

WHO POPULATED JESUS' RELIGIOUS WORLD?

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Pharisees ("separatists")

- **Introduction:** Three ancient sources mentioning the Pharisees are Josephus (one of the four Jewish philosophical schools), N.T., and Rabbinic Literature. The apostle Paul was a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5). In the Gospels, Pharisees (and scribes) are portrayed as opponents of Jesus, and often viewed negatively as "narrow-minded legalists" (Mt. 23:23-24) and "hypocrites" (Mt. 23:3)—an effect of the post-70 context.
- **Politics:** Pharisees supported the Maccabean Revolt against Hellenization. Although they apparently had no political status at the time of Jesus, they were a reform movement seeking influence throughout society. Pharisees likely belonged neither to the lower nor governing class but rather the retainer class (administrative & bureaucratic functions). They had no part in Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. They opposed the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 CE on theological grounds.
- **Piety of the Word:** Pharisees were a lay (male) leadership group, moving strict observance of the Torah from the Temple & priesthood to daily life (the street, home, & marketplace). As separatists, they sought communal commitment to the covenant by strict observance of the Law & ritual purity regarding foods & hand washing. They believed that "all Israel" should live in faithfulness to the Covenant & in sanctity of everyday existence.

Pharisees were in Jerusalem but also elsewhere (in Galilee) as a popular movement. For them, the synagogue complimented or replaced the Temple as the central meeting place (school, burial society, community & worship center). They accepted oral traditions that adapted the written Torah, leading to the Mishnah and Talmud. Hence, Pharisees were predecessors of the rabbis & sages. They were approving of apocalyptic thought, notions of divine activity in human life (providence), reward and punishment in the afterlife, & notion of resurrection (contra Sadducees).

Sadducees ("righteous ones")

- **Introduction:** The Sadducees claimed to be priests in the line of Zadok, those descending from Solomon (1 Kgs 1:8,34, 38-39). At the time of Jesus, temple priests were appointed by Roman authorities. Little information about them exists since no texts authored by them & no post-70 CE group of successors survive. In NT, they were the priestly opponents of Jesus, instrumental in bringing about his death.
- **Temple piety:** They prepared the sacrifices & maintained the temple. They practiced strict purity—the condition of being free from any physical, moral, or ritual contamination—to keep from defiling the temple. Hence, their strict observance of the Torah was for the sake of temple purity. They were religiously conservative adhering only to the written Torah, not the Oral Torah as did the Pharisees. They believed in human responsibility but neither God's providence nor afterlife (no resurrection).
- **Importance of the temple:** Note the stories in Luke 1-2: announcement of John's birth to father/priest Zechariah, sacrificial offering for Jesus in the temple, in the temple Simeon's and Anna's recognition of Jesus' significance, 12 yr. old Jesus learning and teaching in the temple. In Jerusalem Jesus went to the temple to protest against its abuses (Mk. 11:11-18). Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction figured prominently in the charges brought at his trial (Mk. 14:58 & 15:29f.).
- **Politics:** The Sadducees were heirs of the Hasmonean priests (Maccabean Revolt) to maintain the temple system. They collaborated with Roman authorities in Jerusalem to keep order and to protect the temple. They belonged to the wealthy aristocracy.

Essenes: There is consensus that a Hasmonean high priest separated himself and followers from the Sadducees who had corrupted the temple (ca. 150 BCE). The group withdrew to the wilderness and lived as a covenant community, practicing celibacy and strict observance of the Law to await the end-times (apocalyptic view of final battle between "sons of light" and "sons of darkness"). Qumran scrolls (discovered in 1947 and following years) describe a community whose early leader was the "Teacher of Righteousness." It was a community that interpreted Sacred Writings in light of what was happening to them. The Qumran community vanished during the 66-70 CE attack by the Romans, yet other urban Essene communities apparently survived.

Scribes: Scribes ("lawyers" in Luke) were interpreters of the Scriptures. Scribes were among both Pharisees and Sadducees. They were a professional class, trained in reading and probably writing.

Sicarii ("dagger-carriers") & Zealots (used in 66-73 CE revolt): Taking inspiration from the Maccabees, these "bandits" were observers of the Torah and convinced that the "God-given land" needed to be restored to Israel. They assassinated apostate Jews in crowds by using hidden daggers. These factions pursued guerrilla-like warfare against Roman rule. A number of Galilean Jews were resisters, among them was Judas the Galilean at the time of the census of Quirinius in 6-7 CE (Acts 5:37). "Zealots" started the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 CE (begun in Caesarea), which resulted in destroying Jerusalem and its temple. Josephus reports the final stand at Masada (73 CE). Intriguingly, one of Jesus' disciples was "Simon the Zealot" (in Lk. 6:15, but in Mt. 10:4 called "Simon the Cananaean").

Samaritans: The Samaritans lived in Samaria, the area between Galilee and Judea. They were Torah-observing but concluded that 2nd & 3rd parts of Jewish Bible were apostate history (like the Sadducees). With their own distinctive version of the Pentateuch, they viewed themselves as bearers of the true faith from Moses, descendants of the "lost" tribes of Joseph. They thought the second temple in Jerusalem was a mistake, whereas they were "keepers" of the authentic faith (*Samar*) at Mt. Gerizim (John 4:20). Jews ("Jews" from "Judeans") considered them descendants of foreign settlers, as a corrupted and mixed group both racially and theologically. Josephus reports violent confrontations between Samaritans and Jews during first half of 1st century (e.g., Samaritans scattered unclean things in the Jerusalem temple). Shockingly, Jesus made the Samaritan the hero of the parable in Lk. 10:25-37, and only the Samaritan gave thanks in the Lk. 17:11-19 healing story.

Jews/Gentiles: Gentiles (*Goyim*) or the "people of the nations" describe all who are not Jews or people of the covenant. Later "Gentiles" is also used for non-Jewish Christians. At the time of Jesus, most Jews resided outside Palestine (Diaspora). Most did not speak Hebrew (hence the Septuagint or Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures). These Diaspora Jews differentiated themselves by observing Torah, keeping dietary laws, and observing Sabbath. The synagogue was their gathering place. They attempted to have minimal contact with Gentiles (who are off the holiness map). Gentiles were present in Galilee (Sepphoris & Tiberias) & wherever Roman soldiers were stationed (Caesarea & Jerusalem).

Conclusion:

- 2nd Temple Judaism was not monolithic but extremely varied. In some cases, groups were clearly shaped by their desire to counteract their foreign occupation, first Hellenistic and then Roman. Nonetheless, all Jews were united in confessing the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4).
- Among these contrasting options, the Baptist and Jesus-movements must be included (26 CE onward).
- For the most part, the NT writings hold hostile views of Pharisees (& scribes) and Sadducees. Much of this negative attitude resulted from tension in the post-70 contexts in which the Gospels were written. Hostility increases in later writings (read the Gospels of Matthew and John).
- The Pharisaic and Jesus movements were two major groups to survive the 66-73 CE debacle. Eventually the Pharisaic movement became Rabbinic Judaism, leading to the formation and study of Mishnah and Talmud, and the Jesus movement became the Christian Church, largely populated by Gentile believers due largely to Paul's missionary efforts.