

Ancient Jewish History: Pharisees, Sadducees & Essenes

Of the various factions that emerged under Hasmonean rule, three are of particular interest: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.

The Pharisees

The most important of the three were the Pharisees because they are the spiritual fathers of modern [Judaism](#). Their main distinguishing characteristic was a belief in an [Oral Law](#) that God gave to [Moses](#) at Sinai along with the [Torah](#). The [Torah](#), or [Written Law](#), was akin to the U.S. Constitution in the sense that it set down a series of laws that were open to interpretation. The Pharisees believed that God also gave [Moses](#) the knowledge of what these laws meant and how they should be applied. This oral tradition was codified and written down roughly three centuries later in what is known as the [Talmud](#).

The Pharisees also maintained that an after-life existed and that God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous in the world to come. They also believed in a [messiah](#) who would herald an era of world peace.

Pharisees were in a sense blue-collar Jews who adhered to the tenets developed after the destruction of the [Temple](#); that is, such things as individual prayer and assembly in [synagogues](#).

The Sadducees

The Sadducees were elitists who wanted to maintain the priestly caste, but they were also liberal in their willingness to incorporate [Hellenism](#) into their lives, something the Pharisees opposed. The Sadducees rejected the idea of the [Oral Law](#) and insisted on a literal interpretation of the [Written Law](#); consequently, they did not believe in an after life, since it is not mentioned in the [Torah](#). The main focus of Sadducee life was rituals associated with the [Temple](#).

The Sadducees disappeared around 70 A.D., after the destruction of the [Second Temple](#). None of the writings of the Sadducees has survived, so the little we know about them comes from their Pharisaic opponents.

These two "parties" served in the [Great Sanhedrin](#), a kind of Jewish Supreme Court made up of 71 members whose responsibility was to interpret civil and religious laws.

The Essenes

A third faction, the Essenes, emerged out of disgust with the other two. This sect believed the others had corrupted the city and the [Temple](#). They moved out of [Jerusalem](#) and lived a monastic life in the desert, adopting strict dietary laws and a commitment to celibacy.

The Essenes are particularly interesting to scholars because they are believed to be an offshoot of the group that lived in [Qumran](#), near the [Dead Sea](#). In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd stumbled into a cave containing various ancient artifacts and jars containing [manuscripts](#) describing the beliefs of the sect and events of the time.

The most important documents, often only parchment fragments that had to be meticulously restored, were the earliest known copies of the [Old Testament](#). The similarity of the substance of the material found in the scrolls to that in the modern scriptures has confirmed the authenticity of the Bible used today.

Disputes Among the Three Parties

	Sadducees	Pharisees	Essenes
Social Class	Priests, aristocrats	Common people	[Unknown]
Authority	Priests	"Disciples of the Wise"	"Teacher of Righteousness"
Practices	Emphasis on priestly obligations	Application of priestly laws to non-priests	"Inspired Exegesis"
Calendar	Luni-solar	Luni-solar	Solar
Attitude Toward:			
Hellenism	For	Selective	Against
Hasmoneans	Opposed usurpation of priesthood by non-Zadokites	Opposed usurpation of monarchy	Personally opposed to Jonathan
Free will	Yes	Mostly	No
Afterlife	None	Resurrection	Spiritual Survival
Bible	Literalist	Sophisticated scholarly interpretations	"Inspired Exegesis"
Oral Torah	No such thing	Equal to Written Torah	"Inspired Exegesis"

Sources: Mitchell G. Bard, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Middle East Conflicts*, NY: MacMillan, 1999. Chart courtesy of [Prof. Eliezer Segal](#)

