

Bite Size Bible Study

Groups #197

By Pastor Lee

Often when we are reading the Bible we read about the Christian, or the Jewish people and we have a particular picture who they are. Oftentimes we think that each one of these two groups is a homogeneous group, and don't stop to think that they may be divide into multiple subgroups within the major grouping.

Whenever we think of the Jewish people we probably think of the Pharisees or the Sadducees; but very rarely think of the other two major groups. Namely the Essenes and a group often called the 4th philosophy. We find that within each of these 4 major groups there is a divergence of philosophy and/or theology. Trying to think of the Jewish people as homogeneous in their religion doesn't always give us a complete picture and can lead to misinterpretations of the Scripture.

Let's take a closer look at each one of these major Jewish groups that existed around the time of Jesus.

The one we hear about most often is the Pharisees. The Pharisees were widely known as sincere and pious Jews who were intent on above all else keeping the law that God had given to Moses. This group strove to keep all of God's laws as they were given to Moses, as much as was humanly possible. We often think of the Pharisees as hypocrites, but that's not the case for most of them. Most of them strove to do the best that they could in following the Law of Moses. The Pharisees were the ones that were out among the people and trying to lead and teach the people to follow Torah. For the most part the Pharisees appeared to have been held in high honor for such righteous piety.

The Sadducees were a group of aristocratic Jews. They tended to be wealthy and well connected in the community. They did not subscribe to the traditions of the Pharisees and had several wide-ranging disagreements with them over particular theological and practical issues. Unlike the Pharisees the Sadducees did not believe in future resurrection of the dead. They held strictly to a written law of Moses set forth in the Torah. In particular, the importance of proper worship of God in the temple in Jerusalem. Since the Sadducees represented the local aristocracy in Jerusalem it was they who had the most direct connection with the Roman authorities who ruled the land in Jesus' time. It was the high priest who served as the liaison between the Jewish people, Judea, and the Roman government.

The Essenes had serious and sometimes violent disagreements with both the Pharisees and the Sadducees, as well as the Roman government. They considered the Pharisees to be too lax in their traditions. They thought that Sadducees were corrupt leaders who misunderstood or simply disobeyed God's laws for running

the temple. They thought that the Sadducees had irreversibly defiled the temple in its system of sacrifices. They felt that the Roman government was responsible for all the evil in the world.

To escape the corrupted influences of that environment some of the Essenes formed monastic like communities in which they could preserve their own purity and the Torah (as they interpreted it). They felt that they were the only group doing what God commanded, and wanted to distance themselves from the evil that encompassed the rest of Jerusalem and the outside world. They were anticipating that God would end this world soon and that the forces of evil would be cleared from the earth.

A fourth group, commonly called the 4th philosophy, included quite a few different groups. One of the major ones that we hear about are the Zealots. Those in this group supported the use of force to overthrow the foreign powers that ruled the land that God had given to the Jews. For them the land was their divine right and God wanted them to take it back. These groups favored armed rebellion against the Roman authorities. This became their undoing when they clashed with the Roman armies in 66 CE which led to the massive slaughter of many Jews and the destruction of the temple as well as most of the city of Jerusalem in 70AD.

When we look at the new Christians, we see that they too were broken up into a multitude of factions Just as they are today. We see that Paul mentions that there were factions among them.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided?

1 Corinthians 1:12-13a NIV

So, we find that trying to "pigeonhole" a person or a group of people by their ethnicity or association with a group can lead us to unwarranted conclusions. A person may consider himself a part of a particular group but not adhere to every tenant of the group. The person or group may see things differently than others of that grouping. This is what we find today with so many people that call themselves Christian, but don't have the same values or customs. We should try to form a relationship with the person and learn what they really believe and not to force them into a category we define.