

# Jewish Sects

## *Of The Second Temple Period*



*“But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, ‘Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!’” (Acts 23:6)*

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## *Preface*

This booklet contains a series sermons that were preached in Zion, Illinois. Like most of my published sermon outline books, these outlines include more information than was presented in the lessons. I like to include additional material in these outlines for the benefit of students who are not afraid to delve into the weightier matters of Biblical studies. These outlines also allow me to include additional source material to which many Bible students do not have ready access (like the writings of Philo, Josephus, and the Mishnah).

# The Pharisees

## Introduction

- I. When most Christians think of *Judaism*, they often fail to consider that over the centuries many changes have taken place within the Jewish community.
  - A. The religion practiced by the Patriarchs in the book of Genesis is different from that of a devout Jew under the Law of Moses.
  - B. Also, the practices of the Jews during the post-exilic period is very different from the rabbinic Judaism that followed the destruction of the Second Temple.
- II. Nearly every Bible student is familiar with at least two of the sects, or parties, of the Jews that are mentioned in the New Testament, i.e., the Pharisees and the Sadducees.
  - A. A careful reading of the Gospels reveals two other powerful parties—the Herodians and the Zealots.
  - B. From ancient Jewish sources and secular history, we learn of two more sects—the Essenes and the Sicarii.
  - C. In our English Bibles, the word that is translated *sect* (Gr. αἵρεσις; *haireisis*) means, “a body of men separating themselves from others and following their own tenets (*a sect* or *party*): as the Sadducees, Acts 5:17; the Pharisees, Acts 15:5; 26:5; the Christians, Acts 24:5,14 (in both instances with a suggestion of reproach); 28:22...” (Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*).
  - D. In this study, we want to notice the six main Jewish sects of Second Temple Period (i.e., the period in ancient Israel between the construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 516 B.C. and its destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70).
- III. Our Lord, in the days of His flesh, would have interacted with all of these groups.
  - A. The spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to throughout all of Judea would have brought further interaction between the disciples of Christ and the leaders of these various Jewish sects.
  - B. Unfortunately, many Christians have a tendency to characterize all Jews based upon the actions of the Pharisees that our Lord dealt with in Jerusalem.
  - C. This is just as unfair as characterizing all Muslims by the actions of members of terrorist groups like ISIS or the Taliban.
- IV. Since much of what we know about these sects is not found in the Bible text, we will have to look at other writings to help us understand these sects.
  - A. In this series of lessons, we will be quoting at length from the first century historian Flavius Josephus (c. A.D. 37–100), a Jewish priest who led a revolt against Roman oppression in Galilee.
    1. His name at birth was Joseph ben Mattathias, but many years later (and after becoming a Roman citizen) he adopted the Roman name of Flavius Josephus.
    2. He was captured by the Romans at the fall of Yotapata in A.D. 67, and held as a prisoner in Caesarea Maritima till A.D. 69.
    3. He returned to Jerusalem with Titus in A.D. 70 and had a “ringside seat” at the siege and destruction of Jerusalem.
  - B. Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.—c. A.D. 50) was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria, Egypt.
    1. While his writings have survived, we know very little about him.
    2. However, he is mentioned by Josephus and numerous other ancient sources.

- C. The Mishnah is a book containing the oral traditions of the Jews—it was the first major work of Rabbinic literature.
  - 1. This collection of Jewish traditions began to be written down about 130 years after the destruction of Jerusalem.
  - 2. Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, also known as Rabbi Judah the Prince, collected and edited a study of Jewish laws in order that the learning not be lost to future generations.
  - 3. The Mishnah is not an official code of Jewish law—it is a *study book* of law.
- D. Since most people today do not have access to the Mishnah or the writings of Josephus and Philo, I have decided to quote from them at length in this book.

### Discussion

## I. The Pharisees

- A. The Pharisees were the largest and best known sect of the Jews in the gospels.
  - 1. “No Jewish group of the Second Temple period is mentioned more often in the New Testament (ninety-nine times vs. fourteen for the Sadducees) and Josephus (forty-four times; Sadducees, thirteen) than the Pharisees.” (Deines, “Pharisees,” 1061)
  - 2. The word *Pharisee* (Gr. Φαρισαῖος, *Farisaios*) means, “a Pharisee, a follower of the sect of the Pharisees, a numerous and powerful sect of the Jews, distinguished for their ceremonial observances, and apparent sanctity of life, and for being rigid interpreters of the Mosaic law; but who frequently violated its spirit by their traditional interpretations and precepts, to which they ascribed nearly an equal authority with the OT Scriptures, Mt. 5:20; 12:2; 23:14.” (Mounce, *Mounce Greek Dictionary*)
  - 3. Josephus claims that the Pharisees numbered more than 6,000 men in the first century (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.42).
  - 4. The Pharisees were scattered all over the earth and were usually the teachers in the synagogues.
  - 5. Those who did not belong to the fraternity still admired them.
  - 6. The Pharisees were able to spread their philosophy in the 480 synagogues scattered throughout the countryside around Jerusalem.
  - 7. The vast majority of Pharisees were carpenters, fishermen, and storekeepers—just average men of the day.
  - 8. “For most Sunday school-educated and church-nurtured individuals, the very word *Pharisee* conjures up visions of horror akin to the Frankenstein monster or baby snatchers. Be prepared to have some of your prejudices jarred. There were many great and noble Pharisees, as a careful reading of the New Testament will verify. In fact, after studying them, it is easy to see why many practicing Jews still treat the title with respect and honor.” (Coleman, *The Pharisees’ Guide to Total Holiness*, 4)

- B. When the apostle Paul appeared before the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, he said that he was “a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6; cf. Phil 3:5).
1. Please note that he did not say that he “used to be a Pharisee.”
  2. He meant that he still clung to most of the doctrine of the Pharisees.
  3. Paul’s understanding of the resurrection to come did not violate any central tenets of the Pharisees (cf. Gal 1:14).
  4. Paul claimed the Pharisees were the “strictest sect” of Judaism (Acts 26:5).
    - a) “**I lived as a Parush**, a Pharisee. The Greek verb is in the aorist tense, which implies action accomplished in the past that has effects continuing into the present. Sha’ul lived as a Pharisee in the past, and he continued doing so after he became a believer...” (Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*).
    - b) Paul had impeccable credentials!
- C. The apostle Paul was not just any Pharisee—he had been trained at the feet of Rabban Gamaliel the Elder (Acts 22:3).
1. Gamaliel the Elder is quoted numerous times in the Mishnah and was given a title of great honor.
  2. Gamaliel was the first rabbi to carry the title *Rabban* (“our master, our great one”) rather than the more common *Rabbi* (“my master, my great one”).
  3. “When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Torah came to an end, and cleanness and separateness perished” (Mishnah, *Sotah* 9:15).

## II. The Origin Of The Pharisees

- A. About 600 years before Christ, Nebuchadnezzar deported practically all of the inhabitants of Judah over a fifteen-year period.
1. The Babylonians stripped the gold from the palace and sacked the Temple and all of the treasuries (2 Kgs 24:10–16).
  2. They destroyed the city walls, the houses, and the Temple.
  3. Only a few lower-class people were left in Israel, and the destruction of the Jews seemed to be final.
  4. This could have marked the end of the Jewish nation—they had no Temple, no leadership, and their kings were either dead or imprisoned.
  5. Godly men such as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah and numerous others were committed to the faith of their forefathers—they were determined that their identity as a nation would not be erased by the Babylonians (Dan 1:3–8).
  6. It was during these trying times that some Jews kept the hope of the return to their homeland in mind (cf. Isa 14:3–4).
  7. The work of seven decades paid off in 538 B.C. when Cyrus the Great, the king of Persia, released the Jews who had been taken captive and allowed them to return to their homeland (Ezra 1:1–4; cf. Jer 25:11–14).
  8. Not all Jews chose to return—the land was poor and undeveloped and many had found a new life-style and a new religion (cf. Isa 46).

- B. The Pharisees claimed their history went back to the time of Ezra.
1. Ezra spoke of those who “separated themselves” from “the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God” (Ezra 6:21; 10:1-4).
  2. Nehemiah spoke of those of “Israelite lineage” who “separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers” (Neh 9:2).
  3. These devout men “entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law” (Neh 10:28-31).
  4. “The *priests* and *scribes* were the two influential factors which determined the inner development of Israel after the captivity. In Ezra’s time they were still virtually identical. From the commencement of the Greek period they were more and more separated, and about the period of the Maccabean conflict two parties sharply contrasted with each other were developed from them. The *Sadducean* party proceeded from the ranks of the priests, the party of the *Pharisees* from the scribes... The Pharisees were by nature *the rigidly legal*, the Sadducees in the first instance only the *aristocrats*, who certainly were driven by the historical development into that opposition to Pharisaic legality, which however formed no fundamental element of their nature. Hence we gain but a distorted image by opposing the differences between them to each other point by point. On the contrary, the characteristic feature of the Pharisees arises from their *legal tendency*, that of the Sadducees from their *social position*.” (Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Div., 2:9-10)
  5. “The term ‘Pharisee’ means ‘separated ones.’ Perhaps it means that they separated themselves from the masses or that they separated themselves to the study and interpretation of the law. A common assumption is that they developed from the Hasidim, the ultra-orthodox loyal freedom fighters in the time of Judas Maccabeus. They apparently were 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.” (Harrop and Draper, “Jewish Parties In The New Testament”)
  6. “As an Israelite avoided as far as possible all contact with a heathen, lest he should thereby be defiled, so did the Pharisee avoid as far as possible contact with the non-Pharisee, because the latter was to him included in the notion of the unclean Am-haarez.” (Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Div., 2:24)
  7. This devotion to *separation* helps us to understand why the Pharisees were so appalled when Jesus ate with “tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:14-17).

- C. While they might have claimed that their brotherhood went back to the time of Ezra, most scholars will admit it cannot be traced farther back than to the time of the Maccabean conflicts.
1. “It appears that during the Greek period, when the chief priests and rulers of the people took up an increasingly lax attitude towards the law, they united themselves more closely into an association of such as made a duty of its most punctilious observance. When then the Maccabees raised the standard to fight for the faith of their fathers, these ‘pious’ took part in the conflict, but only as long as the faith and the law were actually contended for. When this was no longer the case, and the object of the contest became more and more the national independence, they seem to have retired.” (Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Div., 2:26)
  2. “The Pharisees formed a league or brotherhood of their own (*haburah*), admitting only those who, in the presence of three members, pledged themselves to the strict observance of Levitical purity, to the avoidance of closer association with the ‘AM HA-AREZ (the ignorant and careless poor), to the scrupulous payment of tithes and other imposts due to the priest, the Levite, and the poor, and to a conscientious regard for vows and for other people’s property.” (Kohler, “Pharisees,” 661)
- D. The Pharisees were easy to identify by their distinctive clothing (Matt 23:5).
1. “They do all their deeds to be seen by people, for they make their phylacteries wide and their tassels long” (Matt 23:5 NET Bible®)
  2. Tassels with a blue cord that was attached to the four corners of a man’s garment were to remind him to obey God’s commandments and to lead a holy life (Num 15:37-40; Deut 22:12).
  3. Phylacteries were small cube-shaped cases made of leather, containing four passages of Scripture written on parchment (Exod 13:1-10; 13:11-16; Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21).
  4. Phylacteries were worn on the left arm and forehead rose from a literal interpretation a few Old Testament passages (Exod 13:9; Deut 6:8; 11:18).
  5. While ordinary Jews would only put their phylacteries at prayer or on solemn occasions, the Pharisees wore them all day long!
  6. “Phylacteries were not worn on the Sabbath or on other sacred days; those days were themselves holy signs, so the wearing of phylacteries was unnecessary” (Packer and Tenney, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*, 482).
  7. “The discovery of leather phylactery cases at Qumran illustrates their usage at the time of Jesus. One type, about an inch long, was worn on the forehead and contained four small inner compartments for holding four tiny scrolls on which were written, in tiny script, Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18. The second type, approximately one-third of an inch long, was worn on the left arm and had only one compartment with a single minute scroll containing all four verses. The rabbis themselves had regulations about wearing phylacteries because of the temptation to wear them too large or inappropriately to draw attention to one’s piety. Jesus warns the crowds and the disciples against the practice of parading such religious objects to trumpet one’s piety.” (Wilkins, *Matthew*, 748)

- E. Members of the sect of the Pharisees could be found anywhere in the land.
1. “There was probably no town or village inhabited by Jews which had not its Pharisees, although they would, of course, gather in preference about Jerusalem with its Temple, and what, perhaps would have been even dearer to the heart of a genuine Pharisee—its four hundred and eighty synagogues, its Sanhedrims (great and small), and its schools of study. There could be no difficulty in recognizing such a one. Walking behind him, the chances were, he would soon halt to say his prescribed prayers. If the fixed time for them had come, he would stop short in the middle of the road, perhaps say one section of them, move on, again say another part, and so on, till, whatever else might be doubted, there could be no question of the conspicuousness of his devotions in market-place or corners of streets. There he would stand, as taught by the traditional law, would draw his feet well together, compose his body and clothes, and bend so low ‘that every vertebra in his back would stand out separate,’ or, at least, till ‘the skin over his heart would fall into folds’ (*Ber.* 28 b). The workman would drop his tools, the burden-bearer his load; if a man had already one foot in the stirrup, he would withdraw it. The hour had come, and nothing could be suffered to interrupt or disturb him. The very salutation of a king, it was said, must remain unreturned; nay, the twisting of a serpent around one’s heel must remain unheeded. Nor was it merely the prescribed daily seasons of prayer which so claimed his devotions. On entering a village, and again on leaving it, he must say one or two benedictions; the same in passing through a fortress, in encountering any danger, in meeting with anything new, strange, beautiful, or unexpected. And the longer he prayed the better. In the view of the Rabbis this had a twofold advantage; for ‘much prayer is sure to be heard,’ and ‘prolix prayer prolongeth life.’ At the same time, as each prayer expressed, and closed with a benediction of the Divine Name, there would be special religious merit attaching to mere number, and a hundred ‘benedictions’ said in one day was a kind of measure of great piety.” (Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, n.p.)
  2. “Now, for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the conduct of reason; and what that prescribes to them as good for them, they do; and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason’s dictates for practice. They also pay a respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to contradict them in anything which they have introduced...” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:12)
- F. In Second Temple Judaism, the Pharisees did much of the teaching in the synagogues.
1. They sat “in Moses’ seat” (Matt 23:2).
  2. “In 1926 a unique stone seat was found near the southern wall of the Chorazin synagogue. Since then it has been called the ‘Chair of Moses.’ The Chair of Moses is a special seat that is used in some synagogues, even today, on certain occasions, usually located near the most important wall, that which faces Jerusalem.” (Yeivin, “Features,” n.p.)
  3. The disciples of the Pharisees are mentioned (Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33).



4. “In politics too the standpoint of the Pharisees was the genuinely Jewish one of looking at political questions not from a political, but from a religious point of view. The Pharisees were by no means a ‘political’ party, at least not directly. Their aim, viz. the strict carrying out of the law, was not political, but religious. So far as no obstruction was cast in the way of this, they could be content with any government. It was only when the secular power prevented the practice of the law in that strict manner which the Pharisees demanded, that they gathered together to oppose it, and then really became in a certain sense a political party, opposing even external resistance to external force. This took place not only at the time of the oppression by Antiochus Epiphanes, but also under the Jewish princes John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus, who opposed Pharisaic ordinances from their Sadduceean standpoint. On the other hand, the Pharisees had, under Alexander, who left the whole power in their hands, a leading position in the government, which however they used only for the carrying out of their religious demands. To politics as such they were always comparatively indifferent.” (Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Div., 2:17)

### III. The Doctrine Of The Pharisees

- A. “If the group had a key to its philosophy, it could be stated, ‘How do we look?’ They placed extreme emphasis on the question of the external rather than the internal. This is one of the reasons why Jesus locked horns with them so often. His emphasis in life was exactly the opposite. Historians tell us that the core of their vows can be summed up in two areas: (1) tithing and (2) purification. Do we look right rather than are we right.” (Coleman, *The Pharisees’ Guide to Total Holiness*, 29)
- B. They stressed the importance of ritual purity (Mark 7:1-4; Matt 23:25-26).
  1. Mark makes special note of “the tradition of the elders.”
  2. The disciples of Jesus were not breaking the Mosaic law but rather later Pharisaic traditions.
  3. “According to the Bible (Lev. 11-17 and Numbers 19, *inter alia*), after contact with certain foods, vessels, diseases or bodily emissions, or with idol worship, people entered a state of ritual impurity. This state rendered a person forbidden to perform religious acts. The chief means of ridding oneself or one’s vessels of ritual impurity, say Numbers 19 and Leviticus 15, was through immersion in water. During the time of Jesus, people were particularly preoccupied with issues of ritual cleanliness... A ritual immersion pool, known in Hebrew as a *mikveh*, must contain at least 40 seah—some 85 gallons—of water. At least some of the water had to be ‘living water’ i. e., rain water, river water or seawater that had not been previously stored in a vessel and was let into the main pool from an adjacent reservoir.” (Vamosh, *Daily Life at the Time of Jesus*, 26)
- C. They taught the importance of tithing (Luke 11:42; 18:12; Matt 23:23).
  1. Jews were required to pay tithes of their grains and increase.
  2. The tithing of herbs was not mentioned in the Old Testament passages which deal with tithing (Lev 27:30-33; Deut 14:22-29; 2 Chr 31:5-12).

- D. They taught the importance of fasting (Mark 2:18; Luke 18:12).
1. Fasting was *required* only on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29–31).
  2. In Rabbinic Judaism men fasted twice a week—on Monday and Thursday (Talmud, *Taanit* 12a).
- E. They stressed the Sabbath observance (Mark 2:23–28; 3:1–6).
1. Our Lord often violated the human traditions that the Pharisees had attached to the Sabbath.
  2. Who knew more about the proper way to observe the Sabbath, the Pharisees or the “Lord of the Sabbath”? (Mark 2:28).
- F. They affirmed the existence of angels and demons, and had a firm belief in life beyond the grave (Acts 23:6–8).
1. “They also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again...” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:14)
  2. No source outside of the book of Acts informs us that Sadducees did not believe in angels or spirits.
- G. The Pharisees placed great value in oral tradition (Oral Torah).
1. Rabbi Eleazar the Modite claimed that anyone who interpreted the Scripture in such a way that it opposed Pharisaic tradition “will have no share in the world to come” (Mishnah, *Avot* 3:11).
  2. “What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers; and concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them, while the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude of their side...” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:297)
  3. “In Jesus’ day there were two rival schools within the sect of the Pharisees—the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai. The school of Hillel upheld the honor of tradition as even superior to the Law of Moses. The school of Shammai despised tradition when it clashed with Moses. The antagonism between these rival schools was so great that it was said that even ‘Elijah the Tishbite would never be able to reconcile the disciples of Hillel and Shammai.’ Of these two schools, that of Hillel was by far the more influential in its day; and its decisions have been held authoritative by the greater number of Rabbis.” (Reese, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts*, xi)

4. “The Pharisees accepted along with the Torah, as equally inspired and authoritative, all of the explanatory and supplementary material produced by, and contained within, the oral tradition. This material apparently began to evolve during the Babylonian exile through the new circumstances thereby brought upon the Jewish people. The exile was seen as divine punishment for neglect of the law, and accordingly during this period there was an earnest turning to the divine instructions in the Pentateuch. Detailed exposition of the law appeared in the form of innumerable and highly specific injunctions that were designed to ‘build a hedge’ around the written Torah and thus guard against any possible infringement by ignorance or accident. In addition, the new circumstances of the exile and the post-exilic period involved matters not covered in the written Torah; consequently, new legislation had to be produced by analogy to, and inference from, that which already existed. The content of this oral law continued to evolve and to grow in volume through the intertestamental, NT, and post-NT periods, finally to achieve written form in the Mishnah (A.D. 200). For the Pharisees, the oral law came to be revered so highly that it was said to go back to Moses himself and to have been transmitted over the centuries orally, paralleling the written law that also derived from him.” (Hagner, *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 846)
5. The Pharisees had so much respect for the Scriptures and wanted to protect them so much that they started adding to them.
  - a) Their “helpful suggestions” soon were regarded as sacred law.
  - b) To keep men from violating Torah law, the Pharisees put a *hedge* round it to keep a safe distance between a man and the laws of God.

#### *Conclusion*

- I. The majority of Jewish people were not members of any of religious sect, although they probably were most influenced by the Pharisees.
- II. These ordinary people were known as *am-ba-aretz*, the “people of the land.”

# The Sadducees And The Herodians

## Introduction

- I. We are in a series of lessons on the Jewish Sects of the Second Temple Period—the period in ancient Israel between the construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 516 B.C. and its destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70.
- II. The Pharisees were the largest and best-known sect of the Jews in the gospels.
  - A. The Pharisees were able to spread their philosophy in the 480 synagogues scattered throughout the countryside around Jerusalem.
  - B. The majority of Pharisees were carpenters, fishermen, and storekeepers—just average men of the day.
- III. The doctrine of the Pharisees is often mentioned in the New Testament.
  - A. They taught ritual purity and the importance of tithing.
  - B. They also stressed fasting more often than the Law of Moses required.
  - C. They stressed the Sabbath observance—and invented new laws that they thought would keep people from violating the Sabbath.
  - D. They affirmed the existence of angels and demons, and they had a firm belief in life beyond the grave.
  - E. The Pharisees placed great value in Oral Torah (oral tradition).
- IV. In this lesson, we are going to look at two other sects of the Jews that are mentioned in the New Testament—the Sadducees and the Herodians.

## Discussion

### I. The Sadducees

- A. The Sadducees were a part of the priestly family and lived in Jerusalem.
  1. However, not all priests were Sadducees.
  2. The Sadducees were willing to assimilate Hellenism into their lives—something the Pharisees vehemently opposed.
  3. The Sadducees rejected the idea of the Oral Torah which the Pharisees accepted, and insisted on a literal interpretation of the Torah.
  4. On the other hand, the Pharisees were scattered all over the earth and were usually the teachers in the synagogues.
  5. The Great Sanhedrin, the Jewish equivalent of the Supreme Court, was composed of both Pharisees and Sadducees.
  6. However, John the Baptist called both groups a “brood of vipers” and warns them of “the wrath to come” (Matt 3:7–10).
  7. Sometimes, the hostility between the Sadducees and the Pharisees became so violent that they threw stones at each other (Acts 23:10; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.180, 213).
  8. Until after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the *prince* or *president* of the Great Sanhedrin (*nasi*) was usually a Sadducee, not a Pharisee.
  9. James, the half-brother of our Lord, was stoned to death by Ananus, a Sadducean high priest (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.200; cf. Matt 13:55).

10. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the Sadducees and priests quickly lost their power and influence.
  11. Unfortunately, none of the writings of the Sadducees have been discovered, so what little we know about them comes from their opponents.
  12. "There were indeed Sadducean scribes. But their work has left no trace behind it in history. All the influential scribes belonged to the Pharisaic party. This may be assumed as self-evident, and is confirmed by the fact, that in the few cases in which the party position of the scribes is named, they are as a rule designated as Pharisees." (Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Div., 2:11)
- B. Josephus does not mention the origin of this sect of the Jews.
1. The first reference to the Sadducees by Josephus occurs during the days of the Maccabean Revolt (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:171).
  2. However, the Sadducees claimed that their sect went all the way back to the time of David (an impossible task).
  3. "Name given to the party representing views and practices of the Law and interests of Temple and priesthood directly opposite to those of the Pharisees. The singular form, 'Zadduḳi' (Greek, Σαδδουκαῖος) is an adjective denoting 'an adherent of the Bene Zadok,' the descendants of Zadok, the high priests who, tracing their pedigree back to Zadok, the chief of the priesthood in the days of David and Solomon (I Kings i. 34, ii. 35; I Chron. xxix. 22), formed the Temple hierarchy all through the time of the First and Second Temples down to the days of Ben Sira (II Chron. xxxi. 10; Ezek. xl. 46, xlv. 15, xlviii. 11; Ecclus. [Sirach] li. 12 [9], Hebr.), but who degenerated under the influence of Hellenism, especially during the rule of the Seleucidæ, when to be a follower of the priestly aristocracy was tantamount to being a worldly-minded Epicurean. The name, probably coined by the Ḥasidim as opponents of the Hellenists, became in the course of time a party name applied to all the aristocratic circles connected with the high priests by marriage and other social relations, as only the highest patrician families intermarried with the priests officiating at the Temple in Jerusalem (Kid. iv. 5; Sanh. iv. 2; comp. Josephus, 'B. J.' ii. 8, § 14)." (Kohler, "Sadducees," 630)
- C. The Sadducees were, to use a modern phrase, "the party of the rich."
1. "The Pharisees, who in the time of Herod numbered six thousand, are the party of the masses, while the Sadducees are the party of the aristocracy. Thus according to Josephus the Pharisees had a great deal of power in Jewish society from the last part of the second century B.C.E. until the outbreak of the great revolt, while the Sadducees did not. It may be significant that these claims of Pharisaic power appear only in the *Jewish Antiquities*, which was completed in 93/4 C.E., and not the *Jewish War*, which was completed between ten and fifteen years earlier. The Essenes, who numbered only four thousand, were apparently not a political party at all." (Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 146)

2. “The Sadducees were aristocrats. They were the party of the wealthy and of the high priestly families. They were in charge of the temple, its services, and concessions. They claimed to be descendants of Zadok, high priest of Solomon. True derivation of the term is unknown. In all our literature they stand in opposition to the Pharisees. They were social conservatives, seeking to preserve the practices of the past. They opposed the oral law, accepting the Pentateuch as the ultimate authority. The Sadducees were materialistic in their outlook. They did not believe in life after death or rewards 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 tolerated no threats to their position and wealth, so they strongly opposed Jesus.” (Harrop and Draper, “Jewish Parties In The New Testament,” n.p.)
  3. “The New Testament testifies superabundantly and Josephus expressly, that the high-priestly families belonged to the Sadducean party. Rightly however as this view is for the first time expressly advocated by Geiger, it must not be so understood as to make the Sadducees nothing more than the party of the priests. The contrast of Sadducees and Pharisees is not a contrast of the priestly and the strictly legal party, but of aristocratic priests and strictly legal persons. The Pharisees were by no means in hostile opposition to the priests as such. On the contrary, they interpreted the legal enactments concerning the revenues of the priesthood abundantly in their favor, awarding to them in full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, their heave offerings, tithes, first-born, etc., and decidedly acknowledging the greater sanctity and higher rank of the priests in the Theocracy. On the other hand too, the priests were not all thoroughly hostile to Pharisaism. There were, at least in the last decades before, and the first decades after the destruction of the temple, a large number of priests who themselves belonged to the Rabbinical class. Hence the opponents of the Pharisees were not the priests as such, but only the *aristocratic* priests: those who by their possessions and offices also occupied influential civil positions.” (Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 2nd Div., 2:29–30)
- D. The Sadducees were not willing to accept the Oral Torah as divinely inspired, and they rejected the “tradition of the fathers” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:297).
1. The Pharisees believed that God delivered *two* laws at Sinai: one was the *Written Torah*, i.e., “law of Moses,” and the other was the *Oral Torah* (which they claim was to be handed down and bound on future generations).
  2. Origen of Alexandria, one of the Ante-Nicene Church Fathers, claimed that the Sadducees acknowledged only the Pentateuch and rejected the writings of the prophets (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.49)

3. “The Oral Law was sustained by the Pharisees, and has been kept sacred throughout history. The Sadducees, and later the Karaites, as well as some early reform Jews maintained that the Oral Law was not divinely inspired, and was therefore not binding. However, at present, most Jews, though they may deviate from certain of its practices, believe the Oral Law to be divinely inspired and therefore eternally pertinent and valid.” (Bridger, *The New Jewish Encyclopedia*, 362)
- E. The Sadducees denied the existence of angels (Acts 23:6–8).
1. No source outside of the book of Acts informs us that Sadducees did not believe in angels or spirits.
  2. “Luke’s parenthetical comment here probably refers to the Sadducees’ denial of the developed angelology and demonology of the Pharisees, or maybe ideas about people becoming angels after death or being resurrected in angelic form.” (Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 399)
- F. The Sadducees denied the resurrection (Acts 23:6–8).
1. Josephus claimed that the Sadducees believe that “souls die with the bodies” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:16).
  2. The *Babylonian Talmud* also speaks of how the Sadducees rejected the resurrection of the dead (*Sanhedrin* 90:2).
  3. Since the Sadducees denied the immortality of the soul, resurrection of the dead, and rewards in an afterlife, it seems that they thought God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous in this world only.
  4. “In ancient Judaism the Sadducees were especially notorious for not believing in resurrection; later rabbis who considered themselves successors of the Pharisees often classified Sadducees as heretics for this view (although the Sadducees, who vanished in the years after A.D. 70, were probably no longer around to respond).” (Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 102)
  5. “The Sadducees viewed only the Torah as Scripture; none of the other writings, including the Prophets, were binding. Since there is no explicit reference to a bodily resurrection in the Torah, the Sadducees denied this teaching and presumably viewed it as a later, unbiblical, development. Their disbelief in the resurrection is attested by Josephus although he described it for his Greek readers as denying a belief in the immortal soul.” (Arnold, “Acts,” 445)
  6. “But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins them; for they think it an instance of virtue to dispute with those teachers of philosophy whom they frequent; but this doctrine is received but by a few, yet by those still of the greatest dignity; but they are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates, as they are unwillingly and by force sometimes obliged to be, they addict themselves to the notions of the Pharisees, because the multitude would not otherwise bear them.” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:16–17)

7. The Sadducees “take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men’s own choice, and that the one or the other belongs so to every one, that they may act as they please. They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades.” (Josephus, *War* 2:164–165)
  8. On one occasion, the Sadducees asked Christ about the resurrection of the dead (Matt 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40)
    - a) However, the doctrine of the resurrection is clearly spoken of in the writings of the prophets (Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2–3).
    - b) “Jesus, when arguing for the resurrection (Mark 12:18–27), meets the Sadducees on their own ground by showing the implications of Exodus 3:6 instead of appealing to a more straightforward passage (e.g., Dan. 12:2).” (Dennis and Grudem, eds., *The ESV Study Bible*, n.p.)
- G. The sect of the Sadducees apparently came to an end shortly after Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70.
1. “In Yeshua’s day the *Tz’dukim* tended to be richer, more skeptical, more worldly, and more willing to cooperate with the Roman rulers than the *P’rushim*. However, the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. ended the viability of the *Tz’dukim* by destroying the venue of their chief responsibility; and whatever tradition they may have developed has for the most part been lost.” (Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary: a Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament*, n.p.)
  2. “The aristocratic Sadducees were closely connected with the temple, so their influence was to be destroyed when Jerusalem fell. The militant Zealots would lead the nation to the disastrous defeat, which would turn most Jews against them. The reclusive Essenes had always been a minority sect and would gain nothing from the war. But the Pharisees’ concern for the Law assured them of a dominant place in Jewish life after the Roman conquest. They had developed many oral interpretations of the Law for their own day, and after the fall of Jerusalem they would establish a new center for studying the Law at Jamnia. There they would preserve and systematize the written Law and their oral interpretations of it. This would be the beginning of modern Judaism, commonly called *rabbinic* Judaism.” (Packer and Tenney, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible*, 393–394)



## II. The Herodians

- A. It appears that the Herodians were *politically* affiliated with the Herodian dynasty and hoped for a restoration of Herodian rule in Judea (though Pontius Pilate was the current Roman prefect), but they were *religiously* and *economically* affiliated with the Sadducees.
- B. “Evidence from the Gospels seems to indicate that they were adherents of Herod Antipas. They preferred his rule to the direct rule of the Roman prefects. Although at the time of Herod the Great’s death there were some Jews who wanted to put an end to the Herodian rule, later they found the rule of the prefects was less bearable than that of the Herodians. Consequently, Herod Antipas’s rule was strengthened, and some Jews wanted a united nation under him. This may account for their being in Judea as well as in Galilee.” (Hoehner, “Herodians,” *ISBE*)
- C. “The Herodians were theologically in agreement with the Sadducees, and politically both of these parties would have been the opposite of the Pharisees, who were anti-Hasmonean, anti-Herodian and anti-Roman. The Pharisees looked for a cataclysmic messianic kingdom to remove the rule of the Herods and Rome, whereas the Herodians wanted to preserve the Herodian rule. However, the Herodians and the Pharisees worked together to oppose Jesus because he was introducing a new kingdom that neither wanted.” (Hoehner, *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 494)
- D. “The priesthood in general, and the high priest in particular, dominated the Jewish state during the Second Temple period. As might be expected, the priests were in charge of the temple and the operation of the cult. They were also responsible for the governance of Judaea as a political entity in the larger Near Eastern empire—first the Persian, then the Ptolemaic, followed by the Seleucid. They headed the independent Hasmonean Jewish state, when the rule became that of priest-kings. Under the Romans, the priests had to relinquish much of their political power to the Herodians under Herod the Great, his son Archelaus, Agrippa I, and even to some extent with regard to Agrippa II. Yet they maintained control of the temple and were still the most important figures of the religious establishment.” (Grabbe, *Introduction to Second Temple Judaism*, 42)
- E. The first mention of the sect of the Herodians in the New Testament is when they join forces with the Pharisees in Galilee in an attempt to destroy Jesus (Mark 3:1–6; cf. Matt 12:14, where the Herodians are not mentioned).
- F. During our Lord’s final week, the Herodians joined with the Pharisees in seeking to trap Jesus on the question of paying tribute (Mark 12:13–17; Matt 22:14–17).

### Conclusion

- I. The majority of Jewish people were not members of any Jewish sects, although they probably were most influenced by the Pharisees.
- II. These ordinary people were known as *am-ha-aretz*, the “people of the land.”

# The Zealots, Sicarii, And Essenes

## Introduction

- I. We are in a series of lesson on the Jewish Sects of the Second Temple Period—the period in ancient Israel between the construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 516 B.C. and its destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70.
- II. The Pharisees were the largest and best-known sect of the Jews in the gospels.
  - A. The majority of Pharisees were carpenters, fishermen, and storekeepers—just average men of the day.
  - B. The doctrine of the Pharisees is often mentioned in the New Testament.
  - C. They taught ritual purity, the importance of tithing, fasting, and the Sabbath observance.
  - D. They affirmed the existence of angels and demons, and they had a firm belief in life beyond the grave.
- III. In our last lesson, we looked at two other sects of the Jews mentioned in the New Testament—the Sadducees and the Herodians.
  - A. The Sadducees were a part of the priestly family and lived in Jerusalem.
    1. However, not all priests were Sadducees.
    2. The Sadducees were willing to assimilate Hellenism into their lives—something the Pharisees vehemently opposed.
    3. The Sadducees rejected the idea of the Oral Torah which the Pharisees accepted, and insisted on a literal interpretation of the Torah.
  - B. It appears that the Herodians were politically affiliated with the Herodian dynasty and hoped for a restoration of Herodian rule in Judea, but they were religiously and economically affiliated with the Sadducees.
    1. The first mention of the Herodians in the New Testament is when they join forces with the Pharisees in Galilee in an attempt to destroy Jesus (Mark 3).
    2. During our Lord's final week, the Herodians joined with the Pharisees in seeking to trap Jesus on the question of paying taxes (Mark 12).
- IV. In this lesson, we are going to look at three other Jewish sects: the Zealots, the Sicarii, and the Essenes.

## Discussion

### I. The Zealots

- A. The Zealots were a violent Jewish nationalistic sect and resistance group—they are seldom mentioned in the New Testament.
  1. The word *Zealot*, used in passages such as Acts 1:13, comes from the Greek word *zēlōtēs*.
  2. These were Jewish patriots who opposed Roman rule and the payment of tribute (taxes) by Israel to a pagan king on the ground that this was treason to Israel's true King—Jehovah!

- B. In *theory*, the origin of the group began during the days of Moses.
1. During their wilderness journey, the Israelite “remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab” (Num 25:1).
  2. Not only did they fornicate with these pagan women, but they also “ bowed down to their gods” (Num 25:2).
  3. God’s anger “was aroused against Israel” and He ordered that the leaders of this rebellion be killed (Num 25:3–5).
  4. In spite of this, on Israelite man took a Midianite woman into his tent, “in the sight of Moses” (Num 25:6).
  5. Phinehas, a priest of God and the grandson of Aaron, followed them and killed them both (Num 25:7–9).
  6. God praised Phinehas for his *zeal* (Num 25:10–13; cf. Ps 106:28–31).
  7. There is nothing said in the Old Testament about Phinehas starting any sort of political movement or party among God’s people!
- C. In *truth*, the Zealots were formed many centuries after Moses!
1. The zeal of Phinehas is praised in the apocryphal book of *Ecclesiasticus* (a.k.a., the *Book of the All-Virtuous Wisdom of Joshua ben Sira*, commonly called the *Wisdom of Sirach*, or simply *Sirach*).
  2. “Phinehas the son of Eleazar is the third in glory, for he was zealous in the fear of the Lord, and stood fast, when the people turned away, in the ready goodness of his soul, and made atonement for Israel. Therefore a covenant of peace was established with him, that he should be leader of the sanctuary and of his people, that he and his descendants should have the dignity of the priesthood for ever.” (*Sirach* 45:23–24)
  3. “From the time of the Maccabees (105–63 B.C.) there existed among the Jews a class of men, called Zealots, who rigorously adhered to the Mosaic law and endeavored even by a resort to violence, after the example of Phinehas (Num. 25:11, *zēlōtēs* Finēs 4 Macc. 18:12), to prevent religion from being violated by others; but in the latter days of the Jewish commonwealth they used their holy zeal as a pretext for the basest crime...” (Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*)
  4. During the bloody confrontation between the Jews and the pagan Greek Seleucid Empire, a Jewish priest by the name of Mattathias ben Johanan “burned with zeal” against the Seleucids—a burning zeal that could only be compared to that of Phinehas.
  5. “When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice upon the altar in Modein, according to the king’s command. When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him upon the altar. At the same time he killed the king’s officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar. Thus he burned with zeal for the law, as Phinehas did against Zimri the son of Salu. Then Mattathias cried out in the city with a loud voice, saying: ‘Let every one who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!’ And he and his sons fled to the hills and left all that they had in the city.” (1 Macc 2:23–28 RSV)

6. This was the beginning of the Maccabean Revolt (167 to 160 B.C.).
  7. “The origin of the Zealot movement has not been fully explained. It is almost certain that it has its source in Pharisaism. It is usually assumed that it emerged as a historical magnitude when Judas of Galilee joined the Pharisee Zadok, who had separated himself from Pharisaism, in resistance against Roman rule on the occasion of the census under Quirinius. But the possibility has also to be considered that the Zealots largely consisted of the ‘robber bands’ (→ λησταις) which even before Judas, under the leadership of his father Hezekiah, had pursued their way as fanatical patriots with originally religious motives. Be that as it may, Pharisaism did what was essential to prepare the ground for Zealotism. And in practice it sided with the Zealots, granting them the right of summary jurisdiction and punishment in cases where a Jew entered into the marriage bond with a non-Jew...” (Stumpff, “Zealots,” 2.884–885)
  8. However, Josephus claims that this group came into being during the First Revolt (A.D. 67–68).
  9. “The best esteemed also of the high priests, Jesus the son of Gamala, and Ananus the son of Ananus, when they were at their assemblies, bitterly reproached the people for their sloth, and excited them against the zealots; for that was the name they went by, as if they were zealous in good undertakings, and were not rather zealous in the worst actions, and extravagant in them beyond the example of others.” (Josephus, *War* 4.161)
- D. Simon, one of the twelve apostles, was called a Zealot (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).
1. “Though Luke does not explicitly identify Matthew with Levi, this identification seems likely (see comments on 5:27). If this is the case, the contrast between Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot is striking. While tax collectors were viewed as Roman sympathizers and traitors to the cause of Jewish independence, the Zealots were freedom fighters who actively worked to overthrow the Romans. The Zealots provoked the Jewish revolt against Rome in A.D. 66–74, which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem.” (Strauss, “Luke,” 376–377)
  2. “The Zealots were political activists who were radically opposed to Roman rule. Apart from Jesus’ call and influence on their lives, Matthew and Simon would have had deep animosity toward each other, with Matthew (as a tax collector) working in the service of Rome, and Simon (as a Zealot) seeking to overthrow Rome.” (Dennis and Grudem, eds., *The ESV Study Bible*, n.p.)

3. In Matthew 10:4, Simon is called a *Cananite* (KJV, NKJV, NRSV), but in many translations of the Bible he is called a *Zealot* (HCSB, ESV, NIV, NAS, NET).
  - a) The word *Cananite* in Matthew 10:4 is the Greek word *Kananitēs* (Κανανιτης).
  - b) “This term has no relation at all to the geographical terms for Cana or Canaan, but is derived from the Aramaic term for ‘enthusiast, zealot’ (see Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), possibly because of an earlier affiliation with the party of the Zealots. He may not have been technically a member of the particular Jewish nationalistic party known as ‘Zealots’ (since according to some scholars this party had not been organized at that time), but simply someone who was zealous for Jewish independence from Rome, in which case the term would refer to his temperament.” (Harris, *The NET Bible Notes*, n.p.)
  - c) “Probably Simon’s nickname originated from a ‘zeal’ for the law (cf. Paul’s use of ‘Zealot’ in this sense, Acts 22:3–5; Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:6), but this would be likely to make him sympathetic to the ideals of the later Zealot party. The inclusion of this man together with the government employee Matthew is evidence of the breadth of Jesus’ appeal.” (France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, 181)
- E. It is possible the Barabbas, the criminal who was released in place of Jesus, was a member of the sect of the Zealots (John 18:40).
  1. The word translated *robber* (Gr. ληστής; *lēstēs*) usually means “a plunderer, robber, highwayman” (Mounce, *Mounce Greek Dictionary*).
  2. However, the word can also mean a “revolutionary, insurrectionist, guerrilla” (Bauer, et. al., *BDAG*).
  3. In John 18:40 Barabbas is called a *robber* (KJV, NKJV, ESV, NASV), but in many other translations he is called a *revolutionary* (HCSB, CJB, NAB, NET).
  4. “John 18:40 uses a word for Barabbas that Josephus used for Zealot. Josephus said the Zealots began with Judas the Galilean seeking to lead a revolt over a taxation census (A.D. 6).” (Harrop and Draper, “Jewish Parties In The New Testament,” n.p.)
- F. The Zealots were very active throughout the Jewish rebellion (A.D. 66–73).
- G. The last Zealot stronghold, Masada, fell to the Romans in May A.D. 73.

## II. The Sicarii

- A. The Sicarii (literally “dagger men”) were the most violent and extreme Jewish revolutionaries of the New Testament age—they were committed to the complete overthrow of Roman rule in Palestine.
  1. Their name came from the weapon that its adherents employed, a curved dagger like the Roman *sica*.
  2. Whether a man is a *freedom fighter* or *terrorist* depends upon who is writing the history book.
  3. However, the Romans were not the primary victims of the Sicarii—rather, the Jewish aristocracy was!

4. “A Jewish revolutionary group (Gk. *sikarioi*, from Lat. *sicarii*, ‘dagger carriers’) that arose during the procuratorship of Felix (52–60 C.E.; Josephus *Ant.* 18.23–25; 20.160–72; cf. *Bj* 2.261–63). Named for short daggers (Lat. *sica*) they concealed under their clothing, they assassinated their enemies in broad daylight, especially during festivals when they could escape in the crowd (*Bj* 2.252–60, 425–29; *Ant.* 20.185–88; cf. 20.204–10). The Assassins promoted liberty and equality and were against human rule of any kind (even Jewish). Their relationship to the Zealots is debated.” (Huffman, “Assassins,” n.p.)
  5. “Unlike the social bandits who preyed on Roman petty officials and supply trains, the *sicarii* apparently attacked the Jewish aristocracy. These attacks took one of three forms. First, there were the selective assassinations of the ruling elite. The assassination of the high priest Jonathan is an example. Second, the *sicarii* slaughtered selected pro-Roman members of the Jewish aristocracy who lived in the countryside. These attacks also included plundering and burning selected aristocratic estates (Josephus *J.W.* 2.13.6 §§264–66; *Ant.* 20.8.6 §172). Third, the *sicarii* practiced terrorist hostage taking.” (Evans, et. al., *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 944)
- B. On one occasion Claudius Lysias, a Roman tribune, mistook the apostle Paul for being a member of this terrorist group (Acts 21:38).
1. The word *assassins* (Gr. *σικάρριος*; *sikarios*) is translated as *terrorists* in some versions of the Bible (NIV, NRSV, CEV, CJB, REB).
  2. Claudius Lysias wondered whether Paul was an Egyptian assassin who had recently stirred up a revolt in the wilderness (desert).
  3. Josephus (*War* 2:261–263) claims that during the days of Antonius Felix, there was “an Egyptian false prophet” who had led 30,000 men to the Mount of Olives in order to “break into Jerusalem by force.”
  4. “The word for ‘assassins’ (NASB) or ‘terrorists’ (NIV) here is *sicarii*. These were Jewish terrorists who carried curved daggers under their cloaks and brutally stabbed to death aristocrats in the midst of crowds in the temple, then slipped back into the crowds unseen. A few years after this encounter they kidnapped people to secure the release of their own adherents held by the procurator. Others terrorized the countryside. Josephus’s final reports of them are at the fortress Masada, where they finally perished in A.D. 73. The tribune might be confusing two different kinds of threats, perhaps based on conflicting guesses from the crowd (21:34).” (Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 395)
  5. “Although Josephus calls attention to their use of daggers in order to explain the origin of their name, overall he describes the activities of the *Sicarii* in broader terms, not limited to the use of daggers or to urban settings (see *Ant.* 20.187). Rather, his use of the term ‘*Sicarii*’ loosely refers to a group of Jews who acted against their own people for religious or political reasons. This understanding of the *Sicarii* fits well with the use of the term in Acts 21:38, where a Roman tribune asks Paul if he is the Egyptian who led four thousand *sikarioi* out into the wilderness.” (Yamazaki-Ransom, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, n.p.)

C. Josephus had a lot to say about this group.

1. “And then it was that the sicarii, as they were called, who were robbers, grew numerous. They made use of small swords, not much different in length from the Persian acinacae, but somewhat crooked, and like the Roman sicae [or sickles] as they were called; and from these weapons these robbers got their denomination; and with these weapons they slew a great many; for they mingled themselves among the multitude at their festivals, when they were come up in crowds from all parts to the city to worship God, as we said before, and easily slew those that they had a mind to slay. They also came frequently upon the villages belonging to their enemies, with their weapons, and plundered them, and set them on fire.” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:186–187)
2. “When the country was purged of these, there sprang up another sort of robbers in Jerusalem, which were called Sicarii, who slew men in the daytime, and in the midst of the city; this they did chiefly at the festivals, when they mingled themselves among the multitude, and concealed daggers under their garments, with which they stabbed those that were their enemies; and when any fell down dead, the murderers became a part of those that had indignation against them; by which means they appeared persons of such reputation, that they could by no means be discovered. The first man who was slain by them was Jonathan the high priest, after whose death many were slain every day, while the fear men were in of being so served, was more afflicting than the calamity itself; and while everybody expected death every hour, as men do in war, so men were obliged to look before them, and to take notice of their enemies at a great distance; nor, if their friends were coming to them, durst they trust them any longer; but, in the midst of their suspicions and guarding of themselves, they were slain. Such was the celebrity of the plotters against them, and so cunning was their contrivance.” (Josephus, *War* 2:254–257)

D. Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, the Sicarii fled to the fortress at Masada, on the western shore of the Dead Sea, and “sat out” the rest of the war.

1. They preyed upon the surrounding countryside for their food supplies.
2. The Roman Tenth Legion attacked Masada in A.D. 73—only to discover that all of its occupants had committed suicide (Josephus, *War* 7.303–401).

### III. The Essenes

- A. The Essenes, an ascetic group, were born out of disgust with both the Pharisees and the Sadducees.
  1. The Essenes believed that the Pharisees and the Sadducees had corrupted Jerusalem and the Temple.
  2. They moved out of Jerusalem and lived a monastic life in the desert, adopting strict dietary laws, and a commitment to celibacy.
  3. They refrained from worshiping at the Temple because they believed the priests were defiling the sanctuary, but they had a very high regard for the Scriptures.
  4. They shared all things in common, including food and clothing, and they cared for their sick and elderly.
  5. They were meticulous about maintaining moral purity and dressed only in white linen.
  6. They are not mentioned in the New Testament (or even in rabbinic literature)—possibly because most Jews would not come into contact with them.
  7. The origin of their name, the Essenes, is still a mystery.
- B. Bible scholars are interested in the Essenes because it is believed that a part of their group moved to live at Qumran, near the Dead Sea.
  1. It was in this area, back in 1947, that a young Bedouin shepherd allegedly stumbled into a cave containing ancient artifacts and jars containing manuscripts describing the beliefs of the sect and events of the time.
  2. Among the artifacts were the earliest known copies of the Old Testament, a part of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
  3. The Roman author and philosopher Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23–79) claimed that an Essene community resided near the Dead Sea.
  4. Pliny had visited Judea in spring of A.D. 70.
  5. “On the west side of the Dead Sea, away from the coast, where there are harmful vapors, lives the solitary tribe of the Essenes. This tribe is remarkable beyond all others in the whole world, because it has no women, has rejected sexual desires, is without money and has only the company of palm-trees. Day by day the crowd of refugees is renewed by hordes of people tired of life and driven there by the waves of fortune to adopt their customs. Thus through thousands of ages—incredible to relate—the race in which no one is born lives for ever; so fruitful for them is other men’s dissatisfaction with life!” (Pliny, *Natural History: A Selection*, 61)
  6. “The Essenes claimed that all human actions are determined by fate, while the Pharisees claimed that life is governed jointly by fate and free will. The Qumran scrolls, many of which, in all likelihood, are documents of the Essenes, confirm that these pietists believed that God created two different types of people, those who were destined to become the sons of light and the supporters of truth, and those who were destined to become sons of darkness and the supporters of wickedness.” (Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 95)



7. “We know of the Essenes through the writings of Josephus and Philo, a Jewish philosopher in Alexandria, Egypt. They are not mentioned in the NT. More information about the Essenes is known since the 1947 discovery of manuscripts from caves above the Dead Sea called the Dead Sea Scrolls. The common assumption is that the people of the Scrolls were either Essenes or associated with them. 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. We now know that an active Essene community was located in Jerusalem as well. 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 hard evidence that either Jesus or John the Baptist had any relation to Qumran. Jesus would have strongly opposed their understanding of the law.” (Harrop and Draper, “Jewish Parties In The New Testament,” n.p.)
- C. Since most people do not have ready access to the writings of either Josephus or Philo, I am including two lengthy quotations for your consideration.
- i. “The doctrine of the Essenes is this: That all things are best ascribed to God. They teach the immortality of souls, and esteem that the rewards of righteousness are to be earnestly striven for; and when they send what they have dedicated to God into the temple, they do not offer sacrifices, because they have more pure lustrations of their own; on which account they are excluded from the common court of the temple, but offer their sacrifices themselves; yet is their course of life better than that of other men; and they entirely addict themselves to husbandry. It also deserves our admiration, how much they exceed all other men that addict themselves to virtue, and this in righteousness; and indeed to such a degree, that as it hath never appeared among any other man, neither Greeks nor barbarians, no, not for a little time, so hath it endured a long while among them. This is demonstrated by that institution of theirs which will not suffer anything to hinder them from having all things in common; so that a rich man enjoys no more of his own wealth than he who hath nothing at all. There are about four thousand men that live in this way, and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants; as thinking the latter tempts men to be unjust, and the former gives the handle to domestic quarrels; but as they live by themselves, they minister one to another. They also appoint certain stewards to receive the incomes of their revenues, and of the fruits of the ground; such as are good men and priests, who are to get their corn and their food ready for them. They none of them differ from others of the Essenes in their way of living, but do the most resemble those Dacae who are called Polistae [dwellers in cities.]” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:18–22)

2. “Moreover Palestine and Syria too are not barren of exemplary wisdom and virtue, which countries no slight portion of that most populous nation of the Jews inhabits. There is a portion of those people called Essenes, in number something more than four thousand in my opinion, who derive their name from their piety, though not according to any accurate form of the Grecian dialect, because they are above all men devoted to the service of God, not sacrificing living animals, but studying rather to preserve their own minds in a state of holiness and purity. These men, in the first place, live in villages, avoiding all cities on account of the habitual lawlessness of those who inhabit them, well knowing that such a moral disease is contracted from associations with wicked men, just as a real disease might be from an impure atmosphere, and that this would stamp an incurable evil on their souls. Of these men, some cultivating the earth, and others devoting themselves to those arts which are the result of peace, benefit both themselves and all those who come in contact with them, not storing up treasures of silver and of gold, nor acquiring vast sections of the earth out of a desire for ample revenues, but providing all things which are requisite for the natural purposes of life; for they alone of almost all men having been originally poor and destitute, and that too rather from their own habits and ways of life than from any real deficiency of good fortune, are nevertheless accounted very rich, judging contentment and frugality to be great abundance, as in truth they are. Among those men you will find no makers of arrows, or javelins, or swords, or helmets, or breastplates, or shields; no makers of arms or of military engines; no one, in short, attending to any employment whatever connected with war, or even to any of those occupations even in peace which are easily perverted to wicked purposes; for they are utterly ignorant of all traffic, and of all commercial dealings, and of all navigation, but they repudiate and keep aloof from everything which can possibly afford any inducement to covetousness; and there is not a single slave among them, but they are all free, aiding one another with a reciprocal interchange of good offices; and they condemn masters, not only as unjust, inasmuch as they corrupt the very principle of equality, but likewise as impious, because they destroy the ordinances of nature, which generated them all equally, and brought them up like a mother, as if they were all legitimate brethren, not in name only, but in reality and truth. But in their view this natural relationship of all men to one another has been thrown into disorder by designing covetousness, continually wishing to surpass others in good fortune, and which has therefore engendered alienation instead of affection, and hatred instead of friendship; and leaving the logical part of philosophy, as in no respect necessary for the acquisition of virtue, to the word-catchers, and the natural part, as being too sublime for human nature to master, to those who love to converse about high objects (except indeed so far as such a study takes in the contemplation of the existence of God and of the creation of the universe), they devote all their attention to the moral part of philosophy, using as instructors the laws of their country which it would have been impossible for the human mind to devise without divine inspiration.” (Philo, *Freedom*, 75–80)

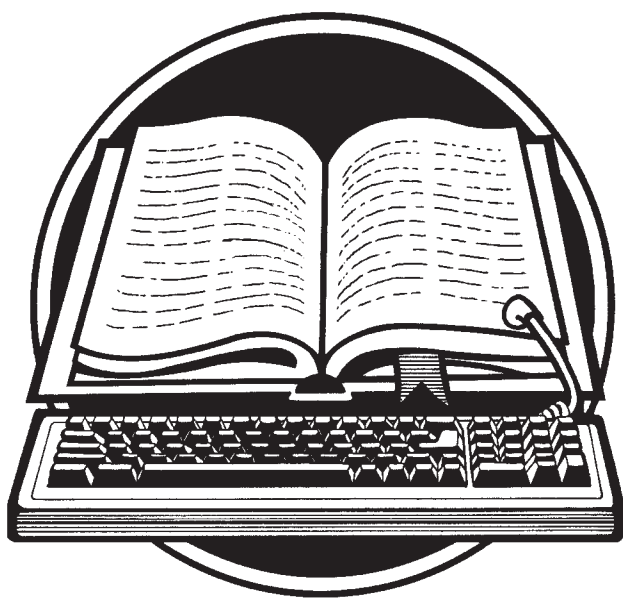
Conclusion

- I. “In the streets of Jerusalem men from the most distant countries met, speaking every variety of language and dialect. Jews and Greeks, Roman soldiers and Galilean peasants, Pharisees, Sadducees, and white-robed Essenes, busy merchants and students of abstruse theology, mingled, a motley crowd, in the narrow streets of the city of palaces.” (Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, n.p.)
- II. The majority of Jewish people were not members of any of religious sect.
- III. These ordinary people were known as *am-ha-aretz*, the “people of the land.”
- IV. “Besides the elders and the landowners, there were the ‘people of the land.’ They were the freemen of the country with basic civil rights, and we meet them throughout the Old Testament (2 Kings 16:15; Jeremiah 1:18; 37:2; Ezekiel 22:29).” (Gowler, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, 265)

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