

ESSENES [ESS seenz] — a religious community that existed in Palestine from the second century B.C. until the Jewish war with Rome (A.D. 66–73). The Essenes were noted for their strict discipline and their isolation from others who did not observe their way of life.

Although the Bible never mentions the Essenes, they are described by several ancient historians. The Essenes are an important part of the background to the New Testament, showing the beliefs and practices of one Jewish religious group at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus. People have been especially interested in the Essenes since the discovery of the DEAD SEA SCROLLS at QUMRAN. The people who lived at Qumran probably were a group of Essenes.

Individual Essenes did not own any private property. Instead, they shared all their possessions with others in their community. They avoided any show of luxury and ate very simple meals. They wore simple clothes.

The Essenes were also known for their careful observance of the laws of Moses as they understood them. They were stricter about keeping the Sabbath than any other Jews, even the PHARISEES. They were concerned about being ritually clean themselves and about eating food that was ritually pure.

Essenes lived in the towns of Palestine in the days of Jesus. They were famous for their hospitality. An Essene traveling from one place to another knew he would be looked after by other Essenes, although he had never met them. The Essenes were also known for taking care of the sick and elderly. They were interested in medicines; in fact, some people think that the name Essenes means “healers.”

The Essenes would arise before sunrise for prayer. Then they would work until about midday, when they would bathe—to make sure they were ritually clean—before eating. Afterwards they would work again until the evening meal.

Anyone who wanted to become an Essene was required to hand over all he owned to the community. He would then be given the typical Essene white robe. Only after he had shown that he was trustworthy for a full year would he be allowed to use the community’s water for purification. And he had to prove that he was reliable for two more years before he could become a full member. Then, after promising to keep the Essene rules, he became a member and was allowed to take part in the community meals. But if he should break the Essene rule, he would be expelled from the community.

The Essenes believed that the souls of people were immortal and would be rewarded or punished after death. They had a special interest in angels, and some were known for making accurate predictions about the future. They avoided taking part in the services of the Temple in Jerusalem. Instead, they worshiped God in their own communities.

Some of the Essenes’ beliefs and practices are similar to those in parts of the New Testament. The ritual washings of the Essenes bring to mind the baptism preached and practiced by John the Baptist. But John baptized people only once, while the Essenes’ washings took place every day. And Jesus told his followers not to use oaths, just as the Essenes avoided oaths.

The Essenes’ practice of COMMUNITY OF GOODS is also similar to what happened in the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44–45). But again there is a difference. Christians sold their property of their own free will, while this was a requirement in the Essene community. Like the Essenes, the early Christians were soon known for their generous hospitality. A major difference was that the early Christians did not practice all the rules about the Sabbath and ritual purity that were so important to the Essenes. Above all, Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah and Lord; the Essenes as a group rejected Jesus and continued to wait for God’s salvation.

SADDUCEES [SAJ uh seez] — members of a Jewish faction that opposed Jesus during His ministry. Known for their denial of the bodily resurrection, the Sadducees came from the leading families of the nation—the priests, merchants, and aristocrats. The high priests and the most powerful members of the priesthood were mainly Sadducees (Acts 5:17).

Some scholars believe the name “Sadducees” came from Zadok, the high priest in the days of David (2 Sam. 15:24) and Solomon (1 Kin. 1:34–45). Many wealthy laypeople were also Sadducees. This may be the reason why the Sadducees gave the impression of wanting to preserve things as they were. They enjoyed privileged positions in society and managed to get along well under Roman rule. Any movement that might upset order and authority was bound to appear dangerous in their eyes.

The Sadducees rejected “the tradition of the elders,” that body of oral and written commentary that interpreted the law of Moses. This automatically placed them in direct conflict with another Jewish group, the PHARISEES, who had made the traditions surrounding the Law almost as important as the Law itself. The Sadducees insisted that only the laws that were written in the law of Moses (the PENTATEUCH, the first five books of the Old Testament) were really binding. The Sadducees thought this way because of religious practices that had taken place for several centuries.

For many years the priests were in charge of teaching the law of God to the Israelites; they were the authorities to go to for interpretation or application of the law (Deut. 17:8–13). Unfortunately, the leading priests lost the respect of the people by becoming corrupt. When this happened, many Jews began to respond to the SCRIBES, people who had become experts in God’s law and who usually lived pious, disciplined lives, although many of them were not priests. People began to follow the teaching of the scribes and to let the scribes interpret the law of God for them. The “tradition of the elders” that followed was made up of customs, rulings, and interpretations that the scribes passed on as the authoritative way in which God’s law should be applied.

The Sadducees rejected this approach to authority in favor of the written law of Moses. They felt the original law alone could be trusted. Naturally, they felt Sadducean priests should be the ones to serve as the law’s interpreters.

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or the immortality of the soul, since these doctrines are not mentioned in the law of Moses. Neither did they believe in rewards or punishments handed out after death, as in the doctrines of heaven and hell. Acts 23:8 indicates that they did not believe in angels or spirits, either. They believed in free will—that people are responsible for their own prosperity or misfortune. They interpreted the law literally and tended to support strict justice as opposed to mercy toward the offender.

Only a few references are made to the Sadducees in the New Testament. They opposed the early church (Acts 4:1–3; 5:17–18), much more so than even the Pharisees (Acts 5:34–39; 15:5; 23:6–9). Since the chief priests usually came from among the Sadducees, it is clear that they played a major role in the arrest of Jesus and the preliminary hearing against Him (Mark 14:60–64), and that they urged Pilate to crucify Him (Mark 15:1, 3, 10–11). Jesus warned His disciples about the “leaven”—the “doctrine” or teaching—of the Sadducees (Matt. 16:1–12). John the Baptist was suspicious of their supposed “repentance” (Matt. 3:7–12).

One incident when Jesus clashed with the Sadducees is recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matt. 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40). Apparently one of the favorite sports of the Sadducees was to make fun of their opponents by showing how their beliefs led to ridiculous conclusions. They approached Jesus with a “what if” question, designed to show the absurd consequences that can arise from believing in the resurrection of the dead. “Suppose,” they asked, “a woman had seven husbands in this life, and each of them died without leaving children? Whose wife would she be in the world to come?”

Jesus replied with a two-part answer. First, He said that they were wrong to suggest that earthly relationships, such as marriage, will continue after the resurrection. Second, Jesus pointed out that they were wrong in not believing in the resurrection at all: “Have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt. 22:31–32; also Ex. 3:6, 15–16).

Jesus' argument was that God told Moses that He was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Of course, these three men had died long before the time of Moses. Yet, if they were not "alive" at the time of Moses (that is, if they did not live on after their deaths), then God would not have called Himself their God, for "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must live on if God is still their God; therefore, it is wrong to deny life after death and the resurrection of the dead.

After posing His reasons, Jesus stated that the Sadducees were "greatly mistaken" in their beliefs (Mark 12:27). The multitude who heard Jesus' argument were "astonished at His teaching" (Matt. 22:33) and the Sadducees were "silenced" (Matt. 22:34).

PHARISEES [FARE uh sees] (*separated ones*) — a religious and political party in Palestine in New Testament times. The Pharisees were known for insisting that the law of God be observed as the scribes interpreted it and for their special commitment to keeping the laws of tithing and ritual purity.

The Pharisees had their roots in the group of faithful Jews known as the Hasidim (or Chasidim). The Hasidim arose in the second century B.C. when the influence of HELLENISM on the Jews was particularly strong and many Jews lived little differently than their Gentile neighbors. But the Hasidim insisted on strict observance of Jewish ritual laws.

When the Syrian King ANTIOCHUS IV tried to do away with the Jewish religion, the Hasidim took part in the revolt of the MACCABEES against him. Apparently from this movement of faithful Hasidim came both the Essenes—who later broke off from other Jews and formed their own communities—and the Pharisees, who remained an active part of Jewish life. Indeed, during the period of independence that followed the revolt, some of the Greek rulers who controlled Palestine favored the Pharisaic party.

As a result of this favoritism, Pharisees came to be represented on the SANHEDRIN, the supreme court and legislative body of the Jews. At times, the Pharisees even dominated the assembly. In New Testament times, Pharisees, though probably in the minority, were still an effective part of the Sanhedrin.

One distinctive feature of the Pharisees was their strong commitment to observing the law of God as it was interpreted and applied by the scribes. Although the priests had been responsible for teaching and interpreting the Law (Lev. 10:8–11; Deut. 33:8–10) in Old Testament times, many people had lost all respect for the priests because of the corruption in the Jerusalem priesthood. They looked to the scribes instead to interpret the Law for them. Some scribes were priests; many were not. Still, they lived pious, disciplined lives; and they had been trained to become experts in the Law. It was natural, then, for people to follow their leading rather than that of the priests.

The way in which the Pharisees spelled out the meaning of the Mosaic Law, the ways in which they adapted that Law to suit the needs of their day, the time-honored customs they endorsed—all these became a part of the "tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:3). Although these traditions were not put into writing, they were passed on from one scribe to another and from the scribes to the people. From this tradition, they claimed, the Jewish people could know the way God's law should be observed. The Pharisees agreed, and they were known for supporting and keeping the "tradition of the elders."

The Pharisees also believed it was important to observe all the laws of God, which they taught were 613 in all. But they were especially known for their commitment to keep the laws of tithing and ritual purity.

According to the New Testament, the Pharisees were concerned about strictly interpreting and keeping the law on all matters (Acts 26:5), including the Sabbath (Mark 2:24), divorce (Mark 10:2), oaths (Matt. 23:16–22), the wearing of PHYLACTERIES and FRINGES (Matt. 23:5), and so on. But they showed special zeal in insisting that laws of tithing and ritual purity be kept (Matt. 23:23–26; Mark 7:1–13; Luke 11:37–42; 18:12).

Since Pharisees found that other Jews were not careful enough about keeping those laws, they felt it was necessary to place limits on their contacts with other Jews as well as with Gentiles. For example, they could not eat in the home of a non-Pharisee, since they could not be sure that the food had been properly tithed and kept ritually pure.

Unlike the SADDUCEES, the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection of the dead. On this point, they were on common ground with the early Christians (Acts 23:6–9). The scribe in Mark 12:28 who thought that Jesus had answered the Sadducees well concerning the Resurrection was probably a Pharisee.

The Pharisees and their scribes enjoyed a good deal of popular support. In one way this is surprising, since the Pharisees kept apart from other Jews. They always seemed to be ready to criticize others for not keeping the laws, and they often looked down on “sinners” who showed no interest in God’s law (Mark 2:16; Luke 7:39; 15:2; 18:11).

Still, unlike the Sadducees, who were mostly rich landowners and powerful priests, many Pharisees were ordinary people. And even though other Jews could not be bothered with observing all the details of the Law, they respected the Pharisees for making the effort. Even Paul credited unbelieving Jews with having a “zeal for God” (Rom. 10:2)—even though it was misguided. He probably was thinking primarily of the Pharisees when he wrote these words.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees appear frequently in the accounts of Jesus’ ministry and the history of the early church. In these passages a number of the typical failings of the Pharisees are evident. Of course, not all Pharisees failed in all these points—and the same failings can be found among religious people of any age.

Pharisees observed the Law carefully as far as appearances went, but their hearts were far from God. Their motives were wrong because they wanted human praise (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16; 23:5–7). They also had evil desires that were hidden by their pious show (Matt. 23:25–28). That is why Pharisees are often called hypocrites: their hearts did not match their outward appearance.

The Pharisees thought they could match God’s standards by keeping all the outward rules. Luke 18:9 says they “trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” This can easily happen when people think God’s will is the same thing as their list of what they can and cannot do. Their desire to keep all of God’s laws was commendable, but sometimes they put the emphasis on the wrong places. Minor details became a major preoccupation, and they forgot the more important things (Matt. 23:23).

Finally, because Pharisees thought they were doing their best to keep God’s laws while others were not, they often looked down on such “sinners”—especially people like tax collectors and prostitutes. Religious people need to remember that they, too, are sinners in God’s eyes, and that Christ died for everyone.¹

¹ Youngblood, R. F., Bruce, F. F., & Harrison, R. K., Thomas Nelson Publishers (Eds.). (1995). In *Nelson’s new illustrated Bible dictionary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.