

Religious Groups in Jesus' Day

Jesus did not operate in a religious vacuum. Several religious groups within Judaism vied for the attention of the Jewish people. Each stressed certain beliefs and practices that they thought were important for living out God's will. All of them were faithful Jews with good intentions but at times their ideas about the best way to live their faith conflicted with Jesus' teaching.

Zealots. The Zealots do not figure prominently in the gospels. They appear only in connection with one of Jesus' apostles, Simon the Zealot.

The Zealots were very anxious for the coming of God's kingdom. Unlike Jesus, however, they believed that the kingdom could only come if the Messiah would lead a rebellion against the Romans. They hated the Romans and disliked any group of Jews—like the Sadducees—that helped the Romans. They believed only Yahweh should be honored as king or Lord. They abhorred paying taxes to a foreign emperor.

Their center of operations was Galilee, Jesus' own home district. He probably knew many Zealots. They would have urged Jesus to become a political messiah, a military figure who would use violence to gain freedom for the Jews. Galilee was a hotbed of rebel activity, and there were several false messiahs who tried to foment revolution even in Jesus'

lifetime. The Zealot movement eventually led to the First Jewish Revolt or holy war against Rome which took place between A.D. 66-70. This revolt led to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

Jesus was opposed to the aims of this group. He taught his followers to love their enemies and turn the other cheek in the face of violence.

Essenes. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote about the Zealots and also the Essenes. We did not know much about the Essenes until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which reveal much about their teachings and lifestyle.

Many of the Essenes lived in the desert in a monastic community at Qumran on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. They lived a rigorous life. Most did not marry. They shared goods in common. Founded by a "Teacher of Righteousness" sometime during the Maccabean era, they rejected the official priestly leaders in Jerusalem. They believed that the last days were fast approaching.

The Essenes divided all of reality into the Sons of Light, representing truth, and the Sons of Darkness, led by an Angel of Darkness. According to them, the battle between these two spiritual realities is waged in each person as well. Eventually God will win the battle. According to the Essenes, two messiahs will bring about God's victory. The first will be a kingly messiah descended from David. The second will be a priestly messiah even more important than the kingly one.

Jesus would have known of their existence. Some scholars even suggest that John the Baptist might at one time have been one of their members since they were known for their ritual washings. John baptized in the Jordan near the Qumran community.

The Romans destroyed the Essenes around A.D. 70 during the First Jewish Revolt. Though there are some similarities between this sect and Jesus, there are major differences as well. For example, the Essenes instructed their members to hate their enemies; Jesus taught love instead. The Essenes required vigorous discipline that only the highly motivated could endure; Jesus' message was open to all people.



Pharisees. The Pharisees, an influential lay movement popular in the towns, desired to follow God by living the Law (Torah) as perfectly as they could. This was a praiseworthy aim. To accomplish it, their leaders taught many customs (known as the "oral law") to regulate every aspect of daily life. Keeping these customs reminded the Pharisees that they could find God in every area of life.

Jesus shared many beliefs with the Pharisees and was closer to them than to any other religious group of his day. However, he criticized the Pharisees' negative judgments of other Jews who did not keep all their traditions.

Jesus' idea of holiness was different from theirs. For example, the Pharisees emphasized a ritual of washing their hands before a meal. Jesus did not believe this made them holy. He taught that inner attitude is more important than external rituals.

A real danger for anyone trying to live a holy life is the temptation to pride. Jesus detected this vice in the way some Pharisees believed they were better and more holy than other people, and he criticized them for it.

Not all the Pharisees of Jesus' day were narrow-minded and judgmental. Two outstanding and influential Pharisees were the scholars Shammai and Hillel. A disciple of Jesus, Nicodemus, was a Pharisee, and St. Paul was a famous Pharisee before his conversion to Jesus.

Sadducees. The Sadducees made up a small but powerful religious group. Taking their name from Sadok, a high priest from the days of King Solomon, the Sadducees were from priestly, wealthy and aristocratic families. They were centered in Jerusalem and focused on Temple worship.

Sadducees were part of "The Establishment." They believed in pleasing and cooperating with Roman occupation. Many of them held positions in the Sanhedrin, the leading ruling body of the Jews in Jerusalem. They gave Jesus to Pilate in large part because they feared the Romans might turn on the Jewish people because of Jesus' popularity with the crowds.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN JESUS' DAY

Read the handout sheet to answer the following questions.

1. Where do we see the Zealots mentioned in the gospels?
2. What did the Zealots want the Messiah to do?
3. Where did the Zealots have their headquarters?
4. Did Jesus support this group?
5. Where did we get much of our information about the teachings and lifestyle of the Essenes?
6. What was the name of the Jewish Historian who wrote about the Zealots and Essenes?
7. What famous figure from the gospels do some scholars think might have been an Essene at one time?
8. How was Jesus' message different from this groups?
9. Jesus' teachings were closest to which group?
10. What was Jesus' attitude toward the Pharisees external rituals?
11. What sin does he criticize them for?
12. Where did the Sadducees get their name?
13. What was the center of their worship?
14. How did the Sadducees cooperation with the Romans hurt Jesus?

TEMPLE PORCHES OR "PORTICOS"



