

Holman Bible Dictionary

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 the Essenes.

Pharisees The Pharisees constituted the most important group. They appear in the Gospels as the opponents of Jesus. Paul claimed that he was a Pharisee before becoming a Christian (Philippians 3:5). They were the most numerous of the groups, although Josephus stated that they numbered only about six thousand. They controlled the synagogues and exercised great control over the general population.

No surviving writing gives us information about the origin of the Pharisees. The earliest reference to them is dated in the time of Jonathan (160-143 B.C.), where 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 queen (76 B.C.).

The name "Pharisee" means "the separated ones." It may mean that they separated themselves from the masses of the people or that they separated themselves to the study and interpretation of the law. It is usually assumed that they were the spiritual descendants of the Hasidim, the loyal fighters for religious freedom in the time of Judas Maccabeus. They appear to be 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 two-fold 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 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 (Matthew 23:15). They saw God as concerned with the life of a person without denying that the individual was responsible for how he or she lived. They had little interest in politics. The Pharisees opposed Jesus because He refused to accept the teachings of the oral law.

Sadducees The Sadducees were the aristocrats of the time. They were the party of the rich and the high priestly families. They were in charge of the Temple and its services. They claimed to be descendants of Zadok, high priest in the time of Solomon. However, the true derivation of their name is unknown. In all our literature, they stand in opposition to the Pharisees. They sought to conserve the beliefs and practices of the past. They opposed the oral law, accepting the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, as the ultimate authority. The Sadducees were materialistic in their outlook. They did not believe in life after death or any reward or punishment beyond this life. They denied the existence of angels and demons. They did not

believe that God was concerned with what people did. Rather people were totally free. They were politically oriented, supporters of ruling powers, whether Seleucids or Romans. They wanted nothing to threaten their position and wealth, so they strongly opposed Jesus.

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

Herodians The Herodians are mentioned in only three places in the New Testament (Matthew 22:16 ; Mark 3:6 ; Mark 12:13). In the earliest reference in Mark, they joined with the Pharisees in a plot to kill Jesus. The other two passages refer to the sending of Pharisees and Herodians to ask Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. It is assumed that they 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.

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 has come to light since 1947 with the discovery of the manuscripts from the caves above the Dead Sea, commonly called the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is generally believed that the people of the Scrolls were closely related to the Essenes. 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. They took vows of celibacy and perpetuated their community by adopting male children. However, some Essenes did marry. When one joined the Essenes, he gave all 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 evidence that either Jesus or John the Baptist had ever had any relation to Qumran. Jesus would have strongly opposed their understanding of the law.

The vast majority of the people were not a member of any of these parties, although they would have been most influenced by the Pharisees. See *Intertestamental History and Literature*; *Dead Sea Scrolls* ; *Synagogue* ; *Temple*.

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