

THE
WORLD
OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT

CULTURAL,
SOCIAL, AND
HISTORICAL
CONTEXTS

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EDITORS

18

Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes

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The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes represent perhaps the three most important Jewish movements for understanding the background of the NT. We see Jesus and the early church frequently facing opposition from the Pharisees and the Sadducees over the law. The Essenes were also a prominent Jewish sect at that time, and scholars have speculated on their influence on the teachings on the NT, although they are not mentioned directly in the NT.

The three groups appear to have emerged, or at least been most active, during the Hasmonean era. Josephus mentions these three “philosophies” as being prominent during the reigns of the Hasmonean Jonathan (152–142 BC; *Ant.* 13.171–73) and of Archelaus (4 BC–AD 6; *J.W.* 2.119). Some have argued that they had earlier roots, from as early as the third century BC or even the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The return from exile and the Hellenization program initiated by Alexander the Great led to an increased concern over who was a “true Jew” and how to follow the law. These groups, in their various stages of formation, represented different responses to these issues.

The task of reconstructing the teachings and historical situation of the groups faces several challenges. For example, the theory that the Qumran documents are from an Essene group has come under question. There is the difficulty of assessing the various tendencies or prejudices of the available sources and what impact these biases might have had, especially regarding their accuracy. Josephus has been seen as being biased toward the Pharisees, since he claims to have once been

a Pharisee (*Life* 10–12). Josephus also emphasizes the disagreements between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, whereas in the Gospels the two groups are often united in their opposition against Jesus. Despite these challenges, what emerges from the literature is consistent enough that we can attempt to make some careful conclusions regarding these Jewish sects.

Pharisees

Origins

The name “Pharisee” appears to go back to the Hebrew *pāraš* and may mean “one who is separate.” It is uncertain whether the term has positive or negative connotations, and whether the Pharisees first used the term to describe themselves or whether they were labeled as such by their opponents. It is also not clear from what or whom they were separated, although the name may relate to their deep concern for separation from impurity or even all pagan practices.

The origins of all three groups may be from the time of the Maccabean revolt. The threat of Hellenization under Antiochus Epiphanes led to the formation of the Jewish resistance movement led by the Hasmoneans (1 Macc. 2:1–28) and the Hasideans (1 Macc. 7:12–13) and included “many who were seeking righteousness and justice” (1 Macc. 2:29). However, the coalition did not last long. Since it was believed that the victory was due to the keeping of the Torah (e.g., 1 Macc. 2:45–46; 3:5, 46–60; 2 Macc. 8:26–27), in line with a Deuteronomistic mind-set, the issue became how the entire people—not just the priests—could keep the law so that the nation could receive blessings instead of curses. This led to the question of how the people, as a nation and as individuals, would keep the commandments.

The Pharisees may have arisen from the Hasideans, with their ties to the scribes, as the ones who emphasized the study of the law and obedience to the commandments. However, their roots may go back to the postexilic era, which also saw a strong Deuteronomistic mind-set with increased focus on following the law. The return from exile could have been a catalyst for values and practices that led to the rise of the Pharisees.

Influence

Josephus and the NT portray the Pharisees as the most influential of the three sects in Palestinian Judaism. Josephus reports that they were the most popular among the people since they had “the support of the masses” (*Ant.* 13.298) and were “extremely influential” among the people (*Ant.* 18.15 LCL). In the Gospels the Pharisees emerge as the most significant opponents of Jesus and the early church, frequently initiating conflicts with him over matters of ritual purity and observance of the law. However, the extent of the Pharisees’ influence on society is debated. It is possible that Josephus, since he claimed to have been a Pharisee,

may have exaggerated the extent of their impact (*Life* 12), and some scholars argue that the Sadducees were more influential.

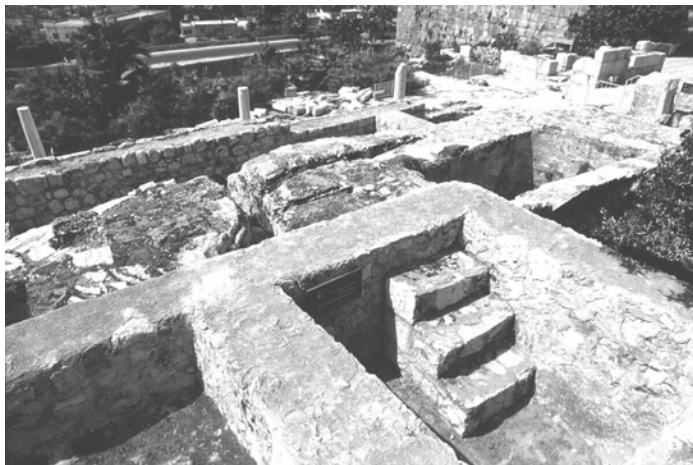
According to Josephus, the Pharisees' power rested primarily on their broad base of support among the people. He states that the Pharisees maintained the support of the majority of the people (*Ant.* 13.296). Acts 5:34 reflects this sentiment when it describes the Pharisee Gamaliel as being "respected by all the people." Josephus records that they were influential during the reign of John Hyrcanus (134–104 BC), who was originally a student of the Pharisees. However, Hyrcanus changed his allegiance to the Sadducees after a Pharisee, Eleazar, asserted that he should lay down the high priesthood and be a secular governor only, and Hyrcanus suspected that this was the sentiment of the entire group (*Ant.* 13.288–99).

The Pharisees clashed with the rulers at other times. They were among the thousands killed during Alexander Jannaeus's reign (103–76 BC) for opposing him (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.88–92; *Ant.* 13.372–76). But before he died, he advised his wife, Alexandra, to give some power to them so that they would "dispose the nation favourably to her." He argued that they would be able to do so because of their influence among the Jews, since they "had the complete confidence of the masses" (Josephus, *Ant.* 3.400–404 LCL). Josephus then records that during her reign they essentially became the "real administrators" of the state (*J.W.* 1.111 LCL).

We find a prominent role played by the Pharisees in the NT. Acts 23:6 states that some were members of the Sanhedrin, along with some Sadducees. Most of all, the Pharisees are the primary opponents of Jesus and the early Christian movement. The Essenes are never mentioned, and while the Sadducees and Pharisees may appear united at times in their opposition to Jesus (e.g., Matt. 16:1), it is more often the Pharisees who come to dispute, sometimes accompanied by the scribes (e.g., Matt. 9:11, 34; 12:2, 38; Mark 7:5; 8:11; Luke 6:7). Their disputes with Jesus are primarily in areas of external piety, such as tithing, fasting, purity, and keeping the Sabbath.

If the Pharisees were the most prominent group in Judaism, it may have been due to their reputation as accurate interpreters of the law. Although all three sects emphasized the importance of the Torah, Josephus particularly cites the Pharisees as being the ones who are seen to be "unrivalled experts" in the law (*Life* 191 LCL; *J.W.* 2.162; 1.110) and who pride themselves as such (*Ant.* 17.41). They have the reputation of being the most observant of the Jews (*J.W.* 1.110). Paul describes himself as a Pharisee who was "educated strictly according to our ancestral law" (Acts 22:3) and belonged "to the strictest sect of our religion" (Acts 26:5). Several Qumran texts identify a group described as those who seek "smooth things" (CD 1.18–19; 4Q169 frgs. 3–4 3.3, 6–7),¹ a negative statement on the impact of the Pharisees' interpretation in that it seduces the people and ultimately leads them astray.

1. Translation from Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Press, 1997).



18.1. *Mikveh* baths at the southern end of the temple mount were used for ceremonial cleansing.

The Pharisees' opposition to Jesus' activities on the Sabbath is a prime example of this emphasis on the strict observance of the law. For the Pharisees, Jesus' healings violate God's prohibition against doing work on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:9–14//Mark 3:1–6//Luke 6:6–11; Luke 14:1–6; John 9:1–41). Jesus challenges them with an alternative interpretation of the Torah, arguing that what is lawful to do on the Sabbath is to do good and to save a life (Mark 3:4; Matt. 12:10–11). When the Pharisees confront Jesus over ritual purity regarding cups and dishes and the cleanness of one's hands, Jesus responds that people are defiled not by what goes into a person but by the things that come out, and that one should clean the inside rather than the outside (Matt. 15:1–20//Mark 7:1–23; Matt. 23:25–26//Luke 11:37–44). Thus Jesus proclaims that it is not external conformity to the law and being justified in the sight of others that counts but internal piety and the matters of the heart (Luke 16:15). Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees also involve tithing and fasting (e.g., Matt. 23:23; Mark 2:18–20; Luke 18:9–14).

Doctrines and Practices

As opposed to the Qumran community, which withdrew from society, the Pharisees emphasized practicing holiness within society. Josephus records that Pharisees were known for their "virtuous conduct" and that the people perform "worship, prayers, and sacrifices" according to their direction (*Ant.* 18.15 LCL). Their halakah guided the people in the pursuit of holiness in everyday life.

The Pharisees accepted a tradition in addition to the written law of Moses, which is referred to as the "tradition of their fathers" (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.408 LCL) or the "tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:5) and probably consisted of interpretation and application of the law. This tradition, which was rejected by the Sadducees

(Josephus, *Ant.* 13.297), may have arisen out of the desire to be as observant as possible in following the written law.

Although the Pharisees believed in divine providence, according to Josephus they also held that the ability to do what was right or wrong was within the capacity of every person, so that fate cooperated with human free will (*J.W.* 2.162–63; *Ant.* 18.13). Thus, according to Josephus, they held a position in between the Essenes, who believed that all events are ascribed to God's will (*Ant.* 18.18), and the Sadducees, who rejected fate entirely (*J.W.* 2.164–65; *Ant.* 13.173). The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead and in an afterlife in which people would be rewarded or punished according to their actions in this life—as opposed to the Sadducees, who believed that the soul perished at death, and the Essenes, who believed only in the immortality of the soul (*J.W.* 2.162–65; *Ant.* 18.15–18). In Acts 23:8 we read that the Pharisees believed in angels and spirits, whereas the Sadducees denied their existence.

According to Josephus, the Pharisees were opposed to the Jewish revolt against Rome and tried to stop it (*J.W.* 2.411–12). Their political realism and deep concern to preserve the religion of their forefathers may have helped them survive the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Their beliefs are generally seen to have formed the basis for rabbinic Judaism, and many Pharisaic teachings are seen in early rabbinic texts, such as the Mishnah.

Sadducees

A second major group within Palestinian Judaism during this time was the Sadducees. In the Gospels they are sometimes unified with the Pharisees in their opposition to Jesus.

Origins

The name “Sadducee” may be derived from Zadok, the Davidic high priest (2 Sam. 8:17; 15:24), who was himself descended from Aaron (1 Chron 24:3). Ezekiel 40:46 states that Zadok and his descendants were the only Levites who could be high priests. The Sadducees could have been these descendants or perhaps merely sympathizers to the Zadokites, who were deposed in 172 BC.

Another theory concerning the origins of the Sadducees connects them with the Qumran community. Lawrence Schiffman has argued that this community was founded by a breakaway group of Sadducees who were unwilling to compromise with the Hasmoneans, who replaced the Zadokite priesthood with their own priests and favored the Pharisees.² Schiffman has compared the laws in the DSS manuscript 4QMMT (the *Halakic Letter*) with those in the Mishnah and the

2. Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The Significance of the Scrolls,” *BRev* 6 (1990): 18–27; idem, “The New Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) and the Origins of the Dead Sea Sect,” *BA* 53 (1990): 64–73.

Talmud and has concluded that the views of the writers of the text were similar to those attributed to the Sadducees and the views of their opponents were those of the Pharisees. A Sadducean origin may also explain why the group frequently referred to themselves as “Sons of Zadok.”

Numerous elements make this theory unlikely. Although there are agreements between the Sadducees and the writer of 4QMMT, many can be explained by the shared priestly roots of the Sadducees and the Essenes. There are also some significant differences that would seem to exclude the Sadducees as the primary influence. For example, the manuscript teaches the importance of fate, whereas the Sadducees opposed a predestinarian theology and instead emphasized free will and human responsibility. The concern about purity would fit the Pharisees better, since they were known for their strict adherence to purity laws.³ However, although it may be difficult to identify the Qumran community as Sadducean, documents such as 4QMMT may shed light on Sadducean halakah.

Influence

The main sources for information on the Sadducees are the NT, Josephus, rabbinic texts such as the Mishnah, and some Qumran documents such as *Pesher on Nahum* and possibly 4QMMT. The Sadducees appear less often in the NT and Josephus than do the Pharisees, perhaps reflecting a lesser influence among the general population. Josephus mentions that the Sadducees “are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them,” in contrast to the Pharisees, who have the confidence of the people (*Ant.* 13.298 LCL). However, some scholars assign a more influential role to the Sadducees. E. P. Sanders, for example, argues for a greater influence because the Romans would have expected the high priests (some of whom were Sadducees) and the aristocrats (which all Sadducees would have been) to have sufficient control over the people that the people would have generally heeded them (*Judaism*, 316–40).

In the NT, the Sadducees are closely associated with the high priest (Acts 5:17). Josephus identifies one Sadducee who was a high priest, Ananus (*Ant.* 20.198–99). Along with the Pharisees, the Sadducees were members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court (Acts 23:6–7).

According to the Gospels and Acts, the Sadducees played a key role in the history of the early church. They appear with the Pharisees in the Gospels as opponents of Jesus (e.g., Matt. 16:1–12). The Sadducees, along with the high priest, have the apostles arrested (Acts 4:1–22; 5:17–18). Since Jesus spoke against the temple (e.g., Mark 11:15–19; 14:57–58; 15:29), the Sadducees’ actions may reflect a concern for the temple.

3. William A. Simmons, *Peoples of the New Testament World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008). For a more detailed discussion of the differences between the Sadducees and the Qumran community, see also James C. VanderKam, “The People of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Essenes or Sadducees?,” *BRev* 7 (1991): 42–47.

Doctrines and Practices

Because the Sadducees left no written documents of their own, the only record of their doctrines is from other sources. We read in the NT that they denied the resurrection, instead believing that the soul died with the body (Matt. 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). In Acts, Paul uses this knowledge to provoke division between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, who do hold to the doctrine (23:6–10). Josephus mentions that the Sadducees also denied the immortality of the soul and the idea of future punishment and rewards in Hades (*J.W.* 2.165; *Ant.* 18.66). Acts 23:8 records that they did not believe in angels or spirits. The Sadducees also rejected fate and believed in free will, that good and evil actions are simply a matter of human choice (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.164–65; *Ant.* 13.173). The Sadducees accepted only the written law, and so, in contrast to the Pharisees, rejected the traditions of the elders (*Ant.* 13.297; 18.16). However, this may mean not that they accepted only the law of Moses as Scripture but rather that they accepted only that as authoritative in legal matters. The Mishnah reflects disagreements between the Pharisees and Sadducees regarding purity (e.g., *m. Yad.* 4.6–8, over the uncleanness of hands).

Although the Sadducees were considered to be less strict in their interpretation of the law than were the Pharisees, they were apparently more severe in punishing offenders. Josephus records that the Sadducees were the most rigid among all the Jews in judging offenders (*Ant.* 20.199; 13.294). In the NT it is the Pharisee Gamaliel who convinces the Sanhedrin not to kill the apostles (Acts 5:33–39).

Although Josephus emphasizes the conflicts between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, in the NT they often appear united in their opposition to Jesus. The only conflict between them comes in the dispute Paul starts over the resurrection. The difference in the portrayals may be explained because of the essential agreement both groups, along with the Essenes, found in the centrality of the Torah, which contrasted them with the Christians, who replaced the Torah with Christ as the main principle. Thus, while the Jewish groups differed in interpretation of the law, they could still have found themselves united in their opposition to a group that subordinated the Torah to Christ.

The Sadducees disappeared from the scene following the destruction of Jerusalem, perhaps because their base of power in the temple was destroyed and they did not have a popular following like the Pharisees did.

Essenes

The third major sect is the Essenes. They are described by the Jewish authors Josephus and Philo and also by the Roman historian Pliny. Although they may have survived the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, there is no evidence to confirm their continued existence after AD 70. They are widely believed to be the group that established the community at Qumran, and the DSS are often seen to have been an Essene library.

Doctrines and Practices

Josephus gives little information on the beliefs of the Essenes. However, he does present extensive descriptions of their practices. Josephus relates how one could be admitted to the sect. For the first year, the novice was to remain outside the community while following their way of life. For the second and third years, one could be a “partaker of the waters of purification” but still not be admitted to the community. At the end of this period, the initiate could be admitted after taking “tremendous oaths,” which included pledges to “practice piety toward the Deity,” “observe justice toward men,” and “hate the unjust and fight for the battle of the just” (J.W. 2.137–42 LCL).

Josephus reports that the Essenes numbered about four thousand (*Ant.* 18.20). Both he and Philo explain that the Essenes lived throughout the cities and villages in Judea (Josephus, J.W. 2.124; Philo, *Hypoth.* 11.1; Philo also mentions in *Prob.* 76 that they avoided cities because of the lawlessness of the inhabitants). According to Pliny the Elder, they lived on the west side of the Dead Sea (*Nat. Hist.* 5.15.73). It is possible that there was a main settlement near the Dead Sea, with smaller groups scattered throughout Judea.

The Essenes held their property in common (Josephus, J.W. 2.122; *Ant.* 18.20; Philo, *Prob.* 85–87), did not own slaves (Philo, *Prob.* 79), and practiced frugality and moderation (Philo, *Hypoth.* 11.11). According to Josephus, Philo, and Pliny, the Essenes were male and did not marry (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.21; J.W. 2.120; Philo, *Hypoth.* 11.14–17; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 5.73). However, Josephus also mentions another group of Essenes who did marry for the purpose of “the propagation of the race” (J.W. 2.160 LCL).

The Essenes were extremely devoted to the law, revering Moses as second only to God himself (Josephus, J.W. 2.145), and they were very dedicated to the study of “the writings of the ancients” (J.W. 2.136 LCL). Josephus records that they were more strict than any other Jews in observing the Sabbath (J.W. 2.147).

In regard to the afterlife, Josephus says that the Essenes, like the Greeks, believed in the immortality of the soul and that the body is like a prison from which the soul is set free at death (J.W. 2.154–58). However, Hippolytus says that they believed in the resurrection of the body (*Haer.* 9.22), although it is unclear if he has added this to make it more in line with his own Christian beliefs or if his account is simply more trustworthy than Josephus’s. They held a deterministic view and would “leave everything in the hands of God” (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.18; also Philo, *Prob.* 84), although they believed in rewards and punishments after death (Josephus, J.W. 2.154–58; *Ant.* 18.18).

Purity played an important role in the sect. The Essenes considered oil to be a defilement (Josephus, J.W. 2.123). Every day all except the novices clothed themselves in white veils and participated in purification baths in cold water (J.W. 2.129). Senior members were considered superior to junior members, and seniors who had contact with a junior were required to wash “as after contact with an alien” (J.W. 2.150).

They also engaged in communal meals. Josephus records that after the baths they would go into the dining room, “as to some sacred shrine” (*J.W.* 2.129). They did not offer sacrifices in the temple but performed their own sacrifices using their own purification ritual (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.19).

The Essenes and the Qumran Community

Many scholars have connected the Essenes with the community at Qumran, since the DSS describe a community that seems very similar to the Essenes. Pliny says the Essene settlement was on the west side of the Dead Sea, above Engedi (*Nat. Hist.* 5.73). According to the archaeological evidence, the Qumran community probably existed from the mid-second century BC until the First Jewish Revolt. This corresponds with Josephus’s chronology of the Essenes: he first mentions them during the time of Jonathan Maccabeus (*Ant.* 13.171) and claims to have spent time with the sect (*Life* 10–12).

There are several significant correspondences between the Qumran documents and the testimonies of Josephus and Philo. Both Josephus and the DSS text the *Rule of the Community* (1QS) describe a similar process of admission, consisting of a two-year candidacy period within the community following an initial preparatory period spent outside the group (1QS 6.13–23). The Qumran community also had common ownership of property (1QS 1.11; 6.18–22). Like the Essenes, they believed in fate, or predeterminism (1QS 3.15–16, 21–23; 1QS 1.7–8; 9.23–24; 1QM 17.5). They both had common meals, from which novices were excluded (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.139; 1QS 6.16–19). There are even interesting correspondences on trivial details, such as a prohibition against spitting in the assembled congregation (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.47; 1QS 7.13).

On the other hand, there are some important differences, and the Qumran-Essene hypothesis has not gone without challenges, including the possible connection of the Qumran community with the Sadducees instead. Pliny, Philo (*Hypoth.* 11.14–15), and Josephus (*J.W.* 2.120) assert that the Essenes were ascetics, but excavations at Qumran have revealed skeletons of women and children as well as men. However, Josephus also records that there was another order of Essenes who did marry (*J.W.* 2.160–61). Thus, we run into a discrepancy among the sources themselves, along with the possibility that they may be describing the community at different stages in their development. However, even if the Qumran community cannot be positively identified as Essene, its members resemble the sect more than any other group in antiquity.

Influence on the New Testament

If we assume that the Qumran community was Essene, it is still difficult to assess the direct influence of the sect on the NT. There has been some speculation that John the Baptist could have been an Essene, given factors such as his asceticism, the possibility that his ministry could have brought him near Qumran (VanderKam,

Dead Sea Scrolls, 208), and similarities between his baptism and the Essene/Qumran community's daily purification baths. However, his onetime, public baptism contrasts with the Essene/Qumran community's daily washing, which was limited only to the members of the sect, and the Essenes were certainly not the only ascetics.

There are some similarities between the early NT church and the Essene/Qumran community, such as a communal sharing of goods (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32). There are similarities in their teachings as well. Both looked to a resurrection of the dead (4Q521) and spoke of a dualism of light and darkness (e.g., 1QS 3.18–21; 1QM; John 1:5; 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1; 1 John 2:9–10). However, many of these concepts are not unique to either the Essenes or the NT and can be found in other places, including the OT.

Although we may not be able to discern a direct influence of the Essenes on the writers of the NT, a greater knowledge of the group enhances our understanding of the NT world and sheds light on some of the tendencies present in the larger environment that saw the beginning of the Christian movement.⁴

See also “The Dead Sea Scrolls.”

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