed the John the Baptist lived with them before he began baptizing in the Jordan and this may have been where he learned of the symbolic ritual of purifications when one repents of their sins.

One author said “The fact that Essenes were never mentioned in the New Testament writings has been attributed to familiarity; so many Essenes joined the early Church that no one needed to mention them. (Hinson, p 19)

Luke 3: 15-16 (John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance vs the Messiah’s anointing by the Holy Spirit.) However they differed significantly re: political methodology

## **Essenes:** continued

**Politically:** Extreme Jewish nationalists who wanted to free their homeland from domination (Jewish Freedom fighters). They practiced a militant version of separation where they carried on violent resistance through guerilla warfare. Due to the numerous ongoing unsuccessful revolts by the Zealots, Jerusalem would eventually be destroyed by the Romans in 70AD. The Zealots fled to Masada where they held out until they were defeated by the Romans who built an earthen ramp to gain access.

One of Jesus' apostles was believed to have been a Zealot. Simon the Canaanite aka "the Zealot". An extreme branch of the Zealots were the Sicarii (sword wielders)

One theory is that Judas Iscariot may have been a Sicarii in light of the similarity of his last name. (another theory is that his last name refers to the town of Kerioth where he may have come from).

- Luke 6: 15 (the call of Simon the Zealot to become a follower of Jesus)

**Religiously:** An educated class: professional interpreters of the Law from the period about 180 BC (the time of Jesus Ben Sirach), Scribes concentrated on the Law and its interpretation (more closely aligned with the Pharisees theologically). At the time of Jesus, there were 2 schools of Scribes.

- Shammaite (strict) – adhered to rigorous adherence to the Law
- Hillelite (liberal) – emphasized love and reconciliation

The Scribes were many times in conflict with Jesus as they resented his teachings based on his own authority and not on the Law as a true source of righteousness. Luke 20: 1-2 (Scribes question Jesus authority to preach and do miracles) Matthew 5: 20 (Jesus condemns the Scribes form of righteousness) Matthew 7: 28-29 (Jesus' teaching with authority amazes the crowds)

Jesus condemns the Scribes and Pharisees for their hypocritical self- righteous adherence to man-made religious regulations at the expense of following divine teachings. Matthews 15: 1-9 - Jesus condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees and Matthew 23: 13-36 for their legalism.

## **Samaritans:**

***Politically:*** Jewish break off sect from Judaism who lived in the central part of Israel.

***Religiously:*** there was a long-standing feud between the Samaritans and the other Jews. Samaritans believed they practiced the true ancient form of Judaism before the time of Babylonian Captivity (not corrupted from the experience of the captivity) Both believed in the Torah although the Samaritans worshipped using their own Samaritan Torah written in the Samaritan alphabet. Both believed very differently about which mountain was more sacred (Mount Gerizim or Mount Zion) John 4: 21-23 (Samaritan women at the well with Jesus)

## **Other Jewish Groups:**

- Guild of priests
- Temple singers
- Levites – attended to Temple functions

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