

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes

It is during the Hasmonean Period of Israel (167 to 37 BC) that the three influential groups in Jesus' day were formed. Professor Eyal Regev of Bar Ilan University in Israel writes: "Political independence and the flourishing state led to the development of three major religious factions: the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Essenes" (Regev 2013, 18). The kingdom of Alexander the Great broke into four smaller kingdoms at his death in 323 BC. Hellenism continued to spread. Greek influence first made its way to Judea through the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Egypt (Greek) and then beginning in 198 BC, through the dominance of the Seleucid Kingdom of Syria (Greek). In order to combat the Hellenizing of traditional Jewish ways, a group arose within Israel known as the Hasidim. The Hasidim wanted to preserve Judaism even if military force was necessary. The Hasidim would splinter into the different sects (c. 150 BC).

The Pharisees

By the opening of the New Testament period, the Pharisees were the largest of these three groups and had the most power. They are mentioned several times in the gospels as being on the receiving end of Jesus' rebukes (Matt. 3:7; 23:15; Luke 11:39; John 9:39-41). They are the group most associated with instigating His arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

The Pharisees are known for being opposed to *the political rulers of Israel*, focusing on ceremonial washing, and most notably for their strict adherence to the oral law, or traditions of the elders. Their theological beliefs included supernatural elements such as the eternity of the soul, the existence of angels, and belief in the resurrection of the dead. These convictions put them in stark contrast to the rivals the Sadducees.

The Sadducees

The Sadducees did not believe in supernatural aspects of Judaism. Their numbers were few, but they were able to maneuver themselves politically to positions of power within the Sanhedrin (e.g. "the religious Supreme Court"), aligning themselves with the Romans and the Hasmoneans before them. The Sadducees rejected the oral law and considered the Torah alone their standard. They believed that God is separate from human affairs and rejected the notion of the resurrection and afterlife. The Sadducees were tightly integrated with the institutions of Judaism, especially the Temple. When the Temple and Jewish state were destroyed in AD 70, the Sadducees went away as well.

The Essenes (Dead Sea Scrolls)

The Essenes are not mentioned in the New Testament and are likely an offshoot of the Pharisees. Their theologies appear to have been similar. They were particularly in opposition to what they believed to be a corrupt priesthood. This conviction prevented them from sacrificing at the temple, which further contrasts them from the two sects of Judaism discussed above. The Essenes are also believed to have been residents of the reclusive Qumran community which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although there is still much unknown about this group, they appear to have been theologically distinct for a heightened reverence of Moses, strict interpretation of the law, and for following the sacrificial system.