

Second Temple Judaism: The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes

Second Temple Judaism refers to the diverse forms of Jewish faith, practice, and expectation that developed during the period of the rebuilt Jerusalem Temple, from about 516 BC until its destruction by Rome in AD 70.

By the time of Jesus, Judaism was not a single, uniform movement. The Jewish people shared the Torah, the temple, the festivals, and the hope that God would fulfill his promises to Israel, but they differed considerably over ***how Israel should live faithfully under foreign domination***. Three of the most important groups were the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. All three appear to have developed during the turbulent centuries between the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt in the second century BC.

The Pharisees - Reform

The Pharisees probably emerged during the Hasmonean period, perhaps from the Hasidim, or “pious ones,” who had resisted the Hellenization of Judaism during the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Their name may come from a Hebrew or Aramaic word meaning “separated ones.” Rather than withdrawing from ordinary Jewish society, however, ***the Pharisees sought to bring holiness into everyday life***. They emphasized careful obedience to the Torah and developed traditions explaining how its commands should be applied in changing circumstances.

Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, angels and spirits, divine judgment, and a future age in which God would vindicate his people. They were closely connected with the synagogue and with the scribal interpretation of Scripture. Although the New Testament frequently records conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jesus actually shared a number of their theological convictions. The controversy often concerned not whether Scripture should be obeyed, but how Scripture should be interpreted and what genuine obedience to God looked like. After the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, the Pharisaic tradition became one of the major foundations of later rabbinic Judaism.

The Sadducees - Control

The Sadducees represented a very different form of Judaism. Their name may have been connected with Zadok, the priestly family associated with the Jerusalem temple. They were closely tied to ***the priestly aristocracy***, the temple establishment, and the wealthy ruling families of Jerusalem. Because much of their authority depended upon the temple, they tended to be politically conservative and were ***often willing to cooperate with whichever foreign power controlled Judea, including Rome***.

The Sadducees appear to have placed particular emphasis upon the written Torah and rejected several beliefs accepted by the Pharisees. According to the New Testament and Josephus, they denied the resurrection of the dead and did not accept the Pharisaic teaching concerning angels and spirits. Their disagreement over resurrection lies behind the encounter in Matthew 22:23–33, where Sadducees attempt to trap Jesus with a question about marriage in the resurrection.

Although the Sadducees were probably fewer in number than the Pharisees, they possessed ***enormous political influence*** because of their control of the temple and

the high priesthood. Consequently, they figure prominently in the arrest and trial of Jesus and later in the persecution of the apostles in Acts. When the Romans destroyed the temple in AD 70, the institutional base of Sadducean power disappeared, and the movement largely vanished from history.

The Essenes - Withdraw

The Essenes represented a more *separatist* response to the religious and political corruption of the age. They probably arose during the same Hasmonean period but concluded that the Jerusalem priesthood and temple leadership had become hopelessly compromised. Some Essenes lived in communities apart from normal society, practicing rigorous purity, communal discipline, shared possessions, regular prayer, and intensive study of Scripture.

The community associated with *the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran* is often identified with the Essenes, although the precise relationship remains debated. These writings reveal a group that believed it was the faithful remnant of Israel living in the last days. They expected an approaching conflict between the forces of light and darkness and anticipated God's dramatic intervention to purify Israel and establish his kingdom.

Interestingly, the Essenes are never explicitly named in the New Testament. Nevertheless, their writings provide an important window into the world of Jesus and the early church. Themes such as the coming kingdom, preparation for the end of the age, ritual purification, the wilderness, the "sons of light," messianic expectation, and the formation of a renewed covenant community all appear in Jewish writings from this period.

Together, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes demonstrate the diversity of Second Temple Judaism. The Pharisees sought holiness through careful interpretation and application of Torah, the Sadducees centered their authority in the temple and priesthood, and the Essenes sought purity by separating themselves from what they regarded as a corrupt religious establishment. Jesus entered this already complicated world announcing something larger than any of these movements: "The kingdom of God has come near." Understanding these groups helps us recognize that many New Testament debates were not arguments between Christianity and Judaism, but debates taking place within Judaism over what faithfulness to Israel's God should look like as God's promised kingdom drew near.