

# The Religious World of Jesus

## *Introduction*

The world that Jesus entered was intensely religious. The beliefs, practices, and institutions of the Jewish people were solidly rooted in the biblical traditions--after all, the Jews were the people of God! But over the years Israel had to adjust to persecution, invasion, exile, and foreign rule. And as they applied the Scriptures to the various crises and situations that they faced, disagreements arose that led to serious divisions among the people. Such divisions were not foreign to Israel--the Old Testament records numerous examples; but what was new was that by the first century distinct and competing religious groups or schools of thought parties had been formed. So when Jesus taught the people, he was often compelled to address the teachings and traditions of these different factions.

To understand the teachings of Jesus, then, we need to know more about His world--who the religious leaders were, how the different groups arose, what they believed, and why they collided with Jesus as they did. We shall begin with a survey of the major events that led to this religious diversity, and then survey the different groups that are prominent in the Gospel narratives.

## *The Historical Setting*

The historical background of this period is, of course, the entire history of Israel in general; but for the immediate conditions of the first century we need only go back a couple of centuries before Jesus.

When the empire of Alexander the Great was divided up, Palestine was first ruled by the Ptolemies of Egypt but then was taken by the Seleucids, who ruled from Syria. And although the Jews welcomed this change at first, the Hellenizing influence and religious persecution that these Seleucid rulers brought led to the wars that eventually won the Jews their independence. The account of the events leading up to and following these Jewish revolts are significant for our understanding of the religious life and leadership in Israel in the time of Jesus. It was a time of conflict and chaos, both on the political and religious scene. It was a time when foreign rulers influenced Jewish religion, even taking the authority to appoint the High Priests in Jerusalem; and subsequently, it was a time when the Jews' political leaders took that office to themselves. Out of these and other religious issues came the major Jewish sects.

## *The Seleucid Rule*

At first, the Syrians exhibited tolerance for the Jews, especially with the rule of Seleuchus IV in 187 B.C. But Seleuchus sent his son Demetrius to Rome to ransom his brother who was being held there as a hostage. Unfortunately, when Seleuchus was murdered in 175 B.C. this brother, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, took the throne and began the persecution of the Jews over their religion.

As part of an internal power play, and with the temple treasury as part of the prize, Antiochus replaced the High Priest Onias III with his [Onias'] brother Jason. This practice of a new ruler replacing a priest was fairly common in the ancient world; but it was new to the Jews whose Law stipulated a life-long tenure for the High Priest. But Jason was more liberal; he began instituting many Hellenizing changes in society, even accommodating the Jewish faith to Greek ways. By changing the status of Jerusalem to a Greek city he increased its wealth, as well as his own and that of the other Hellenizers. His opponents could not accept these changes because to them the culture and the faith were inseparable. In their mind he was to be condemned for these changes (2 Macc. 4:11).

Apparently Jason outlived his usefulness for the Hellenizers eventually sought to be rid of him. And so around 170, Antiochus awarded Menelaus, a Benjamite, the High Priesthood in exchange for a bribe (2 Macc. 4:32-50). But when Antiochus was off fighting in Egypt, renewing the old rivalry with the Ptolemies, riots broke out in Jerusalem over the appointment (2 Macc. 4:25-26). When Antiochus returned from Egypt he was determined to subdue the Jews. His departure from Egypt was humiliating. He was forced to withdraw by a decision of the Roman Senate that upheld the stipulations of an earlier treaty. Brought down by the Romans, he was in no mood to be troubled by the Jews. When he came to Jerusalem he put down the rebellion and solidified the position of Menelaus (2 Macc. 5:11-21); he also stationed Gentile troops in Jerusalem who set up Syrian (Greek) gods in the Temple and defiled Jewish worship (1 Macc. 1:39). All of this divided the Jews between the Hellenizers, who cared little about religion, and the faithful (*Hasidim* as they were called), who were outraged. The Hellenizers won out and their opponents, mostly conservative priests and scribes, were forced out; but with this affront to Jewish worship the opposition took on a religious theme and fervor--they were now defending the Jewish faith, the Law of Moses, against pagans.

Antiochus proceeded to outlaw Jewish observances like circumcision, Sabbath-day observance, and temple ritual--in an effort to obliterate Yahwism. In December, 167, he offered pigs (a Greek custom) on the altar in Jerusalem (1 Macc. 1:41-50); he also sacrificed to Zeus (1 Macc. 1:54-59; 2 Macc. 6:2-5). Moreover, his governing policies brought cruelty to those who practiced Judaism.

The revolt came about 167 B.C. when the Jews had enough of the pagan worship of Antiochus. It actually began when an old priest and elder named Mattathias refused to make pagan sacrifices; he killed a fellow Israelite who (perhaps out of fear) tried to make the sacrifice, as well as the official who demanded it. Mattathias and his followers fled for safety. Their decision to fight to defend the faith was triggered by a Syrian slaughter of Jews over a conflict about work on the Sabbath (1 Macc. 2:31-38). Because of this the rebels decided that they would fight even on the Sabbath to save Judaism.

When Mattathias died in 166, his sons took up the fight, tearing down pagan altars and killing defecting Jews. Judas, his third son, took over the leadership, fought guerilla warfare against the Syrians,

and was finally able to beat back the Syrian army, at least to the point of being able to take Jerusalem and force Syria to withdraw its rulings against Jewish religion (2 Macc. 9:19-27). The Temple was purified in 164 (an event commemorated by the Jewish feast of Hanukkah).

While Judas was able to gain religious freedom in that struggle, he was not able to attain the political freedom he sought in the subsequent years. In 162 when he tried to take the Akra, the citadel in Jerusalem (1 Macc. 6:18ff.), the Hellenizers appealed to the new Syrian king, Antiochus V, for military help. The conflict that followed led to a siege of Jerusalem at a time when food was already scarce because it was a Sabbatical year. But the siege ended suddenly when the Syrian throne was threatened by another individual claiming to be the rightful king. According to the settlement that was quickly reached Menelaus was executed, conditions were restored to what they were before the persecution of Antiochus IV, Judas became the head of the Jewish state, but Syria retained dominion and kept the citadel. With this change the Hellenizing party of Jews all but disappeared.

Demetrius, the legitimate heir to the Syrian throne, did overthrow Antiochus V. He attempted to appease the Jews by appointing a legitimate priest, Alcimus, to the office of High Priest (1 Macc. 7). But Alcimus, although popular with most of the Jews, had enemies. He was accused of having offered pagan sacrifices in the Temple. And in the squabble that ensued he made the mistake of executing sixty *Hasidim* who opposed him. Judas, one of those opposed to this priest, led a renewed rebellion against Syria and the Jewish apostates. But because these rebels were now only a minority, Judas had to obtain support from Rome through a treaty. It was a treaty that would benefit the Jews later but proved costly to Judas now, for by getting involved with Rome against Syria, he found himself in a bigger war, a war from which most his men fled, and in which he, courageous to the end, died in battle.

His brother Jonathan took over the leadership of the rebellion in 161; but because the Jews had their religion back he found that they were not that interested in continuing a political fight against Syria. Jonathan settled for peace with Syria in 156 and retired to his home.

But conflict soon arose over another appointment to the priesthood. Alexander Balas arrived in Syria in 152 to contend for the throne. He found in Jonathan an eager ally against the ruling power. So after his victory he rewarded Jonathan by appointing him High Priest in place of Alcimus, who had died. Gowan underscores this surprising turn of affairs: Jonathan, an anti-Syrian rebel and a conservative, had now accepted the appointment to the priesthood by a foreign king.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan, of course, was not a Zadokite priest; and it is possible that this appointment, or one of the several like it, was the occasion for the departure of many of the faithful for the desert. As we shall see, the Dead Sea scrolls refer to a "wicked priest," a non-Zadokite priest, as the reason for the community's withdrawing from temple worship.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Donald E. Gowan, *Bridge Between the Testaments* (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1980), p. 105).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 105.

## *The Hasmonean Rule*

With the Syrian throne in turmoil, the Jews and other states seized the opportunity to set up their little kingdoms. But Jonathan was caught and treacherously killed in 143 (1 Macc. 12).

Simon, the last of the sons of Mattathias, assumed the leadership in 143. According to 1 Maccabees 13:41-42, he was able to achieve political freedom for the Jews, freedom from tribute to Syria as well as and control of the citadel of Jerusalem. With him the Hasmonean Rule actually began (143-63 B.C.).<sup>3</sup> But Jewish life under this regime was not much better than under Syria; it was fraught with corruption and intrigue.

Simon enjoyed peace in Judea because Syria was occupied elsewhere. In 140 he was proclaimed High Priest and Prince, thus joining the political and religious offices. He took the title Prince of the People. Since many followed a strict observance of the Torah, there was controversy. No doubt, some opposed the idea of a non-Davidic king, and others objected to a non-Zadokite priest; but one person being both King and High Priest--by self-proclamation--was also problematic. Then, to complicate matters, when Antiochus VII decided that he wanted his lands back war broke out again. His military effort against the Jews was feeble and failing--until someone murdered Simon and two of his sons in 134 (1 Macc. 16).

John Hyrcanus, the one son who was left alive, sought a treaty with Syria in order to stay in power. By the treaty Hyrcanus lost the Jewish independence and the nation became a vassal of Syria once again. But he was allowed to keep his kingdom, now limited to Judea, with the provision that the walls of Jerusalem be pulled down. The Jews were permitted to keep their religious feasts and observances. And John Hyrcanus was the High Priest. Since the Pharisees objected to this High Priest having temporal power, Hyrcanus allied himself with the Sadducees. In this event we find some of the earliest information about the disagreements between these two parties that were vying for power.

In 128 when the Seleucid empire was disintegrating Hyrcanus used his military strength, largely made up of mercenaries, to capture Samaria and Idumea. He destroyed the Samaritan temple in a crushing blow that enflamed Samaritan bitterness toward the Jews, and he forced the Idumeans to convert to Judaism. Ironically, this Idumean policy would open the door later for Herod to claim to be a "Jew."

When Hyrcanus died in 104, his will made his wife the ruler and his son Aristobulus the High Priest. But Aristobulus imprisoned her as well as his brothers and proclaimed himself king. He conquered Galilee, and continued the policy there of forced conversions to the Jewish faith. As a result, the Jews in Jerusalem held Galilean "Jews" in contempt (Jn. 1:46; 7:52). The reign of Aristobulus lasted only about a year.

Salome Alexandra, his widow, released the three brothers from prison. One of them, Alexander Jannaeus, assumed the office of High Priest. He then married Salome by the *levirate* marriage, which was

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<sup>3</sup>The name for this dynasty comes from the ancestral name *Hasmon*. The name *Maccabee* is a nickname, meaning "the hammer." So the title "Hasmoneans" is preferred.

unlawful for a High Priest to do, and through it he became king. He reigned from 103-76, extending the Jewish kingdom to its limits.

But Alexander Jannaeus had great contempt for ritual law; his participation was often half-hearted, and certainly offensive. On one occasion (ca. 90 B.C.) in contempt for the Pharisees he poured the libations of the Temple on his feet and was pelted with citrons by the people. In retaliation he ordered an attack on the people, and many were killed.

The "faithful" Jews tried even harder to get rid of him; in 88 they appealed to and allied themselves with Demetrius III of Syria. Alexander was soundly defeated; but the Jews, perhaps having second thoughts, decided that on the whole they preferred Hasmonean rule to Seleucid rule. So Alexander was retained as king. He immediately suppressed the insurrection by the conservatives, and to celebrate his victory he crucified 800 Jews, Pharisees probably, after having their wives and children butchered. Thousands fled the land (*Ant* 13, 14, 2; *BJ* 1, 93-98).

It is important to note that this early conservative opposition to the Hasmoneans was led by the Pharisees, both during the reigns of Hyrcanus and Jannaeus. It was the Sadducees who were allowed to determine policies, even though they were the minority. Nevertheless, on his deathbed Alexander reversed himself: he instructed his wife to align herself with the Pharisees because they were backed by the people.

His wife Salome Alexandra had married and outlived two kings; she was not now about to relinquish the throne to one of the sons, Aristobulus or Hyrcanus. As the new political ruler she made Hyrcanus the High Priest, obviously not being able to assume that office herself. She also made peace with the Pharisees as her husband had advised and allowed them to dominate government. Not surprisingly, they took the opportunity to get rid of their old enemies.

In 67 B.C., when the Queen died, Hyrcanus II held both offices of High Priest and King, but it was short-lived, three months to be exact. War broke out between the brothers over the throne. Most of the support, certainly the anti-Pharisaic party, went to Aristobulus who won rather easily and replaced his deposed brother for a short time as both ruler and High Priest. With his succession the Sadducees were once again in power.

Hyrcanus, however, was not through. He sought help from the Nabateans in Idumea. Antipater, the king of Idumea, served as his intermediary. He first persuaded Aretus, the Nabatean leader, to attack Palestine with massive power. Rome intervened and stopped the war and made Syria a Roman province. Moreover, Pompey decided in favor of Hyrcanus, largely through the effective appeal of Antipater. So Hyrcanus, the Pharisee, became the religious and political leaders, although he was stripped of his political power in 57 B.C.

### ***The Roman Rule***

By 63 B.C. Judea was clearly under Roman rule, although the Jews had a certain amount of freedom. Throughout the following years, up until 48, Aristobulus made several futile attempts to regain power. But this came to an end with the Roman civil war. Hyrcanus and Antipater supported Julius

Caesar; for this they were rewarded well--Hyrcanus was made ethnarch as well as High Priest, and Antipater was made procurator of Judea. Caesar also made Antigonus, a son of Aristobulus, a governor, and placed Herod over Galilee.

After Julius Caesar was killed in 44 B.C., Palestine suffered under Cassius and then Antony. But in the year 40, when the Parthians invaded Syria and Palestine, Antigonus joined them and with their support captured Jerusalem. He then cut off the ears of Hyrcanus so that he could no longer serve as High Priest in that mutilated condition. Antigonus held control for three years until he was defeated by Herod and then beheaded by Rome.

When Herod destroyed Antigonus he brought the Hasmonean line to an end. It is unlikely that many mourned the end of an era that had non-Davidic kings, non-Zadokite priests, endless wars and much corruption in high places. But through their wars and policies of forced conversions, Idumea and Galilee were now part of the Jewish state along with Judea, with only the area of Samaria left out. Interestingly, with the loss of Judean autonomy, the Pharisees quit their political involvement and became more concerned with devotion to the Law. They no longer concerned themselves with who ruled the country, as long as they were allowed their religion. The Pharisees' retreat left room for the Sadducees in the governing class to exercise more control. Nevertheless, the Pharisees, continued to represent essential Judaism. As for the Essenes, it seems that they became less monastic at about this time, possibly due in part to the end of the despised Hasmonean priesthood.

Having failed in their attempt at self rule, the Jews now were to be subjected to foreign rule once again. Herod was their king, but Rome held the power. And this Herod was the son of Antipater the Idumean, a descendant of Edom--Esau of all people! Antipater had seen to it that Herod was made governor in Galilee; but Herod was a diplomat in his own right. Not only did he gain the favor of Caesar, he also found favor with Cassius and Antony: in 40 B.C. with the help of bribes he was able to obtain the appointment as King of Judea; and with the help of Rome he was able to take control of the kingdom by defeating Antigonus. In the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Herod found himself on the losing side with his support of Antony and Cleopatra. But he managed to convince Octavian (Augustus) that he could be just as loyal to him.

So Herod remained a vassal under Rome; he was limited in making wars and treaties, but he was free from tribute and had the right to levy taxes. He embarked on an enormous building program to make Palestine a prestigious Hellenistic state. Even though he did not live the Jewish faith, he tried to represent himself as a Jew. He tore down the 500 year old Temple and began building a new one to match his other building projects. As part of this appeal to the Jews he was careful to do it according to Jewish laws, using consecrated priests trained to do much of the work. But his pagan ways and his sinful life drew much opposition. He may have found favor with Rome, and he may have sought to appease the Jews, but he still made enemies on every level, including his own family.

Herod tried to link himself to the Hasmoneans by marrying Mariamme, the daughter of Hyrcanus II and the niece of his enemy Antigonus. He still needed to replace the mutilated priest, and so he used this chance to appease the pious Jews who thought he was a half-Jew, an Idumean, and a friend of the Romans.

He chose Hananeel, a Zadokite of Babylon. But after great opposition to this selection, he yielded and made the popular Aristobulus the High Priest--whom he subsequently drowned while swimming. Claiming to be innocent and displaying great sadness, he was able to gain acquittal from Rome for this crime, probably through a bribe.

By eliminating the Hasmoneans Herod brought to an end the line of royal priests. He appointed seven high priests during his tenure; consequently, there were a number of ex-high priests around in the days of Jesus. Annas served from 6-15, and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, who tried Jesus, served from 18-36. Herod and his successors, Archelaus and the procurators, controlled the High Priests by retaining all their garments and implements until needed.

Herod's reign was contemptible in the eyes of the righteous. He interfered with the High Priesthood, appointing priests and deposing them at will. He was accommodating to pagan ways, making temples and athletic arenas in the Roman mode. And even though he was a powerful and effective ruler, he was also ruthless and cruel. He was responsible for the death of his wife Mariamme, as well as several of his own sons and relatives. It is not hard to imagine how such a man could command the killing of the innocent children when he heard of the birth of a king (Mt. 2).

But even though Herod ruled as a tyrant and levied heavy taxes, he did create a kingdom with magnificent buildings, garrisons, and a harbor at Caesarea. But probably most significantly, he gave the people a generation of peace, something they had not had for ages. After what the Jews had been through for decades before, this time was most welcome.

Herod died in 4 B.C. (thus the birth of Jesus would have occurred in late 5 B.C. or early 4 B.C.). His will made his son Archelaus king, and his other sons tetrarchs, Antipas in Galilee and Perea, and Philip in the northeast. Augustus ratified the will, but reduced Archelaus to ethnarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Archelaus had a cruel reign of about ten years, 4 B.C. to 6 A.D. He angered the Jews by marrying his brother's widow and deposing High Priests; he was subsequently banished by Rome.

From 6 to 66 A.D. Judea was under the authority of prefects or procurators who ruled from Caesarea Maritima ("by the sea"). Most of them were powerful military governors, but were not very wise or capable men in other respects. Some of the policies at the very beginning prompted the formation of the zealot movement. And later, Pontius Pilate had nothing but trouble during his ten years in Palestine (from 26-36). In fact, he was removed by Rome for cruelty (murder, rape, bribery, oppression and the like), which must have been excessive because Rome itself was not known for softness.

The other brothers lasted longer. Philip had a long reign in the northeast territories (from 4 B.C. to 34 A.D.). Herod Antipas also held on to his territory for a number of years (until about 40 A.D.). Antipas is known in the Bible for his deposing of his wife and marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. John the Baptist preached against his evil practices and was beheaded (Mt. 14:1-12). Jesus referred to Herod Antipas as "that fox" (Lk. 13:32). But his only encounter with the king was at his trial: Herod was in Jerusalem as part of his pilgrimage, and Pilate, who had the jurisdiction, sent Jesus to him, perhaps trying to avoid the decision, or perhaps out of professional courtesy (Lk. 23:6-12). Herod took no action.

When Philip died, Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great, replaced him. Agrippa was a good friend of Caligula in Rome; and when he became emperor he gave Agrippa the tetrarchy as well as the title of king (34 A.D.). This made Agrippa's sister Herodias jealous; she persuaded her husband, Antipas, to seek royal status also. But Agrippa persuaded Caligula of the evils of Antipas and got him banished to Gaul. By 41 A.D. Agrippa had been given all the territory of Antipas as well as Samaria, Judea and Idumea. While this king seems to have been the least offensive of the lot, he did persecute the Christians, putting James to death (Acts 12:1-3). But then in the height of his pride he was struck down by God and suffered a horrible death himself (Acts 12:20-23; also discussed by Josephus).

Claudius made the kingdom a province under procurators. And with Jewish zeal for independence rising once again, these governors did little to appease the people. Two of them, Felix and Festus, mentioned in the Book of Acts, were basically despots who paved the way for the war that marked the end of the Jewish state.

Herod Agrippa II, the son of Agrippa I, was made the king of Philip's tetrarchy and the guardian of the temple with the right to appoint the High Priest. Even though this was meant by Rome to appease the Jews, it did not work. He was as bad as the others; and in the war of 66-70 he sided with Rome. It was this Agrippa who heard Paul's speech (Acts 26).

There were two major wars with Rome that brought an end to the Jewish state. The first war came in 66 A.D. It was over in 70 with the capture of Jerusalem; but the Zealots dragged it on until 73. The political situation leading up to the war was about the same as it had been, but the excesses of the governors and the temper of the zealots were sufficient to ignite the conflict. When the temple treasury was diverted into Roman hands, the people reacted strongly and were met with retaliation. The governor of Syria could not quell the rebellion, and so in 67 Vespasian came and subdued Galilee. In Jerusalem the Zealots took complete charge of the war effort, but while they were doing this Vespasian gained control of all the surrounding area. In the middle of 69 Vespasian returned to Rome and left the siege of Jerusalem to his son Titus. Five months later the city was taken, the temple burned, the people killed or imprisoned, and most of the city leveled. The war was over except for the strongholds still in Jewish hands, Masada being the last to fall in 73.

The land was devastated by this war. Judaism survived, of course, but without the temple, the priests, or the sacrifices. The pious were left to develop the new form of the religion, making use of the Synagogue for the study of the Scriptures and the keeping of the Law. A new Council was organized in Jamnia, near Joppa. And the leaders now were known as rabbis, since the political parties and their controversies ceased with the destruction of Jerusalem.

The second war, the great war of Rome and the Jews, came in the days of Hadrian. Under Trajan there were many conflicts between Jews and Greeks that were met by harsh punishment from Rome. Old issues from the first war were still unresolved, and Zealot refugees stirred up the hatred. Moreover, Jewish Messianic enthusiasm was growing. When Hadrian replaced Trajan it appeared that better times lay ahead; but those hopes were quickly dashed. Hadrian soundly defeated all the Jewish groups, with hundreds of thousands of Jews killed in the slaughter. Hadrian prohibited Jewish customs, especially circumcision, and



made plans to build a temple to Jupiter on the temple mount. The unrest broke into war all over the land in 131 and continued until 135 when the final blow came. It was finally over. The land would now be known as Palestine--Hadrian named it that in view of the connection to Troy via the Philistines. Jerusalem was rebuilt as a Roman colony and Jews were prohibited from entering it. And rabbinic religious activity that stayed in the land moved to Tiberias in Galilee.

### ***Concluding Observations***

For two hundred years before and one hundred years after the birth of Christ, the Jewish people saw very little peace and even less autonomy. They were forced to live as the people of God under the domination of foreign powers with all their pagan activities and contempt for the Jews. They never gave up the dream or the fight for Jewish independence, even though they could not possibly have achieved it by their own sword.

Among the Jews themselves there was a constant struggle for the political and religious power. The Jewish religious parties had a long history of conflict in these arenas, and many of their distinctive ideas were formulated as a result of the struggle. The office of the High Priest seems to have been at the heart of the conflict. It achieved extensive powers beyond what the Law had prescribed; but it was continually occupied by people totally unqualified for the position of the religious leader of the nation. No doubt there were many good and righteous leaders in the land, but the ones that come to the fore knew nothing apparently of the genuine piety and humility and integrity that God had required in leaders. Even the efforts by the righteous Jews to bring about compliance with the Law were so complicated, improperly focused, or unbalanced, that the people were unable to follow them successfully. With the religious leadership in such disarray and the spiritual needs of the people being largely unmet, the work of the Messiah would have to be spiritual before it could be political. But then that had always been the divine plan.

### ***The Pharisees***

Of the three "sects" that Josephus lists, Pharisees, Essenes, and Sadducees,<sup>4</sup> the Pharisees appealed to him the most. He had great respect for the Essenes with whom he lived for three years; but he joined the Pharisees. He had little respect for the Sadducees. Trying to determine the nature of these three groups is a very difficult task, for the literature about them is incomplete and at times confusing.

The New Testament refers to the Pharisees frequently and usually always with regard to their faults. Consequently, in dictionaries Pharisees have almost always been defined as hypocrites and misguided

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<sup>4</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.5.9.

zealots; Christendom has largely disparaged them.<sup>5</sup> But now the tendency in scholarship is to take the view that the Pharisees have been misrepresented in at least some degree in the Gospels, especially in Matthew and John, which, we are told, reflect the growing antagonism between Christianity and Judaism after 70 A.D.; moreover, it is now commonly held that the Pharisees had no part in the death of Jesus, but in fact Jesus may have been a Pharisee Himself.<sup>6</sup> Of course, it is one thing to say that the Gospel writers selected cases that best illustrated the Jewish opposition to Jesus; but it is quite another to say that they misrepresented the facts or invented the stories.

It is not only the New Testament that presents a negative view of the Pharisees; Rabbinic literature in general is critical of the them. The Talmud lists seven categories of Pharisees, and only the seventh is laudable: there is the shouldering Pharisee, who parades good deeds; there is the delaying Pharisee, who lets business wait in order to do a good deed; there is the bruised Pharisee, who walks into a wall to keep from looking at a woman; there is the pestle Pharisee, who with false humility walks with his head down like a pestle on a mortar; there is the ever-reckoning Pharisee, who asks what good deeds he might do that would be reckoned as canceling out his neglects; there is the fearful Pharisee, who is in terror of God; and there is the loving Pharisee, who like Abraham loves God—he is admirable.<sup>7</sup> Two other expressions are used in the Mishnah to describe the Pharisees: "destroyers of the world" and "Pharisaic plagues," which certainly portray them very critically.<sup>8</sup> So we must note here as well that the earliest rabbinic sages (called *tannites*) did not identify themselves as Pharisees.<sup>9</sup>

But this is what makes the study of the Pharisees a more acute problem than the study of other groups. Judaism in a real sense arose from and found its directing guidelines from Pharisaism—so there is lineal descent.<sup>10</sup> Although Rabbinic writers do not call themselves Pharisees (they use the term *hakamim*, "sages") the lines are there. Sandmel suggests that there may have been at some point a subtle but perceptible shift from the use of Pharisees to sages. He says that the original movement disappeared in time, but the impulse behind the movement endured. The Pharisees were committed to the validity of the Scriptures as well as the oral torah. They were progressive, open to reasonable change. Rabbinic Judaism

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<sup>5</sup>Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 158.

<sup>6</sup>James D. G. Dunn, "Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus," in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism*, ed. by Jacob Neusner, et. al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 264,5.

<sup>7</sup>*b.Sotah* 22b.

<sup>8</sup>*Sotah* 3:4.

<sup>9</sup>Anthony J. Saldarini, Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society, A Sociological Approach (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>Sandmel, p. 158.

is what Pharisaism developed into; there was the ascendancy of a non-political academy, and the rule shifted from Sanhedrin to the sages.<sup>11</sup> But Judaism is not the same as Pharisaism; there were many other components that contributed to the formation of Rabbinic Judaism. Any discussion of the Pharisees, then, becomes a dangerous area of debate in theology and biblical criticism.

### ***The Name "Pharisee"***

Both the New Testament and Josephus refer to the sect of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5).<sup>12</sup> The name seems clearly related to the word *paras*, "to divide, separate." This would yield two possible interpretations: "separated ones" and "interpreters" (those who would divide Scripture and thus interpret).<sup>13</sup> The difficulty with this last view is that the form of the word in Hebrew is a passive participle which does not lend itself to the active sense required for "interpreter"; hence, "separated ones" is probably the meaning of the name.<sup>14</sup>

But from whom did they separate? The general consensus is that they separated from the "people of the land," the *'am ha'ares*. This was a designation of the illiterate and the unrefined people of the land, the peasants, whose illiteracy impeded any careful fidelity to the religious duties such as concerned tithes and cleanness.<sup>15</sup>

The Mishnah preserves some of these ideas. We read how the people of the land could not be pious (*Ab. 2:5*); only the *hasid* could.<sup>16</sup> This name *hasid* is placed as an antonym of the *'am ha'ares* in *Chagigah 2:7*. And furthermore, the reliable (i.e., the religious--Pharisees) could not even stay in their houses as guests (*Dem. 2:2*).

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 161,2.

<sup>12</sup>Jeremias argues that either the Pharisees or the Sadducees are technically sects (Greek *hairesis*), for they did not separate themselves from society (Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969], p. 230, n. 36).

<sup>13</sup>Josephus says that they were known for their precise and minute interpretations (Wars, 1.5.2 and 2.8.14).

<sup>14</sup>Leah Bronner, Sects and Separatism During the Second Jewish Commonwealth (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1967), p. 70; see also Solomon Zeitlin, "The Pharisees: A Historical Study," JQR NS 70 (1961):99.

<sup>15</sup>Sandmel, p. 167. See also Aaron Oppenheimer, The `Am Ha-aretz: A Study in the Social History of the Jewish People in the Hellenistic-Roman Period (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

<sup>16</sup>With certain qualifications, the term *hasid* may be taken as an early designation for the Pharisee; see F. F. Bruce, New Testament History (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. 71.

In the New Testament the ruling Pharisees describe these common people as ignorant and cursed (Jn. 7:49). On one occasion a Pharisee asked Jesus why he ate with them (Mt. 9:11). In fact, the statement that Jesus was untaught would be taken as a critical slur (Jn. 7:15).

It is possible that the Pharisees took this name to themselves. In presenting this view Moore notes that the *Sifra* on Leviticus 11:44 which says, "as I am separate (*parush*), so be ye also separate (*perushim*),"<sup>17</sup> makes separateness synonymous with holiness. But Bronner correctly asks if this were the meaning, why would they have preferred the word to *Hasidim* which has the similar meaning?<sup>18</sup>

A better view is that the name was given to them by their opponents, perhaps the Sadducees, and was at first derogatory.<sup>19</sup> In this case it may have the significance of separation from certain ruling bodies. Zeitlin compares the use of the word Protestant in Christianity; it was first a derogatory term used by the Catholics but later came to be the proper and acceptable designation.<sup>20</sup> In support of this view there are a few references in the Rabbinic literature where the Sadducees used the term. There is a story recorded about Jannaeus' change of parties; in it a Sadducee tells him the "Pharisees" are not loyal to him. After the report, the text calls them "sages" and not Pharisees.<sup>21</sup> The point is that they did not call themselves Pharisees.<sup>22</sup> In *Maccoth* 1:6 those who oppose the Sadducees are called "sages." What probably happened is that in time others used the term and it became an acceptable name.

But the consideration of the meaning of the name may be helped by a review of the early references to the Pharisees.

### ***The Origin of the Pharisees***

The Pharisees developed as a group out of the larger *Hasidim*, the early "faithful" Jews who opposed Hellenization. So from the *Hasidim* derived the Essenes, who withdrew entirely over illegitimate priests, and the Pharisees, who stayed in to argue their case.<sup>23</sup> They probably were willing to accept the

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<sup>17</sup>See George F. Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), I:61.

<sup>18</sup>Bronner, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup>Zeitlin, p. 108; see also Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967 reprint), I:323.

<sup>20</sup>Zeitlin, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup>*b. Qiddushim* 66a; see also *Yadayim* 4:8.

<sup>22</sup>Zeitlin, p. 111.

<sup>23</sup>These *Hasidim* were the early pious Jews; they are not to be confused with the *Hasidim* that emerged in the 18th century in eastern Europe (Sandmel, p. 159).

leadership of the Hasmoneans for they would be giving guidance to a regime founded on the defense of the Law.<sup>24</sup>

One of the earliest references concerns an Eleazar who told Hyrcanus (who had been a disciple of the Pharisees) that he ought to lay aside the priesthood for his mother had been a captive in Antiochus Epiphanes' day--meaning that Hyrcanus might be the child of a rape. The king resented this, of course; but he also was angered by the Pharisees' suggestion that Eleazar be punished lightly. So Hyrcanus shifted to the Sadducean party and persecuted the Pharisees by abrogating the laws they had established.<sup>25</sup>

Under Jannaeus (104-78) the Pharisees were kept from influence on the crown. In fact, Jannaeus had great contempt for them and their ritual laws, and this contempt led to that outbreak in which 800 Pharisees were put to death (although Josephus does not say they were Pharisees) after the throats of their wives and children were cut. When Alexandra Salome succeeded, the Pharisees used their power to demand the death for those responsible for the killing of the 800. This counter-slaughter only serve to bring together a good deal of opposition to the Pharisees. Sandmel astutely observes that the "seizure of power, and the capacity to use it cruelly, was an objective of both the Pharisees and Sadducees of that time. The religious distinction, if remembered at all, was clearly secondary to the political."<sup>26</sup> When Herod came to power and ended the Hasmonean rule, both parties diminished in unity and power.

### *The Nature of the Pharisees*

Many ideas have been expressed concerning the nature of the Pharisees in the days of Jesus. Saldarini presents these plausible descriptions:<sup>27</sup>The Pharisees were one small group among many in Israel, and so they competed with Jesus and with other groups for the influence of the people. There was no dominant group or view. But, according to Josephus, the Pharisees were like a political interest group; they had their goals for society and sought to achieve them; they were always there to gain access to power and

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<sup>24</sup>Gowan, p. 189.

<sup>25</sup>Sandmel, pp. 156,7.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>27</sup>Saldarini, pp. 277-286. Saldarini criticizes the view of Rivkin that the Pharisees were a group of scholars who wanted to wrest control of Judaism from the established authorities (Ellis Rivkin, "Defining the Pharisees: The Tannaitic Sources," HUCA 40,41 [1969-70], pp. 205-249), as well as the view of Neusner that characterizes the Pharisees as a non-political sect; Saldarini says that misunderstands how religion was part of the social and political scene (Jacob Neusner, The Pharisees, Rabbinic Perspectives [New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1973]). Neusner also criticizes Rivkin because the work has more interpretation than tracing of sources.

influence society to a new communal commitment to a strict Jewish way of life.<sup>28</sup> They were a long-lasting and well connected organization; and although separatists, they entered into many mutual relationships to accomplish their aims. They could even join with Sadducees for some purpose, but not for a long relationship.

Saldarini also describes their position in society: They were higher than the peasants, but lower than the ruling class. Most of them would be subordinate officials in government, bureaucrats, judges, educators. In short, they were retainers who were literate servants of the governing class. Thus, they were interwoven throughout society, and not a unified withdrawn community. They were bound together by certain beliefs and practices and endeavors to influence change. All their rulings were necessary for the Jews trying to live against the Roman influence. Saldarini classifies them as a reformist sect, one that seeks gradual, divinely revealed alterations in the world (p. 286); but they may have had introversionist tendencies to withdraw as well (like Qumran).

They were not completely unified in their views. Within the group there were factions, notably of Hillel and Shammai, two figures who dominated Pharisaical Judaism in the time of Herod. Shammai was known more for his strictness and severity; Hillel for humaneness and leniency.<sup>29</sup> Of their disciples, known as the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai, the school of Hillel usually prevailed.

Saldarini also notes the problem of references to Pharisees in Galilee (p. 291). Josephus and John put the Pharisees in Jerusalem and associate them with the governing class; but the synoptic Gospels place Pharisees in Galilee. One modern view is that the Pharisees were added to the stories, that is, the early church put the Pharisees in all the Galilean disputes or moved the disputes with Pharisees in them to Galilee. Saldarini rightly rejects this idea as lacking cogency; they would not have placed the Pharisees there if that was contrary to first century tradition. The fact that there is no reference to Galilean Pharisees in Josephus does not mean that they were not there, for he focuses on Jerusalem and the government. So Pharisees were likely present in Galilee; they were not in charge, but may have served some functions in government. The opposition they formed in their dispute with Jesus was somewhat different from the stronger opposition in Judea.

Although the Pharisees were not great in number (Josephus says around 6,000), they did have tremendous influence over the people. Neither the Sadducees nor the Essenes could exert the influence the Pharisees could. The Zealots could, however; the Pharisees were every bit as zealous for the Torah

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<sup>28</sup>The community of Qumran was critical of them as too accommodating to changes in Jewish society. This is the point of the designation of them as "seekers after smooth things" in *Peshar Nahum* (Saldarini, p. 279).

<sup>29</sup>Gowan, p. 190.

as the Zealots were, but they stood against violence--they wanted to trust and wait.<sup>30</sup> The Zealots "came with the burning words of men smarting under cruelty at the hands of heathen oppressors."<sup>61</sup>

### ***The Major Characteristics of the Pharisees***

There are two major characteristics of the Pharisees, their meticulous observance of obligations under the Law for purity, tithing, and sabbath observances; and their emphasis on oral law as equally binding to the Law.<sup>32</sup> The New Testament witnesses to their great concern over tithing and purity in Matthew 23:23-26 and Luke 11:39-42; and the many disputes Jesus had with the Jews over the sabbath day reflects their concern for that law as well. Rabbinic literature also preserves such descriptions of the pious Jews: In *Demai* 2:2-3 and *Hagigah* 2:5-6 the dual obligations of purity and tithing are mentioned together; and *Taharoth* 4:12 stresses the "cleanness of Pharisees," whereas *Niddah* 4:2 scorns the Sadducees as being lax with regard to purity.

The other major characteristic of the Pharisees is the value they placed on oral traditions. "Oral law" refers to traditional rules and observances that were designed to adapt the written Law to the changes of time. All the Jews, including the Sadducees, had their own interpretations; but the Sadducees rejected the Pharisees' traditions and the authority given to them.<sup>33</sup>

Josephus claims that this is the main issue between the Pharisees and the Sadducees.<sup>34</sup> He writes that the Pharisees delivered a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the Law of Moses; the Sadducees reject them, and esteem only those observances to be obligatory that are in the written law. This description by Josephus has raised other questions about the Sadducees beliefs--which will be discussed below.

But the issue of "oral law" is critical here. Josephus stated that the Pharisees were considered the most accurate interpreters of the Law.<sup>35</sup> Their dedication to the Law was the heart of their faith; it overshadowed and explained the contempt they had for the people of the land. In interpreting the Law they

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<sup>30</sup>Travers R. Herford, Judaism in the New Testament Period (London: The Lindsey Press, 1928), p. 77.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>32</sup>Edersheim, Life and Times, I:311-12.

<sup>33</sup>Moore, I:67; Edersheim, Life and Times, I:314; and Asher Finkel, The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), pp. 38-42.

<sup>34</sup>Josephus, Antiquities, 13.10.6; 18.1.4; and 13.6.2.

<sup>35</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.162.

followed the guidance of their doctrine, attaching the chief importance to the observance of those commandments which such doctrine dictated to them.<sup>36</sup> And they had reason for formulating oral law, for the Bible itself made it legitimate (Dt. 17:8-11); difficult cases required interpretation, especially when social conditions changed so much. Gowan summarizes the requirements from Scripture and the community for the validation of the rulings: they had to be in accordance with Scripture, they had to have been customary for some time, they had to be associated with some recognized authority, and they had to be accepted by the majority of the sages.<sup>37</sup> And in the final analysis the teaching had to be in accordance with this body of ancestral laws. So great care was taken to establish the many traditions that brought the Law forward to their changing times. Paul himself was taught by Gamaliel under such strictures (Acts 22:3).

The point is that the Sadducees and the Pharisees did not disagree on the necessity of oral law-- they both had it. But the Sadducees rejected the authority given by the Pharisees to their traditions.<sup>38</sup> To the Sadducees, the "traditions of our forefathers" was not equal to "the written law." In the New Testament we catch another glimpse of this Pharisaical view of traditions: Jesus was asked why his disciples "transgressed" the traditions of the elders (Mt. 15:1-2). The legalism of the Pharisees came more with the multiplying of these rulings than with the use of Scripture.

The Mishnah records many examples of traditions that became binding. According to *Sukkoth* 4:9, in the morning service in the Feast of Tabernacles it was the custom of the people to shout to the priest to raise his hands when he was about to pour the water into the basin for the water libation. The reason for this was the memory of a priest who poured the water on his feet, showing contempt for the Pharisees and the rite. The ruling was not biblical and according to the Pharisees' opponents should have had no authority.<sup>39</sup> Another example comes from *Erub* 3:2. It concerns travel on the sabbath. Exodus 16:29 says that the people were not to leave their place on the Sabbath day. To circumvent this ruling, *erub* was employed--a formal merging of households into a single unit was allowed so that one could carry burdens from house to house and not transgress the Law. The Sadducees rejected this as unbiblical; they are referred to in *Erub* 3:2 as those who do not admit to the legality of *erub*. *Erub* 6:2 refers to a certain Sadducee who placed restrictions on the movement of other Jews. In cases like this they circumvented the plain meaning of the text by their additions.

In the process of multiplying rulings it was easy for the Pharisees to become hypocritical because in attempting to be faithful to the letter of the Law they lost the spirit of the Law. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees was well known; Edersheim says that some of the sayings in the Rabbinical literature on this are

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<sup>36</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.12.

<sup>37</sup>Gowan, p. 193.

<sup>38</sup>Bronner, p. 78.

<sup>39</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.13.5.



more withering than those in the New Testament.<sup>40</sup> So Jesus warned His disciples to beware of the teachings of the Pharisees (Mt. 16:12), or the leaven of the Pharisees (Lk. 12:1); He also rebuked their hypocrisy (Mt. 23).

### *Concluding Observations*

Herford reminds us that if Pharisaism is viewed as a barren and unspiritual formalism, the description is entirely untrue.<sup>41</sup> The Pharisees were preoccupied with doing the will of God; they were devout, pious believers, who looked forward in hope to God's program. They wanted to live according to the Law of Moses, but the times had changed; Rome now ruled the land. The Law of Moses could have become an ancient relic, but the Pharisees believed that one could find in the Law the principles to rule their present life. They found in *halakah* and *haggadah*<sup>42</sup> the guidance they needed for the use of the Law in their lives. They believed that God was behind both the Law and *halakah*, for they were interdependent. Their method of adapting the Law to their life allowed Judaism to remain a living and growing religion.<sup>43</sup>

It seems to me that modern conservative Christians share many of the fine qualities of the Pharisees. Had they lived in that generation, they would have found their greatest agreement with them; they would not have belonged to the other groups. Like the Pharisees they are devout believers who seek to preserve the faith that they have received. They believe in the inspiration of the Scripture and the doctrines contained in them. They place top priority on the apostolic interpretations of the Old Testament Scripture which now have become part of their canon. They have a great desire to do the will of God, and among their many teachings, tithing and remaining pure receive much attention.

But they most easily exhibit the excesses and errors of Pharisaism as well. Perhaps this is simply the lot of those in any age who believe that they have the truth. They often ascribe a great deal of authority to the teachings they receive on the Bible, even to the point of elevating application to the level of interpretation, so that those who do not comply with the Word of God as they understand may be considered disobedient. Unfortunately, the self-righteous and hypocritical attitude of the Pharisees is alive and well today in our churches. We shall return to these problems in later chapters.

### *The Sadducees*

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<sup>40</sup>Life and Times, I:312.

<sup>41</sup>Herford, Judaism, p. 87.

<sup>42</sup>*Halakah* refers to the way of life embodied in the teachings of the written Law and the oral law; *haggadah* is the interpretation for edification and is not specifically for regulation of conduct.

<sup>43</sup>Gowan, p. 194. As we shall see, they overstated the source of the oral law, claiming it came from Moses; and they overstated the penalty, claiming on occasion that greater stringency applies to the work of the scribes than the words of the Law (*Ab.* 3:12; *Sanh.* 11:3).

One of the major difficulties in describing the Sadducees is that all that we know about them comes from their opponents. They themselves left no written records of their history, their organization, or their views. They appear on the scene just before the great schism between the Hellenizers and the *Hasidim*, and they disappear as a group in the great destruction of 70 A.D. But judging from the comments in the New Testament, the Mishnah, and Josephus, they do form a formidable group.

### ***The Name "Sadducees"***

There is no doubt that the name "Sadducees" is related to the Hebrew verbal form *sadaq* (*tsah-dak*), "to be righteous." But exactly how it is related is unclear. The most common suggestion is to associate it with the personal name Zadok; but if it is connected to this name, whether the Zadok of the Solomonic times, or a later Zadok, the doubling of the second consonant is difficult to explain etymologically. At present there is no satisfactory analysis available for the name.

### ***The Origin of the Sadducees***

The meaning of the name is related to theories about the origin of the sect. One theory, referred to above, is that the Sadducees were named after Zadok, the father of the priestly families in Solomon's time; it would then be a fitting name for the party in Jerusalem that was characterized for so long as priestly.<sup>44</sup> But this cannot be easily developed, for there is no evidence for it. Besides, not all the Sadducees were priests, and some of the members of the community at Qumran were priests of the Zadokite line. Moreover, the Hasmoneans brought an end to the Zadokite priesthood as well as the Hellenizers. That would leave the use of the name Sadducees as a title without actual substance.

A second view is that they were named after Zadok, a disciple of Antigonus of Socho. Antigonus taught Boethus and Zadok; his teaching stressed that they should serve God with no thought of reward;<sup>45</sup> because of this, the theory goes, they concluded that he did not believe in resurrection or life after death. Boethus formed the Boethusians, who may have been the Herodians of the New Testament; the son of Boethus was appointed High Priest by Herod. The other disciple, Zadok, would have been one of the early leaders in the party that took his name.

A third view is that the name is simply related to *saddiq*, "righteous ones" (*saddiqim* for the plural).<sup>46</sup> This would be similar to and in contrast to the *hasidim*, the "pious ones," the early title for the

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<sup>44</sup>IDB, s.v. "Sadducees," by A. G. Sundberg, 4:160.

<sup>45</sup>Aboth de R. Nathan, c. 5.

<sup>46</sup>Edersheim, Life and Times, I:323.

group out of which developed the Pharisees.<sup>47</sup> But this view, like the others, is etymologically difficult; the spelling of the name "Sadducee" suggests that the name is a passive--"righteous ones" would be active.

These are the possible meanings of the name of the sect. And so without any convincing solution to the problem of the name of the Sadducees, we must be satisfied to turn our attention to the few brief descriptions of the sect. Here too these descriptions raise additional questions about their beliefs.

### *The Nature of the Sadducees*

Most treatments about the Sadducees assume that all Chief Priests and other leaders of Judaism were Sadducees.<sup>48</sup> The text of Josephus does not say that; it says only that those priests who were Sadducees came from the governing class. Josephus only once refers to an individual Sadducee, Ananus the High Priest.<sup>49</sup> His identification fits the class--he was from the highest level of society and was stern in justice.<sup>50</sup> Probably a relatively small number of the governing class was Sadducean, but we have no way of knowing the numbers.

The Sadducean party was generally the party of the wealthy aristocrats. This is not actually stated in the sources; but it is a reasonable conclusion given the fact that they lived near the Temple and saw more of their needs fully satisfied by having their lives intertwine with the nobility.<sup>51</sup> Josephus says they were able to persuade none but the rich,<sup>52</sup> meaning among other things that they had a small following of their peers, whereas the Pharisees were backed by the masses. The party may have originally developed out of the conservative members of the aristocracy, the supporters of Onias III.<sup>53</sup> And while it certainly had the confidence of the rich, not all the Sadducees were rich.

Many priests belonged to the Sadducees according to Josephus,<sup>54</sup> but not all priests were

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<sup>47</sup>Sandmel wonders if it might not also be a derisive epithet used in scorn--"self-styled righteous" (p. 156).

<sup>48</sup>Saldarini lists a variety of the views, ancient and modern, about the Sadducees (p. 299).

<sup>49</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.9.1 (199-203).

<sup>50</sup>Saldarini. p. 299.

<sup>51</sup>Sandmel, p. 157.

<sup>52</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.10.6.

<sup>53</sup>Gowan, p. 185.

<sup>54</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.9.1.

Sadducees. The New Testament shows a close association between the Priests and the Sadducees (Acts 4:1 and 5:17). According to Josephus, Ananus, a Sadducee, had five sons who all became High Priests. While it is probable that the members of the priestly aristocracy were Sadducees, many priests were Pharisees. It was the priests of the Pharisees who were sent to question John (Jn. 1:19-24). And according to Acts 23, both Sadducees and Pharisees made up the Sanhedrin because Paul rallied the members who were Pharisees to his side.

The Sadducees held more of the leadership positions, but most frequently had to submit to the demands of the Pharisees.<sup>55</sup> Because the people backed the Pharisees, the Sadducees were forced to observe the Pharisees' oral tradition. This they did not wish to do; they preferred to be unconstrained by customs and deal with the written law only. Written laws left uninterpreted were vague, which would mean that they were free to decide what they meant.<sup>56</sup> But the Pharisees usually got their way, even when a Sadducee was High Priest. According to *Yoma* 1:5, when the High Priest was a Sadducee, the Pharisees compelled him to burn incense according to their view of Leviticus 16:13--after he had entered the Holy of Holies. According to *Yoma* 19b, one Sadducee explained that they complied because they were afraid of the Pharisees.

The descriptions from the literature paint the Sadducees as nasty and arrogant because they had power and competed with others for it;<sup>57</sup> they were called boorish, rude to their peers as aliens, and quick to dispute with the teachers of the path they follow.<sup>58</sup>

### *The Teachings of the Sadducees*

**Scripture and Tradition.** The Sadducees had what has been called a conservative attitude toward Scripture--they restricted authority to the written law interpreted literally, and were not open to change. But the question that is raised concerns how much of the Scripture they accepted as God's Word. We know from Josephus that they hated the traditions of the Pharisees, accepting only the written law.<sup>59</sup> From this expression in Josephus, and the fact that Jesus limited Himself to the Pentateuch in debating the Sadducees, the Church Fathers concluded that the Sadducees only accepted the Law of Moses as Scripture.<sup>60</sup> But this may be a misunderstanding on the part of the Fathers. When Josephus says that they

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<sup>55</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.4.

<sup>56</sup>Saldarini, p. 117.

<sup>57</sup>Saldarini, p. 300.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>59</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.10.6 [403].

<sup>60</sup>Moore, *Judaism*, I:68.

rejected all but the written law, he probably meant that they did not permit legal or doctrinal deductions from the prophets. He most likely meant that they opposed unwritten traditions. According to the Talmud, in the debates the Sadducees were attacked from other books of the Bible and used them themselves in their arguments. This strongly suggests that they viewed them as Scripture as well.

The Pharisees had a large body of oral interpretation that had become binding. It was this that the Sadducees opposed. But the idea that the Sadducees took the Scripture literally and rejected oral law is not accurate; all the Jewish groups began with the literal text and added their understanding of it to justify their way of life.<sup>61</sup> The Sadducees had their own *halakah*; but they did not claim that it was divinely authoritative as the Pharisees had done for their interpretations.<sup>62</sup> Although the Sadducees held Scripture as the sole authority, they also believed that it should be modified by logic, especially in matters of doctrine. And if the interpretations of the Pharisees were not binding, then others could decide for themselves what it meant. In this the Sadducees would not be viewed as conservatives by the Pharisees, for in their opinion the Sadducees were not safeguarding the traditional faith.

The Sadducees like all Jews believed that the Torah, the Law of Moses, was on a much higher plane than the rest of the Scriptures.<sup>63</sup> So there is no clear evidence from their arguments that they held less of the canon than the Pharisees. Apocalyptic material, or any Greek syncretism, they rejected outright. It may be that the Sadducees believed that only the Torah was canonical, or that the Torah was vastly more important than other Scripture, but there is simply no evidence for this. However, their major complaint that the Pharisees extended the "canon" with their interpretations can be demonstrated. The Sadducees rightly rejected the oral law of the Pharisees, but perhaps because they wanted the freedom to follow their own.

One of the areas of debate between the Sadducees and the Pharisees concerned the calendar. Leviticus 23:15-16 began the tabulation for the Feast of Weeks using the expression "on the day after the Sabbath." The Sadducees said that "Sabbath" meant the sabbath, and so the feast of Weeks always fell on a Sunday. But the Pharisees ruled that "Sabbath" was the first day of Passover, whatever that day was, and so the feast of Weeks could actually come on any day.<sup>64</sup> Sandmel observes in conjunction with this that calendars are always high profile debates; until Nicea, Easter was on Sunday of the Passover week, but Nicea freed it from the Jewish calendar.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Saldarini, p. 303.

<sup>62</sup>Gowan, p. 182.

<sup>63</sup>Oesterly and Box, The Religion and the Worship of the Synagogue, pp. 27, 138.

<sup>64</sup>Sandmel, p. 158.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 440.

***Human Freedom and Determinism.*** According to Josephus,<sup>66</sup> the three major sects disagree on the human will: the Essenes are very deterministic, the Pharisees try to combine determinism and free will, but the Sadducees believed that all human affairs result from human freedom. The question here is whether or not Josephus is making the distinctions too fine in order to harmonize the ideas with Greek philosophy. It may be that the Sadducees' strictness gave the idea they were limited to free will--they reasoned too much out. The fact that the Sadducees did not believe in God's apocalyptic intervention in history could have given the impression that they denied fate and saw everything under human control.<sup>67</sup>

***Resurrection.*** The evidence is clear that the Sadducees denied the doctrine of the resurrection. Acts 23:6-8 records how this issue divided the Sanhedrin, for it was the Pharisees who believed in the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul. Matthew 22:23 and Acts 4:1-2 also refer to the Sadducees in this way. It is probably because the resurrection was so critical for Christianity that the New Testament focuses on this point.

Josephus confirms that the Sadducees denied the resurrection, the immortality of the soul, eternal rewards, or the "world to come."<sup>68</sup> The Sadducees kept their focus on the status quo of the nation of Israel in this world and not the next.

There are some of references in the Mishnah that also convey this tradition about their beliefs. According to *Beracoth* 9:5, the blessing ends with "from everlasting." But because the Sadducees said that there was only one world, to guard against this idea the sages changed the blessing to "everlasting to everlasting." More importantly, however, is *Sanhedrin* 10:1, which records the general belief that all Israel has a portion in the world to come. It then lists those who do not, and the Sadducees are listed because they do not believe there is such.

The doctrine of the resurrection is hinted at in the earlier Old Testament, but clearly taught in Daniel.<sup>69</sup> It may be that the Sadducees did not put much stock in this work in that it is so apocalyptic.

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<sup>66</sup>Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8.14 [162-166]; *Antiquities*, 18.1.3-4 [12-17].

<sup>67</sup>Saldarini, p. 300.

<sup>68</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.4 [16]; *Wars*, 2.8.14 [165].

<sup>69</sup>There are many passages that seem to included the idea of resurrection, and certainly immortality. The problem is that passages like Psalm 49 and Psalm 73 use language that in other passages can be interpreted differently (see the discussion in A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* [Cambridge: At the University Press, 1930], pp. xcv-xcvii). And certainly the desire to be buried in the land had for its reason a hope in the future. But such intimations did not clearly express that the dead will rise, as did the statement in Daniel.

Gowan thinks that it was late and not available to them in their formative thinking,<sup>70</sup> but surely, even if a late date is taken for Daniel, the ideas it reflects were in the air long before these debates. And if Daniel was actually written earlier, then there was sufficient time for the teaching to be part of the Jewish faith. Saldarini, reflecting the common view, does not like the idea that belief in the afterlife was established in Judaism by the second century.<sup>71</sup> The Pharisees surely seem to have thought it was. But the Sadducees were conservative; they probably would not have accepted anything that came from apocalyptic literature or that might not have been clearly formulated in the earliest times. Yet, the main issue is more likely whether or not it was clearly taught in the Law--that was the issue for any Jew. It is interesting to note that according to *Sanhedrin* 90b, the Pharisees proved resurrection from Exodus 15:l. We shall return to this point later.

**Angels.** The doctrine of angelology is more difficult. Acts 23:8 says that the Sadducees did not believe in angels. Gowan thinks there is something missing in this statement, because angels are clearly revealed in the Old Testament, especially the Pentateuch, and since the Sadducees accepted that they would have believed in angels. But this argument is not convincing, since it is possible not to believe in things clearly revealed.<sup>72</sup> Gowan suggests that what might be meant is an elaborate angelology, but he rejects this, observing that the Mishnah never mentions angels either. Rather, he thinks that the two clauses go together, and that the doctrine of angels that the Sadducees rejected refers to the idea that the dead were changed into angels.<sup>73</sup>

The Sadducees pictured God and humans as independent and distant, both in this life and the next. Rewards for righteousness were in this life, and hence they were keen on wealth and influence as evidence of divine blessing.

### ***Concluding Observations***

The reaction to the Sadducees was predictable. If they were not actually despised by the Pharisees and by the people, they were merely tolerated.<sup>74</sup> In the pseudepigraphical work *The Psalms of Solomon*, written in the middle of the first century B.C., the Sadducees are simply called sinners (4:2ff). In the

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<sup>70</sup>Gowan, p. 183. Did they recognize Daniel as Scripture? The Essenes surely did; and there was no question of it raised in debate. But still, the acid test for any Jew was whether or not it was in the Law (Sandmel, p. 157).

<sup>71</sup>Saldarini, p. 307.

<sup>72</sup>Gowan, p. 184.

<sup>73</sup>Gowan, p. 184; see also Solomon Zeitlin, "The Sadducees and the Belief in Angels," *JBL* 83 (1964):67-71.

<sup>74</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.1.4; 13.10.6.

Mishnah the Sadducees are listed with the ignorant of the laws, the deaf mute, imbecile, and minor, because they would not admit to the legality of the ruling about the *erub*. *Niddah* 4:2 affirms that the daughter of a Sadducee is equal to a Cuthean or Samaritan woman, probably because the Sadducees were lax in their purity laws. In fact, the Sadducees are grouped together with the Samaritans and the Sectarrians (*minim*, or "infidels," a term used for the Jewish Christians; see *Beracoth* 9:5). In the later Rabbinic literature they are painted in more lurid colors, as if they were heretics, not even Jews; Saldarini concludes that this is not accurate, but that the statements form a strong defense against the Sadducees.<sup>75</sup>

So the Sadducees were the religious and political sect that was largely made up of wealthy, conservative aristocrats, many of them priests. They frequently held high offices in the Temple, and with them a good bit of influence. They objected to unwritten traditions, because they preferred to have the freedom to interpret the Scriptures as they wished. They denied resurrection, immortality of the soul, rewards in the life to come, and angels in some sense. Their influence diminished until they disappeared by 70 A.D.

Saldarini adds that to outsiders the differences between Pharisees and Sadducees may appear to be minor; but "within the community such differences typically produce fierce conflicts over control and influence . . . ."<sup>76</sup>

There are Christians today who are very much like the Sadducees of old, although not in every sense. Although they claim to be Christian, they do not actually believe in the resurrection, especially the resurrection of Jesus. And to them, doctrines of angels (and demons) are mythical expressions from a primitive mentality. Their form of Christianity has been submitted to modern reason, with the result that a host of biblical teachings from miracles to rules for purity have been severed from the conservative interpretations and applications and given new focus. Of course, many conservatives view such "Christians" as unbelievers, followers of another faith entirely. But it is often difficult to know what the modern liberal actually believes.

The problem is that many who believe like this are in positions of leadership in the churches, seminaries, and denominations. They might not be wealthy (not all the Sadducees were); but because they are well-educated they seem to reflect an aristocratic view of themselves, that they are above the common Christian's simplistic faith. Their education and their position has probably created stumbling blocks for their faith; but unfortunately it has also impressed many others and gained for them a following. Their claim to be able to retrieve the true core of Christianity may simply be a foil for rejecting what they are unable to believe or unwilling to practice.

### *The Essenes*

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<sup>75</sup>Saldarini, p. 302.

<sup>76</sup>Saldarini, p. 305.



Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Judean wilderness, the only material available on the Essenes came from the classical historians. Because the community was semi-monastic and separatist, it is not surprising that the information was sometimes vague or incomplete. Furthermore, the philosophical biases of the writers may account for some inconsistencies in our understanding the sect.

### ***The Classical Sources***

The oldest accounts of Essenes we have come from Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.--50 A.D.): Quod omnis liber probus sit (Every Good Man Is Free) and Hypothetica also called Apologia.<sup>77</sup> He tended to idealize the Essenes and accommodate their ideas and lives to his Greek readers.

There are three major accounts of the Essenes in Josephus. The best known and earliest (shortly after 70) is Bellum Judaicum (History of the Jewish Wars) 2. 8. 2-13. The other two notices are in Antiquitates (Jewish Antiquities) 13.5.9 and 18.1.5. Josephus also pointed to features in the Essenes that would appeal to the Greeks. He compared the Essenes to Pythagorus, the Pharisees to the Stoics and the Sadducees to the Epicureans.<sup>78</sup>

The elder Pliny, a Latin writer who accompanied Titus in the war, briefly mentions the Essenes in his Natural History, V, 17,4. He writes about the marvels of the Dead Sea; but he locates and describes the Essenes in that area.

### ***The Name of the Essenes***

The Greek name *Essenoi* or *Essaioi* is related to the Aramaic *hasya*, "pious,"<sup>79</sup> and this Aramaic word has been confirmed in the west in a Palmyrene inscription.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Philo in a couple of places connects the name with Greek *hosiotas*, "piety" or "holiness."<sup>81</sup> So the name is an Aramaic plural of the Semitic word for "pious." The Hebrew equivalent would be *hasidim*, "the pious" or faithful.

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<sup>77</sup>This latter work is lost; but the passage on the Essenes from it is quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea in Praeparatio Evangelica, Book VIII, chapter 11.

<sup>78</sup>Josephus, Antiquities, 15.10.4 [371,2].

<sup>79</sup>Frank Moore Cross, Jr., The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1958), p. 51. Another view of the derivation is to relate the word to Hebrew *'esa*, "council,"--the party of the council (Andre Dupont-Sommer, The Essene Writings of Qumran, p. 43).

<sup>80</sup>This usage of the verb shows that the word was not limited to Eastern Aramaic. See J. T. Milik, Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 80, n. 1. The original discovery was made by Cantineau and written up in Syria 14 (1933):177.

<sup>81</sup>Philo, Quod omnis, XII. 75.

## *The Classical Descriptions*

***Their Founding.*** The literature refers to a lawgiver who encouraged communal living and founded the Essenes;<sup>82</sup> because no one was permitted to blaspheme him, he must have been a revered contemporary, perhaps the Teacher of Righteousness himself.<sup>83</sup> References to the Essenes begin in the governorship of Jonathan, 160-143 B.C.<sup>84</sup> Individual Essenes are mentioned occasionally: Judas, in the reign of Aristobulus I (104-103) predicted the day and place of the death of Antigonus;<sup>85</sup> a Menahem greeted Herod as the future king when Herod was yet a boy; consequently, Herod had high regard for them;<sup>86</sup> another Essene named Simon interpreted a dream of Archelaus in A.D. 6.<sup>87</sup>

Pliny locates a community of Essenes on the shore of the Dead Sea, just north of Engada and Masada. But other Essenes lived in towns and villages and had an open house policy for traveling Essenes.<sup>88</sup> There were apparently different orders of the sect; Josephus refers to the customs of one "order of Essenes."<sup>89</sup>

***Characteristics.*** Admission required a postulant to live outside the camp for a year with minimal provisions and follow the rules of discipline. If he remained faithful he could draw near to the purification water. Then, after two more years as a novitiate, he could take the oath and join the meal.<sup>90</sup>

The Essenes were ascetics. Their life was one of self-denial for the performance of virtuous acts. They had no money, no luxuries, no pleasures of love (with women); they sought contentment away from the world.<sup>91</sup> One whose name was Banus lived in the desert, wore only what grew on trees, ate only what

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<sup>82</sup>Philo, *Apologia pro Judeis* (=Hypothetica), 1.

<sup>83</sup>Dupont-Sommer, p. 31.

<sup>84</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.5.9 [171,2].

<sup>85</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.11.2 [311,12].

<sup>86</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.10.5 [373-8].

<sup>87</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.13.3 [346,7].

<sup>88</sup>Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8.5 [124]; Philo, *Apologia*, 1.

<sup>89</sup>Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8.10 [150].

<sup>90</sup>Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8.7 [137].

<sup>91</sup>Pliny, V.17.4; Philo, *Apologia*, 11; *Quod omnis*, 77.

grew of its own accord, and bathed in cold water to preserve his chastity.<sup>92</sup>

The Essenes held all things in common. They were indeed a brotherhood; all activity was for the common good of the community.<sup>93</sup> When they joined they relinquished all their personal property.<sup>94</sup> When they worked, their salaries were handed over to a common purse.<sup>95</sup> If any were in need, they could simply take from the common supplies.<sup>96</sup> And no one had a private house, for the dwellings were open to all travelers.<sup>97</sup> Any Essene traveling could therefore go unencumbered, except for being armed for safety.<sup>98</sup>

The Essene orders differed on marriage and children. They generally were celibates, but there were exceptions. Josephus says that they adopted children for instruction, but Philo says that there were to be no children because they would be a hindrance.<sup>99</sup> With regard to marriage, Philo affirms that the Essenes banned marriage because women were selfish, jealous, deceitful, seducing, and leading the sovereign mind into bondage to her and the care of children.<sup>100</sup> But Josephus says that marriage was important for the continuation of the race; therefore, there were Essenes that married and had sexual intercourse only for the purpose of procreation.<sup>101</sup> Josephus is probably correct because he lived with the Essenes for three years, and Philo seems to be turning the information towards Greek philosophy.

The Essenes did virtuous deeds. Because this was their ideal, their righteousness was incomparable.<sup>102</sup> Because of their belief in the immortality of the soul, they engaged in virtue for the hope

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<sup>92</sup>Josephus, Life, 2ff.

<sup>93</sup>Philo, Apologia, 4,5.

<sup>94</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.3 [122].

<sup>95</sup>Philo, Apologia, 10; Quod omnis, 86.

<sup>96</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.4 [126]; Philo, Apologia, 12.

<sup>97</sup>Philo, Quod omnis, 85.

<sup>98</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.4 [125].

<sup>99</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.2 [120]; Philo, Apologia, 3, 16.

<sup>100</sup>Philo, Apologia, 14-17.

<sup>101</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.2 [121] and 8.13 [160].

<sup>102</sup>Josephus, Antiquities, 18.1.20.

of reward and the fear of immortal punishment.<sup>103</sup>

A good portion of their time was spent repeating a vow, which was said before eating as a constant reminder of their dogma: they vowed piety to God, justice to man, hatred of the wicked and love for the just; they also promised to love the brethren, love truth, conceal nothing from one another and reveal nothing to outsiders.<sup>104</sup>

The Essenes were diligent workers. They had fled the unholy cities but still worked in their occupations--not now for profit but for the necessities of life.<sup>105</sup> We have a good description of the daily routine: With great piety they would all arise in silence with no speaking until after the ancestral prayer facing the sun. Afterwards they would be dismissed by supervisors to their crafts, working until the fifth hour (11), when they reassembled, bathed in cold water, entered the restricted room and were seated, wearing sacred garments. They were each served just the right amount of food. The priest prayed, then they ate, then they prayed again and the priest blessed God, the giver of life. They would then return to their work. They would take dinner in the same way, allowing each other to speak in turn with no shouting or vulgar talk. This silence was a mystery to the outsider.<sup>106</sup>

The Essenes observed strict religious orders. They functioned as scribes and prophets, studying and preserving the Scriptures, the books of their sect, and the names of angels.<sup>107</sup> Their work of healing involved ascribing properties to stones and roots for protection.<sup>108</sup> And they were expert at foreseeing future events.<sup>109</sup>

They worshipped in obedience to the Law. There was daily instruction except on the holy Sabbath. During instruction they sat in order, one man reading, one elder explaining usually by symbols and allegories.<sup>110</sup> They were in disagreement over the sacrificial system in Jerusalem, either because of the

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<sup>103</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.11 [157].

<sup>104</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.7 [139-141].

<sup>105</sup>Philo, Quod omnis, 76

<sup>106</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.5 [128-133].

<sup>107</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.7 [135,142]. The use of the term for the names of angels has been seen as a connection with Iranian religious beliefs.

<sup>108</sup>It is this reference that has led some to define the name of the group to mean "healers" ('asayya) similar to Egyptian groups known to Philo as Therapeutai. See Geza Vermes, "The Etymology of 'Essenes'," Revue de Qumran 2 (1959,60):427ff.

<sup>109</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.12 [159].

<sup>110</sup>Philo, Quod omnis, 81,82.

priesthood or the calendar (they followed the solar calendar of Jubilees). They sent offerings to the Temple, but no sacrifice; they made the sacrifices among themselves since their customs of purification were different.<sup>111</sup> Their purifications were strict; they washed in cold water for purity. And, interestingly, oil to them was a defilement, necessitating washing.<sup>112</sup>

The Essenes had strict discipline. Those caught in grave faults would be expelled from the camp, often dying of starvation. The community took many of them back at their last gasp, believing that they had suffered for the expiation of their sins. But their judgments were exact and impartial; their decisions irrevocable.<sup>113</sup> Some of their laws were very detailed. For example, one could not spit in the middle of the company on the Sabbath day. Another more superstitious law related to this is that no one could spit to the right.<sup>114</sup> With the Essenes the Sabbath day was more rigorously kept than with any other group--one could not even go to stool.

But they certainly cared for their own and for those in need. The sick, the elderly, travelers, and anyone in need, were provided for out of the common purse. As a result, many of them lived to a ripe old age of 100.<sup>115</sup>

The Essenes honored virtue in this life and hoped for rewards in the world to come. They they were able to endure the persecutions of the Romans because a glorious death was better than capitulating. If they gave up their souls they would recover them again. To them the body was corruptible, a prison which entwined the immortal soul. At death the soul was freed from bondage and could rise to a heavenly world. Josephus says that in this they were like the Greeks,<sup>116</sup> but Hippolytus contested that they believed in a resurrection as well, and his view is more likely.<sup>117</sup>

According to the classical writers, then, the Essenes were ascetic, semi-monastic Jews who separated themselves from the pagan world to pursue a life of virtue which they believed was not possible apart from the seclusion of the brotherhood. Being conscious of evil, they engaged in purifications, instruction, communal meals instituted by the priests, and their own sacrifices. It was a hierarchical system based on love and obedience. Admission was rigid, discipline hard. Nevertheless, the system was a

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<sup>111</sup>Josephus, Antiquities, 18.1.5 [19].

<sup>112</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.3 [123].

<sup>113</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.8 [143-145].

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 9 [147].

<sup>115</sup>Philo, Quod omnis, 87, and Apologia, 13.

<sup>116</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.8.10 [152-158].

<sup>117</sup>Hippolytus, The Refutation of All Heresies, 9:21. (But check this reference in Hippolytus).

legalistic life of work and love for fellow man to live in peace and virtue. To the Greek mind, which was the interest of Philo, this was the means of obtaining freedom.

### *The Witness of the Dead Sea Scrolls*

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the caves around Qumran on the northwest shores of the Dead Sea in 1945.<sup>118</sup> In all there were over 400 manuscripts from eleven caves.

From archaeology we know that there were three occupations of the community. A few coins and sherds from the early era show that the community began to flourish in the reign of Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.).<sup>119</sup> While there may have been an earlier and continual dwelling on the site, the first major community was built around 110 and flourished until an earthquake in 31 B.C. ripped through it and cracked the cisterns. A few people continued living there among the ruins, but there was an interval in the occupation because of the absence of coins of Herod and the infrequent number of manuscripts. The reign of Archelaus gave them reason to rebuild for the second occupation was from 4 B.C. until 68 A.D. The third occupation was Roman.

So the evidence of archaeology and the scrolls points to the same time that Josephus describes the Essenes; and the location is the same as that given in Pliny.

### *The Scrolls*

The Rule of the Congregation, also known as The Manual of Discipline, first states the aim of the community: to leave the evil way and serve God in accordance with the Law of Moses, seeking the pure life and hating the sons of disobedience. Then the scroll describes the ceremony of admission, the annual census, and the common life.

Instruction concerning the two spirits forms a major part of the scroll. God the creator allotted two spirits to man, which constantly struggle. One is truth, whose origin is the fountain of life, and this has dominion over all the princes of light. The other is perversity from the power of darkness, and it is in the hand of the Angel of darkness. For those in the right path there is bliss, perpetual life and joy, and everlasting light. The reward for evil is the blow of the Angel of destruction in the everlasting pit by God's

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<sup>118</sup>A young bedouin throwing stones into the caves hit one of the clay pots that held them. After two years they were acquired by the Metropolitan at St. Mark's Monastery in Jerusalem. Eventually they were obtained by those able to study them (Milik, pp. 12,13).

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., pp. 51,52.

wrath. God has set an end for all perversity--he will at that time destroy it forever.<sup>120</sup>

After this instruction in theology the Rule spells out the discipline of the community. Those converted from evil became a community of law under the authority of the sons of Zadok, priests who kept covenant. In the oath the newcomer promised to obey all that was revealed to the Zadokites about the Law of Moses, and to be separated from men who walk in wickedness. For the first year the newcomer could not touch the purification of the Many; after that all his wages and property would be mingled with the community's, but he would spend another year of testing before coming to the meal.

Reproof for misconduct was with humility and love and not with anger, disrespect, or a spirit of wickedness. The scroll lists different errors with their punishments; for example, saying the holy name, death, but if accidental, dismissal; falling asleep during instruction, ten days' separation; malice, revenge, and foolish words, three months; going naked before another, six months; or murmuring, final dismissal.

In sum, the community was a Jewish sect that went into the wilderness to prepare the way. The members were priests, levites, common people, women and children included; but the priests were prominent. They looked for two messiahs, a priestly messiah and a messiah of Israel, probably a ruler.<sup>121</sup> The Law was supreme; nevertheless there was no reference to animal sacrifice. There was a strong emphasis on election, but with human responsibility.<sup>122</sup>

In the additional Rule of Annexe and the Benedictions, there is recorded the procedure when Adonai shall have begotten the Messiah among them. The priest enters at the head of the congregation, then the heads of the sons of Aaron, and then the Messiah, followed by the chiefs of the tribes, the wise men and the holy. When they gather for the community table, no one may reach for food before the priest stretches out his hand over the food, and then the Messiah will do the same.<sup>123</sup>

The Habakkuk Commentary offers interpretations on the biblical text. The members of the community believed that these interpretations (called *peshet*) of mysteries (called *raz*) were revealed to

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<sup>120</sup>This theology has more than a hint of dualism; for a discussion, see the literature on this aspect of Qumran.

<sup>121</sup>This may still reflect an earlier bitter opposition to the political leaders holding the priestly office as well.

<sup>122</sup>See Eugene Merrill, Qumran and Predestination.

<sup>123</sup>Dupont-Sommer concludes that this must be the Messiah of Israel, and the Priest the Messiah of Aaron (p. 108).

the chosen interpreter, the Teacher of Righteousness.<sup>124</sup> But in addition the community thought it stood in the prophetic line of Daniel;<sup>125</sup> Daniel wrote, "None of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise (*maskilim*) shall understand" (Dan. 12:10). They believed they were in the end times and that they were the *maskilim*, for secrets and their interpretations were revealed to them.

The scroll refers to the *Kittim* as the enemies of Israel. Although the term in the Old Testament refers to Cyprus, it receives a wider use in the scrolls, namely, ruthless pagan warriors trampling over the land and its inhabitants, sacrificing to military standards, using weapons of war as objects of worship. Since the commentary was written around 63 B.C., the immediate reference was to the Romans.<sup>126</sup>

But the scroll also mentions the "Teacher of Righteousness," who arose in opposition to the teacher of falsehood, and founded the community.<sup>127</sup> Such a title could be used of many different individuals at different times;<sup>128</sup> but this individual was the founder, a priest who received divine revelation, an interpreter whose interpretations were binding, and a strict ascetic. The references show how high this holy person stood in their memory.

The source of all the troubles was the "Wicked Priest." This individual began well, but soon forsook God and the Law, amassing wealth by violence and becoming famous for wickedness.<sup>129</sup> It may be that he slew the Teacher, for the commentary refers to the iniquity he did to him, for which God humbled him with a devastating blow.

The task is to fit all these titles and events together to identify the persons and therefore the founding of the community. It is a sad commentary that there is no lack of candidates for the role of the wicked priest. One view is that the events are pre-Maccabean, that the wicked priest was Menelaus who desecrated the Temple, and caused Onias III, the High Priest, to flee, leaving the priesthood without a Zadokite. A second view is that the wicked priest was Hyrcanus (134-104), who broke with the Pharisees. A man named Judas who demanded that Hyrcanus lay aside the priesthood would then be the

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<sup>124</sup>F. F. Bruce, Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts (London: The Tyndale Press, 1960), p. 9.

<sup>125</sup>Compare the scroll of the Hymns of Thanksgiving (1QH) to see examples of this, notably I, 21; II, 13; and IV, 27-29.

<sup>126</sup>Charles F. Pfeiffer, The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), p. 68. This is the most widely held view.

<sup>127</sup>The clear reference to his founding the community is in the Damascus Document.

<sup>128</sup>See J. Weingreen, "The Title Moreh Sedek," Journal of Semitic Studies 6 (1961):162-174.

<sup>129</sup>Pfeiffer, p. 71; see also a summary of the Damascus Document in Milik, pp. 56-58.



founder of the Essenes. Another view is that the wicked priest was Aristobulus I in view of the infliction of diseases he experienced before his death. A fourth view is that the wicked priest was Alexander Jannaeus, who was delivered into the hands of his enemies, but escaped; because the people hated him so much he massacred the Pharisees.

Another view with more connecting links puts it in the time of Aristobulus and Hyrcanus II. The comments on Habakkuk 2:7-8 refer to the "last priests of Jerusalem" who amassed wealth by plundering (which could be the tribute of 63 B.C.). Hyrcanus II would then be the wicked priest. The comment on Habakkuk 1:13b says that the "House of Absalom" was silent when the charges were made against the Teacher. This might refer to Absalom, the uncle and father-in-law of Aristobulus II.<sup>130</sup>

While this view is appealing, Milik makes a stronger case with his description of the earlier period.<sup>131</sup> The *Hasidim* of the Maccabean period was a group drawn from the priesthood and laity; they broke with the Maccabeans and supported Alcimus, the ungodly but Aaronite nominee for priest by the Seleucid king.<sup>132</sup> But when Alcimus turned on them and slaughtered sixty people, part of the faithful abandoned Jerusalem for the wilderness commune. They disapproved of Hellenism; they disapproved of ruling priests, they disagreed over the calendar, and they were stunned by the unworthy conduct of the new priests, especially since many of them were priests themselves.

Milik focuses on two important facts about the wicked priest: 1) he rebuilt Jerusalem, and 2) he died in torment in captivity. Jonathan (160-142) rebuilt the city; and Balas gave him the priesthood in 152. His involvement in Syrian politics brought in a process of secularization. The Kittim of Assyria (usually read Syria) would then be the major enemies referred to when the Jews abandoned Jerusalem for their desert home. And finally, the Essenes are first mentioned during the reign of Jonathan.<sup>133</sup>

Although one cannot be dogmatic, this last view makes the best sense. But one must not miss the point--the controversy was basically over the priesthood, its power and its degeneration.

The War Scroll offers a description of the final war, real or unreal, between the righteous and the wicked, drawing on eschatological passages from the Old Testament. The righteous are called "sons of light," for they were led by the spirit of truth; they were the Jews of Levi, Judah, and Benjamin, those that were true to David, the true line of Israel. The "children of darkness" refers to Edom, Moab, and Amon,

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<sup>130</sup>It might also refer to the actual son of David, and therefore be a figurative description of the Great Sanhedrin as traitors. If this is so, the Teacher would have been tried before the Sanhedrin, accused by Hyrcanus II, and condemned (Dupont-Sommer, p. 261, n. 4).

<sup>131</sup>Milik, pp. 80-84.

<sup>132</sup>Recall that the name "Essene" is a Greek translation of the Aramaic equivalent of this Hebrew name.

<sup>133</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.5.171.

the immediate enemies, as well as the Kittim of Syria and Egypt, Greek powers ultimately.

The Temple Scroll has a large section of instructions for the rebuilding of the Temple. The community viewed it as the missing law of 1 Chronicles 28:19, the plans given to Solomon. But the plans do not fit Solomon's, or Zerubbabel's, or Herod's temples--the author had in mind a future temple.

### ***Concluding Observations***

Millar Burrows summarizes the comparison between the Essenes described by the historians and the material from the scrolls with a cautionary note: "The current tendency to use the term 'Essene' in a broad way to include the Qumran sect along with others of the same general character is not seriously objectionable . . . we may consider it possible, though by no means certain, that Josephus was thinking of the Qumran community when he wrote of the 'other order' of Essenes, which practiced marriage. It is thoroughly possible, even probable, that Pliny's Essenes were the men of Qumran. One must still, however, protest . . . the assumption that both bodies of data apply to one and the same group."<sup>134</sup>

What are the difficulties in equating the Qumran community with the Essenes? First, the name "Essene" is not used in the scrolls; second, there is a greater sectarianism at Qumran than among other Essenes who lived in towns; third, at Qumran the oath was central for admission, but elsewhere it came at different times; fourth, the group at Qumran was under a hierarchical order of priests, something not mentioned of the Essenes; fifth, the Essenes sent gifts to the Temple (but did not go to sacrifice), but Qumran repudiated the Temple; and sixth, the later works of the scrolls are more militant than some think the Essenes were.

To explain these inconsistencies we must remember that the community concealed things from outsiders; the scrolls, then, being the product of the community, should provide additional and sometimes different information. We must also recall that Josephus and Philo were coloring things for the Greek readers.

The similarities make it clear that this was an order of Essenes: first, the location fits the reference in Pliny; second, the description fits well--purity, asceticism, a common life, care for the sick and aged, but division over marriage and children; third, both groups have washings and lustrations; fourth, admission was by graded examination periods; fifth, both have a common meal, with Qumran giving more details; sixth, the Qumran community was in the prophetic line, interpreting mysteries and seeing visions of the end times, and the Essenes were known to interpret dreams and predict events; seventh, both groups had a hierarchical system with strict rules and rigid discipline; eighth, the Essenes believed in fate (as Josephus saw it), and predestination was strongly held at Qumran; ninth, both groups refused to sacrifice in the

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<sup>134</sup>Millar Burrows, More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), p. 273. He adds, "To some it may seem pedantic to maintain this distinction, but for the purpose of accurate historical knowledge it is essential."

Temple, strictly observed the Sabbath, and loved to study the ancient books.

The Bible does not refer to the Essenes or to the community at Qumran directly. Yet there are indications that John the Baptist might have had contact with such a group in his early years. John was born into a priestly family in a nation that was divided over the priesthood; his father expressed great expectations with his birth.<sup>135</sup> He apparently seceded from that role. Luke 1:80 says that John was in the wilderness until the day of his manifestation. There is no indication of when he left home; but it is reasonable to conclude from this that he spent most of his youthful years there, a belief that has led to the speculation that his parents died and the Essenes cared for him and trained him.<sup>136</sup> His parents were old at his birth.

Not only did he live in the wilderness, he was an ascetic, clothed with camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey (Mk. 1:6). The Damascus Document mentions locusts as an active diet (XII, 14). Nothing is said of honey; but many Essenes were bee-keepers and knew how to handle such liquids. John came preaching as a voice in the wilderness (Isa. 40:3); this phrase was used in the Rule of the Congregation (VIII, 14 and IX, 19) for the purpose of the community (with a little different meaning). And of course John's ministry included baptism, within ten miles of Qumran. Finally, John's denunciation of the Pharisees and the Sadducees would have been perfectly acceptable to the Essenes. The fact that Essenes are not mentioned in Matthew 3:17 may be significant.

But John was no Essene. His baptism was unto repentance, but the community's was a repeated lustration to maintain purity. John was called to evangelistic efforts, but they were cloistered, refusing to give secrets to the wicked. And, of course, John saw Jesus as the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. As far as we know, the people in Qumran did not--they remained a Jewish sect until the end of the Roman wars.

With Jesus there are even more differences with the Essenes: He was no ascetic, He was not a legalist, He was not bothered by oil, He did not separate Himself from the Temple, and He was not secretive about His message. He did, of course, withdraw from the crowds and the cities for prayer and renewal. But this is not the same as living in a community. The differences between the Essenes and Jesus will be developed in subsequent chapters.

Down through the history of the Church there have been groups of Christians who separated themselves from the unholy cities and formed such communities, calling them by a variety of names to reflect the nature of their orders. Their purposes and functions were not unlike those of the Essene communities;

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<sup>135</sup>It is interesting to compare Luke 1:68-79 with the material from Qumran; while both draw heavily from the Old Testament, there is the same expectancy of a new age and the end of darkness.

<sup>136</sup>Burrows, p. 57.

and on occasion their theology has been similarly preoccupied with the events of the end of the age. Even today Christian communities exist; they may be part of an historical order known for monastic life, or they may be independent communes. Living in a community that shares all things, has an ordered devotional life and a rigid code of discipline does not appeal to the rank and file of Christians. And neither should it, for such communities do not facilitate the whole mission of the Church in the world. Moreover, such communities can easily fall under the control of individuals who may abuse their power.

But there is also something of the spirit of the Essenes in many Christians who prefer that their communities, their schools, and their workplaces if possible, be thoroughly Christian and separated from the evil society. I am not saying that this is necessarily the wrong thing to do, for that would have to be determined in the different situations. But this interest in developing and safeguarding an isolated environment goes far beyond the usual conviction of biblical separation.

### *The Zealots*

The Zealots represented a principle and a policy that the other groups did not share. The Sadducees lived a good life and sought power in high places. The Pharisees believed that it was God's will to live in the world in which God had placed them, to remain pure, and to meet the temptations, the dangers, and the trials.<sup>137</sup> And the Essenes simply fled from the conflict and took refuge in their desert commune. But opposite the Essenes were the Zealots who would confront any opposition directly.

#### *The Name "Zealot"*

The name "Zealot" was first used by Josephus to describe the militant Jews in the War of 66-70. But the designation has come to be used of all who rebelled against Rome with force.<sup>138</sup> The name itself is not difficult; it describes one who is filled with zeal or passionate intensity to fight for some threatened institution or ideal.<sup>139</sup> The term carries the connotation of a fanatic, one who was ready to go to extreme violence against Gentile oppressors.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>Herford, p. 64.

<sup>138</sup>See the discussion of groups in Martin Hengel, *The Zealots* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), pp. 24-75.

<sup>139</sup>The term in Hebrew can be translated "zeal" or "jealousy." The term describes the burning passion for a cause. If it is used in the negative sense, it would refer to envy, the burning desire for something off-limits.

<sup>140</sup>Herford, p. 66.

### *Descriptions of the Rebel Groups*

Josephus refers to the Zealots as the "fourth Jewish philosophy," founded by Judas the Galilean (in 6 A.D.); he strongly contends that all succeeding troubles including the burning of the Temple can be traced to his teaching. Gowan is correct to note that Josephus, who had turned to the Romans, is most certainly offering a politically acceptable assessment of these sworn enemies of Rome that he calls "bandits."<sup>141</sup> It is difficult to discover reliable information about the zealots when Josephus, who opposed them bitterly, is the only source.

Gowan lists several individuals and groups who rebelled against Rome with violence; while the term Zealot applies to only some of the "players" as he calls them, it is often used for any of these rebel factions.<sup>142</sup>

1. Hezekiah, the father of Judas, was executed by Herod around 46 B.C.<sup>143</sup> Josephus calls him a robber-chieftain; he sounded the first note of militant rebellion. It must have been a significant event, for the Sanhedrin wanted to try Herod for his execution.

2. Judas of Galilee, his son, is known as the founder of the Zealots. Herford compares Judas to Mattathias (167 B.C.) in that he gathered around him those that were zealous for the Torah; they showed the same zeal.<sup>144</sup> But there is one major difference: in the days of Judas the Jews were free to worship as they wished for the most part. At any rate, Judas revolted against Rome over the census that was taken by Quirinius. The death of Judas is referred to by Gamaliel in Acts 5:37.

3. James and Simon, the sons of Judas, continued the rebellion and were crucified in 46 or 48 A.D.<sup>145</sup>

4. The Sicarii (from the Latin sicarius, a short sword or dagger) were a group of rebels who fought in the time of Felix; they killed the High Priest Jonathan, fled to the desert and held Masada until 73.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup>Gowan, p. 201.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid., pp. 203,4.

<sup>143</sup>Josephus, Antiquities, 14.158-160; Wars, 1.204,5.

<sup>144</sup>Herford, p. 67.

<sup>145</sup>Josephus, Antiquities, 20. 102.

<sup>146</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.254-457; 4.400-405.

4. Eleazar, the son of the High Priest Ananias, contributed to the beginning of the revolt in 66 by making the priests stop offering daily sacrifices for Caesar.<sup>147</sup>

5. Menahem, the son of Judas, obtained weapons from Masada and came to Jerusalem to try to establish some kind of reign. He was killed by other rebels.<sup>148</sup>

6. Eleazar, the son of Jairus, a relative of Menahem, fled to Masada and led the futile resistance of 70-73.<sup>149</sup>

7. The actual Zealots were the extremists in Jerusalem who tried to seize power after the fall of Galilee in 67, 68. They basically carried on terrorist activities.<sup>150</sup>

8. John of Gischala was also an important rebel; he tried to take royal authority in Jerusalem, betrayed the people in the process, and was eventually captured at the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>151</sup>

9. Simon bar Giora attempted to take Jerusalem; he controlled the south.

10. Galileans, followers of John of Gischala, are described as transvestite assassins.<sup>152</sup>

11. Eleazar, son of Simon, was the leader of the Zealots when they revolted against John.

So when Titus was on his way to destroy Jerusalem, there were three groups of rebels in the city: Eleazar and the Zealots held the Temple, John controlled the upper city, and Simon controlled the lower city.

These were all disparate groups and individuals; but because they all had essentially the same goal, and similar methods, they can be grouped together under a discussion of zealots. Gowan concludes that it can be called a movement because (1) Josephus calls it the fourth philosophy, and (2) it was a dynasty

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<sup>147</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.409.

<sup>148</sup>Josephus, Wars, 2.433-448.

<sup>149</sup>Josephus, Wars, 7.253.

<sup>150</sup>Josephus, Wars, 4.160ff.

<sup>151</sup>Josephus, Wars, 4.84ff.

<sup>152</sup>Josephus, Wars, 4.558-563.

of rebels--most of them seem to be related to each other in some way.<sup>153</sup> Judas probably was not a founder in the strict sense, but his teachings and his zeal influenced the rest. They were basically fanatics, waging war on all who opposed them, but certainly exhibiting bravery, for they endured sieges and torture rather than call anyone "lord" other than God.<sup>154</sup>

### *The Beliefs of the Zealots*

The movement was religious, but certainly an activist one. The common ground for all these Jewish parties was the Torah. But unlike the Pharisees the Zealots offered no new conception of the Law; they were not out to interpret it, just to fight for it to assert all that it demanded. Herford summarizes the simple ideas that they believed the Torah demanded:<sup>155</sup> 1) YHWH was the only king that the Jews would acknowledge;<sup>156</sup> 2) they would establish His reign by rooting out paganism and by breaking the yoke of tyranny; 3) the Torah made separation from Gentiles necessary, exalted Israel as the chosen of God, and promised triumph. The zealots would seek to enforce these beliefs by violence of any kind. In the end, though, they lost their sense of order and their high motivation.

According to Josephus, Judas called the Jews cowards if they continued paying taxes to Rome or agreed to submit in other ways to any but God;<sup>157</sup> to him, taxation was slavery. In many things they probably agreed with the Pharisees--but they had a passion for liberty. The Pharisees, of course, were not zealots; they were swept into these wars against their will. They might have been more sympathetic at the outset, but not in the final conflicts which led inevitably to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish state.

### *Concluding Observations*

The Zealots do not figure prominently in the biblical records. But there are references to them. One of the twelve, Simon Zelotes (Mk. 3:18) was probably a member of some group originally. Barabbas was clearly a zealot; the term used to describe him in John 18:40 is the same word used by Josephus to describe the Zealots. And possibly Judas Iscariot had leanings towards their ideas.

But Jesus never openly refers to the Zealots. His statement that men try to take the kingdom by force (Mt. 11:12) has been interpreted as a criticism of such misguided zeal. Whether it refers to the

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<sup>153</sup>Gowan, p. 205.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., 207.

<sup>155</sup>Herford, pp. 68,69.

<sup>156</sup>For a detailed discussion of this conviction, see Hengel, The Zealots, pp. 90-99.

<sup>157</sup>Antiquities, 18,23-25.

Zealots or not is debated; Hengel argues against the connection.<sup>158</sup>

There is nothing wrong with zeal, of course; it is based on biblical teachings<sup>159</sup> and is absolutely essential for Christianity to succeed. Jesus Himself was filled with the zeal of the Lord when he cleansed the Temple. But zeal for the work of the Lord is totally different from the attitudes and actions of the zealots--they were not doing the will of the Lord. In the history of the Church there are many examples of such misguided zeal, most notably, the crusades. And the history of the Church is also stained with individuals who seized political power along with their religious authority. Even today there are individuals or groups of Christian zealots who occasionally try seek to fulfill their mission by violence. Jesus taught that His kingdom was not of this world, otherwise His servants would fight; and that the work of His kingdom must not be enveloped in violence--no matter how much zeal the participants may have. We shall see more of this contrast in the subsequent chapters.

### *The Scribes*

The scribes make up another group of individuals who enjoyed the authority of leadership in Israel. In the New Testament they are associated with the Pharisees and the High Priests as opponents of Jesus. In the Mishnah they are presented as pre-rabbinic teachers with authority, as well as copyists and teachers.<sup>160</sup> Josephus does not list them as a distinct group.

The scribes have a notable history. All ancient peoples had large numbers of scribes for the transmission of religious texts and other legal and historical documents. In the Old Testament the best known scribe is Ezra; because he was both a scribe and a priest, he was a very powerful religious leader (Ez. 7:6).

If there had not been copyists and interpreters, there would have been no transmission of the biblical text. Those who did the work very quickly became authorities on the text. Most of them were probably priests, or linked with priestly groups. With so many complicated materials involved with the transmission of the holy writings, professional, well-trained scribes were absolutely essential.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>He contends that a reference to the zealots would not fit that context, that the dating ("from the days of John until now") does not fit, and the verbs would imply "storming" rather than "forcing" (*The Zealots*, p. 388).

<sup>159</sup>See Hengel, pp. 146-148.

<sup>160</sup>Saldarini, p. 241.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid., p. 249.



Under the influence of the Greek world, non-priests were added to the scribal class in greater numbers. Moreover, more specialized activities were included; the scribes were also philosophers, sophists, councilors, and teachers.<sup>162</sup> In the Book of Deuteronomy we are told that the Levites were the teachers of the Law; but from the Hellenistic period on this task was shared by scribes who may or may not have been connected to the priestly or Levitical heritage--they took their place beside the priests.<sup>163</sup>

In the Maccabean period the scribes were prominent leaders of society; they were now an institution. "Scribe" became a title for a learned guardian of the Law. According to Ben Sira a scribe was also a wise man who had comprehensive knowledge.<sup>164</sup> And Ben Sira is an important witness; his primary calling was as a biblical scholar, a teacher of the Law, and a representative of the class of *soferim*.<sup>165</sup>

According to Josephus, scribes were officials at all levels of government. Saldarini concludes that in the New Testament they could be mid-level officials serving the king (p. 261). But there were also Temple scribes who occupied themselves recording, teaching, and ruling on points of law.

The scribes do not seem to be a coherent social group with membership. They were basically bureaucrats, experts on Jewish life and law. They might be lower level scribes who served the villages as village scribes, making contracts, documents, and serving as government officials. But they mostly lived in Jerusalem and associated with the priests: they were expert in judicial procedures, helpful in the enforcement of Jewish law and custom, and even joined the governing class and served on the Sanhedrin. Because they depended on the wealthy for their training and their positions, they were loyal to the chief priests and leaders.<sup>166</sup>

In Rabbinic literature they are the early authoritative teachers to whom a large number of rulings and legal interpretations are attributed.<sup>167</sup> They were influential in Judaism, to be sure; the Mishnah circumscribes but does not condemn their authority.<sup>168</sup> At this period they were credited with less authority than they seem to have in the Bible. In the Talmudic period the roles of the scribe and the wise were

<sup>162</sup>Saldarini, p. 249.

<sup>163</sup>Moore, I:41, 42.

<sup>164</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>165</sup>Moore, I, 39.

<sup>166</sup>Saldarini, pp. 266,267.

<sup>167</sup>In the *tannaitic* literature the scholars are not called "scribes"; they are the "sages" (*hakamim*).

<sup>168</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

assimilated into the title Rabbi.<sup>169</sup>

In the New Testament period the scribes were learned teachers and authoritative leaders, who were drawn from the priests and Levites, as well as the common people. Mark portrays them as high officials, advisors to the chief priests, and teachers of the Law. As such they were part of many types of officials opposed to Jesus. Matthew presents them as the learned of Judaism, leaders of the community. Luke portrays them as an appendage of the Pharisees, learned men who were protecting Judaism, and leaders who were associated with the Chief Priests. It is clear from the many witnesses that the scribes had authority because they had knowledge. And whatever level of government they served, they sought to preserve Judaism against opponents like Jesus.

In Christianity the "learned" have always been influential; and with that influence comes authority. This can be very good. The Church desperately needs spiritual leaders who are biblical scholars. Unfortunately, such learning can be more of a hindrance than a help. Biblical scholarship can be weak and ineffectual; it can also be dishonest and destructive. And it is not uncommon to see scholars, buoyed by popularity, seize the authority and set themselves over generations of biblical authorities. And if they have little or no faith, or if they follow faulty presuppositions, their learning will not contribute to the spiritual growth of the believing community. More often than not the learned work to impress their peers, and in such academic arenas modern criticism and political correctness are the ways to acceptance and advancement. Traditional beliefs, especially the supernatural, are all too often considered to be obscurantist. And it is not merely because a good deal of conservative scholarship has been shoddy. Much of the Christian faith is simply an embarrassment to many. The world of biblical scholarship is filled with theological cowards. One can only wonder how the modern scholars would compare to the ancient scribes' opposition to Jesus and His claims.

### *The Priests*

#### *The High Priest*

At the top of the social and political scale was the High Priest. In the Old Testament period the High Priest did not have much power, but during and after the exile he apparently attained greater importance.<sup>170</sup> In fact, many of the trappings of the monarchy were transferred to the High Priest, not merely the clothing but also the duties of government.

The prophet Zechariah of the restored community had already foreseen in his vision of Joshua the High Priest the union of the offices of King and Priest (Zech. 3 and 6); but these visions did not give an

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<sup>169</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>170</sup>Gowan, p. 257.

explanation of how one holding the high office in the line of Judah could also occupy the office of High Priest, which was in the line of Levi. The Hasmonean leaders attempted to unite the two offices, but since they were neither Davidic nor Zadokite<sup>171</sup> they met great opposition.

The priesthood traced its lineage from Aaron through his son Eleazar to Zadok; the other son was Ithamar. The line of the High Priests were in the Zadokite family until the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, when Onias III had to flee for his life.

Until that time, the office had a life-long tenure; but afterward the high priests were appointed and deposed at the will of the ruler, whether Seleucid, Roman, or Herodian.

The Hasmoneans were priests, but not of the line from Zadok. They first obtained the office of the High Priest from the Seleucids, but then simply took the office upon ascending the throne. Their control ended when Herod eliminated every male in the Hasmonean line.

During the Roman period there were 28 High Priests; Herod appointed seven of them himself. So there were always several ex-High Priests around, and they still retained their titles and their influence.<sup>172</sup> But Herod and his successors controlled the office. There were only a few families of the nobility from which the High Priests could be chosen, but it may be that any member of these families could use the title. Jeremias suggests that anyone above the rank of an ordinary priest could be called one of the "chief priests." In the Gospel accounts the two best known High Priests are Caiaphas (who ruled from 18-36 A.D.) who presided over the group that turned Jesus over to Pilate for crucifixion, and Annas (who ruled from 6-15 A.D.), his father-in-law, who first examined Jesus.

The last High Priest of the Jewish state was a commoner chosen by lot when the Zealots took the Temple.

The High Priest was supposed to be able to trace his lineage from the High Priestly families. He also had to maintain ritual purity in himself and in his descendants. His major tasks were to make atonement in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, to officiate in the Temple, and (at certain historical times) to preside over the Sanhedrin. Of course, as High Priest he could officiate any time he wished.<sup>173</sup>

### ***Priests and Levites***

Any man who was born in the family of Levi and had an impeccable genealogy could serve as a

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<sup>171</sup>They were priests, but not of the family of Zadok. Thus, they could not be High Priests.

<sup>172</sup>Leopold Sabourin, *Priesthood, A Comparative Study* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), p. 163.

<sup>173</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

priest in the Temple (262). Because of the importance of the Temple for Judaism, and because the priesthood was restricted to the family of Levi, this was an honorable position.

Those who could not trace their lines back were Levites. Their duties were outside the court of the priests: they were involved with Temple music, performed various physical and religious services for the Temple, and served as Temple guards. It was such a group of Levites who came to arrest Jesus (Mt. 26:47) and later the apostles (Acts 4:1-3).

The priesthood was divided into 24 courses or families, 16 were Zadokite and 8 were of Ithamar. Each group was responsible for one week of service in the Temple at a time, so in a given year they would serve a total of two weeks as well as the times of the festivals. The rest of the year they ministered throughout the land in the areas in which they lived.

Their duties included making the sacrifices and performing the ritual of the sanctuary, burning the incense along with their intercession in the Holy Place, and teaching the people the laws and the ritual (Deut. 33:9,10; Mal. 2:7).

There were various levels of priests: the Captain of the Temple seems to occupy the highest post; those in charge of the Temple treasury were important because of the vast sums contained there; and then the various overseers held lesser administration posts. Gowan thinks that these would be what the New Testament calls "chief priests" in Matthew 2:4 and 26:3.<sup>174</sup> But Sandmel suggests the title "chief priests" would refer to the relatives of the High Priest who were not directly involved in the succession.<sup>175</sup> It may be that the description included other officials such as former High Priests and heads of the 24 courses of priests.<sup>176</sup>

### ***Concluding Observations***

Sabourin concludes that one thing is certain: in the days of Jesus there existed a priestly aristocracy whose standard of living contrasted dramatically with the modest conditions of the common priests.<sup>177</sup> They were the official representatives of the sacral life of the nation; and they, this priestly aristocracy, as a body rejected Christ as a transgressor.<sup>178</sup> Notable among them are Caiaphas and Annas, High Priests from the

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<sup>174</sup>Gowan, pp. 266,267.

<sup>175</sup>Sandmel, p. 133.

<sup>176</sup>Sabourin, p. 165.

<sup>177</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid., pp. 165,166.

Sadducean ruling class and part of Israel's nobility. They certainly held the power over the Sanhedrin in the trial of Jesus, even though they were subordinate to Pontius Pilate for their final decisions.

In the early days of the Church many priests came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 6:7).

Many situations in the history of the Church have reflected such conditions in the clergy--an aristocracy that obtained one way or another the higher offices of the Church, but neglected the spiritual requirements of such positions, while many common priests tried to fulfill their duties faithfully. Even today it is easy to lose sight of what the ministry is all about, and to seek power over others. In the final analysis spiritual leadership can become a religious dictatorship. So the servant of God does have the greater opportunity for sin, for he can make the cause serve him. What is so often lost in the struggle for importance and authority is the pattern of Jesus Christ, our High Priest. He came not to be served, but to serve.

### *Conclusion*

Spiritual leadership in the days of Jesus had certainly gone awry, and the spiritual life of the people was thrown into confusion. Of course there were a few faithful leaders around, good people who were devout, wise, learned, and capable, who were trying to minister as they understood they should do. But the greater number who occupied positions of authority had been caught up in the constant religious battles with pagan rulers and power struggles with one another. They disagreed with each other on theology, politics, ritual, and ministry. Too often they were pre-occupied with their own interpretations of the Scripture to hear the truth; they became self-righteous and self-serving. Their hypocrisy and unbelief blinded them to the truth of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Against this backdrop our Lord called people to follow Him and learn of Him. The training that they received from Jesus was designed to make them into spiritual leaders in the Church that He was building. But the qualities of spiritual leadership that He was cultivating in them through their spiritual growth contrasted sharply with what they and everyone else could see in the current religious leaders of the day.

