Judaism in the First Century: Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, Hasidim

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Main Sources: Josephus, Antiquities, XIII. 5.9, 10:6; XVII.1.2-4; The Jewish War, II.8.14

Josephus, Antiquities, XIII. 5.9:

At this time there were three sects among the Jews, who had different opinions concerning human actions; the one was called the sect of the Pharisees, another the sect of the Sadducees, and the other the sect of the Essenes. Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate. But the sect of the Essenes affirm that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination. And for the Sadducees, they take away fate, and say that there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but they suppose that all our actions are in our own power, so that we are ourselves the cause of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly. However, I have give a more exact account of these opinions in the second book of the Jewish War.

Josephus, Antiquities, XIII, 10:6:

What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers; and concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them, while the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude of their side; but about these two sects, and that of the Essenes, I have treated accurately in the second book of Jewish affairs.

Josephus, Antiquities, XVIII 1.2-4:

The Jews had for a great while three sects of philosophy peculiar to themselves; the sect of the Essenes, and the sect of the Sadducees, and the third sort of opinions was that of those called Pharisees; of which sects although I have already spoken in the second book of the Jewish War, yet will I a little touch upon them now. Now, for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the conduct of reason; and what that prescribes to them as good for them, they do; and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason’s dictates for practice. They also pay a respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to contradict them in anything which they have introduced; and, when they determine that all things are done by fate, they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit; since their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a temperament, whereby what he wills is done, but so that the will of men can act virtuously or viciously. They also believe that souls have an immaterial vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and life again; on account of which doctrines, they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatsoever they do about divine worship,

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1 All translations from Josephus are from William Whiston, trans. The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987).
prayers, and sacrifices, they perform them according to their direction; insomuch that the cities gave great attestations to them on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives and their discourses also.

But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins them; for they think it an instance of virtue to dispute with those teachers of philosophy whom they frequent; but this doctrine is received but by a few, yet by those still of the greatest dignity; but they are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates, as they are unwillingly and by force sometimes obliged to be, they addict themselves to the notions of the Pharisees, because the multitude would not otherwise bear them.

The doctrine of the Essenes is this: That all things are best ascribed to God. They teach the immortality of souls, and esteem that the rewards of righteousness are to be earnestly striven for; and when they send what they have dedicated to God into the temple, they do not offer sacrifices, because they have more pure lustrations of their own; on which account they are excluded from the common court of the temple, but offer their sacrifices themselves; yet is their course of life better than that of other men; and they entirely addict themselves to husbandry. It also deserves our admiration, how much they exceed all other men that addict themselves to virtue, and this in righteousness; and indeed to such a degree, that as it hath never appeared among any other man, neither Greeks nor barbarians, no, not for a little time, so hath it endured a long while among them. This is demonstrated by that institution of theirs which will not suffer anything to hinder them from having all things in common; so that a rich man enjoys no more of his own wealth than he who hath nothing at all. There are about four thousand men that live in this way, and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants; as thinking the latter tempts men to be unjust, and the former gives the handle to domestic quarrels; but as they live by themselves, they minister one to another. They also appoint certain stewards to receive the incomes of their revenues, and of the fruits of the ground; such as are good men and priests, who are to get their corn and their food ready for them. They none of them differ from others of the Essenes in their way of living, but do the most resemble those Daceae who are called Polistae [dwellers in cities].

But of the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy, Judas the Galilean was the author. These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty; and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord. They also do not value dying any kind of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relationships and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man Lord; and since this immovable resolution of theirs is well known to a great many, I shall speak no farther about that matter; nor am I afraid that anything I have said of them should be disbelieved, but rather fear, that what I have said is beneath the resolution they show when they undergo pain; and it was in Gessius Florus’s time that the nation began to grow mad with this distemper, who was our procurator, and who occasioned the Jews to go wild with it by the abuse of his authority, and to make them revolt from the Romans; and these are the sects of Jewish philosophy.

Josephus, The Jewish War, II.8.2-14:

For there are three philosophical sects among the Jews. The followers of the first of whom are the Pharisees; of the second the Sadducees; and the third sect, who pretends to a severer discipline, and called Essenes. These last are Jews by birth, and seem to have a greater affection for one another than the other sects have. These Essenes reject pleasures as an evil, but esteem continence, and the conquest over our passions, to be virtue. They neglect wedlock, but choose
out other persons’ children, while they are pliable, and fir for learning; and esteem them to be of
their kindred, and form them according to their own manners. They do not absolutely deny the
fitness of marriage, and the succession of mankind thereby continued; but they guard against the
lascivious behavior of women, and are persuaded that none of them preserve their fidelity to one
man.

These men are despisers of riches, and so very communicative as raises our admiration. Nor is
there any one to be found among them who hath more than another; for it is a law among them,
that those who come to them must let what they have to be common to the whole order,
insomuch, that among them all there is no appearance of poverty or excess of riches, but every
one’s possessions are intermingled with every other’s possessions: and so there is, as it were, one
patrimony among all the brethren….they have no certain city but many of them dwell in every
city; and if any of their sect come from other places, what they have lies open for them, just as if
it were their own; and they go into such as they never knew before, as if they had been ever so
long acquainted with them…

And as for their piety towards God, it is very extraordinary; for before sunrising they speak not a
word about profane matters, but put up certain prayers which they have received from their
forefathers, as if they made a supplication for its rising...

For their doctrine is this: That bodies are corruptible, and that the matter they are made of it not
permanent; but that the souls are immortal, and continue forever; and that they come out of the
most subtle air, and are united to their bodies as in prisons, into which they are drawn by a certain
natural enticement; but that then they are set free from the bonds of the flesh, they then, as
released from a long bondage, rejoice and mount upward. And this is like the opinion of the
Greeks, that good souls have their habitations beyond the ocean, in a region that is neither
oppressed with storms of rain, or snow, or with intense heat, but that this place is such as is
refreshed by the gentle breathing of a west wing, that is perpetually blowing from the ocean;
while they allot to bad souls a dark and tempestuous den, full
of never-ceasing punishments. And
indeed the Greeks seem to me to have followed the same notion, when they allot the islands of
the blessed to their brace men, whom they call heroes and demigods; and to the souls of the
wicked, the region of the ungodly, in Hades...

There are also those among them who undertake to foretell things to come, by reading the holy
books, and using several sorts of purifications, and being perpetually conversant in the discourses
of the prophets; and it is but seldom that they miss in their predictions.

Moreover, there is another order of Essenes, who agree with the rest as to their way of living, and
customs, and laws, but differ from them in the point of marriage, as thinking that by not marrying
they cut off the principal part of the human life, which is the prospect of succession; nay rather,
that if all men should be of the same opinion, the whole race of mankind would fail. However,
they try their spouses for three years; and if they find that they have their natural purgations
thrice, as trials that they are likely to be fruitful, they then actually marry them...

But then as to the other two other orders at first mentioned: the Pharisees are those who are
esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws, and introduce the first sect. These
ascribe to all fate [or providence], and to God, and yet allow, that to act what is right, or the
contrary, is principally in the power of men, although fate does cooperate in every action. They
say that all souls are incorruptible; but that the souls of good men are only removed into other
bodies, but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment. But the Sadducees are those that compose the second order, and take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men’s own choice, and that the one or the other belongs so to every one, that they may act as they please. They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades. Moreover, the Pharisees are friendly to one another, and are for the exercise of concord and regard for the public. But the behavior of the Sadducees one towards another is in some degree wiled; and their conversation with those that are of their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them. And this is what I had to say concerning the philosophic sects among the Jews.

Josephus, *Life*, 2

When I was a child, and about fourteen years of age, I was commended by all for the love I had to learning; on which account the high priests and principal men of the city came then frequently to me together, in order to know my opinion about the accurate understandings of points of the law; and when I was about sixteen years old, I had a mind to make trial of the several sects that were among us. These sects are three: The first is that of the Pharisees, the second that of the Sadducees, and the third that of the Essenes, as we have frequently told you; for I thought that by this means I might, choose the best, if I were once acquainted with them all; so I contented myself with hard fare, and underwent great difficulties and went through them all. Nor did I content myself with these trials only; but when I was informed that one, whose name was Banus, lived in the desert, and used no other clothing than grew upon trees, and had no other food than what grew of its own accord, and bathed himself in cold water frequently, both by night and by day, in order to preserve his chastity, I imitated him in those things, and continue with him three years. So when I had accomplished my desires, I returned back to the city, being now nineteen years old, and began to conduct myself according to the rules of the sect of the Pharisees, which is kin to the sect of the Stoics, as the Greeks call them.

The Specifics

A. Pharisees:

[Josephus, Antiquities, XIII.15:5-9]

B. Sadducees:

[Josephus, Antiquities, XIII.10:6]

Matthew 22:23-40

23 The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection;’ and they asked him a question, saying, 24 ‘Teacher, Moses said, “If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.”’ 25 Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. 26 The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. 27 Last of all, the woman herself died. 28 In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.’
29 Jesus answered them, ‘You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31 And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ’“I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.’ 32 And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 35 ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” 36 This is the greatest and first commandment. 37 And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ (Trans. NRSV)

Mishnah Yadayim 4:6-7:

The Sadducees said, "We blame [object to] you Pharisees, because you say, 'Sacred Scriptures make the hands unclean, but the books Hameram do not make the hands unclean.'" Rabban Jochanan ben Zachai replied [ironically], "And have we nothing else to object to the Pharisees but this? They also assert that the bones of an ass are clean, but the bones of Jochanan the high priest are unclean." They [the Sadducees] replied, "According to their love [the estimation in which the bones are held] is their uncleanness, so that no one may turn the bones of his father and mother into spoons." He answered them, "In like manner [are] the sacred Scriptures; according to their love [the high estimation in which they are held] is their uncleanness; whereas the books Hameram, which are not beloved [held in no esteem], do not make the hands unclean."

The Sadducees said, "We blame [object to] you Pharisees, that ye declare the stream [which flows when water is poured from a clean vessel into an unclean one] to be clean." The Pharisees replied [with much better right], "We [may] blame [object to] you Sadducees, that ye declare a streamlet of water which flows from a burial ground to be clean." The Sadducees [further] said, "We blame [object to] you Pharisees, because ye say, 'If mine ox or mine ass cause any damage, I am bound [to make compensation], but should my bondman or bondwoman cause any damage, I am absolved [from making compensation];' if I am bound for mine ox and mine ass, respecting which there are no duties enjoined on me, [does it not follow that] for my bondman or bondwoman, respecting whom there are duties enjoined on me, it is just that I should [also] be bound [to compensate] for the damage he [or she] occasions?' [But] they [the Pharisees] replied, "Not the same rule which applies to mine ox or mine ass, that are not possessed of reason, can apply to my bondman or bondwoman, who are possessed of reason; for, should I offend them, they may [maliciously] set fire to the growing corn of another person, in order that I might be bound to pay for it." (Trans. Sefaria.Org)

C. Essenes:

Philo of Alexandria, Hypothetica, 11:1-18

[The Essenes] live in many cities of Judaea and in many villages and grouped in great societies of many members. Their persuasion is not based on birth, for birth is not a descriptive mark of
voluntary associations, but on their zeal for virtue and desire to promote brotherly love. Thus no Essene is a mere child nor even a stripling or newly bearded, since the characters of such are unstable with a waywardness corresponding to the immaturity of their age, but full grown and already verging on old age, no longer carried under by the tide of the body nor led by the passions, but enjoying the veritable, the only real freedom. This freedom is attested by their life. None of them allows himself to have any private property, either house or slave or estate or cattle or any of the other things which are amassed and abundantly procured by wealth, but they put everything together into the public stock and enjoy the benefit of them all in common.

They live together formed into clubs, bands of comradeship with common meals, and never cease to conduct all their affairs to serve the general weal. But they have various occupations at which they labour with untiring application and never plead cold or heat or any of the violent changes in the atmosphere as an excuse. Before the sun is risen they betake themselves to their familiar tasks and only when it sets force themselves to return, for they delight in them as much as do those who are entered for gymnastic competitions. For they consider that the exercises which they practise whatever they may be are more valuable to life, more pleasant to soul and body and more lasting than those of the athlete in as much as they can still be plied with vigour when that of the body is past its prime.

Some of them labour on the land skilled in sowing and planting, some as herdsmen taking charge of every kind of cattle and some superintend the swarms of bees. Others work at the handicrafts to avoid the sufferings which are forced upon us by our indispensable requirements and shrink from no innocent way of getting a livelihood. Each branch when it has received the wages of these so different occupations gives it to one person who has been appointed as treasurer. He takes it and at once buys what is necessary and provides food in abundance and anything else which human life requires. Thus having each day a common life and a common table they are content with the same conditions, lovers of frugality who shun expensive luxury as a disease of both body and soul.

And not only is their table in common but their clothing also. For in winter they have a stock of stout coats ready and in summer cheap vests, so that he who wishes may easily take any garment he likes, since what one has is held to belong to all and conversely what all have one has. Again if anyone is sick he is nursed at the common expense and tended with care and thoughtfulness by all. The old men too even if they are childless are treated as parents of a not merely numerous but very filial family and regularly close their life with an exceedingly prosperous and comfortable old age; so many are those who give them precedence and honour as their due and minister to them as a duty voluntarily and deliberately accepted rather than enforced by nature.

Furthermore they eschew marriage because they clearly discern it to be the sole or the principal danger to the maintenance of the communal life, as well as because they particularly practise continence. For no Essene takes a wife, because a wife is a selfish creature, excessively jealous and an adept at beguiling the morals of her husband and seducing him by her continued impostures. For by the fawning talk which she practises and the other ways in which she plays her part like an actress on the stage she first ensnares the sight and hearing, and when these subjects as it were have been duped she cajoles the sovereign mind.
And if children come, filled with the spirit of arrogance and bold speaking she gives utterance with
more audacious hardihood to things which before she hinted covertly and under disguise, and
casting off all shame she compels him to commit actions which are all hostile to the life of
fellowship. For he who is either fast bound in the love lures of his wife or under the stress of nature
makes his children his first care ceases to be the same to others and unconsciously has become a
different man and has passed from freedom into slavery.

Such then is the life of the Essenes, a life so highly to be prized that not only commoners but also
great kings look upon them with admiration and amazement, and the approbation and honours
which they give add further veneration to their venerable name. (Trans.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 5.15\(^2\)

(17.) Lying on the west of Asphaltites, and sufficiently distant to escape its noxious exhalations,
are the Esseni\(^2\), a people that live apart from the world, and marvellous beyond all others.
throughout the whole earth, for they have no women among them; to sexual desire they are
strangers; money they have none; the palm-trees are their only companions. Day after day,
however, their numbers are fully recruited by multitudes of strangers that resort to them, driven
thither to adopt their usages by the tempests of fortune, and wearied with the miseries of life.
Thus it is, that through thousands of ages, incredible to relate, this people eternally prolongs its
existence, without a single birth taking place there; so fruitful a source of population to it is that
weariness of life which is felt by others. (Trans. John Bostock; Perseus.Tufts.Edu)

Dead Sea Scrolls, The Damascus Document

D. Hasidim:

[1 Maccabees 2:37-47]

1 Maccabees 7:8-18

8 So the king chose Bacchides, one of the king’s Friends, governor of the province Beyond the
River; he was a great man in the kingdom and was faithful to the king. 9 He sent him, and with
him he sent the ungodly Alcimus, whom he made high priest; and he commanded him to take
vengeance on the Israelites. 10 So they marched away and came with a large force into the land of
Judah; and he sent messengers to Judas and his brothers with peaceable but treacherous

\(^2\) F. H. Colson, trans., *Philo Volume IX: Every Good Man is Free; On the Contemplative Life; On the Eternity of the
World; Against Flaccus; Apology for the Jews; On Providence* (LCL 363; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
1941).
words. But they paid no attention to their words, for they saw that they had come with a large force.  

12 Then a group of scribes appeared in a body before Alcimus and Bacchides to ask for just terms. The Hasideans were first among the Israelites to seek peace from them, for they said, ‘A priest of the line of Aaron has come with the army, and he will not harm us.’ Alcimus spoke peaceable words to them and swore this oath to them, ‘We will not seek to injure you or your friends.’ So they trusted him; but he seized sixty of them and killed them in one day, in accordance with the word that was written, ‘The flesh of your faithful ones and their blood they poured out all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them.’ Then the fear and dread of them fell on all the people, for they said, ‘There is no truth or justice in them, for they have violated the agreement and the oath that they swore.’ (NRSV) 

2 Maccabees 14:1-11

3 Now a certain Alcimus, who had formerly been high priest but had willfully defiled himself in the times of separation, realized that there was no way for him to be safe or to have access again to the holy altar, and went to King Demetrius in about the one hundred and fifty-first year, presenting to him a crown of gold and a palm, and besides these some of the customary olive branches from the temple. During that day he kept quiet. But he found an opportunity that furthered his mad purpose when he was invited by Demetrius to a meeting of the council and was asked about the attitude and intentions of the Jews. He answered:  

6 ‘Those of the Jews who are called Hasideans, whose leader is Judas Maccabeus, are keeping up war and stirring up sedition, and will not let the kingdom attain tranquillity. Therefore I have laid aside my ancestral glory—I mean the high-priesthood—and have now come here, first because I am genuinely concerned for the interests of the king, and second because I have regard also for my compatriots. For through the folly of those whom I have mentioned our whole nation is now in no small misfortune. (NRSV)