

Three Main Jewish Sects

Explanation

The New Testament mentions several Jewish social institutions that can be quite confusing. The charts in this section provide basic information about the main groups with which Jesus interacted or may have had contact. Beyond the aristocratic Herodians, three main Jewish sects were religiously active during the time of Jesus: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. In addition, many Jews would have been unaffiliated with any of these particular movements.

Pharisaic (separatist) Judaism is known through later rabbinic writings. Jesus clashed with the Pharisees partly because he encountered them often in the outlying villages and also because he shared many of their underlying religious concerns. Friction is often the greatest between groups that are actually the closest to each other.

The Sadducees were largely hellenized Jews who controlled the temple and Sanhedrin in Jerusalem and cooperated with the Romans.

The Essenes, who awaited the impending arrival of the apocalyptic end of the world, occupied one neighborhood in Jerusalem and may have drawn adherents from all around Judea. They were centered at Qumran where they copied biblical scrolls and produced sectarian documents found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. They are never mentioned directly in the New Testament. This chart compares these three main sects on a few of their most salient points of doctrine and practice.

References

Elias J. Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
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Frederick J. Murphy, *The Religious World of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

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	PHARISEES	SADDUCEES	ESSENES
General	in the world but not of the world	in the world and of the world	neither in the world nor of the world
Law	valued oral law, also accepted old written law	rejected oral law, accepted only old written law	wrote hidden law, accepted and gave interpretations to old law
Interpretation	accurate, precise	pragmatic, accommodating	creative, adaptive
God	participates in events of world	removed from the evil of world	Messiah will destroy the evil of world
Fate	Fate cooperates in human actions	rejected Fate, emphasized agency	accepted Fate
Society	kind to each other, lenient (Mt 5:46; Acts 5:39)	rude to each other, boorish, punitive (compare Acts 5:40)	great attachment to each other
Main Locations	rural villages and cities	urban centers	remote communes, separate quarters
Gentiles	partially accepted	openly accepted	mostly rejected
Property	lived simply	sought wealth	despised wealth, held goods in common
Pleasure			shunned pleasure
Souls	imperishable, good souls alone go on to another body, wicked souls suffer eternal punishment, believed in resurrection	no afterlife, no eternal rewards or punishments	bodies perishable, souls immortal, liberated upon death