

Jewish Religious Sects

at the time of Jesus

Pharisees

- means the “separate ones”
- upheld tradition and Scriptures
- usually middle class, artisans
- teachers and preachers of the Law (Torah)
- controlled every phase of Jewish daily life
- taught in the synagogues
- hoped for Messiah, King and Kingdom
- believed in the prophets’ writings which nourished a Messianic hope
- believed in resurrection and future world
- often arrogant, pious, self-righteous, hypocritical, spiritually dull
- plotted Jesus’ death
- Paul, Nicodemus, and Jairus were Pharisees

Sadducees

- from aristocratic, wealthy families
- controlled Temple worship
- accepted only written Law (Torah)
- rejected oral law and prophets
- denied existence of angels and saints
- denied resurrection or any afterlife
- held power in the Sanhedrin
- hostile to Jesus’ movement
- “high priest” of the Temple came only from this sect
- rigid, narrow-minded, conservative
- wanted to keep status quo
- maintained their position as long as they worked with the Romans (chief priests belonged to this party)
- this sect died out with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE

Scribes

- some sat on the Sanhedrin
- their job was to study, preserve Jewish Law
- copied and edited all Scripture; taught and interpreted the law
- they were not paid; had to have another job
- most were Pharisees
- held the seat of honor in a synagogue
- represented a distinctive class in the community
- Gamaliel was a Pharisee and scribe
- professional lawyers—interrogated Jesus on certain points of the law
- they were venerated with reverential awe and respect
- their words had sovereign authority

Essenes

- lived in communes; withdrew from the world
- became monks: believed in purity, no marriage, gave up worldly goods
- opposed slavery, war, animal sacrifice
- copied the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in 1947 in caves near Qumran