

# Jewish Groups at the Time of Jesus

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Introduction:

Many people used to think of first-century Judaism as a monolithic block, a solidly unified religion, from which Christianity split off as a new religion. In contrast, we now know that there were many different sub-groups within ancient Judaism, and that the early "Jesus Movement" was just one of many different Jewish groups. Moreover, the separation of Christianity from Judaism was not sudden, but happened gradually over several generations.

Judaism at the time of Jesus was both unified and divided, much like Christianity is today. All Jews believed and practiced some core aspects of their religion (Monotheism, the Law of Moses, Circumcision, etc. -- see Covenants and Pillars of Ancient Judaism), but different Jewish groups debated and disagreed with each other about many details (expectations of the Messiah, ritual and purity laws, how to live under foreign domination, etc.). Similarly all Christians today agree on certain core items (Jesus is the Son of God, the NT has 27 books, etc.) but disagree on many details (the number of sacraments, forms of worship, role of faith and good works, etc.).

To understand the separation of Christianity from Judaism, consider the analogy of parents and teenagers. Sometimes tensions within a family cause a separation; but do the parents throw the teenagers out, or do the teenagers run away from home? Sometimes it is the parents, sometimes the teens, and sometimes both! The religious situation in the first century was similar: sometimes a local group of Christians were ostracized or forced to leave Judaism; in other cases Christians chose to separate themselves from their Jewish heritage.

Also, whose "fault" is it when parents and teenagers separate? Usually at least a little of both! Rarely do parents kick well-behaved children out of the house, and rarely do teens run away from parents who are not overly harsh or demanding. Similarly in the first century, certain factors on both sides caused those Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah (later called "Christians") to separate from the majority of Jews who thought believing in Jesus was wrong and potentially harmful to their religion.

While some of the later writings of the NT show great hostility and nasty polemics between Jews and Christians, most of the arguments between Jesus and his contemporaries should be seen as inner-Jewish controversies. Not only did Jesus and his disciples disagree with and argue against various groups of other Jews, but these other groups also had major disagreements and arguments with each other on a whole variety of topics.

To understand the New Testament properly, especially the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospels, we need to learn about the wide variety of different Jewish groups that existed in the first century. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, describes three major Jewish groups and their "philosophies" or ways of life: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. He also mentions various other political and revolutionary groups of Jews active in the first century CE, especially during the first War against Rome. The New Testament mentions Pharisees and Sadducees (but not Essenes) in addition to various other identifiable groups, the most important of which are described below:

***Pharisees*** - a group of influential Jews active in Palestine from 2nd century BCE through 1st century CE; they advocated and adhered to strict observance of the Sabbath rest, purity rituals, tithing, and food restrictions based on the Hebrew Scriptures and on later traditions.

- "Pharisees" probably means "separated ones" in Hebrew, referring to their strict observance of laws and traditions (Luke 18:10-12). Long-time political and religious rivals of the Sadducees, vying for influence among the rulers and the people.
- Mostly laymen, but possibly also some priests (from the tribe of Levi) or even members of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34).
- Followed not only the laws of the Hebrew Bible, but also the "traditions of the elders" (Mark 7:1-13; Matt 15:1-20).
- Leaders were called "rabbis" or "teachers", such as Nicodemus (John 3:1-10; 7:50; 19:39) and Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3).
- Also had trained "scribes" (Mark 2:16; Acts 23:9) and "disciples" (Mark 2:18; Matt 22:16; Luke 5:33).
- NT Gospels portray them mainly as opponents of Jesus (Mark 8:11; 10:2), who conspire with the Herodians to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6).
- Some of Jesus' harshest polemics are directed against the "hypocrisy" and "blindness" of the Pharisees (Matt 23; John 9).
- In contrast to Sadducees (Mark 12:18-27), Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:1-8).
- Paul himself was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6; 26:5), as were some other early Christians (Acts 15:5).

***Sadducees*** - another prominent group of Jews in Palestine from 2nd century BCE through 1st century CE; they were probably smaller "elite" group, but even more influential than the Pharisees; they followed the laws of the Hebrew Bible (the Torah), but rejected newer traditions.

- "Sadducees" comes from the Hebrew *tsaddiqim* ("righteous ones"), which may refer to the way they wished to live their lives.
- The name may also derive from Zadok, the high priest under King David (1 Kings 1:26), since many Sadducees were priests.
- Long-time political and religious rivals of the Pharisees, although their influence was more with the wealthy ruling elites.
- Probably also rivals of the Herodians, since they had supported the Hasmonean Jewish rulers against King Herod.
- Closely associated with the Jerusalem Temple and with the ruling council ("Sanhedrin") of the Jews (Acts 4:1; 5:17; 23:6).
- Did not believe in life after death (Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27) or in angels or spirits (Acts 23:8).
- NT Gospels portray them (often together with the Pharisees) mainly as opponents of Jesus (Matt 16:1-12; Mark 18:12-27).
- But they also rejected the teachings of the Pharisees, esp. their oral traditions and newer innovations.

**Essenes** - a smaller group or "sect" that lived a communal "monastic" lifestyle at Qumran (near the Dead Sea) from 2nd century BCE through 1st century CE; the "Dead Sea Scrolls" found in this location in 1947 are usually associated with them.

- Originally a group of priests, founded and/or led by a "Teacher of Righteousness" during the early Maccabean/Hasmonean era.
- They regarded the Jerusalem priests as illegitimate, since those were not Zadokites (from the family of the high priest Zadok).
- They rejected the validity of the Temple worship, and thus refused to attend the festivals or support the Jerusalem Temple.
- They expected God to send a great prophet and two different "Messiahs" (anointed leaders), one kingly and one priestly.
- They live a communitarian life with strict membership requirements, rules, and rituals; they probably also practiced celibacy.
- Mentioned by Josephus, but not in the NT (although some scholars think the "Herodians" in the NT refer to Essenes).
- Some scholars think John the Baptist (also Jesus?) was closely associated with the Essenes, but a direct connection is unlikely.
- Monastery destroyed by the Roman Army ca. 68 AD, during the Jewish War against Rome, which Essenes probably considered the final battle between the forces of good (the true Israelites) and evil (the Romans and their collaborators).
- Dozens of complete scrolls and thousands of written fragments were discovered from 1947 to mid-1950's in caves near Qumran.
- The Scrolls contain copies of almost the entire Hebrew Bible, some older non-canonical texts, and dozens of the Essenes own writings.

**Herodians** - probably a faction that supported the policies and government of the Herodian family, especially during the time of Herod Antipas, ruler over Galilee and Perea during the lifetimes of John the Baptist and of Jesus.

- Mentioned only twice in Mark and once in Matthew, but never in Luke, John, or the rest of the NT.
- In Mark 3:6 they conspire with the Pharisees to kill Jesus, still fairly early during Jesus' ministry in Galilee.
- In Mark 12:13-17 and Matt 22:16 they join some Pharisees in trying to trap Jesus with a question about paying taxes to Caesar.
- See also the possibly related references to the friends and court officials of Herod (Mark 6:21, 26; Matt 14:1-12; Luke 23:7-12).

**Zealots** - one of several different "revolutionary" groups in the 1st century CE who opposed the Roman occupation of Israel.

- "Zealots" were probably not an organized group at first, but any Jews "zealous" for God's law (Num 25:13; 1 Kings 19:10; Acts 22:3; Gal 1:14).
- Just before and during the First Jewish War against Rome, "Zealots" were a nationalistic revolutionary party opposed to the Romans.
- One of Jesus' apostles (not the same as Simon Peter) is called "Simon the Zealot" in Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13 (but "Simon the Cananaean" in Mark 3:18 & Matt 10:4).
- He may have belonged to a revolutionary group before joining Jesus, but more likely was "zealous" in the older sense.

**High Priest, Chief Priests, Priests, and Levites** - members of the tribe of Levi who were responsible for the temple and its sacrifices, and thus were the religious and social leaders of the Jewish people.

- Priests and Levites in ancient Israel had to be men from the tribe of Levi; any Jews from the eleven other tribes could not be priests.
- Levites (members of the tribe of Levi who were not priests) assisted in the practical operation of the temple as guards, musicians, etc. (Luke 10:32; John 1:19; Acts 4:36; cf. Num 3, 8; etc.).
- Priests offered the sacrifices and took care of other cultic/ritual concerns in the temple (Mark 1:44; Matt 12:4-5; Luke 1:5-23; etc.).
- The same Greek word is translated "High Priest" (sg.) and "Chief Priests" (pl.) in most English Bibles; they were in charge of the Temple in Jerusalem and thus were the most important religious leaders in ancient Israel, at least prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.
- The High Priest was appointed annually, but members of the family of Annas and Caiaphas were often reappointed in the first century (Matt 26:3, 57; Luke 3:2; John 11:49; 18:12-28; Acts 4:6).
- The Gospels portray the chief priests (often with the scribes and elders) as members of the ruling authorities who opposed Jesus, long sought to arrest and kill him, and eventually condemned him to death (in cooperation with the Roman governor).

**Scribes** - men specially trained in writing, and thus influential as interpreters and teachers of the Law, and agents of the rulers.

- "Scribes" did not form their own party, but could belong to other groups (e.g. "the scribes of the Pharisees" in Mark 2:16; Acts 23:9).
- Most of their duties involved writing, e.g. producing legal documents, recording deeds, copying scriptures, teaching people, etc.
- Since they specialized in the interpretation of the Jewish Law (Torah), "scribes" are sometimes translated and regarded as "lawyers".
- But only Luke uses the technical term for "lawyer" (nomikos; 7:30; 10:25; etc.) in some passages where Mark and Matthew have "scribe" (grammateus).
- The Gospels usually portray scribes (along with chief priests, elders, and/or Pharisees) as opponents of Jesus who actively sought his death (Mark 11:27).
- The Acts of the Apostles also portrays them as opponents of the early Christians (Acts 4:5; 6:12).
- But there are a few exceptions: some scribes are neutral (Matt 13:52), or even praised by Jesus (Mark 12:28-34), or rise to defend Paul (Acts 23:9).

**Elders** - the "older men" of a community who formed the ruling elite and were often members of official "councils".

- The Greek word "presbyter" simply refers to older men, but was mainly used for men respected by others as leaders and role models.
- The Gospels usually portray the elders (often with scribes and/or priests) as opponents of Jesus who conspired to have him killed.
- The NT Letters and Epistles also mention "elders" as leaders of the early Christian communities (1 Tim 5:17-20; 1 Peter 5:1-5).
- The Book of Revelation gives a prominent role to "twenty-four elders" who surround God's throne (Rev 4:4-11).

***Disciples of John the Baptist*** - during his lifetime and for several centuries thereafter, certain groups of people considered themselves followers of John the Baptist; some of them became Christians, but others maintained that John was earlier and more important than Jesus.

- John the Baptist was recognized as a great preacher and prophet, calling the people to repentance (Mark 1; Matt 3; Luke 3; John 1)
- According to Luke 1:36, Elizabeth and Mary were closely related, and thus John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins.
- John has an effective and popular ministry, preaching and baptizing people for the forgiveness of their sins (Mark 1:4-8).
- Yet he also aroused enough opposition that he was eventually arrested and executed by Herod Antipas (Mark 1:14; 6:14-29).
- He had a substantial number of disciples during his own lifetime (Mark 2:18; Matt 11:2-19; Luke 11:1; John 1:35-39; 3:25).
- Even after his death, some people were still disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 18:24-28; 19:1-5).

***Followers of Jesus of Nazareth*** - starting with smaller numbers of Jews in Galilee and Judea during his lifetime, those who believed in Jesus grew over the decades, spreading the "Jesus Movement" to other nations, cultures, and languages throughout the ancient Mediterranean.

- During his public ministry, Jesus had many "disciples"; he chose some (Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-14), while others came to him (10:17-31).
- Since he was an itinerant preacher, people literally "followed" him as he journeyed throughout Israel (Mark 2:15; Luke 9:57-62).
- He also sent some of them out as "missionaries" or "apostles" (twelve in Mark 3:13-19; 6:6-13; seventy in Luke 10:1-20).
- After his death, his disciples and relatives formed a community of believers soon joined by others (Acts 1:13-15; 2:37-47; 6:7; 9:31).
- At first, all the disciples of Jesus were Jews, but later they were also joined by Gentiles (Acts 11:1-21; 12:24; 14:1; etc.).
- The group was called by various names: followers of "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 18:25; 19:9, 23; etc.), "Christians" (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16), "Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5), etc.
- They usually called each other "brothers and sisters" (Mark 1:31-35; Rom 1:13; James 1:2; etc.) or "saints" (Acts 9:13; Rom 1:7; Col 1:2; etc.).