

JEWISH SECTS DURING THE SECOND TEMPLE

by Mitchell Rose, Cleveland, Ohio (216)381-5566 mitchrose51@gmail.com www.mitchellrose.us PAGE 1 of 2

This is about 3 Jewish sects that co-existed in the last 200 years of the 2nd Temple. (1) Pharisees (Perushim in Hebrew); (2) Sadducees (Tzedokim); (3) Essenes (Essiyim).

Pharisees

Pharisees believed, like we do today, that when Gd taught Moses a huge number of laws, Moses wrote down only a minority of those laws in the Torah, and left a majority of the laws unwritten, to be transmitted orally from generation to generation for the next 1500 years, until many of the orally-transmitted laws were written down in a book called the Mishna in the year 200. And 300 years later, many more the oral laws were wrote down in a book called the Gemara.

Sadducees

In contrast to the Pharisees, the Sadducees did not believe in that oral laws came from Gd. They instead believed that everything Gd taught Moses is in the written Torah. And if a law is not found in the Torah, Gd did not say it.

Pharisees and Sadducees held different opinions about the spiritual world: Pharisees believed in angels; Sadducees did not. Pharisees believed our soul is immortal and lives on after our death in the afterlife; Sadducees did not. Pharisees believed the dead will one day be resurrected; Sadducees did not believe in resurrection.

Pharisees and Sadducees cooperated during the period of the 2nd temple. Both Pharisees and Sadducees served in the Sanhedrin. Both Pharisees and Sadducees served as the high priests. In fact, the high priest during Jesus' time was a Sadducee.

Unlike the Pharisees and the Essenes who were prolific writers, the Sadducees did not write books about their beliefs. So all we know about Sadducees are from other sources: the Talmud written by Pharisees, Dead Sea scrolls written by Essenes, books written by historians who lived during that time (Josephus who lived for a while in an Essene community, Jewish philosopher Philo who died in Egypt 50CE, and gentile Pliny the Elder who died in Rome 79CE)

The aristocrat and wealthy Jews tended to be Sadducees. Also the Temple officials tended to be Sadducees. That is because the Sadducees believed that Judaism is limited to what is written in the Torah. And most laws in the Torah deal with the temple. So Sadducees focused their efforts on managing the temple. So when the Temple was destroyed in the year 70, the Sadducee movement lost its core mission, and disappeared.

The majority of Jews were Pharisees. So all high priests, even those that were Sadducees, would perform Pharisee rituals, to avoid antagonizing the Pharisee majority. For example, there is an oral law that the high priest in the Temple should pour water on the altar on each day of Sukkot. This water-pouring ceremony was so cherished by the Pharisees that they celebrated it with a big party in the Temple that lasted all night – a party called "Simchas Bais Hashoeva". But since this water-pouring ritual is not found in the Torah – it is instead an oral law - Sadducees did not believe in it. But the Sadducee high priests would perform this ritual anyway, just to satisfy the Pharisee majority.

One high priest who did antagonize the Pharisees was Alexander Yanai. He wore two hats – he was both (1) king of Israel and head of the army and (2) the high priest. About the year 80 BCE, Alexander Yanai decided to switch from being a Pharisee to being a Sadducee. During the next Sukkot Holiday, he was officiating in the Temp in front of a packed crowd all holding their lulavs and esrogs. He was given the special water to pour on the altar, but he instead poured it on the ground. Well, the crowd was so outraged at this sacrilege, that some of them pelted him with their esrogs. He called in army to quell the riot, and 6K people were killed.

Essenes

Essenes lived in communes throughout Israel in the last 200 years of the 2nd Temple period. The most prominent Essene community was Qumran, in the Judean desert, along the shore of the Dead Sea.

Essenes practiced to communal life, like monks in a monastery. They all dressed the same -- in a white robe with a belt. Their daily regimen was to awaken early, immerse in mikvah, pray together, eat breakfast together in a dining hall, and work all day till supper. The Essene commune was self-sufficient, from agriculture, sheep, cattle, beehives, and handicrafts. They practiced collective ownership of everything. Any money a member obtained was shared with the commune. The commune had a financial manager, who was elected by the members. Their lifestyle was frugal and basic. They practiced asceticism (attaining spirituality through self-discipline and self-denial). They practiced piety and celibacy (some communes). Some communes were men only.

They were meticulous in their observance of ritual purity. For example, (1) they immersed in a mikvah daily, and (2) they built latrines outside the community, so that their community would not be ritually defiled by someone pooping within it.

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The Essenes were big on **studying** Jewish literature, **copying** Jewish literature, and **composing** Jewish literature. They had a large library of manuscripts.

They were meticulous in the observance of Shabbat; Shabbat was devoted to studying.

They were big on mysticism. For example, they studied the names of angels as taught in their sacred writings. They had a revered leader called "Moreh ha-Tzedek" who according to their writings was a "teacher of righteousness to whom Gd revealed the secrets of the prophets." They believed in immortality of the soul.

They were into charity. Forbade the expression of anger. Forbade taking an oath, and believed a man's word alone is binding enough.

They were vegetarians, and opposed animal sacrifice. They opposed slavery.

They were big on eschatology (study of end of world as we know it during the future messianic era). They were hoping their good deeds would prepare them for the messianic era. They called themselves the "sons of light", against the "sons of darkness". They believed the messianic era would be heralded by 2 meshiachs -- one a religious leader and the other a lay leader. Followed by a great war between the forces of good and evil, with Gd and angels aiding the "sons of light", against the "sons of darkness" aided by Satan and his demons. After the messianic war, a new temple would be built. They initially believed this messianic era would occur 40 years after the death of their founder. When 40 years lapsed after the death of their founder and the messianic era did not come, they figured Gd is simply delaying it.

The procedure for a person to join the Essene community started with a 3 year probationary period. Then the person would be initiated into the brotherhood by taking an oath. The oath included the following: I promise to maintain a pure lifestyle, to abstain from immorality, to treat everyone with righteousness and justice. I promise to not hate those who wrong you, to pray for my enemies, to be truthful, and not plagiarize. I promise to not keep secrets about myself. But if someone else confides a secret to me, I will not divulge it to others. I will teach the Essene doctrines to others, without distortion from how it was taught to me, and to preserve the books of the Essenes and the names of the angels.

Amazing, a sect that was so demanding on its members was not a passing fad, but instead lasted for 200 years, until the destruction of the 2nd Temple.