

11-2017

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Recommended Citation

Willmington, Harold, "Political and Religious Groups in the Days of Jesus Christ" (2017). *The Second Person File*. 57.

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POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN THE DAYS OF JESUS CHRIST

GALILEANS

The Galileans arose in northern Palestine, headed by Judas of Galilee, who led a rebellion against all foreign elements, advocating "Galilee for Galileans." They were the "extreme right" fanatics of their day. The anti-Roman position of the Galileans would have put them at odds with officials such as Pontius Pilate, who on one occasion felt forced to slaughter a number of them (Lk.13:1). Christ's enemies tried to identify both Him and His disciples with the Galileans (Mt. 6:69; Mk. 14:70; Lk 23:6).

HERODIANS

The Herodians were a political party who favored rule by the family of Herod. Though Jewish, they saw the rule of the Herods, under Roman oversight, as Israel's best chance for survival as a nation. They were therefore the "law and order" advocates of the day. They regarded Christ as a revolutionary fanatic and on three occasions joined the efforts of the Pharisees to silence Him (Mk 3:6; 12:13; Mt. 22:16). Christ soundly condemned them (Mk. 8:15; 12:13-17).

LEVITES

The Levites were the descendants of Levi and were in charge of the Temple. Though quite prominent in Israelite history, they make only two appearances in the NT: The Jews sent some priests and Levites to check out the desert ministry of John the Baptist (John 1:19); Christ used them as an example of uncharitable religiosity in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

PHARISEES

The Pharisees, who came to prominence around 100 B.C. during the time of the Maccabees, were known as the champions and guardians of Israel's written and oral law. As such they became the most bitter and hateful enemies of Christ. They numbered about 6,000 in Christ's day. John the Baptist called the Pharisees a "brood of snakes" (Mt. 3:7). Christ denounced them for letting their traditions negate the power of God's Word (Mt. 15:1-9; 23:1-36). He warned His followers about their false righteousness (Mt. 5:20), false teaching (Mt. 16:11), and false humility (Lk 18:10-14).

The Pharisees in turn condemned Christ for things such as associating with sinners (Mt. 9:11; Lk. 7:39; 15:2), healing on the Sabbath (Lk. 6:7; 14:1-6), and allowing His disciples to work on the

Sabbath (Mt. 12:1-2). They despised Him because He refused to follow their traditions (Mt. 15:1-2). They sought to entrap Him on various theological issues (Mt. 19:3; 22:15). They denied His miracles (Jn. 9:15-16). And, from early in His ministry, they sought to kill Him (Mt. 12:14; Jn. 11:47-53).

Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1) and Paul (Acts 23:6; Phil. 3:5) were Pharisees by birth and training.

PUBLICANS

These public officials were authorized by Rome to collect taxes from the Jews for that Empire. Because of this, they were hated and despised by the Jews who associated them with terrible sinners (Mt. 9:11; 11:19), harlots (Mt. 21:31-32), and outright pagans (Mt. 18:17). Jesus was severely criticized by the Pharisees for eating with them (Mt. 9:10-11; Lk. 15:1-2). However, many Publicans apparently accepted the message of John the Baptist and were subsequently baptized (Lk. 3:12; 7:29). Jesus would later relate the parable of the humble publican and the haughty Pharisee (Lk. 18:10-13). Finally, one of the most well-known conversion accounts in the gospel records was that of a publican named Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:2-10).

SADDUCEES

Taking their name from Zadok, high priest during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 2:35), the Sadducees came into prominence at about the same time as the Pharisees, a century before Christ. The Sadducees were the Jewish aristocrats of Christ's day and held most seats on the Sanhedrin. As the "insiders" of the priestly class, they accepted only the written Law and rejected the oral traditions popular with Pharisees. But both parties briefly set aside their differences to accomplish their common goal of getting rid of Christ.

John the Baptist lumped the Sadducees and Pharisees together, calling both of them a "brood of snakes" (Mt. 3:7). Christ, likewise, warned His followers to beware of the erroneous teachings of both Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt. 16:11).

The Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, rejected the idea of the resurrection and an afterlife, and on at least one occasion they tried to ridicule Christ on this point (Mk. 12:18-27). Later, this difference of opinion was used by Paul to drive a wedge into the Pharisees' and Sadducees' united opposition to Christ (Acts 23:1-10).

SAMARITANS

When the Assyrian king Sargon II took the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity in 722 B.C., he followed the Assyrian custom by leaving only the poorest and most uneducated Israelites behind and inviting other nations to come in and homestead the land vacated by those taken captive. These newcomers brought with them their pagan religions (2 Kings 17:24-33). As the

Jews left in the land intermarried with them they came to be viewed as a separate race, neither Jew nor Gentile, and were held in contempt by Jews. (The name Samaritan comes from Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom. In Christ's day the name referred to the entire territory between Judea and Galilee.)

The Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Temple in 536, but their offer was refused (Ezra 4:1-3). A century later, the Samaritan governor Sanballat tried to frustrate Nehemiah's rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (Neh. 6:1-9). A complete break between the Jews and Samaritans occurred when the grandson of Eliashib the high priest married Sanballat's daughter, contrary to the statute prohibiting mixed marriages (Neh. 13:23-28). Since he refused to annul the marriage, he was promptly expelled from the priesthood and exiled. He retired to Samaria, where Sanballat built a temple for him on Mount Gerizim. This temple was destroyed by John Hyrcanus in 128 because the Samaritans had compromised with paganism under Antiochus Epiphanes IV by dedicating their temple to the Greek god Zeus.

By the time of the N.T., the hatred between Jews and Samaritans had reached its zenith (Jn. 4:9; 8:48). Christ once ordered His disciples not to enter Samaria (Mt. 10:5), though He Himself ministered to Samaritans (Jn. 4:1-42). A Samaritan was the hero in one of Christ's parables (Lk. 10:30-37). When He healed ten lepers, the only one who thanked Him was a Samaritan (Lk. 17:11-19).

During Christ's final days of ministry, one village of Samaritans rejected Him because of His plans to go on to Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51-56). Just prior to His ascension, however, Christ commanded His disciples to proclaim the gospel in Samaria (Acts 1:8).

THE SANHEDRIN

The Sanhedrin (the "high council," NLT) was the Jewish Supreme Court for both religious and legal matters. It may have come from the time of Moses (Num. 11:16-17) or of King Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 19:8). It had seventy-one members, including: the high priest, who was president; the heads of the twenty-four priestly service divisions; scribes and lawyers; and elders, representing the laity. The word Sanhedrin comes from two Greek words: *sun* ("together with"), and *hedro* ("a sitting place"), thus referring to a group that sits in session. (Cathedral and ex cathedra have the same roots.)

Though the Jewish people trusted the Sanhedrin to render justice, when Christ stood before them prior to His crucifixion (Mt. 26:57-68; 27:1-2) the trial was unjust in several ways:

- They normally met in a semicircle with the prisoner standing in the midst, able to see them all. Jesus was blindfolded.
- Normally, two clerks were appointed—one to record the votes for acquittal, the other for conviction. In Christ's case this was not done.
- The arguments for acquittal were normally given first. There is no record of this happening in Christ's trial.

- If the vote was for acquittal, the prisoner was set free immediately; if the vote was for conviction, condemnation could not be pronounced until the following day. Christ was condemned the same day (Mt. 26:66).

Several leaders of the early church were also tried before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:5-22; 5:21-40; 6:12-15; 22:30-23:10).

SCRIBES

Scribes (also called "experts in religious law")—(Mt. 22:35; Lk. 7:30) were the students, interpreters, and teachers of the O.T. Scriptures. Scribes had great power in Jewish society and were often called upon to settle disputes. They became bitter enemies of Christ, who grouped them with Pharisees, calling them both hypocrites (Mt. 23:13).

Scribes in the N.T. refused John's baptism (Lk. 7:30); tried to entrap Jesus on the issues of adultery (Jn. 8:3-12) and healing on the Sabbath (Lk. 6:7); demanded that Jesus perform signs (Mt. 12:38); and condemned Him for associating with sinners (Lk. 15:2).

Christ warned His disciples about the scribes' false righteousness (Mt. 5:20) and denounced the scribes for letting their traditions negate the power of God's Word (Mt. 16:21; 21:15; 23:1-36; Mk. 12:28-40).

ZEALOTS

The Zealots were an intensely nationalistic sect, anti-Roman to the core, advocating that Israel should return to a theocratic form of government. They were the direct opposite of the tax-collecting Publicans.

However, it is significant to observe that Jesus chose both a Zealot (Simon the Zealot, Lk. 6:15; Acts 1:13), and a Publican (Matthew, Mt. 9:9) to serve as two of His apostles!