

Jewish Religious Groups

SANHEDRIN

The ancient Jewish court system was called the Sanhedrin. The Great Sanhedrin, also referred to as the Jewish Council, was the supreme religious body in the Land of Israel during the first century A.D. This council was made up of 70 members plus the High Priest making it 71. There were also smaller religious Sanhedrins in every town in Israel, as well as a civil political-democratic Sanhedrin.

PHARISEES

The name Pharisee means "separatist." Their strictness to the letter of the law separated them from their fellow Jews and even more from the non-Jews. They were, for the most part, middle-class tradesmen and artisans. They were very legalistic and meticulous about the external obedience to the law and traditions. They advocated and adhered to strict observance of the Sabbath rest, purity rituals, tithing and food restrictions. They believed in the books of Moses (The Torah) and the prophets. They believed in bodily resurrection, eternal life, angels and demons. They were admired by the common people for their apparent piety. They were very influential in the synagogues. They rejected Jesus as Messiah because he did not follow all their traditions and associated with notoriously sinful people. Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Gamaliel and Paul were all Pharisees.

SADDUCEES

Sadducees were a very politically-minded, reformist party. They were a smaller, more elite group of Jews who controlled the priesthood and the Temple rituals. They only believed in the five books of Moses (Torah) and denied a belief in angels, demons, resurrection, and eternal life. They were more practically-minded than the Pharisees and relied on logic while placing little importance on faith. They were often willing to compromise values to maintain their status and influential positions.

SCRIBES

Scribes were the professional copyists and interpreters of the law. They became regarded as the authorities on the Scriptures. They taught and emphasized the Jewish traditions. Many scribes were Pharisees. They denied Jesus' authority to interpret the law or the Scriptures. They rejected Jesus as Messiah because he did not strictly obey their traditions.

HERODIANS

Herodians were a Jewish political party of King Herod's supporters. They tried to trap Jesus with questions and plotted to kill him. They saw Jesus as a threat to their political future with the Roman government.

ZEALOTS

These were Jewish patriots that were fiercely determined to end Roman rule in Israel. They did not recognize Jesus as Messiah. They believed the Messiah would be a political leader who would overthrow the Roman government and establish Israel as the most powerful nation in the world.

ESSENES (not mentioned in the Bible)

A smaller group or sect that lived a communal lifestyle at Qumran (near the Dead Sea) from 2nd century B.C. through the 1st century A.D. The Dead Sea Scrolls are associated with them.

SHAMMAI AND HILLEL (not mentioned in the Bible)

Shammai and Hillel were two rabbis who each had a large following and had their own schools (House of Shammai and House of Hillel) of interpreting the Torah and the Talmud. There are 316 recorded disagreements between the schools, with the House of Hillel generally taking the lenient view and the House of Shammai, the more stringent one. For example, the House of Shammai said that a man may not divorce his wife unless he has found her to be unfaithful. But the House of Hillel said if she spoiled or burned a dish for her husband, he could divorce her because he has found some indecency in her.