

PHARISEES, SADDUCEES & ESSENES

Introduction

The term “Jew” referred to a person from the region called Judea, home of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and its first mention in the Bible comes in II Ki. 16:6. With the northern ten tribes of Israel lost, the term Jew was used to refer to all Hebrews once the Babylonian captives returned to Jerusalem. Today, there are those who are Jews by birth (ethnicity), those who are Jews by religion (faith), and those who are both. In Jesus’ day, there were three main Jewish parties or sects: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. While the Pharisees are mentioned 100 times in the NT, and the Sadducees 14 times, the Essenes are not mentioned at all. Most Jews in that day did not belong to any sect, but of those that did, about 6,000 were Pharisees, about 4,000 were Essenes, and the Sadducees were even smaller. In this study we will look briefly at all three and what distinguished them from one another.

Pharisees

When thinking of this group, there are probably three things that come to mind: 1) they believed in the resurrection of the dead; 2) they believed in angels and spirits; and 3) they were the people among which the Apostle Paul (Saul) was raised/educated. (Acts 22:3 & 23:6-8) The name comes from the Hebrew word that means “separated.” Of the three sects, the Pharisees were the “Formalists.” They embraced not only the written law but also the oral law that had accumulated as tradition. They sought to attract attention and gain the admiration and praise of men, as seen in Lu. 18:11-12. For this, Jesus rebuked them repeatedly and warned His followers not to be like them. This, of course, made him the target of their hatred and resentment. The Pharisees were able to win popularity and political influence, so after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD, their traditions became the foundation of the modern day “Orthodox Jews.” Condemnations by Jesus focused on the hypocrisy and legalism of the Pharisees, and include Matthew 5:20; 23:1-39 and Luke 11. Despite all this, there were some upright men among this group, such as the noted teacher Gamaliel, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Paul.

Sadducees

The name of this group likely derived from Zadok, a descendant of Aaron, and chief priest in the days of King David who anointed Solomon as king. Of the three groups, these were the “Free-Thinkers.” This group is mentioned less frequently in the NT, but with similar disfavor by Jesus (Mt. 16:1-12; 22:23-34; Mk. 12:18-27; Lu. 20:27-38). Also, Acts 4:1-3; 5:17-18; & 23:6-8. As noted above, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, nor in spirits or angels. Though they were rivals of the Pharisees, the two groups were allies in their dislike of Jesus. The Sadducees denied that the oral law was a divine revelation, accepting only the written law (Torah) as binding and divine. The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that the Sadducees also believed in the free will of man, whereas the Pharisees believed in the providence and sovereignty of God. The men of this sect were wealthy aristocrats, who were largely secular and pro-Roman. After the destruction of the Temple, this sect disappeared, probably because its doctrine of no after-life offered little hope to the Jews who struggled under Roman rule.

Essenes

The name of this group probably signifies “seer” or “the silent and mysterious.” Of the three groups, these were the “Puritans.” They strove zealously to achieve purity through self-denial, temperance and farm labor, believing that the end of time was imminent. To that end, they lived in reclusive communes, away from mainstream society and the Temple establishment, which they saw as corrupt. Many of their settlements were on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. One such commune called Qumran is near where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. The likely reason Essenes are not mentioned in the Bible is that they had no interaction with Jesus due to their secluded living. Like the Pharisees, they believed history was predestined by God, and they viewed themselves as the “true Israel” or “the elect.” Slavery, war, commerce and swearing oaths were forbidden. Like the Sadducees, this group vanished after the Jewish War vs. Rome in the first century AD. ***(For more on these three sects, see Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, 2.8.2 - 2.8.14; and Smith’s Bible Dictionary, pp. 181, 507-508, & 579-580.)***

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Discussion Questions

1. What did the Pharisees and Sadducees have in common?
2. Do you think the members of these sects were benefited spiritually from their “religion”?
3. Read Mk. 7:1-13. What were the main charges Jesus brought against the Pharisees in this passage?
4. II Tim. 3:5 speaks of people “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.” From these, Paul said to turn away. What is formalism and why is it harmful?
5. How is formal religion different from “worshiping in Spirit and in Truth” (Jn. 4:24)? How can we prevent formalism from creeping into our services? How do you think it begins?