

# FACT SHEET ON JEWISH SECTARIANISM

Because the first-century historian Josephus mentions the three philosophical schools of Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes along with an anti-Roman group he calls Zealots that arose in the 60s CE, and because the Gospels and Acts mention Pharisees and Sadducees as well as refer to one disciple as a Zealot, many have the impression that all Jews fell into one of these four categories. That is incorrect. Josephus compares the Pharisees to Stoics, the Sadducees to Epicureans, and the Essenes to Pythagorians. These schools no more encompass the vast majority of people in the Empire than the three (or four) groups Josephus mentions encompass Jews in Judea and Galilee

Nor were all Jews fractured into competing groups: they agreed on the fundamentals. This fact sheet seeks to rectify these misrepresentations in line with the observations of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 2001 that “The description of three ‘parties’ or schools of thought given by Josephus—Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes—is a simplification that must be interpreted with circumspection. One can be sure that many Jews did not belong to any of the three groups. ... It is ... likely that Jesus did not belong to any of [them]. He was simply one of the common people” (“The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible” (2001), pars. 66 and 67).

MISREPRESENTATIONS	CORRECTIONS
<p><b>MISREPRESENTATION 1:</b> Most Jews in the Second Temple period were members of a specific philosophical school.</p>	<p><b>CORRECTION:</b> The majority of Jews in the Second Temple period were not sectarian. According to Josephus, there were only six thousand Pharisees, four thousand Sadducees, and three thousand Essenes by the late Second Temple period (<i>Antiquities</i> 18.18–22). The probable Jewish population in Judea is estimated at around 500,000, so the total sectarian population was 13,000 or 3% of the total population.</p> <p>Jews throughout the Roman world practiced what scholars today call Common Judaism. In diverse ways, they observed the three main identifying markers of Jewish practice: the Sabbath, dietary laws, and circumcision. They also gathered regularly in synagogues to hear and interpret their scriptures.</p>
<p><b>MISREPRESENTATION 2:</b> Jewish sects were characterized by petty infighting, bitter rivalries, and legal disputes.</p>	<p><b>CORRECTION:</b> Living under the tensions of Greek and then Roman domination, Jewish sects sometimes found themselves at odds with each other as political tides flowed back and forth. They also had diverse interpretations of the Torah and engaged in distinctive practices. At the same time, Jewish sects engaged in significant social and religious collaboration.</p>
<p><b>MISREPRESENTATION 3:</b> By the first century, Judaism had lost its ethical core. Jews did not care about outsiders and did their best to stay away from them. The early Christian emphasis on love for all humanity was a departure from Jewish teachings.</p>	<p><b>CORRECTION:</b> Jewish texts produced in the late Second Temple period highlight the importance of benevolent behavior not only towards all Jews, but towards all humanity (2 Enoch 66:6; Letter of Aristeas, The Testament of Zebulun, 5:1, 6:4–6; T. Sim. 4:7; T. Iss. 5:2; T. Zeb. 8:4–5; T. Gad 4:2–7, 5:2, 6:1–3, 7:7, T. Jos. 17:2–5; T. Benj. 3:3–5; T. Reub. 6:9, inter alia). Paul describes his own righteousness through the lens of his Pharisaic affiliation (Philippians 3:4–6). Evidence that Jews accepted Roman supported in building their synagogue appears in Luke and complicates the claim that Jews did not associate with Gentiles (Luke 7:1–6).</p>

<p><b>MISREPRESENTATION 4:</b> Jerusalem and its Temple was the single and sole center of Jewish religious life and authority in the Second Temple period.</p>	<p><b>CORRECTION:</b> Jews all over the Diaspora demonstrated their devotion to the Jerusalem temple with financial support and occasional pilgrimages. But Jews outside of Judea also developed independent community systems that included local religious leadership, that would have been analogous to modern day presidents, custodians, and beadles (<i>genarch</i>, the <i>archon</i>, and possibly the <i>ethnarch</i>), councils (<i>politeuma</i> and <i>gerousia</i>), and heads of synagogues (<i>archisynagogos</i>). Inscriptional and literary evidence from outside of Judea indicates that Jews in the Hellenistic world built and regularly attended synagogues. Most of these Jews did not visit the Temple regularly (Josephus, <i>Antiquities</i>, 14.194).</p>
<p><b>MISREPRESENTATION 5:</b> Jesus (and later, Paul) went against the grain of Jewish teaching by saying that God cared for all people, and that all people can be saved.</p>	<p><b>CORRECTION:</b> The notion that all people must adhere to a set of moral laws has its origins in biblical prophetic literature (Isaiah 66:18–23) and early Second Temple Literature (Jubilees 7:20–21 and Sibylline Oracle 4:24–39). Unlike early Jesus followers, who claimed that salvation would only take place for those who had faith through Christ, most Jews outside of the Jesus community did not insist that salvation would only take place within the parameters of their faith community.</p>

**MISREPRESENTATION 1 NOTES:**

See *Guidelines*, III: “Judaism in the time of Christ and the Apostles was a complex reality, embracing many different trends, many spiritual, religious social and cultural trends;” cf. Edward Parish Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief: 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992) 241–278.

**MISREPRESENTATION 2 NOTES:**

Josephus, *Antiquities* XVIII, 18–22; Pliny, *Natural History* 5.15.73; Philo, *Every Good Man is Free*, 75-87). See *Guidelines/BCEIA*, 1985, 10:e: “An explicit rejection should be made of the historically inaccurate notion that [the] Judaism of that time, especially that of Pharisaism, was a decadent formalism and hypocrisy.”

**MISREPRESENTATION 3 NOTES:**

2 Enoch 66:6; Letter of Aristeas, The Testament of Zebulon, 5:1, 6:4–6; T. Sim. 4:7; T. Iss. 5:2; T. Zeb. 8:4–5; T. Gad 4:2–7, 5:2, 6:1–3, 7:7, T. Jos. 17:2–5; T. Benj. 3:3–5; T. Reub. 6:9, inter alia). See *Guidelines* III: “The OT and the Jewish tradition founded upon it must not be set against the NT in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor.” Cf. *God’s Mercy*, 31.d; Deut 6:5; Lev. 19:18, 32; Hos 11:1-9; Matt. 22:34-40.

**MISREPRESENTATION 4 NOTES:**

Josephus, *Antiquities*, 11:157; *Against Apion*, 2:145, 164–5, 184, 250). By the time the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the Jews had long established a mechanism by which to survive in its absence. See CCC #583-584: “Like the prophets before him Jesus expressed the deepest respect for the Temple in Jerusalem...Jesus went up to the Temple as the privileged place of encounter with God.”

**MISREPRESENTATION 5 NOTES:**

Jews taught that Gentiles who observed the seven Noahide Laws (prohibition of: idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, eating from a living animal and the requirement to establish a legal system) were righteous Gentiles and had a place in the world to come. The number of Noahide laws has fluctuated in Jewish tradition, but their existence, and the notion that

righteous Gentiles had a guaranteed place in the World to Come, was not in question during this period. Steven S. Schwarzschild and Saul Berman, "Noahide Laws," in *Encyclopedia Judaica 12* (Jerusalem, Macmillan, 1971), 1189-91 (Lux, *The Jewish People*, 150 n.2)

Documents referred to: Guidelines = *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (1974); Guidelines/BCEIA = *Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations* - Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations, Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs, May 7, 1985/Revision of 1967 Guidelines; God's Mercy = *God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching*, Committee on the Liturgy, NCCB, Sept. 18, 1988; CCC = *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Liguori Publications, 1994; The Jewish People = Richard C. Lux, *The Jewish People, the Holy Land, and the State of Israel : A Catholic View*, Paulist Press, 2010.

### **SUPPORTING ESSAY: Sectarianism and Common Judaism in the Late Second Temple Period**

Adopted from the forthcoming essay in *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, Volume 2: Emerging Judaism, 332 BCE – 600 CE*

Most Jews in the Second Temple period adopted practices which connected them with other Jews throughout the Greco-Roman world. Jews and Greeks alike considered these common practices, which included the observance of dietary law, circumcision, and the Sabbath, to be the primary identifying markers of Jewish identity. By the end of the first century CE, most Jews were living in communities whose cultural and religious hubs were concentrated in the synagogue, where Jews regularly gathered to read their scriptures. The reading and interpreting of sacred scriptures would comprise the primary expression of religious devotion for these Jews, and the synagogue would become the main site of communal gathering and scriptural recitation well before it was established as a place of communal prayer.

And yet, by the beginning of the first century CE, thousands of Judeans were affiliated with groups and organizations that politically or ideologically distinguished them from other Jews. Josephus calls the members of three of these groups Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, and describes them as representing different philosophical schools of thought. In some passages, Josephus refers to these groups as *haireses*, a word that is often translated today into *sects*. The modern connotation of a sect, however, which can imply that a group is shut out from outside society and centered on a messianic figure who has promised them salvation, does not apply to all of these schools of thought.

### **Literary Evidence for Judean Sects**

Our primary sources of evidence for the Jewish sects of Judea come from the writings of Josephus (c.37–c.100), the deuterocanonical books 1 and 2 Maccabees, the cache of documents found at Qumran, and early Christian sources. Of these sources, Josephus provides us with the most material, but his descriptions of how these groups lived and their key points of difference are not entirely consistent. He first mentions them in the second book of *The Jewish War*, which he wrote shortly after the war ended in 73 CE. In this book, Josephus describes a tax revolt against Rome led by a Galilean Jew named Judas, and he notes that while Judas was a sectarian, he was not a member of the three main sects that were prevalent at this time in Judea. Josephus then provides a lengthy parenthetical description of these sects, and focuses primarily on the Essenes, describing the extent of their piety, their communal lifestyle, and their internal organization. Josephus closes by briefly noting that the Pharisees and Sadducees differed from one another and from Essenes in their approach to the matters of free will and resurrection. His emphasis on the Essenes in this passage might be due to his perception that they were lesser known to his audience than the Pharisees and Sadducees, who held administrative positions in Jerusalem and at times interacted with Roman authorities. Josephus also lived among the three main sectarian communities as a teenager, and reports that, at the time, he identified most strongly with the Pharisees.

Josephus mentions these groups again in Books 13 and 18 of his *Antiquities of the Jews*, which he completed about twenty years later. In Book 13, Josephus writes that the difference between these schools of thought hinges on their attitude toward fate versus free will, with the Sadducees rejecting fate, the Essenes rejecting free will, and the Pharisees taking a moderate middle ground. Based on this passage's placement, which has little relationship with its context but sets the stage for a conflict between Pharisees and Sadducees during the reign of Hyrcanus I (134–104 BCE), Josephus implies that by the time that Jonathan the Hasmonean ruled Judea (161–143 BCE), these sects were already established.

The scrolls discovered in the caves of Qumran also provide a wealth of information regarding Judean sectarian life. These scrolls were stored sometime in the first century BCE or CE by a small community of Jewish sectarians who established a settlement near the northwestern corner of the Dead Sea. According to some scholars, they also had a settlement in the southwest corner of Jerusalem. They would remain in these caves until their discovery in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and provide evidence of a sect whose members withdrew from Jerusalem and rejected the authority of the Temple administrators. Most scholars identify this community as a subset of the Essene sect.

Earlier evidence suggests that, yet another sectarian group existed within Judea in addition to the ones mentioned by Josephus. The books 1 Maccabees, likely written in Hebrew sometime after 136 BCE, and 2 Maccabees, a five-volume work that was written in Greek and condensed into a single volume at the end of the second century BCE, both mention a group of Jews called the Hasideans. In 1 Maccabees, this group is massacred by the Syrian Greeks when they refuse to pick up arms on the Sabbath, believing that doing so was a violation of their ancestral law. In 2 Maccabees, the Hasideans are accused by Hellenized Jews of being responsible for the Hasmonean rebellion.

Finally, the earliest followers of Jesus were viewed as a Jewish sect by the Roman Empire, which provided them with no protective sanctions. A complete “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity would not occur until the fourth century.

### **The Origins of Judean Sectarianism**

Most scholars believe that sects in Judea emerged as distinct groups sometime shortly after the Maccabean revolt. This theory is partly based on Josephus's placement of his first description of these groups in Book 13 of *Antiquities*, which describes the Hasmonean revolt and its aftermath. Given this context, perhaps these groups developed as negative responses to the shift in priestly leadership from the Oniad family to the Hasmonean family. Alternatively, it is possible that Jews retreated into sects as a means of resisting the Hasmoneans' increased Hellenization in the second century BCE. Yet another possibility is that these groups emerged from differences concerning the question of the arrival of the end-time, a question which led sectarians to lay claim to scriptural predictions concerning the redemption of Israel and God's final salvation. The questions of why sects formed and what lay at the heart of sectarian debate remain unresolved, in part because we have so little literary evidence about these groups outside of the writings of Josephus and the writings discovered in the Dead Sea caves.

What we do know with near certainty, however, is that most Jews in Judea were not members of a sect: according to Josephus, only six thousand Jews were Pharisees, four thousand were Sadducees, and three thousand were Essenes. And while Josephus writes that the majority of Jews in Judea followed the Pharisees' teachings, it would be a mistake to describe the late Second Temple period as “sectarian.”

### **Community Organization in the Diaspora**

There were also distinctive groups of Jews living outside of Judea that may be considered sectarian. One group, whom Philo of Alexandria calls the Therapeutae, was a group of celibate Jewish men and women who retreated into the wilderness to immerse themselves in study, coming together only on the Sabbath. Although Philo does not use the word *hairesis* to describe the Therapeutae, he links them to the Essenes in his introduction to his description of the Therapeutae, introducing the Therapeutae as people who embrace “the life of contemplation” (Contempl. 1). Even the early followers of Jesus both within and without

Judea were likely considered a sect by other Jews and by the Romans. The majority of Jews in the late Second Temple period, however, did not reside in Judea, and had little or no exposure to sectarian lifestyles. Besides the Therapeutae and early Jesus followers, we know of no Jews in the Greco-Roman diaspora who lived in communities which would fit scholars' definitions of a sect.

On the other hand, Jews both in Judea and in the diaspora did not organize as a single body with a cohesive infrastructure. The Jews of Alexandria, Antioch, and elsewhere throughout the Greek and then Roman empire constructed bodies of legislation that would, in some cases, center on synagogue leadership, but this infrastructure varied from city to city. In some cases, community titles were used in multiple regions, but meant different things. We can only infer what terms such as *ethnarch*, *genarch*, and *gerousia* meant, and what the leaders who held these positions and were members of such councils did, based on the contexts in which they appear.

Perhaps most significantly, the sources which speak of Jewish communal organization in the diaspora and in Judea indicate that Jews lived in highly structured and well-organized communities, but at the same time, the decentralization of these communities meant that these communities developed biblical interpretations and practices in creative ways.