

Dr. Anthony Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 10, The Jewish Sects

Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Anthony Tomasino examines the **various Jewish sects** that existed before the time of Jesus, primarily using the historian **Josephus** as a guide. While the Jewish people were united by "non-negotiables" like **monotheism, circumcision, and the Torah**, they were divided into groups such as the **Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes**. Josephus framed these groups as **philosophical schools** to appeal to a Roman audience, highlighting their differing views on **free will, the afterlife, and spiritual intervention**. Beyond these well-known sects, the text explores the **Samaritans, the Dead Sea Scrolls community**, and a revolutionary "fourth philosophy" that incited revolt against Rome. Ultimately, the source emphasizes that these organized groups represented only a **small minority** of the total Jewish population, most of whom lived without strict sectarian labels. The primary friction between these factions often centered on **orthopraxis**, or the specific details of religious practice, rather than just abstract theological beliefs.

Briefing Document:

The Jewish Sects and the Foundations of Unity Before Jesus

Executive Summary

The Jewish religious landscape during the second temple period was characterized by a fundamental tension between core "non-negotiable" tenets and intense sectarian diversity. While the vast majority of the Jewish population—estimated at nearly one million throughout the Mediterranean—did not belong to a specific sect, the groups described by the historian Josephus (Pharisees, Sadducees, and

Essenes) exerted significant influence on the theological and political trajectory of the nation.

Critical Takeaways:

- **Defining Unity:** Jewish identity was anchored in four non-negotiables: Monotheism, Circumcision, the authority of the Laws of Moses (Torah), and the legitimacy of the Jerusalem Temple.
- **The Nature of Dissent:** Disagreements among sects were primarily focused on *orthopraxis* (correct practice) rather than *orthodoxy* (correct belief). Differences in ritual purity and liturgical calendars were more divisive than fundamental dogmatic disagreements regarding the afterlife.
- **Sectarian Demographics:** Formal members of sects constituted a tiny minority—approximately 15,000 individuals—of the total Jewish population.
- **Interpretative Frameworks:** Josephus intentionally framed these sects as "philosophies" to make Jewish social divisions intelligible to a Roman audience familiar with Stoicism and Epicureanism.

The Non-Negotiables of Jewish Unity

Before examining the sources of disunity, it is essential to identify the elements that constituted the "broad umbrella" of Judaism. These were the non-negotiables that defined a "true Jew" in the eyes of the community.

The Four Pillars of Faith

Pillar	Description
Monotheism	Belief in one God, reinforced daily through the recitation of the <i>Shema</i> ("Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one").
Circumcision	The physical sign of the covenant. While some Hellenized Jews or followers of Philo attempted to spiritualize the practice, it remained a literal requirement for communal belonging.

The Laws of Moses All Jews accepted the Torah as binding holy scripture, though they differed radically in how those laws were interpreted.

The Jerusalem Temple Recognized as the primary site for animal sacrifice and the dwelling place of God. Rejection of the Jerusalem Temple (as seen with the Samaritans) generally resulted in exclusion from the Jewish community.

Detailed Analysis of the Primary Sects

Josephus identifies four "philosophies" among the Jews, likely aligning them with Roman categories to demonstrate Jewish intellectual sophistication.

1. The Pharisees

The Pharisees were the most popular group among the masses and are considered the progenitors of Rabbinic Judaism.

- **Etymology:** The name likely derives from the Hebrew *paras*, meaning "to separate." This may refer to their separation from impurity or their role in making meticulous distinctions in the law.
- **Interpretation:** They were "liberal" interpreters of Scripture, meaning they were not bound to the literal text. They utilized oral traditions and storytelling to expand upon the Torah.
- **The "Hedge" Around the Law:** A central Pharisaic precept was to build a "hedge" of traditional rules around biblical laws to prevent even an accidental violation (e.g., forbidding a scribe to carry a quill on the Sabbath to prevent the temptation of working).
- **Key Beliefs:** They believed in the resurrection of the dead, the existence of spirits/angels, and a balance between free will and divine providence (all things are foreseen, but humans must choose).

2. The Sadducees

The Sadducees represented the conservative, upper-class elite, often associated with the high priesthood and temple administration.

- **Etymology:** Likely linked to "Zadok," the high priest of the Solomonic line.
- **Literalism:** They were conservative interpreters who rejected oral traditions and expansions on the text, sticking as closely as possible to the literal meaning of the Torah.
- **Theological Rejections:** They famously rejected the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and the intervention of spirits, arguing these ideas were not found in the Books of Moses.
- **Free Will:** According to Josephus, they believed entirely in free will and rejected the idea of divine predestination. They viewed wealth as a sign of God's favor for their works in the present life.

3. The Essenes

The Essenes were an ascetic group focused on stern discipline and community life.

- **Lifestyle:** They were noted for eschewing physical comforts, practicing celibacy (though one branch allowed marriage), and rejecting the ownership of slaves.
- **Prophecy and Astrology:** They were regarded as the most accurate interpreters of prophetic oracles and used astrology and herbs in their practices.
- **Afterlife and Fate:** Unlike the Pharisees' belief in bodily resurrection, the Essenes believed in a spiritual afterlife where the soul travels to a "realm of the blessed." They held a strong view of predestination, rejecting free will.

4. The Fourth Philosophy (The "Zealots")

Josephus describes a fourth group that shared Pharisaic religious views but was defined by a radical political stance.

- **Tenet:** An "unconquerable thirst for freedom," refusing to recognize anyone as king except God.
- **Historical Impact:** This group is credited with inciting the great revolt against Rome. Josephus portrays them as the "black sheep" responsible for the eventual destruction of the nation.

The Sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls

While often associated with the Essenes, the community at Qumran (founded by the "Teacher of Righteousness") exhibited distinct characteristics that suggest they were a separate entity or a specific sub-sect.

- **Comparison with Essenes:**
 - **Marriage:** The Dead Sea Scrolls contain specific instructions on marriage and finding a wife, whereas many Essenes were celibate.
 - **Pacifism:** Unlike the pacifism often attributed to Essenes by Philo, the Qumran sect prepared for a violent, bloody "holy war" to overthrow Roman rule and corrupt Jerusalem leadership.
 - **Slavery:** The scrolls discuss the treatment of slaves, whereas Philo claims Essenes rejected slavery entirely.
- **Primary Grievances:** As detailed in the document **4QMMT** (*Miqsat Ma'ase Hatorah*), the sect broke away from the main Jewish body primarily over the **liturgical calendar** (observing festivals on different days) and specific purity rituals, such as the proper way to pour water during hand-washing.

Conclusion: Orthopraxis vs. Orthodoxy

The sources reveal that for the Jews of the first century, **orthopraxis** (correct action) was more significant than **orthodoxy** (correct belief). The community could tolerate massive theological divides regarding the nature of the afterlife or the extent of free will. However, disagreements over how to wash one's hands or which day to celebrate a festival were seen as legitimate grounds for sectarian separation. Ultimately, these groups represented a tiny percentage of the Jewish population, most of whom identified simply as Jews, adhering to the core non-negotiables while remaining outside formal sectarian structures.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Jewish Sects and the Diversity of Second Temple Judaism

This study guide provides a comprehensive review of the religious and political landscape of Judaism before and during the time of Jesus, focusing on the various sects described by the historian Josephus and other historical sources.

Quiz: Short Answer Questions

1. Why does the historian Josephus refer to the different Jewish sects as "philosophies"?
2. What were the four "non-negotiable" tenets that united almost all Jews during the Second Temple period?
3. What is the linguistic origin of the name "Pharisee," and how does it reflect their religious identity?
4. How did the Pharisees' approach to interpreting the Torah differ from that of the Sadducees?
5. What was the Pharisaic concept of a "hedge around the law"?
6. On what grounds did the Sadducees reject the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead?
7. How did the Essenes' view of free will and predestination differ from the views held by the Pharisees and Sadducees?
8. Why were the Samaritans considered an "excluded sect" despite sharing the Torah and the same God as the Judeans?
9. What defined the "Fourth Philosophy," and how did they differ from the Pharisees?
10. What is the difference between "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxis," and which was more significant in the context of Jewish sectarianism?

Answer Key

1. Josephus used the term "philosophy" to draw parallels between Jewish sects and the Roman/Greek philosophical schools popular in his day, such as Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism. By framing Jewish divisions as intellectual and philosophical debates, he aimed to make Judaism more relatable and respectable to a Roman audience.
2. The four non-negotiables were monotheism (the belief in one God, affirmed by the Shema), the covenant of circumcision, the binding authority of the Laws of Moses (Torah), and the legitimacy of the Temple in Jerusalem as the primary site for sacrifice.
3. The name "Pharisee" likely derives from the Hebrew verb *paras*, meaning "to separate." This may refer to them being "separated ones" who distinguished themselves from impurity or those who made careful "divisions" or distinctions in their application of religious laws, such as tithing.
4. The Pharisees were "liberal" interpreters who believed the text should be interpreted broadly, using oral traditions and logical rules to draw out profound meanings. In contrast, the Sadducees were "conservative" interpreters who insisted on the literal meaning of the written text and rejected expansions upon it.
5. The "hedge around the law" refers to the rabbinic and Pharisaic practice of creating additional traditional rules to prevent a person from even coming close to breaking a biblical commandment. For example, to ensure the Sabbath was not violated by writing, a tradition might be established forbidding a scribe from carrying a quill behind his ear.
6. The Sadducees rejected the resurrection because they stuck to the literal meaning of the Torah (the books of Moses) and claimed the doctrine was not found there. They disregarded later books like Daniel, where the resurrection is explicitly mentioned, as having the same level of authority.
7. The Essenes held a view of total predestination, believing everything was part of God's plan and rejecting the concept of free will. The Sadducees believed in complete free will with no divine intervention, while the Pharisees took a middle road, believing all things are foreseen by God but individuals are still responsible for their decisions.

8. The Samaritans were excluded primarily because they rejected the Jerusalem Temple and Mount Zion, insisting that Mount Gerizim was the only legitimate place of worship. They also possessed their own narrative claiming Judeans were apostates, leading to mutual hostility despite their shared use of the Torah.

9. The "Fourth Philosophy" shared the religious views of the Pharisees but possessed an "unconquerable thirst for freedom." Their defining radical position was that they would recognize no king except God, a stance that eventually incited the great revolt against Roman rule.

10. "Orthodoxy" refers to correct belief, while "orthopraxis" refers to correct practice. In the Jewish sects, disagreements over belief (like the resurrection) were often tolerated, but differences in practice—such as the calendar or how to wash one's hands—were frequently the primary causes of division and the breaking of fellowship.

Essay Prompts

1. **The Josephus Problem:** Evaluate the reliability of Josephus as a source for understanding the Jewish sects. Discuss how his desire to appeal to a Roman audience may have colored his descriptions of Jewish "philosophies," particularly regarding his focus on the Greco-Roman debate over free will.
2. **The Evolution of Authority:** Trace the connection between the Pharisees and the later development of Rabbinic Judaism. How did the Pharisaic emphasis on oral tradition and broad interpretation allow Judaism to survive and restructure itself after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD?
3. **Conflict at the Temple:** Analyze the role of the Jerusalem Temple as both a source of unity and a catalyst for sectarianism. Contrast the Sadducees' association with the Temple hierarchy with the Dead Sea Scroll sect's total withdrawal from it due to perceived priestly immorality and calendar errors.
4. **Sects vs. the Masses:** Discuss the demographic reality of Jewish sects during the Second Temple period. If only a small percentage of the population (approximately 15,000 out of a million) belonged to a specific sect, what

defined the religious life of the "average" Jew, and how did they relate to the non-negotiable tenets of the faith?

5. **Practices of Separation:** Using the document *4QMMT* as a reference, explain why "piddly little points of practice" (orthopraxis) were more divisive among the sects than major doctrinal differences (orthodoxy). Provide examples of how specific rituals or interpretations of the law served as "filters" for Jewish identity.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **4QMMT (*Miqsat Ma'ase Hatorah*):** A fragmentary Dead Sea Scroll text, also known as "Some of the Works of the Law," that outlines the Qumran sect's reasons for separating from the rest of Judaism, focusing on calendar and purity issues.
- **Asceticism:** A lifestyle characterized by the rejection of physical comforts and pleasures; practiced by the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scroll sect to maintain a state of discipline and purity.
- **Bar Kokhba Rebellion:** The second major Jewish revolt against Rome (132–136 AD), after which Jews were forbidden from entering Jerusalem, leading to a major rethinking of Jewish ritual and sacrifice.
- **Essenes:** A sectarian group characterized by asceticism, a belief in total predestination, and an interest in astrology and prophecy; they generally lived in disciplined, sometimes celibate, communities.
- **Gentilic Ending:** A linguistic suffix (like the "-ee" in Pharisee) that indicates a person belongs to a certain group, family, or division.
- **Hasmoneans:** The ruling dynasty of Judea established after the Maccabean Revolt; they eventually took over the high priesthood, a move that may have sparked the formation of rival sects like the Sadducees.
- **Mishnah:** The written collection of Jewish oral traditions and rabbinic debates; it portrays the Pharisees as heroes and often focuses on matters of orthopraxis.

- **Monotheism:** The belief that there is only one God; for Second Temple Jews, this was a non-negotiable fact of faith daily reaffirmed by the recitation of the *Shema*.
- **Orthopraxis:** "Correct practice"; the emphasis on the proper way to perform religious rituals and obey laws, which was the primary area of contention between Jewish sects.
- **Paras:** The Hebrew verb meaning "to separate," serving as the likely linguistic root for the name "Pharisee."
- **Pharisees:** A popular Jewish sect known for their liberal interpretation of Scripture, belief in the resurrection, and use of oral tradition to build a "hedge" around the Mosaic law.
- **Sadducees:** An upper-class, often priestly sect that adhered to a literal interpretation of the Torah, rejected the resurrection and the existence of spirits, and emphasized human free will.
- **Samaritans:** A group located in the region of Samaria that followed the Torah but was excluded from mainstream Judaism because they worshipped on Mount Gerizim rather than at the Jerusalem Temple.
- **Shema:** The central prayer of Judaism ("Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one"), recited daily to affirm monotheism.
- **Teacher of Righteousness:** The unnamed founder of the Dead Sea Scroll sect, whose death was used as a chronological marker for the sect's expectations of the end of the world.
- **Zadok:** The progenitor of the line of high priests; the name "Sadducee" is likely derived from this name, suggesting they viewed themselves as the "party of Zadok."
- **Zealots:** A term Josephus uses specifically for a faction during the Great Revolt, though it is often used more broadly to describe the "Fourth Philosophy" and other anti-Roman revolutionaries.