

New Testament Survey

Religious Sects and Groups

I. Religious Sects¹

A. Pharisees²

1. Origin unknown. Name could have come from "parsee" which means "to separate" since they separated themselves from all that was common.
2. First mentioned under the reign of John Hyrcanus (135-105 B.C.).
3. The Pharisees were a very small group probably numbering less than 5,000.
4. The Pharisees were made up of middle-class people. Very few wealthy.
5. The Pharisees accepted all of the Old Testament canon as Scripture.
6. Several fundamental beliefs were
 - a. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.
 - b. The immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body.
 - c. Angels and demons.
 - d. Written and oral law consisting of 613 commandments.
7. During Christ's time there were two basic schools, Hillel (very conservative) and Shammai (very liberal). The Talmud, the Jewish commentary on the law, lists at least 316 controversies between these two basic groups.
8. The Pharisees continued the Hasidim (*pious ones*) tradition in their reaction against Hellenism.

B. Sadducees³

1. The Sadducees were the aristocracy of the day.
2. They did not accept all of the Old Testament, just the five books of Moses.
3. The Sadducees ran the temple and the temple concessions (making them very wealthy). The high priest was a Sadducee.
4. The Sadducees denied immortality of the soul (Matthew 22:23-33) and the oral laws of the Pharisees. They also did not believe in angels or demons.

¹ For a general overview, see James Borland, *A General Introduction to the New Testament*, (Lynchburg: University Book House, 1986), pp. 83-90.

² Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Between The Testaments*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), pp. 112-115.

³ *Ibid*, pg. 115.

5. The Sadducees traced their roots to the Hellenizing influences of the Greeks. Their progenitors were of the group that accepted Greek customs in order to exist under the Seleucids in the second and first centuries B.C.
6. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees was a closed group. No one but the aristocracy and those born into the ruling families became members of this group.

C. Essenes⁴

1. The Essenes were an ascetic group which lived in the areas to the north of the Dead Sea. Unlike the Pharisees who worked within the organized system of Judaism, the Essenes retreated to their monasteries by the Dead Sea.
2. They had a very strict mode of life, refusing to live with and interact with the other Jewish sects. Becoming an Essene was a long and arduous process for the proselyte.
3. They were the group that copied and preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls.
4. Some of their basic beliefs were:
 - a. The immortality of the soul and the rejection of a future bodily resurrection. This can be traced to the influence of philosophical dualism.
 - b. The Essenes discouraged or forbade marriage.
 - c. The rejection of the apostate temple worship headed by the Sadducees.
 - d. Very strict Sabbath rules, even more strict than the Pharisees.

D. Zealots⁵

1. A very fanatical group that used terrorism to overthrow the Roman government.
2. Simon, one of Christ's disciples, was a Zealot.
3. One group, the Sicarri, carried knives that would be used to randomly murder Romans and other Roman collaborators.

E. Herodians

1. A group of Jews that thought it best to support the Herodian rulership. They were despised by the Pharisees.
2. It is interesting to see that the Herodians, Pharisees, and Sadducees united to attempt to discredit Christ in Matthew 22.

II. Religious and Political Institutions and Groups

A. The Synagogue

⁴ Ibid, pp. 115-118.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 120.

1. A Jewish place for worship. In Jesus' day it was a school and a local law court.
 2. Many think that it began during the Babylonian captivity.
 3. The synagogue was ruled by a board of elders with some elected to read the law.
 4. Later, the synagogue became a model for the local church.
- B. The Sanhedrin
1. The ruling body in Israel consisting of 70 men.
 2. The high priest was an *ex officio* member and became the 71st.
- C. Scribes and Lawyers
1. Official interpreters of the law.
 2. Scribes had the responsibility for producing copies of the law for public worship.