

THE HISTORY, CREED, AND INFLUENCE OF FOUR JEWISH GROUPS  
AND INSTITUTIONS IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

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## THE HISTORY, CREED, AND INFLEUCNE OF FOUR JEWISH GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

Of the many different Jewish sects and institutions common to Jesus in his day, there are four primary sects that I will be discussing in this paper. The Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and the Essenes are the four being discussed.

### PHARISEES

Of the first of the Jewish groups and the most commonly known are the Pharisees. The exact starting point of the Pharisees is unknown but the period around the time of Ezra is a good guess. Scholar R. Herford writes.

The period, which followed the time of Ezra, is wrapped in obscurity, and only a few dim rays of light penetrate here and there. Somewhere in that obscurity Pharisaism had its beginning and its early history, and all that can be done is to take the help of those few rays of light and try to make out what they disclose.<sup>1</sup>

But the exact details of the origin of the Pharisees are difficult to say. The Pharisees do appear and show up in both Christian and Jewish historical documents, but they cannot be studied in isolation, but must be studied as only a part of the entire Jewish people.<sup>2</sup> The Pharisees were the strictest sect of the Jews according to Acts 26:5, and it is believed that they were the most

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<sup>1</sup> R. Herford, *The Pharisees* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1924), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Bowkler John, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 1.

influential.<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees made many contributions to Judaism, and one of the reasons for their great influence during the times of Jesus was Jewish legalism, another was the development and organization of the Jewish religion, which happened after the captivity.<sup>4</sup>

The creed and or doctrine of the Pharisees is vast and complex.

The doctrines of the Pharisees included predestination, or as some have termed it, a teaching of special divine providence. They also laid much stress on the immortality of the soul and had a fundamental belief in spirit life, teachings which usually caused much controversy when they met the Sadducees who just as emphatically denied them (Acts 23:6-9). Being people of the law they believed in final reward for good works and that the souls of the wicked were detained forever under the earth, while those of the virtuous rose again and even migrated into other bodies. They accepted the OT Scriptures and fostered the usual Jewish Messianic hope, which they gave a material and nationalistic twist.<sup>5</sup>

After examining the information on the Pharisees it makes it much easier to understand why Jesus bumped heads with them so often. The Pharisees had in so many cases replaced the word of God with their man made traditions and legalisms. He rebuked them for their outright rejection of himself (Lk 12:1), and he rebuked them for their hypocrisy (Mk 12:15).<sup>6</sup> Jesus really rebuked them in Matt 23 and said some harsh things to them and used

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<sup>3</sup> Tenney, Merrill, C, *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), 647.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> W. David Cloud, *Way of Life Encyclopedia of the Bible & Christianity*. (Washington: Way of Life Literature, 1993), 294.

intense language. In verse 15 of chapter 23 Jesus refers to the Pharisees as sons of hell. Much of the language that he uses against the Pharisees in much of the gospels is harsh. But by studying the legalistic practices of the group its not wonder that Jesus used such harsh language to describe them in so many Biblical passages.

### SADDUCEES

The origin of the Sadducees is not known to be exact. However the sect is sought in the period in Jewish history, which is between the restoration of the Jews to their own land 536 B.C. and the Christian era.<sup>7</sup> The very first appearance of the Sadducees appears to be in Matt 3:7. In the King James Version of the Bible Sadducees are mentioned some 14 times. However in the New International and the English Standard Versions Sadducees are mentioned some 15 times. The Sadducees just like the Pharisees had many creeds and doctrines just like the Pharisees. Some of these doctrines are the following.

1. They held only to the written law and rejected the tradition of the Pharisees.
2. They denied the resurrection
3. They denied the existence of angels and spirits
4. They denied divine predestination and the freedom of the human will.<sup>8</sup>

The Sadducees do not appear to have had much of an influence in the times of Jesus, or at least compared to the Pharisees. However after the day of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,740.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,741.

Pentecost they were very actively against the early New Testament Church. It is reported in Acts 5:17 that the Sadducees were responsible for the arrest of the apostles. Looking at the book of Acts shows that the Sadducees had a very hostile and militant attitude towards the early NT Church. The Sadducees met their end at the destruction of the temple in AD 70. They are not mentioned in history after this time.

### ZEALOTS

Zealots are another sect of Jews, which originated with Judas the Gaulonite (Acts 5:37) in AD 6.<sup>9</sup> The word “Zealot” is never mentioned in the KJV, however in the New King James Version and the New International Version the word Zealot is used. Zealots are rarely mentioned in the NT, so very little is known about them outside of historical and non-Biblical resources. Some of their beliefs were as follows.

The Zealots held that paying taxes to the Roman Empire was treason against God. They took their name from the zeal shown by the Maccabeans when they threw off the Syrian yoke. The Romans referred to the Zealots as “sicarii,” or “dagger men,” because they were continually in action with this weapon.<sup>10</sup>

The huge influence this group had was militaristic and this group wanted to revolt against the Roman authorities of Jesus’ day. Biblical scholar Ralph Gower says that the Zealots tried to stimulate Jesus into leading a popular

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<sup>9</sup> Gower Ralph, *The New Manners & Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute), 1987, 260.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

revolt.<sup>11</sup> It is widely known that they met their demise in AD 73 at Masada via mass suicide. However according to Gower “Zealots were still active in the time of the final rebellion of Bar Cochba in AD 135 that led to the final banishment of the Jews from their own country and the final destruction of Jerusalem”.<sup>12</sup> After this date nothing is known about the Zealots of the sources that I consulted for this research paper.

### ESSENES

The Essenes were a Jewish mystical sect that somewhat resembled the Pharisees. They originated about BC 100 and disappeared from history after the destruction of Jerusalem. They are not directly mentioned in scripture, although they may be referred to in Mt 19:11,12 Col 2:8, 18, 23.<sup>13</sup> The origin of the Essenes can be hard to trace, however the historian Josephus first mentions them about the time of 150 BC.<sup>14</sup> The theology and doctrine of the Essenes had some commonalities with the Pharisees. One such common similarity was the Jewish view of the world, which entered into an absolute belief in providence. Also the name of Moses was an object of great reverence, and those that blasphemed it were punished with death.<sup>15</sup> The Essene form

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.,261.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 262

<sup>13</sup> Easton, M.G, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (Cedar Rapids: Laridian, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> F. Unger Merrill. *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Cedar Rapids: Laridian, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

of worship included the reading of the scriptures and exegeted. The Sabbath was also very strictly observed. In conclusion it may be observed “Essenism is merely Pharisaism in the superlative degree.” It was however influenced by foreign systems of theology, philosophy, and of these there are four that have been composed, namely Buddhism, Parseeism, Syrian heathenism, and Pythagoreanism.<sup>16</sup> The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology states that this sect also disappeared from history at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The Essenes are not directly mentioned in the scriptures, however some believe that they are referred to in Mt 19:11-12, Col 2:8, 18, 23. The Essenes are important mostly because of the Dead Sea Scroll discovery. Besides this very little is known about the Essenes.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

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