

“At the beginning of the Christian era, Judaism was divided into many different groups.”

Introduction

During the late Second Temple period, particularly in the first century CE, Judaism was characterised by considerable internal diversity. Rather than forming a single unified religious system, Jewish society contained several distinct groups that differed in their interpretation of the Torah, their understanding of religious authority, and their responses to the political realities of Roman rule. The most prominent of these groups were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots. Evidence for these movements comes primarily from the writings of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, the New Testament, and the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran.¹ Together these sources reveal that Judaism at the beginning of the Christian era was complex and internally divided.

Nevertheless, despite these differences, these groups remained rooted in a shared Jewish tradition centred on the Torah, the Temple and the covenant between God and Israel. Modern historians therefore generally interpret them not as separate religions but as competing interpretations of Judaism within the same religious framework.² This essay evaluates the statement that Judaism was divided into many different groups by examining the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots, demonstrating both the diversity and the underlying unity of Jewish religious life during the first century CE.

Historical Context of Sectarian Judaism

The emergence of Jewish sects during the Second Temple period must be understood within its broader historical context. Following the return from Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, Jewish religious life centred on the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. However, the political control of Judea changed several times in subsequent centuries as the region came under Persian, Hellenistic and eventually Roman authority.

The Maccabean revolt in the second century BCE against Seleucid rule played a particularly important role in shaping later Jewish divisions. The Hasmonean rulers who emerged from this revolt combined both political leadership and the high priesthood, a

¹ Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 79–81.

² E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. 318–320.

development that many Jews regarded as illegitimate.³ This combination of religious and political authority created tensions that contributed to the formation of different groups within Judaism, each claiming to represent the true interpretation of the law and the proper leadership of Israel.

By the first century CE, Judea was firmly under Roman rule. Jewish society faced significant political and religious pressures, including taxation, foreign administration and disputes regarding the authority of the Temple priesthood. Different Jewish groups responded to these challenges in distinct ways. Some emphasised strict interpretation of the law, others cooperated with Roman authorities, while some withdrew from society or advocated violent resistance. These responses shaped the identities of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees were among the most influential religious groups in first-century Judaism. Josephus describes them as a respected group known for their expertise in interpreting the law and their influence among the people.⁴ Their authority derived not from priestly office but from their role as teachers and interpreters of the Torah.

One of the defining features of Pharisaic belief was their acceptance of both the written Torah and a body of oral traditions that interpreted and expanded upon the law. These traditions later formed the foundation of rabbinic Judaism and were eventually recorded in the Mishnah. By emphasising the interpretation of the law in everyday life, the Pharisees effectively extended religious observance beyond the Temple into ordinary Jewish society.⁵

Theologically, the Pharisees held several beliefs that distinguished them from other groups. Josephus reports that they believed in the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead.⁶ The New Testament confirms this distinction, noting that the Sadducees denied these doctrines while the Pharisees accepted them.⁷

The Pharisees were typically drawn from educated lay classes rather than the priestly elite. Their influence therefore extended through teaching and interpretation rather than Temple authority. E. P. Sanders argues that the Pharisees helped transform Judaism by

³ Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, pp. 96–100.

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII.1.3.

⁵ Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, pp. 414–420.

⁶ Josephus, *Jewish War*, II.8.14.

⁷ Acts 23:8.

emphasising the observance of the law in everyday life rather than focusing exclusively on Temple ritual.⁸

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are often portrayed as opponents of Jesus. However, many modern scholars argue that this portrayal reflects later conflicts between early Christians and Jewish authorities rather than an accurate depiction of Pharisaic Judaism. Indeed, Jesus' method of interpreting scripture and engaging in legal debate closely resembles the style of Pharisaic teaching.

The Sadducees

The Sadducees represented a very different social and religious group. They were closely associated with the Temple priesthood and the aristocratic elite of Jerusalem. Their authority derived largely from their control of Temple rituals and their influence within the political leadership of Judea.

Josephus describes the Sadducees as a relatively small but powerful group composed primarily of wealthy families.⁹ Because of their political position, they often cooperated with Roman authorities in order to maintain stability and preserve their own influence.

One of the most significant differences between the Sadducees and the Pharisees concerned their interpretation of religious authority. The Sadducees recognised only the written Torah as authoritative and rejected the oral traditions accepted by the Pharisees.¹⁰ As a result, they also rejected certain theological doctrines that were not explicitly found in the Torah.

Most notably, the Sadducees denied the doctrine of resurrection and rejected the existence of angels and spirits. This disagreement is reflected in both Josephus' writings and the New Testament.¹¹ In the Gospel of Mark, for example, the Sadducees challenge Jesus with a question concerning resurrection precisely because they did not believe in it.¹²

The power of the Sadducees was closely tied to the Temple institution. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 CE during the Jewish revolt, the Sadducean leadership lost its primary source of authority and gradually disappeared from Jewish history.

⁸ Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, pp. 423–425.

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII.1.4.

¹⁰ Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, p. 124.

¹¹ Josephus, *Jewish War*, II.8.14.

¹² Mark 12:18.

The Essenes

The Essenes formed another distinctive movement within Judaism. Unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, they adopted a separatist lifestyle and withdrew from mainstream Jewish society. Josephus describes them as a disciplined community devoted to communal living, shared property and strict moral conduct.¹³

Many scholars associate the Essenes with the community at Qumran, which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. These texts reveal a group that believed it represented the true covenant community of Israel. The Qumran community viewed the Jerusalem Temple leadership as corrupt and expected an imminent apocalyptic conflict between the forces of good and evil.¹⁴

Members of this community followed strict rules governing purity, daily conduct and religious observance. New members were required to undergo a lengthy initiation process before being admitted into full membership. Some Essenes also practiced celibacy and rejected participation in Temple rituals.

The Essenes therefore represent an example of sectarian division arising from disputes over religious authority. By withdrawing from Jerusalem and forming isolated communities, they demonstrated their rejection of the Temple leadership controlled by the Sadducees.

The Zealots

While the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes were primarily religious movements, the Zealots were more directly political in character. They emerged as a movement committed to resisting Roman rule and restoring Jewish independence.

Josephus refers to them as the “fourth philosophy” of Judaism, founded by Judas of Galilee during the Roman census of 6 CE.¹⁵ According to Josephus, the Zealots believed that God alone should be recognised as the ruler of Israel and that submission to Roman authority was unacceptable.

This ideology reflected a strong form of Jewish religious nationalism. The Zealots believed that foreign domination violated Israel’s covenant with God and that resistance was therefore a religious duty.

¹³ Josephus, *Jewish War*, II.120–161.

¹⁴ Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 52–60.

¹⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII.1.1.

The movement played a major role in the outbreak of the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66 CE. Radical factions eventually seized control of Jerusalem and fought against Roman forces. The conflict ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE.

Some Zealot fighters continued their resistance at the fortress of Masada until 73 CE. Josephus records that the defenders ultimately chose mass suicide rather than surrender to Roman forces.¹⁶ The Zealots therefore demonstrate how political and religious tensions could combine to produce radical responses to Roman domination.

Assessing the Diversity of Early Judaism

The existence of these groups demonstrates the significant diversity within Judaism during the first century CE. Their differences can be observed in several areas.

First, they held contrasting theological beliefs. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, angels and oral law, whereas the Sadducees rejected these doctrines. The Essenes developed an apocalyptic worldview centred on divine judgment, while the Zealots emphasised the political sovereignty of God.

Second, these groups differed in their relationship to political power. The Sadducees cooperated with Roman authorities in order to preserve their position within the Temple hierarchy. The Pharisees focused primarily on teaching and interpreting the law. The Essenes withdrew from society to form separatist religious communities, while the Zealots actively opposed Roman rule through armed rebellion.

Third, these movements reflected different social backgrounds. The Sadducees were associated with the wealthy priestly elite, the Pharisees with educated lay scholars, the Essenes with ascetic communal groups, and the Zealots with revolutionary nationalists.

Despite these differences, it is important to recognise that these groups still shared a common Jewish identity. They all accepted the authority of the Hebrew scriptures and understood themselves as members of the covenant people of Israel. Consequently, historians generally interpret them as competing interpretations of Judaism rather than completely separate religions.¹⁷

Conclusion

The claim that Judaism at the beginning of the Christian era was divided into many different groups is strongly supported by historical evidence. The Pharisees,

¹⁶ Josephus, *Jewish War*, VII.320–406.

¹⁷ Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, pp. 480–482.

Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots each represented distinct responses to the religious and political challenges of the late Second Temple period.

These groups differed in their interpretation of the law, their theological beliefs and their attitudes toward Roman rule. The Pharisees emphasised legal interpretation and oral tradition, the Sadducees controlled the Temple priesthood and rejected certain doctrines, the Essenes formed separatist communities devoted to strict religious discipline, and the Zealots promoted militant resistance against Roman authority.

However, despite these differences, they remained part of a shared Jewish religious tradition centred on the Torah and the covenant with God. Rather than representing entirely separate religions, these movements illustrate the dynamic and pluralistic character of Judaism in the first century CE. Understanding this diversity is essential for interpreting the historical context in which early Christianity emerged and in which the major political conflicts of the first century eventually unfolded.

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