

## Sects of the Jews in the First Century A.D.

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by Bill Crews

**B**y the time that Jesus began His ministry among the Jews in Palestine there were five well-known parties or sects among the Jews: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Herodians and the Zealots. All but one, the Essenes, are mentioned in the New Testament. None is referred to in the Old Testament because all arose after the close of the last book of the Old Testament, **Malachi**. The rise and power of Rome cultivated the existence of the Herodians and the Zealots. Josephus (Flavius Josephus, 37 to 100? A.D.), a Jewish historian and himself a Pharisee, claims that the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes existed as parties even in the days of Judas Maccabees (c. 165 B.C.) when many of the Jews were struggling for independence from the Seleucid rulers of Syria. The Zealots (or Canaanites) resisted all foreign rule as unscriptural, struggled for complete independence and resorted to assassinations and other violence. They advocated strict observance of the law of Moses, and they claimed that they could trace their movement back to the time of the Maccabees. Simon, one of the apostles (not Simon Peter) is identified as having been a Zealot or Canaanite (**Luke 6:16; Matthew 10:4**). The Herodians, who believed that the only hope for any measure of Jewish greatness and nominal independence as a nation lay in cooperating with the rulers of the Roman Empire, arose in the days of Herod the Great and his sons. They were supporters of the Herods who were both Jews (technically, Herod the Great was of Idumean origin) and vassal kings of the Romans over the Jews and Samaritans in Palestine.

The Sadducees were concentrated in Jerusalem and its environs; the Pharisees were found all over Palestine and in nations beyond (Saul, “a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees,” was from Tarsus of Cilicia in southeastern Asia Minor, **Acts 23:5; 22:3**). The Essenes were concentrated mostly in small villages and in isolated places in Palestine (the hill country of Judea) and other countries. The Pharisees were more popular with the Jews in general and more numerous than the Sadducees (although their total number everywhere was probably no more than a few thousand), but the Sadducees were wealthier and more influential. The Sadducees were a religio-political party of priestly and aristocratic tendencies; the Pharisees were more religious and democratic. Most of the priests (high priest, chief priests (ex-high priests and the families of ex-high priests and priests) were Sadducees. The Jewish high court (the Sanhedrin or council), a solemn body of 70 men, was composed of both Pharisees and Sadducees – the former by alliance with the Romans and the latter by political cunning – held the reins of government among the Jews in Palestine. The Essenes believed in foreordination (“all things are left in the hands of God”), and the Sadducees denied fate altogether and made human freedom absolute. The philosophy of the Pharisees fell in between. Paul, in **Acts 26:5**, referred to the Pharisees as “*the strictest sect of our religion*,” whereas those encountered by Jesus were hypocrites in practice. (Later, as a disciple of Christ, Paul refused the designation of the church as a “sect,” **Acts 24:5, 14**).

Jesus had no respect for these parties and denounced the ones to whom He made any reference. There were, no doubt, some good people among them and some good principles taught by them, but this did not justify them. They were not of God, but of man. They were not brought into existence by a respect for God and allegiance to His law, whatever their adherents thought or felt. They should never have arisen. Read **Matthew 15:13-14; 16:5-12; 13:14-15; 15:8-9**. The parties that men found and the doctrines that men develop are religious plants that God did not plant and will be rooted up. The same can be said of the religious parties, movements, denominations of today.

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