

Study 6: Jewish Sects

Introduction

There were five major “political” parties of the Jews in the New Testament times. We are very familiar with (at least the names of) two of them.

They play quite a prominent part through the book of Acts, and we will take some “time out” from our studies through Acts, to look at them before we progress further through the studies.

Body of the Study

What is a Sect?

Was Christianity regarded as “just another Jewish Sect”?

Josephus’ discussion on the Jewish Sects.

The Pharisees

The Sadducees

The Essenes

The Zealots

The Herodians

Sectarian impact in the New Testament

Homework:

Re-read the notes as a review of this study.

- *Pre-read Acts Chapter 5 in preparation for the next study.*

Notes for study 6: Jewish Sects

Introduction

What is a Sect?

In New Testament times the Jewish religion was divided into different political groups or factions, called *sects*. A sect is defined as:

- “A faction or party within a larger religious group” – *Applied Bible Dictionary*
- “A choosing”; “It properly denotes a predilection either for a particular truth, or for a perversion of one, generally with the expectation of personal advantage;” – *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

A Sect is therefore somewhat like our political parties, each with its own “version” of the truth, and its own “ideals”.

In the same way that having a proper understanding of our modern culture requires us to have an understanding of the political system that underpins it, and the political parties and factions that drive that system, so it is with our understanding of the political backdrop of the New Testament.

Nothing in the Old Testament tells of or suggests the existence of sects, and it is therefore likely that they originated during the inter-testimonial period, during the Maccabean revolt around 150-200 BC. The earliest references to the sects can be found in Josephus (of which there are many, some of the earliest being *Antiquities, Book 13, chapter 5*), and the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees.

Was Christianity regarded as “just another Jewish Sect”?

There is a wide spread theme throughout the New Testament history of the church, that the Jews regarded christianity as another Jewish sect. This is explicitly shown at the close of the book of Acts. Paul arrives in Rome, and immediately gets in contact with the Jewish leaders there. He had been accused and pursued by the Jews in Judea, which resulted in his arrest and his imprisoned trip to Rome. The response of the Roman Jews to Paul is quite revealing:

AC 28:21 They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. ²² But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect."

The first revelation is that after Paul had left Judea, the Jews there thought they were rid of him, and didn't bother pursuing him as he went to Rome. Their focus was obviously based in Jerusalem – the centre of Jewish activities. Not only did they not write to the Jewish leaders in Rome, but none of the people who came there had anything bad to say about Paul!

Secondly, the reputation of Christianity had spread as far as Rome, and it was such a big issue that it was spoken about everywhere.

Thirdly, as far as the Jews were concerned, there was nothing spoken about in favour of christianity, but “everywhere it was spoken against”. This tells us a lot about the Jews' closed minds, and their preconceived idea that the Jewish Law was the ultimate revelation of God, and “We are right with God, because we are descendants of Abraham” (Jn 3:39).

Fourthly, The Jews in Rome had an open and fair mind, in that they were prepared to listen to Paul. Later verses tell us that Paul had a continuous stream of people coming to his house to listen to what he had to say.

Fifthly, we see here that “brothers” is not a term confined to Christian brethren, but the Jews regarded other Jews as “brothers”. The context here shows that these people were *not* Jews who had become Christians, and so the term is really “fellow Jews”. There are several other

places in the NT where such terms occur, but the context here is clear, and makes the interpretation of other passages much clearer.

Finally and in the context of this study, the Jews regarded Christianity as just another Jewish sect. (We've got the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Zealots, so we might as well have the Christians as a sect as well!). This leads to much of what is written about in the NT about the Judaisers, who were insisting that people become a Jew first if they wanted to be a Christian – an issue that permeates almost every book of the New Testament from Acts onwards.

Josephus' discussion on the Jewish Sects.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us quite a bit about three of the sects in his description of the destruction of Jerusalem, known as *The Wars of the Jews*.

Wars 2:8:2

See attachment

Antiq 13:5:9

Pharisees say that some (but not all) actions are the work of fate, and some are the result of human action. The Essenes believe that fate governs all things, and man can have no influence over the outcomes. The Sadducees say that there is no such thing as fate, and all actions are under man's control, so that whatever happens to us are of our own making.

Antiq 18:1:2

The Pharisees are described as living frugally, despising delicacies in their diet, following "reason" earnestly and with striving, respecting the aged. They believe in the immortality of the soul, and reward and punishment beyond this life.

The Sadducees believe that the soul dies with the body, and only practice what the (written) law requires, and most often become compromised to the Pharisees doctrine because of the pressures of the people.

The Essenes believe that all things are best ascribed to God, that souls are immortal, that the reward of righteousness should be earnestly striven for. It seems that they did not go to the temple often, and did not offer sacrifices when they did, believing that their own areas of worship were "purer". They shared all of the things that they had, which resulted in equality between the rich and poor. They did not marry (which is why the sect was not large, and died out), and numbered about 4,000 men.

The Zealots were formed by Judas the Galilean, and mostly agree with the Pharisees, but have a zealous (hence the name) drive for liberty (free from Roman rule). They do not value dying and are not afraid to suffer pain.

The Pharisees

Literally, Pharisees are "the separated ones"¹ The apostle Paul was a Pharisee, and the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). He further tells us that the Pharisees were the most conservative sect of the Jewish religion (Acts 26:5).

They were a religious rather than a political party, but nevertheless looked for the Messiah to come and lead the fight against Rome. The more learned of the sect were called scribes, but not all the Pharisees were scribes.²

The Sadducees

The Sadducees were liberal theologians, cultured aristocrats, and smooth politicians. They were the priestly class, although not all priests were Sadducees, as many did not have the wealth or culture. They were moved by policy continually, and usually adopted the principles of the Pharisees when they secured an official position. They denied the existence of angels

¹ Foster, R.C. "Studies in the Life of Christ", ISBN 0-89900-644-2; Chapter 8, p 44

² Ibid.

and the resurrection, and refuted the traditions of the Elders (the Oral Law) that was treasured by the Pharisees. They were influential in the Sanhedrin, and had a practical monopoly of the High Priesthood. In their attitude towards the bible, their program, and policies, they were the counterpart of the “modernists” of today.³ (Modernists are more interested in meaning and metaphor than in a literal interpretation of the text.)

The Essenes

The Essenes lived in Syria and Palestine. At first they lived in villages and avoided cities so as to escape the contamination of evil. They were pacifists, pursued agriculture, despised slavery, and lived in colonies sharing all that they had.

The Essenes are not mentioned in the New Testament, possibly because they seldom came to Jerusalem, and lived apart from the rest of society like hermits. Consequently they did not engage in combat activities with the works of Jesus – such as brought the Pharisees and Sadducees into prominence.⁴

Much of what has been learned about the Essenes has resulted from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the former Qumran community in 1947. The sect was founded by the otherwise unknown “Teacher of Righteousness” about 165 BC, and lasted until AD 68 when it was destroyed in the Jewish revolt against the Romans. They saw themselves as the true people of God, and the other Jews (including the Temple in Jerusalem) as His enemies. They lived a monastic lifestyle in the desert, in strict discipline waiting for the coming Messiahs (the priestly Messiah of Aaron and the royal Messiah of Israel).⁵

Whilst they are regarded as a conservative sect by some, others regard them as “an apostate sect which rejected many of the central teachings of the Old Testament.”⁶ JB Lightfoot declares that Josephus “says plainly that they addressed prayers to the sun, and it is difficult to suppose that he has wantonly introduced a dash of paganism into his picture; nor indeed was there any adequate motive for his doing so”⁷. Foster also notes “It may be added that the fact of Josephus’ having lived among the Essenes and observed most carefully their practice gives added weight to his testimony.”⁸

The Zealots

Called the “fourth sect of Jewish Philosophy” by Josephus, they were political extremists who favoured revolution to overcome Roman rule. Their cry was “No tribute to Caesar; no king but Jehovah; no tax but the temple tax.”⁹

They were also called Cananaean’s or Galilaean’s as they were founded by Judas of Galilee when the Romans introduced a poll-tax in AD 6. Ultimately, the great Jewish revolt against the Romans was provoked by the Zealots in AD 66, and resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The Herodians

These were a political party devoted to the Herod family, and eager to restore them to full power. They are mentioned in the NT in Mt 22:16, Mk 3:6, and Mk 12:13.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ The New Lion Handbook to the Bible – Jewish Religion in NT times

⁶ Foster, Ibid p 310

⁷ Lightfoot commentary on Colossians, pp 349-419; quoted from Foster, Ibid p 311

⁸ Foster, Ibid p 311

⁹ Foster Ibid p 46

Sectarian impact in the New Testament

Whilst the minor sects (Herodians, Essenes, and Zealots) are hardly (if at all) mentioned in the New Testament, much of the gospel writing outlines the clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Sadducees occupied the prominent political position in controlling the Sanhedrin. They saw Jesus as a political threat – especially given the crowds that were following Him. Their challenges to Him were not based on doctrinal issues, but rather were attempts to trap Him showing Him as a false teacher, by doing so undermining His power. They came to Jesus and asked Him about the resurrection “...*That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ²⁴ "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. ²⁵ Now there were seven brothers ... ²⁸ Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?" ²⁹ Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.... ³¹ But about the resurrection of the dead--have you not read what God said to you, ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' ? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."*” (Mt 22:23-32 NIV).

Their question was aimed at trapping Jesus. They didn't believe in the resurrection, and were trying to score a point. Jesus showed from the scriptures, that although they were in a position of power in the Sanhedrin, they didn't even understand the scriptures that they were supposed to be administering.

On the other hand, the Pharisees were motivated by strict adherence to the Law of Moses, and challenged Jesus' teaching because they didn't perceive Him conforming to it. Jesus challenged them “...*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel...*” (Mt 23:23-24 NIV).

In a similar way, they accused Jesus and His disciples of not keeping the Sabbath when He healed a lame man (Jn 5:9), and made a blind man to see (Jn 9:14). They totally ignored the *sign* (what was done) that proved He was from God. They were more concerned about Jesus having done things on the Sabbath day. Likewise, they brought a woman caught in the very act of adultery to Jesus (Jn 8:3 - 11) and asked Him what they should do (The Law said to stone her to death). Yet, they had failed to bring the man along, when the Law said that they *both* should be stoned to death.

These examples help us to understand the motivations of both of these sects. Yet, on every occasion, Jesus is the master over both the political players (the Sadducees) and the legalists (the Pharisees). He respected their position and authority, without condoning their practices and their perversion of the Law.

“...*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ² "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.' ...”* (Mt 23:1-7 NIV)

JOSEPHUS, WARS OF THE JEWS: BOOK 2 CHAPTER 8.

Archelaus's Ethnarchy Is Reduced Into A [Roman] Province. The Sedition Of Judas Of Galilee. The Three Sects.

1. And now Archelaus's part of Judea was reduced into a province, and Coponius, one of the equestrian order among the Romans, was sent as a procurator, having the power of [life and] death put into his hands by Caesar. Under his administration it was that a certain Galilean, whose name was Judas, prevailed with his countrymen to revolt, and said they were cowards if they would endure to pay a tax to the Romans and would after God submit to mortal men as their lords. This man was a teacher of a peculiar sect of his own, and was not at all like the rest of those their leaders.

2. For there are three philosophical sects among the Jews. The followers of the first of which are the Pharisees; of the second, the Sadducees; and the third sect, which pretends to a severer discipline, are called Essens. These last are Jews by birth, and seem to have a greater affection for one another than the other sects have. These Essens reject pleasures as an evil, but esteem continence, and the conquest over our passions, to be virtue. They neglect wedlock, but choose out other persons children, while they are pliable, and fit for learning, and esteem them to be of their kindred, and form them according to their own manners. They do not absolutely deny the fitness of marriage, and the succession of mankind thereby continued; but they guard against the lascivious behavior of women, and are persuaded that none of them preserve their fidelity to one man.

3. These men are despisers of riches, and so very communicative as raises our admiration. Nor is there any one to be found among them who hath more than another; for it is a law among them, that those who come to them must let what they have be common to the whole order, — insomuch that among them all there is no appearance of poverty, or excess of riches, but every one's possessions are intermingled with every other's possessions; and so there is, as it were, one patrimony among all the brethren. They think that oil is a defilement; and if any one of them be anointed without his own approbation, it is wiped off his body; for they think to be sweaty is a good thing, as they do also to be clothed in white garments. They also have stewards appointed to take care of their common affairs, who every one of them have no separate business for any, but what is for the uses of them all.

4. They have no one certain city, but many of them dwell in every city; and if any of their sect come from other places, what they have lies open for them, just as if it were their own; and they go in to such as they never knew before, as if they had been ever so long acquainted with them. For which reason they carry nothing at all with them when they travel into remote parts, though still they take their weapons with them, for fear of thieves. Accordingly, there is, in every city where they live, one appointed particularly to take care of strangers, and to provide garments and other necessaries for them. But the habit and management of their bodies is such as children use who are in fear of their masters. Nor do they allow of the change of or of shoes till be first torn to pieces, or worn out by time. Nor do they either buy or sell any thing to one another; but every one of them gives what he hath to him that wanteth it, and receives from him again in lieu of it what may be convenient for himself; and although there be no requital made, they are fully allowed to take what they want of whomsoever they please.

5. And as for their piety towards God, it is very extraordinary; for before sun-rising they speak not a word about profane matters, but put up certain prayers which they have received from their forefathers, as if they made a supplication for its rising. After this every one of them are sent away by their curators, to exercise some of those arts wherein they are skilled, in which they labor with great diligence till the fifth hour. After which they assemble themselves together again into one place; and when they have clothed themselves in white veils, they then bathe their bodies in cold water. And after this purification is over, they every one meet together in an apartment of their own, into which it is not permitted to any of another sect to enter; while they go, after a pure manner, into the dining-room, as into a certain holy temple, and quietly set themselves down; upon which the baker lays them loaves in order; the cook also brings a single plate of one sort of food, and sets it before every one of them; but a priest says grace before meat; and it is unlawful for any one to taste of the food before grace be said. The same priest, when he hath dined, says grace again after meat; and when they begin, and when they end, they praise God, as he that bestows their food upon them; after which they lay aside their [white] garments, and betake themselves to their labors again till the evening; then they return home to supper, after the same manner; and if there be any strangers there, they sit down with them. Nor is there ever any clamor or disturbance to pollute their house, but they give every one leave to speak in their turn; which silence thus kept in their house appears to foreigners like some tremendous mystery; the cause of which is that perpetual sobriety they exercise, and the same settled measure of meat and drink that is allotted them, and that such as is abundantly sufficient for them.

6. And truly, as for other things, they do nothing but according to the injunctions of their curators; only these two things are done among them at everyone's own free-will, which are to assist those that want it, and to show mercy; for they are permitted of their own accord to afford succor to such as deserve it, when they stand in need of it, and to bestow food on those that are in distress; but they cannot give any thing to their kindred without the curators. They dispense their anger after a just manner, and restrain their passion. They are eminent for fidelity, and are the ministers of peace; whatsoever they say also is firmer than an oath; but swearing is avoided by them, and they esteem it worse than perjury (4) for they say that he who cannot be believed without [swearing by] God is already condemned. They also take great pains in studying the writings of the ancients, and choose out of them what is most for the advantage of their soul and body; and they inquire after such roots and medicinal stones as may cure their distempers.

7. But now if any one hath a mind to come over to their sect, he is not immediately admitted, but he is prescribed the same method of living which they use for a year, while he continues excluded; and they give him also a small hatchet, and the fore-mentioned girdle, and the white garment. And when he hath given evidence, during that time, that he can observe their continence, he approaches nearer to their way of living, and is made a partaker of the waters of purification; yet is he not even now admitted to live with them; for after this demonstration of his fortitude, his temper is tried two more years; and if he appear to be worthy, they then admit him into their society. And before he is allowed to touch their common food, he is obliged to take tremendous oaths, that, in the first place, he will exercise piety towards God, and then that he will observe justice towards men, and that he will do no harm to any one, either of his own accord, or by the command of others; that he will always hate the wicked, and be assistant to the righteous; that he will ever show fidelity to all men, and especially to those in authority, because no one obtains the government without God's assistance; and that if he be in authority, he will at no time whatever abuse his authority, nor endeavor to outshine his subjects either in his garments, or any other finery; that he will be perpetually a lover of truth, and propose to himself to reprove those that tell lies; that he will keep his hands clear from theft, and his soul from unlawful gains; and that he will neither conceal any thing from those of his own sect, nor discover any of their doctrines to others, no, not though anyone should compel him so to do at the hazard of his life. Moreover, he swears to communicate their doctrines to no one any otherwise than as he received them himself; that he will abstain from robbery, and will equally preserve the books belonging to their sect, and the names of the angels (5) [or messengers]. These are the oaths by which they secure their proselytes to themselves.

8. But for those that are caught in any heinous sins, they cast them out of their society; and he who is thus separated from them does often die after a miserable manner; for as he is bound by the oath he hath taken, and by the customs he hath been engaged in, he is not at liberty to partake of that food that he meets with elsewhere, but is forced to eat grass, and to famish his body with hunger, till he perish; for which reason they receive many of them again when they are at their last gasp, out of compassion to them, as thinking the miseries they have endured till they came to the very brink of death to be a sufficient punishment for the sins they had been guilty of.

9. But in the judgments they exercise they are most accurate and just, nor do they pass sentence by the votes of a court that is fewer than a hundred. And as to what is once determined by that number, it is unalterable. What they most of all honor, after God himself, is the name of their legislator [Moses], whom if any one blaspheme he is punished capitally. They also think it a good thing to obey their elders, and the major part. Accordingly, if ten of them be sitting together, no one of them will speak while the other nine are against it. They also avoid spitting in the midst of them, or on the right side. Moreover, they are stricter than any other of the Jews in resting from their labors on the seventh day; for they not only get their food ready the day before, that they may not be obliged to kindle a fire on that day, but they will not remove any vessel out of its place, nor go to stool thereon. Nay, on other days they dig a small pit, a foot deep, with a paddle (which kind of hatchet is given them when they are first admitted among them); and covering themselves round with their garment, that they may not affront the Divine rays of light, they ease themselves into that pit, after which they put the earth that was dug out again into the pit; and even this they do only in the more lonely places, which they choose out for this purpose; and although this easement of the body be natural, yet it is a rule with them to wash themselves after it, as if it were a defilement to them.

10. Now after the time of their preparatory trial is over, they are parted into four classes; and so far are the juniors inferior to the seniors, that if the seniors should be touched by the juniors, they must wash themselves, as if they had intermixed themselves with the company of a foreigner. They are long-lived also, insomuch that many of them live above a hundred years, by means of the simplicity of their diet; nay, as I think, by means of the regular course of life they observe also. They condemn the miseries of life, and are above pain, by the generosity of their mind. And as for death, if it will be for their glory,

they esteem it better than living always; and indeed our war with the Romans gave abundant evidence what great souls they had in their trials, wherein, although they were tortured and distorted, burnt and torn to pieces, and went through all kinds of instruments of torment, that they might be forced either to blaspheme their legislator, or to eat what was forbidden them, yet could they not be made to do either of them, no, nor once to flatter their tormentors, or to shed a tear; but they smiled in their very pains, and laughed those to scorn who inflicted the torments upon them, and resigned up their souls with great alacrity, as expecting to receive them again.

11. For their doctrine is this: That bodies are corruptible, and that the matter they are made of is not permanent; but that the souls are immortal, and continue for ever; and that they come out of the most subtile air, and are united to their bodies as to prisons, into which they are drawn by a certain natural enticement; but that when they are set free from the bonds of the flesh, they then, as released from a long bondage, rejoice and mount upward. And this is like the opinions of the Greeks, that good souls have their habitations beyond the ocean, in a region that is neither oppressed with storms of rain or snow, or with intense heat, but that this place is such as is refreshed by the gentle breathing of a west wind, that is perpetually blowing from the ocean; while they allot to bad souls a dark and tempestuous den, full of never-ceasing punishments. And indeed the Greeks seem to me to have followed the same notion, when they allot the islands of the blessed to their brave men, whom they call heroes and demi-gods; and to the souls of the wicked, the region of the ungodly, in Hades, where their fables relate that certain persons, such as Sisyphus, and Tantalus, and Ixion, and Tityus, are punished; which is built on this first supposition, that souls are immortal; and thence are those exhortations to virtue and dehortations from wickedness collected; whereby good men are bettered in the conduct of their life by the hope they have of reward after their death; and whereby the vehement inclinations of bad men to vice are restrained, by the fear and expectation they are in, that although they should lie concealed in this life, they should suffer immortal punishment after their death. These are the Divine doctrines of the Essens (6) about the soul, which lay an unavoidable bait for such as have once had a taste of their philosophy.

12. There are also those among them who undertake to foretell things to come, (7) by reading the holy books, and using several sorts of purifications, and being perpetually conversant in the discourses of the prophets; and it is but seldom that they miss in their predictions.

13. Moreover, there is another order of Essens, (8) who agree with the rest as to their way of living, and customs, and laws, but differ from them in the point of marriage, as thinking that by not marrying they cut off the principal part of human life, which is the prospect of succession; nay, rather, that if all men should be of the same opinion, the whole race of mankind would fail. However, they try their spouses for three years; and if they find that they have their natural purgations thrice, as trials that they are likely to be fruitful, they then actually marry them. But they do not use to accompany with their wives when they are with child, as a demonstration that they do not marry out of regard to pleasure, but for the sake of posterity. Now the women go into the baths with some of their garments on, as the men do with somewhat girded about them. And these are the customs of this order of Essens.

14. But then as to the two other orders at first mentioned, the Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws, and introduce the first sect. These ascribe all to fate [or providence], and to God, and yet allow, that to act what is right, or the contrary, is principally in the power of men, although fate does co-operate in every action. They say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are removed into other bodies, — but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment. But the Sadducees are those that compose the second order, and take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men's own choice, and that the one or the other belongs so to every one, that they may act as they please. They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades. Moreover, the Pharisees are friendly to one another, and are for the exercise of concord, and regard for the public; but the behavior of the Sadducees one towards another is in some degree wild, and their conversation with those that are of their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them. And this is what I had to say concerning the philosophic sects among the Jews.