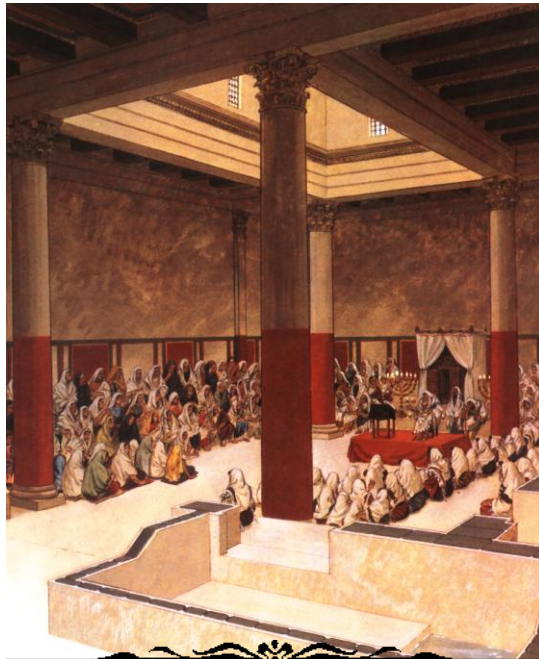


# Political / Religious Factions in Ancient Jerusalem



Around the time of Jesus Christ

## Religious / Political Climate

The climate in Jerusalem during and around the time of Christ was plagued with revolts, insurrections, and false Messiahs. The Roman Empire ruled the land of Israel, and imposed taxations and compliance with Roman law. The Jews had experienced years of turmoil, having been ruled by the Greeks prior to Rome. The troubled Jewish nation was allowed a limited government, primarily for religious control, through a council called the 'Sanhedrin'. Even so, the Jews were far from united. There were many factions within the nation: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Scribes, just to name a few. Understanding the makeup of the nation will help a student better understand the climate of the New Testament.

## Sanhedrin

The word Sanhedrin is a Greek word, 'συνέδριον', meaning 'a council-chamber'. The Great Sanhedrin was the governing council of the Jews. It is said that the Sanhedrin originated at the time of Moses, when he set apart 70 elders to judge the people. This original council was called the 'Mishna'. The 'Mishna' disappeared after the children of Israel entered Palestine. After the Jews returned from Babylonian captivity, there was a need to restore and define the somewhat lost religion. History is vague; however, sometime between the return of the Jews and the time of Herod the Great, the Jewish council was reinstated with the purpose of judging and ruling over the people. The Sanhedrin consisted of priests, scribes, lawyers, and those who were well schooled in Jewish law and ritual. There are many that believe a member of the council served for life. The council consisted of 71 men who sat in a semi-half-circle. The Great Sanhedrin met on fixed occasions and was presided over by two officials (zugot or the "pair"), the nasi and the av bet din. The Sanhedrin met in the Gazzith (the Chamber of Hewn Stone), a grand hall located on the southeast corner of the temple court, right off the area dedicated for sacrifice. The Great Sanhedrin might be the equivalent of our Supreme Court. The Talmud makes mention of lesser Sanhedrins organized in each major city within Judea. These lesser Sanhedrins consisted of only 23 men.



The Chamber of Hewn Stone

## Sadducees

The Sadducees were a religious party or school in Judea at the time of Christ. Between the Pharisees and Sadducees lie the beliefs or affiliations of most of the Jews of the time of Christ. Similar to the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States political system, these two parties dominated even though there were smaller factions with strong beliefs. The Sadducees and Pharisees were religious groups; however, they existed in a state where

politics and religious beliefs were spun together. The Sadducees rejected the truthfulness of oral laws and traditions. They believed only in written law, rejecting all oral traditions. Their name is said to have been derived from Zadok, the great High Priest under King David. The Hebrew word for Sadducee is 'Tzedoq', meaning 'follower of Zadok'. They are sometimes referred to as Zadokites. The Sons of Zadok were a class of Priests and Temple officials who represented the upper class of society. There are some that feel the name 'Sadducee' actually comes from the Hebrew word 'zedekah' meaning 'righteous'. The thought that they were somehow more righteous than everyone else, went to their head. As time went on, they became an aristocratic class. The Sadducees were known for the following beliefs:



1. The Sadducees also rejected any belief that they could not fully justify by the written law.
2. The Sadducees rejected the doctrine of man's resurrection after death, saying it could not be proven from the Torah.
3. The Sadducees denied the existence of spirits or angels.
4. The Sadducees denied that there was such a thing as "future" punishments or rewards for one's actions.
5. The Sadducees believed in the "Agency" of man. They believed that man was free to choose for himself the manner in which he would conduct his life. They used this doctrine so heavily, that they almost excluded God from Governmental decisions.
6. The Sadducees rejected the idea of another world. There were no worlds without end, no spirit world, and no pre-earth existence.

By the time of Christ the political power in the Sanhedrin had swung from the Sadducees to the Pharisees, though they maintained the seat power. Though they had lost the majority, they maintained a grip of power until they dropped from existence. The Sadducees seemed to be a party with less strength and fewer followers while the Pharisees were growing. By 100 AD, the Sadducees disappeared from recorded history. Even at the time of Christ, Josephus records that the number of Sadducees were but a few. For the most part they were an elite group.



## Pharisees

Similar to the Sadducees, the Pharisees were a religious party or school; however, they were seldom of social or financial prominence. Where the Sadducees were considered rich aristocrats, the Pharisees were common folk often lacking prestigious family lines. By the time of Christ they were increasing in prominence and popularity. According to Josephus there were over 6,000 Pharisees at



the time of Christ. Many consider the Pharisees as the 'Formalist' among the Jews. The Pharisees, if one had to summarize them, were sticklers for the law. They believed in adhering to the letter of the written law and at the same time accepted the fact that there existed an oral law that had been

passed down among the scribes. This oral law served as explanation to the written law. The Pharisees relied heavily upon the scribes to define and clarify the written law based on their oral tradition. In our day, the first portion of the Talmud contains the oral law. Using the written and oral law, the Pharisees were fanatics about keeping the rituals and practices of the religion to strict adherence. The main differing doctrine that set the Pharisees apart from other sects in Judea was the belief in the resurrection. Many believe that the Pharisees were closest to the future Christians. The Pharisees gained great political strength and respect among the Jews. Due to this fact they gained seats on the Sanhedrin. The basic beliefs of the Pharisees are as follows:

1. The Pharisees embraced the belief of resurrection.
2. The Pharisees believed that there was more to God's law than was contained in holy writ. They believed in oral traditions, interpretation, and rabbinical review. Even so, they were fanatical in their approach to the law.
3. The Pharisees believe in the existence of spirits or angels.
4. The Pharisees believed that God could punish or reward one for his/her actions. At the same time, they believed in the idea of blind fate.
5. The Pharisees believe that God created this world and governs it. They believe in other spheres of existence.
6. The Pharisees were considered to be lenient relative to the Sadducees approach to the law.

## Essenes

According to Josephus, there were over 4,000 Essenes at the time of Christ. Interestingly, most people think of the two majority religious groups of ancient Israel as the Sadducees and the Pharisees, when in reality it was probably the Pharisees and the Essenes. The Essenes can hardly be classified as a political or governmental "party", since they tried to clearly separate themselves from politics.



In that respect, the Pharisees and Sadducees clearly dominated the stage. The Essenes were a grass roots movement in meridian Israel. They believed in purification and a return to the doctrines of Moses. They were a fanatical group, denouncing the idea that adherence to the law or any code of doctrines brought about divine favor without personal purity. They felt that

the Pharisees and Sadducees had lost sight of true religion and were caught up in the bureaucracy of carnal desires and rituals without meaning. Many consider the Essenes a small insignificant group; however, given the numbers they cannot be ignored when studying the New Testament. It should also be noted the John the Baptist was probably raised in an Essene community, and lived an Essene life style. There were many sects within the Essenes. Some sects took their vow of purity so deep that they separated themselves from the Jewish community all together, many of whom lived in the Desert near the Dead Sea. Even sects that lived in Jewish communities, tried to separate themselves in their daily activities. Apparently, the Essenes claimed to have a royal priestly lineage from Zadok. The head of an Essene community was called a 'Teacher of Righteousness'. The beliefs of the Essenes are detailed and numerous. Some of the major beliefs are as follows:



1. The Essenes believed in true conversion prior to membership. A potential convert, must serve in the community for 1 year prior to joining.

2. The Essenes were sticklers for purity. They ritually bathed twice a day prior to meals, and anytime they came in contact with something considered impure. They required absolute worthiness. Rituals were always second to purity.

3. The Essenes believed in a pseudo law of consecration. The community worked together, ate together, and conducted all aspects of life with a form of common consent.

4. They believed in an absolute hierarchy. The head of the community, the Priest or Teacher of Righteousness, was the last word. Similarly, no one in the community did anything without the permission of the Leader.

5. The Essenes were stricter in their observance of the Sabbath, and other laws, than the Pharisees and Sadducees. They followed the law to the letter.

6. They believed in life after death. Like the Pharisees, they believed that there is a spirit and it continues after death.

7. They believed in Angels and a God that was actively involved in their lives. In fact, they left very little to their own choice. They felt everything was a result of fate. The Sadducees believed in free agency to an extreme. The Essenes believed in absolute fate, while the Pharisees believed in both.

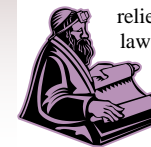
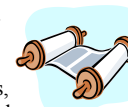
8. The Essenes centered their lives on a central sanctuary, they associated with the Temple. All facets of life revolved around worship in the sanctuary.

9. The Essenes based most of their religion on the importance of covenants. Covenants were vital to God's commandments, and so sacred to the Essenes that they were kept secret from the outside world.



## The Scribes

The scribes were part of a truly old profession in Israel. King David created the office of scribe, or 'saphar'. They worked on writing the king's letters, writing the laws and decrees of the land, and managing the finances of the Kingdom. By the time of King Hezekiah, the scribes were responsible for transcribing old records, studying and interpreting the law, as well as teaching others of their interpretation. The scribes were a class of priests, so to speak. After the time of Christ, they divided into two religious/political classes, the zealots and the disciples of Hillel. The Pharisees relied heavily on their interpretation of the law. Scribes could progress to become rabbis or members of the Sanhedrin. The title lawyer is suspected to be the same as scribe. Scribes, in many aspects, replaces the prophets.



## The Herodians

The Herodians were a smaller, yet significant sect among the Jewish government. They were supporters of Herod. Their belief was not necessarily in Herod, but in the hope that the Jews would somehow sever their ties to Rome and again rule themselves. Since the family of Herod had acquired so much power and authority, they were seen as a possible way to obtain political freedom.



## The Zealots

A 'Zealot' is a member of a Jewish sect, noted for its uncompromising opposition to pagan Rome and their beliefs in multiple gods. The Zealots were an aggressive political party whose concern for the national and religious life of the Jewish people led them to despise even Jews who sought peace and conciliation with the Roman authorities. A census of Galilee ordered by Rome in 6 CE, spurred the Zealots to rally the populace to noncompliance on the grounds that agreement was an implicit acknowledgement by Jews of the right of pagans to rule their nation. Extremist among the Zealots turned to terrorism and assassination and became known as Sicarii (Greek sikarioi, "dagger man"). They frequented public places with hidden daggers to strike down persons friendly to Rome.



## The Publican

The Publican were the IRS collectors of the ancient Roman Empire. The Romans farmed out the collection to locals who desired to make a healthy living for themselves in the process. The taxes were delivered to the Roman 'Publicum'; hence, a publican. They were seen by the Jews as traitors.