

Jewish Sects and Jesus

Pharisees

Who were the Pharisees?

Ideological descendants of the Hasmoneans of the intertestamental period who fought to maintain their Jewish identity in the face of religious persecution.

A New Testament religious and political party that pursued, policed, and demanded a form of righteous living that conformed to their lofty standards.

Teachers of the common people, the rabbis, who led in the synagogues.

The authorized religious teachers who certified the next generation of authorized religious teachers.

What did the Pharisees believe?

That divine truth was provided in the written Word of the Old Testament as well as in the traditional oral interpretation and extensions of that Word, which they traced back to Moses (the oral law).

That righteous living was the highest virtue, with special emphasis placed on Sabbath observance.

That there was a spirit world filled with both angels and demons.

That the soul was immortal and that there would be a bodily resurrection.

That heaven was reserved for Torah-observing Jews and just a few Torah-observing gentiles.

How did the Pharisees and Jesus interact?

Pharisees like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Saul (Paul) came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

Generally Pharisees did not like

the way Jesus spent time with those regarded as public sinners, like tax collectors and prostitutes;

the more casual relationship Jesus appeared to have with Sabbath observance;

the fact that Jesus was not “authorized” to teach by any of their own authorized teachers.

Jesus criticized

their elevation of the oral law, making it the equivalent of divine law, particularly with regard to Sabbath observance;

the burden that the oral law placed on ordinary Israelites;

their prideful, self-aggrandizing behavior;

their failure to demonstrate love and mercy;

their attitude toward gentiles.

Sadducees

Who were the Sadducees?

Claimed to be descendants of Zadok, the high priest at the time of David and Solomon.

Distinguished from the ordinary priests, they were the aristocratic priests who lived in Jerusalem and formed a political party with well-to-do families.

Controlled the everyday affairs of the temple in Jerusalem.

Dominated the Jewish ruling council (Sanhedrin) during the time of the New Testament.

Established a working relationship with the occupying power of Rome by showing a willingness to compromise their Jewish identity and accept the ideology of the Roman world in exchange for the benefits it yielded.

What did the Sadducees believe?

That divine truth was derived only from the written Old Testament (the Torah or Pentateuch in particular) without recourse to the oral law.

That the fate of mortals resided in the choices they made rather than in divine providence.

That the real world did not include spiritual beings.

That there was no resurrection or life beyond death.

That material possession, power, and social prestige were the ultimate rewards in life and were to be pursued at all costs.

How did Jesus and the Sadducees interact?

The Sadducees saw Jesus as a threat to the status quo, which gave them power over the temple and thus the wealth and notoriety the temple could provide.

Jesus directly criticized

their failure to believe in life after death and the resurrection;

their infatuation with power, prestige, and wealth, not only when he spoke on these topics but also when he disrupted the buying and selling in the temple markets.

Zealots

Who were the Zealots?

A less-well-defined Jewish movement that opposed Rome's occupation of the promised land and all those who collaborated with Rome.

What did the Zealots believe?

- That there could be no peace with the Romans who occupied their land.
- That Rome's occupation was not a call to repent but a call to revolt.
- That the payment of Roman taxes was a sign of disloyalty to the Almighty.
- That being a righteous, Torah-observing Jew meant to reject all things Roman.
- That national liberty for Israel was the chief goal of living.

How did the Zealots and Jesus interact?

The Zealots would not have liked

- Jesus's failure to use his power and influence in support of national liberation;
- Jesus's relationship with tax collectors in general and Matthew in particular;
- Jesus's kindly treatment of centurions and the inclusion of gentiles in the kingdom of God;
- Jesus's directive to pay the taxes to Caesar that belonged to him;
- Jesus's call to love one's enemies and pray for them.

Direct encounters with the Zealots are not mentioned in the gospels as such, but Jesus counted Simon the Zealot among his disciples (Luke 6:15).

Essenes

Who were the Essenes?

- A religious movement within Judaism scattered about Israel, including places like Jerusalem and Qumran.
- A group that abhorred the way in which the temple in Jerusalem was being operated.
- A somewhat ascetic group that directed its energies toward prayer, communal support, ritual purity, and waiting for the end of time.
- A group that paid particular attention to the life of the mind, giving attention to the copying, study, and interpretation of Scripture.

What did the Essenes believe?

- That God was sovereign.
- That mortals were created with an immortal soul.
- That communal living prevented the unhealthy formation of a class-oriented society.
- That personal wealth was a risk, so goods were held communally, used for the common good, and used to help those in need.

That the duty of mortals was to live a righteous life, including a strict observance of the Sabbath.

How did the Essenes and Jesus interact?

There is no direct mention of Jesus interacting with a member of an Essene community, but given their presence in the places he taught, they likely heard him.

The Essenes would have liked

- Jesus's call to abandon the world to follow him;
- Jesus's criticism of the aristocratic priests;
- Jesus's warning about infatuation with wealth;
- Jesus's teaching on the immortality of mortals;
- Jesus's emphasis on prayer;
- Jesus's attention to the Word of God;
- Jesus's call for care of the needy;
- Jesus's eschatological focus on the kingdom of God to come.