

The Diversity Within Judaism

- 1) The diversity of Judaism at the time of Jesus is such that most scholars now speak of Second Temple Judaism. **this diversity should not be allowed to negate the greater truth that there was more that united Judaism then divided them.** Yet, these things that were held in common amongst the Jews were also the source of their divisions.

“The radical pluralisation of Judaism prior to Jesus, and of which Jesus was both a symptom and a result, is rooted in the flawed unity of restored Israel during the [Maccabean] period” (B. Chilton).
- 2) In order to place a person somewhere in the spectrum of first century Judaism you need to discover their attitude to
 - the Temple
 - Ritual Purity
 - the Torah
 - the Romans (= the current chapter in their common story).
“First-century Judaism was the setting for many such disputes, the result of common convictions about Israel’s past combined with different readings of what Israel’s God now demanded of his people” (Westerholm, *DJG* 614). **Much of their differences can be seen in their expectations of the coming of God’s kingdom.**
- 3) At some level, the Pharisees, the Essenes, and the Zealots can be understood as Second Temple Reform Movements, i.e., they wanted to remake Judaism in their own image. The Sadducees can be considered the *status quo* group. (Followers of Jesus also began as a Second Temple Reform Group but, during the first 50-70 years their inclusion of Gentiles *as Gentiles* proved too radical for common Judaism.)
- 4) It is estimated that there were over 20,000 priests in Israel, 6,000 Pharisees, and 4,000 Essenes.
- 5) There are very detailed articles on the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and the Zealots in *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* and *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*.
- 6) There are limited historical records for each of these ST reform movements as they did not write about themselves and the debates between them were mostly oral.
- 7) The best starting point is considered to be the Jewish historian, Josephus, introduction to the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots written for his first-century Roman audience will understand. Of course, Josephus had an agenda that shapes his description.

As for the **Pharisees**, they say that certain events are the work of Fate¹, but not all; as to other events, it depends upon ourselves whether they shall take place or not. The sect of **Essenes**, however, declares that Fate is mistress of all things, and that nothing befalls men unless it be in accordance with her decree. But the **Sadducees** do away with Fate, holding that there is no such thing and that human actions are not achieved in accordance with her decree, but that all things lie within our own power, so that we ourselves are responsible for our well-being, while we suffer misfortune through our own thoughtlessness. (Josephus *Ant.* 13.171-73)

The Jews had for a great while had 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. (Josephus *Ant.* 18)

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

¹ By “Fate” Josephus means YHWH, but as he is writing for a Roman audience he uses philosophical rather than religious language.

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 any thing 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 man can act virtuously or viciously. They also believe that souls have an immortal rigor 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 live again; on account of which doctrines they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatsoever they do about Divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they perform them according to their direction; insomuch that the cities give 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 any thing 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 (3) 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 men, 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 any thing 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 Essens in their way of living, but do the most resemble those Dacae 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 kinds of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations 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 further about that matter; nor am I afraid that any thing 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.

Priests, High Priests, and Sadducees

Those who controlled the Temple effectively controlled Israel. The Sadducees, a priestly group, controlled the Temple. They were willing to cooperate with the Romans to ensure the survival of Israel.

1) Brief history

- a) Priests had to be of unquestionable priestly ancestry and were permitted to marry only a woman of pure Israelite blood. He (there were no female priests in Israel) had to be free from physical defects and had to be in a state of ritual purity when performing his duties, e.g., uncontaminated by contact with a dead body or through bodily discharges.
 - i) The Jerusalem based priests were wealthy and powerful. The High Priest was always the head of the Sanhedrin – the highest Jewish court and the means by which the Romans worked with the local Jewish leadership to control the local population.
 - ii) Country priests like Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, were (land) poor and they depended upon receiving a portion of the Temple tithes. They were important persons in a community for they studied the Torah (literate = social status; religious status) and got a turn to serve in the Temple (religious status).
- b) “They were the main teachers of the law, and the group to which ordinary Jews turned for judgment and arbitration in disputes or legal problems” (Wright, also Sanders). **“The priests were the local representatives of mainline ‘official’ Judaism” (Wright).**
- c) The name of the Sadducees suggests an appeal to the line of Zadok to whom was committed the priestly ministry of Israel (Ezek 40:46; 43:19) (Zadok was the High Priest for David and Solomon). It is possible they developed as a group under the Hasmoneans who ruled as High Priests and so needed the support and legitimation of the sons of Zadok, i.e., the Sadducees. They are associated with the priests, especially the high priests and the Sanhedrin. They also have been tied to the Herodians who were part of the royal court of Herod the Great.

2) Their goals for Israel centred upon **survival of the nation through cooperation with Rome.** They were used by Rome to provide a local means of controlling the population. This is especially true of the chief priests in Jerusalem.

“The portrait of the Sadducees that tradition has preserved is of a worldly, religiously dispassionate group, more interested in privilege and wealth than in devotion to the true traditions of Israel. This is doubtless true, to some extent, and the marriage between a theological affirmation of Torah alone and the political affirmation of their own power was surely a convenient one” (Newsome).

3) Their distinctive teachings and practices

- a) They maintained that human choices and actions were totally free – unrestrained by divine influence. For this reason, they tended to disassociate God from human affairs. This led them to cooperate with the Romans believing that **“if it is to be, it is up to me.”** There was no-one to come to establish the kingdom, that was left to them to do as best as they could. **Their fear that refusal to cooperate would lead the Romans to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple proved true in 66-70 CE.**
- b) The Temple was theirs to maintain and to use. Control of the Temple was the key to their power. Judaism was a Temple centred religion (unlike Rabbinic Judaism which is a Torah centred way of life) and so the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE destroyed them.
- c) The Sadducees accepted the Torah (Pentateuch) and made little effort to reapply it to the present situation of the people. The Torah stressed that correct worship in the Temple would bring with it material prosperity and the elite priests attempted to realise its promise. “The Sadducees held strictly to the literal wording of the Law and refused to admit to equal rank with the written letters the oral tradition which the Pharisees treasured” (Lohse, p.75).

- d) This meant that they also rejected the resurrection and the spirit world, issues not addressed in the Pentateuch/Torah.

4) Their role in the Gospels

- a) Because the Sadducees were Jerusalem based, Jesus did not directly confront them until he arrived in Jerusalem and “cleanses” the Temple. At which point he very much becomes their concern, and it is only a few days later that he is crucified.
- b) Jesus and the kingdom of God would have been a dangerous indulgence from their point of view. They carried the responsibility of the nation and acted with political expediency, for them it was truly better for one to die than many.

(John 11:47-52) So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. **If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.**” But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” He did not say this of his own accord but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

Essenes – Dead Sea Scrolls Community

Essenes saw the Jerusalem Temple as totally compromised and expected God to judge it and Israel. They saw themselves as the holy remnant of Israel and they withdrew from society so as to keep themselves “pure” while they waited for God to act against “the sons of darkness.”

1) Brief history

- a) A “monastic” movement represented by several communities scattered throughout Israel. They would provide hospitality to travelling Essenes but not to non-Essenes. Apparently, a community of Essenes lived in Jerusalem. It is believed that the Dead Sea Scroll (Qumran) community was associated with Essenes. Some Essenes practiced celibacy in order to avoid impurity. Some would marry but always to another Essene. This is indicative of boundaries being more narrowly defined than simply Jewish/Gentile.
- b) Perhaps the name is derived from “healers” or “the pious.” They share some heritage with priests. Possibly share a heritage with the Pharisees. Perhaps they were a purity sect, centred around the Temple rather than the Torah.
- c) In the Dead Sea Scrolls (recovered from caves above the excavated Qumran site in 1947-1956) two key figures appear, the wicked priest and the righteous teacher. The wicked priest – probably the Hasmonean High Priest – was initially supported but then rejected. This suggests that the Essenes were a part of the Maccabean revolution but grew dissatisfied with the way things developed. The **“Teacher of Righteousness”** seems to have been a rival to the High Priest in Jerusalem. Some of the Psalms associated with his name suggest a deep piety.

2) They had no interest in Israel as a whole. They saw themselves as **the remnant of the true Israel**. Their sole concern was maintaining the purity of their own communities.

3) Their distinctive teachings and practices

- a) They tended towards “fatalism.” Humans could not affect the plans and the workings of God. They were *passively* awaiting the vindication of God. They did not believe they could do anything to advance the timing of God’s coming. A coming which they expected would be accompanied by a holy war between the angels of light and darkness.
- b) They were ascetic. They engaged in rigorous physical work, studied the Scriptures, and maintained a high level of ritual purity. They were particularly strict with reference to the

Sabbath. They often shared a communal life with all personal property was donated to the community. They avoided all unnecessary contact with non-Essenes.

- c) Possibly they rejected the current practice of the Temple without rejecting the Temple itself. Or, possibly they saw themselves as the true Temple. They were vitally concerned with maintaining the purity of the community. An initiation period preceded full admittance to the community. An expelled member would die rather than eat unclean food.
 - d) **They were awaiting two Messiahs:** a Davidic King and, the more important one, an Aaronic High Priest. It was the priestly messiah who would re-establish the Temple and its sacrifices.
 - e) Essenes interpreted Scripture through the method of *peshet* in which the words of Scripture are taken to be referring to the present situation of the community and characters of Scripture would be equated with contemporary persons.
- 4) There is no clear indication in the Gospels that Jesus had any interaction with them. They were sectarian, withdrawn, a closed social group, non-conformists. Some suggest that John the Baptist may have had an association with them. However, he was clearly not an Essene at the time of his ministry to Israel!
- 5) The separateness of the Essenes meant that the presence of the Romans was largely irrelevant to them. However, they were expecting God to intervene decisively against his enemies (including the Romans) in the near future in what they described as an apocalyptic battle between the “sons of light” (i.e., the angels and them) and the “sons of darkness” (i.e., demons and everyone else). Although they were pacifists, there is some evidence that they may have been stockpiling weapons in order for them to join the apocalyptic battle. This may explain why the Romans totally destroyed their communities during the Jewish War.

Zealots – Bandits (or Freedom Fighters)

Whether a person is an insurgent criminal or a religious freedom fighter is in the eye of the beholder. The “zealots” are those Jews who saw themselves as zealous for the God of Israel and his Torah and who, in the tradition of the Maccabees, would overthrow the ungodly Romans and reclaim Israel for YHWH. They acted not because they believed they could overthrow the Romans but because they believed that God would use them to overthrow the Romans. Israel has “no King but God!”

- 1) Their cry was **“no king but God.”** Their goal was a land truly free from Gentile defilement, just as God originally intended.
- 2) Not all that we now call Zealots were religiously motivated, some were probably just destitute and had taken to criminal behaviours in order to survive. Some of the “bandits,” certainly Judas the Galilean and his followers, saw their mission in terms of a religious revolt. They rejected the Roman attempt to take a census of the people in 6 C.E., a census that was intended to aid the ability of the Romans to tax them as a conquered people.
- 3) The Gospels make no direct reference to Zealots as a movement. Some identify one of Jesus’ disciples as a zealot, Simon (Acts 1:13), but this is unlikely.
 - a) However, the references to criminals/rebels around the death of Jesus, Barabbas (Mark 15:7) and the “thieves” on the cross, does suggest the likelihood that Jesus was crucified as an “anti-Roman revolutionary.” (Mark 15:7, “Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.”)

Pharisees

Recommended reading. Kent L. Yinger, *The Pharisees: Their History, Character, and New Testament Portrait* (Cascade Books, 2022). <https://amzn.asia/g3jDHdI>

1) Introduction

- a) In the time of Jesus, Pharisees were viewed by most other Jews as upright individuals known particularly for their precise interpretation and practice (*akribeia*) of the Mosaic commands. They were not widely considered hypocrites or insincere show-offs, although cases of such were known and were condemned by the Pharisees themselves. Their precision led to spelling out the implications of the commandments which themselves remained fairly general. This was termed *halakhab* (the way one should walk) which formed a body of “traditions of the fathers” passed down through generations and families. (K. Yinger)
- b) They were a relatively small group, yet influential due to the widespread respect of the populace for their careful commitment to Israel’s ways. This influence was not of a formal nature; they did not control the Jerusalem Sanhedrin or synagogue life nationwide. (K. Yinger)
- c) “The Pharisaic agenda...had always been to purify Israel by summoning her to return to the true ancestral traditions; to restore Israel to her independent theocratic status; and to be, as a pressure group, in the vanguard of such movements by the study and practice of Torah” (N.T. Wright). Pharisees believed, “Once the people had prepared themselves in purity and holiness for his coming, then the Messiah would appear as the Son of David, gather the scattered tribes of Israel and re-establish the kingdom” (Lohse, p.81).
- d) **“If the whole law would be kept by all Israel for one day, then God would come”** (Rabbinic proverb that probably reflects the attitude of the Pharisees).

2) Brief history

- a) Their name means either “separated ones” or “specifiers” (of the divine Torah). Their historical interest was clearly political. It is likely that they were formed sometime during the Maccabean Period from a concern to establish the true people of Israel in accordance with the careful observance of Torah.
- b) A lay group drawn from all classes and professions of Jewish society that formed itself into a table-fellowship group, the *haberim*.
- c) They demonstrated a concern to remain in a state of ritual purity equivalent to that of a priest eating sacred meals. This led them to a particular concern over issues of food purity and tithing. The only way of being sure that the food they were eating was ritually pure was to oversee the various stages of production and to eat with trusted companions who shared the same concerns.
- d) There are various opinions concerning how militant the Pharisees were. The uncertainty probably reflects historical differences existing among the Pharisees. It is certain that they would have opposed the presence of the Romans in Israel; some took up arms (significantly in 6 C.E.). The majority view seemed to focus upon an expectation that God would intervene if the people prepared themselves first by living faithfully to God’s covenant with them to be “a kingdom of priests.”
- e) The relationship to the later Rabbis to the Pharisees is still an open question. However, it is likely that Rabbinic Judaism is closer to Pharisaic Judaism than to any other form of Second Temple Judaism.

- 3) The Pharisees must be considered as a group with their own vision for the destiny and responsibilities of Israel. They are certainly not just pious individuals (or hypocrites) with a concern for their own future salvation. **The Pharisees’ vision was built upon Israel being a holy nation, a kingdom of priests.**

- 4) They are a “lay” (i.e., not priestly) group, highly committed to worshipping God with their lives and who believed that God wanted Israel to be a kingdom of priests. But how could they live this out? There is evidence that Pharisees attempted to maintain priestly state of purity as evidenced by their concern to achieve purity in eating meals. Certainly, “they tried to maintain purity at a degree higher than that prescribed in the Hebrew Bible for ordinary Jews under ordinary conditions is not in question.”
- 5) To live in this higher state of purity, the Torah needed to be interpreted in such a way that it showed how to keep pure in matters of daily life. The importance of obeying God led them to “hedge the Law” so that they would not accidentally break one of God’s commandments.
- 6) It used to be asserted that Pharisees were obsessed with minor details of purity. Hopefully, readers can now perceive that one person’s “obsession” is another’s “careful obedience,” and that Christians and Jews might reasonably differ over what is minor and major. In any case, it is unlikely that most first-century Jews would have accused them of being “obsessed.” (K. Yinger)
- 7) Another pillar of the older view is that Pharisees were legalists. Actually, this used to be the view of Jewish soteriology in general, with the Pharisees taken as a particularly egregious example. This view of Jewish soteriology has been effectively dismantled by others, and we have found no evidence that Pharisees viewed their acts of obedience as earning them salvation, righteousness or turning God from being angry with them to favourable. (K. Yinger)
- 8) Their distinctive teachings and practices (shared by many Jews)
 - a) Maintained a mix of the action of God and the action of humans in the reality of life. Providence – humans must act for God to act.
 - b) Believed that the Torah revealed God’s will for how his people should act. In order to ensure the applicability of Torah in the current situation they drew upon the Oral Torah (e.g., Mt 15:2; Mk 7:10-12, Mt 23:16-22; Paul in Gal 1:14) – an interpretation and a supplement to Torah. This helped them to build a hedge around the Torah.
 - c) Rather than being known as overly strict, the Pharisees were, in fact, criticized by some (who were probably Essenes) as making obedience too easy or “smooth.” It would appear that Pharisees sought to promulgate a path of obedience that was both carefully accurate and practicable for Israel. (K. Yinger)
 - d) Believed in a general resurrection (i.e., God would intervene to bring vindication to Israel and judgement against the nations) and the spirit world (i.e., God is active in our world) (Acts 23:6-8).
 - e) They believed in judgment of individuals and eternal punishment. Hence, each individual’s behaviour was important.
 - f) They sought to maintain ritual purity through washings (ritual baths, *mikveh*) and tithing (Mt 23:23).
- 9) How much influence did they have over the people and the institutions of Israel?
 - a) It is likely that they were a small group, “a few thousand at most, and based almost entirely in Jerusalem” (Sanders). This corrects the older view that equated Pharisaism with Judaism.

“It is vital...that even in this period, at the height of their influence, we do not imagine the Pharisees acting, or even thinking of themselves, as a kind of secret thought-police. They were not an official body. They were not even the official teachers of Torah: that was one of the functions of the priesthood, both in Jerusalem and in the local community. They only obtained power if they colluded with or influenced another group who already possessed it” (Wright, *NTPG*, 189).
- 10) Their role in the Gospels
 - a) Pharisees were respected by the people; they are certainly not all (or even mostly) hypocrites. Jesus said, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)

- i) Some Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod's plot, Luke 13:31.
- ii) They invited him to eat with them, Luke 7:36-50
- iii) Some believed in Jesus, as evidenced by Nicodemus (John 3:1) and the presence of Pharisees as *Pharisees* in the early church (e.g., Acts 5:34, 23:6-9; Paul).
- b) E. P. Sanders doubts (1) the historical reliability of the conflict stories, and (2) that there were serious disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees over observance. However, there are good reasons for accepting the Gospel accounts.
 - i) Both Jesus and the Pharisees were competing for the allegiance of the masses. Jesus' attitude to Torah practice and purity was a direct threat to the Pharisees agenda.
 - ii) Common Jews listened to Pharisees when they spoke about how Jews should live under God's Torah. For this reason, other teachers, like Jesus of Nazareth, giving different advice as to how authentic Judaism was to be lived posed a challenge, and especially so if they were able to gather a noticeable following. (K. Yinger)
 - iii) Saul the Pharisee was violently opposed to the practice of the Christians.
 - iv) Areas of dispute in the Gospels – Sabbath, purity, association with sinners, taxes to Caesar – fit with what we know of the Pharisees' main concerns.
 - v) **“In the end, the Pharisees could not reconcile Jesus – his actions and his claims – with their own understanding of piety and godliness.”** (Taylor, *EDT*, 851) **Or, with their own vision for Israel.**

Am I talking with a Pharisee or an Evangelical?	Phar.	Evan.
1. Believe that God has chosen a special people for himself through which the whole world might be blessed. Believe that God's chosen people are a “kingdom of priests” who can direct people towards God (but only if they are faithful themselves)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Believe that God has revealed his character and his ways in Scripture, so that we might know how to faithfully serve him.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Believe that those parts of Scripture which refer to a different time and a different culture can be interpreted in a way that lets us know how to faithfully serve God in the here and now.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Believe that all of God's people should strive towards living as God's people 24/7, and not just when it suits them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Believe that interpreting Scripture is important enough to get right, and so studying Scripture (and putting into practice what you learn) is essential to living faithfully for God. We should avoid listening to those who don't share our commitment to the Scriptures as the source of God's truth.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Believe that their interpretation of Scripture is sufficiently correct as to be the interpretation that all faithful people of God should embrace.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Believe that God will come and establish his kingdom over all the earth, but that the faithlessness of God's people contributes to this coming Day of the Lord.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Believe that being holy means being set apart from God, which has the practical implication of avoiding evil and not being unequally yoked with sinners.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Believe that establishing a culture of faithfulness by grouping together with like minded people and being instructed by faithful teachers will contribute to their daily walk with God.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Believe there is never a time when we should compromise the truth of Scripture, and that faithfulness in the big things require us to be faithful in the small things.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Sinners

Recommended reading. **Tax Collectors and Sinners** by Greg Carey (see [Bible Odyssey](#))

- 1) Sinners are not a group in Second Temple Judaism in the same way that Sadducees, Essenes, Pharisees, or Zealots are. The basis for calling a person a sinner varies depending on who is using it, e.g., religious practice, moral practice, social boundaries. However, the intent of calling a person a sinner is universally to exclude them from the speaker's group, marking the person as an excluded outsider and to express disapproval of their (in the eyes of the speaker) anti-group behaviour.
 - a) When Jesus ate with "sinners" (Mark 2:15-17, Luke 15:1-2) the problem was not one of ritual purity but of moral offence. Most Scholars regard sinners as people who habitually behaved in immoral ways or in ways that contradicted widely shared religious observance. We never encounter a clear definition of sinners, a term that almost surely expressed general social disapproval. When Jesus says, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17; Matt 5:45; Luke 5:32), he contrasts the two groups. (G. Carey)
 - b) "Sinners" is certainly not intended as a neutral theological description of a person's need for Christ's redemptive work. (For, in that case, we are all sinners, and the term cannot be used to distinguish one person from another.)
 - c) "Sinners" is not a label that references a group of people who are ritually unclean. (Almost all Jews would be ritually unclean most of the time.) Nor are they simply ordinary people who don't observe Pharisaic practices, the so-called *am ha'arets* (or, "people of the land"). The Gospels accounts suggest that the common people used this label of others.
 - d) It is unlikely that sinners is equivalent to apostates; that is, those Jews who have become Gentiles and taken up the worship of other gods.
 - e) Mt 11:16-19, Lk 7:37, and Mk 2:17 "make it clear that the notoriously wicked are intended" by the designation "sinners." (Westerholm, *DJG*, 612) Although, at other times, a broader group of people seem to be in mind.
- 2) The label "sinner" is being used by the (religious) majority to judge and isolate others in order to maintain their control over who belongs to their social group.
 - a) In sociological terms, we have been talking about "labeling" and "deviance." Simply, deviance involves any behaviours that transgress generally accepted social norms. For example, we might consider drinking beer among Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics. (I have done both.) Among Southern Baptists in those cultural pockets where Baptists represent a large percentage of the population, beer drinking represents a deviant behaviour. If a person, especially a young person, drinks beer, her behaviour elicits prayers from her peer group. The old joke is that although Protestants may not recognize the Pope, two Baptists will not recognize one another in a liquor store. Not so, of course, among Roman Catholics in most of the world, for whom drinking is one of life's pleasures. From a social point of view, sometimes beer drinking counts as sin and sometimes it does not. Deviance is not necessarily immoral. What may represent deviant behaviour in one social context may seem heroic in retrospect. (G. Carey)
- 3) Historians debate the significance of Jesus's association with sinners. Quite a few regard Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners as a distinctive feature of his ministry. E. P. Sanders has famously suggested that Jesus alienated his enemies by embracing sinners without requiring their repentance. That is how the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus. Although Jesus did not violate Jewish law in doing so, as some have supposed, one struggles to imagine why early Christians would invent the tradition that Jesus intentionally associated with disreputable people. (G. Carey)

According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus received criticism for dining with "tax collectors and sinners." Mark (2:16-17) and Matthew (9:11-13) report this controversy once, when Jesus invites a tax collector to follow him and then dines at the tax collector's house. Luke develops this one scene (5:27-32) into a theme, adding three other controversies that arise when Jesus dines with sinners

(7:36-50; 15:1-32; 19:1-10). Luke gives the impression that sinners found themselves attracted to (and welcomed by) Jesus's ministry (15:1-2). Luke also adds a parable in which Jesus judges a tax collector as more "righteous" than a Pharisee (18:11-14). In Matthew, Jesus alludes to criticisms that he is "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (11:19). (C. Carey)

- 4) The tax (tolls and tariffs) collectors in the Gospels are encountered largely in Galilee in which case, they worked for Herod not the Romans. Their offence was more likely their dishonesty (or, exploitation of others) rather than being "quislings" (Roman collaborators), e.g., Levi, and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10).
- 5) The Pharisees, concerned that all Israelites maintain high levels of personal holiness and concerned that impurity is contagious, apparently regard it as inappropriate for a righteous person to consort with sinners.
- 6) Luke's story (7:36-50, "Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman") denies us the sort of background information we might desire concerning the woman. That is probably a good thing. It moves us away from evaluating her to considering the power of her presence in the story. Her entrance fills the room with tension: here is a sinner among professedly righteous men. And a woman to boot! One more thing about the woman in Luke 7—and Jesus' interaction with her. Jesus pronounces her sins forgiven, but he never calls on her to repent. Indeed, the story demonstrates no interest in whether she changes her behaviour or not. This, we shall see, is a common trait of Jesus' ministry. Not only does he allow sinners into his company, he joins them. Yet he never calls ordinary sinners to repentance. We have lots to learn from this story—not just about righteousness and forgiveness and not just about Jesus' compassion for the lost. Deep engagement with this scene teaches us about ourselves and our assumptions. So easily we evaluate others' worth with no real appreciation for their stories, their histories, and their struggles. So easily we encounter people whom society has pushed to the margins, and we assume they lack power or agency. What does our perception of weakness, vulnerability, and stigma hide from our vision? What do we fail to see in other people, and in ourselves, as a result of such categories? (G. Carey)

Q1. Is it the type of sin, the amount of sin, or the persistence in sin that might justify a person as a sinner?

Q2. If sinner and righteous are antonyms, then does the absence of a type of sin, a lesser amount of sin, or living without a persistent sin make a person righteous?

Q3. What is the point of labelling a person a sinner if you are going to hang out with them on their terms?

Appendix: “Revolutionary Movements, Jewish. § 2. Messianic Pretenders”²

In Judaism prior to the first century there was no single messianic expectation held by Jews. Furthermore, messiah, as a title, does not appear frequently in pre-Christian literature. Only after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, when rabbinic theological reflection standardized and popularized the term, does *messiah* appear frequently with essentially the same meaning in each usage. The scarcity of the term, however, *does not* suggest that there were no expectations of an anointed royal Jewish leader. The OT had begun to shape an expectation with its promises of a “branch” that God would raise for David. This notion can be seen in Jeremiah 23:5–6 and Isaiah 11:2–9, where the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” shall “judge the poor with righteousness.” Micah also contributed to the expectation by identifying Bethlehem as the home town of Messiah (Mic 5:2). But it is inappropriate to speak of a widespread OT expectation of a messiah.

During the period of Persian and Hellenistic domination, there is also little evidence of a messianic hope. The promises to David and the prophecies of a future Davidic king were known during these periods (cf. Sir 47:11, 22; 1 Macc 2:57), but the fulfilment was postponed to the distant future. This is also probably the case during the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes, although a few references may be interpreted otherwise (cf. *1 Enoch* 90:9, 37–38; 1 Macc. 3:4). During the Hasmonean period, however, the hope of an anointed royal figure who would deliver Israel became more prominent. At Qumran there were apparently two anointed figures: a high-priestly messiah and the Prince of the Congregation, a lay head of the eschatological community. And in other Jewish literature of the period an anointed royal figure begins to emerge (*Pss. Sol.* 17). But among extant writings, only those coming from the period following the death of Herod (4 B.C.) refer unambiguously to a promised anointed figure.

After the death of Herod in 4 B.C. the Jews pressed Herod’s son and heir apparent, Archelaus, for a number of reforms. During the Passover, when the demands reached a feverish pitch, Archelaus sent his armies into Jerusalem and massacred thousands of worshiping pilgrims. This action catalysed revolt in every major area of Herod’s kingdom, and some of these revolts took the form of messianic movements. Josephus identifies several leaders of these movements: **Judas, the son of Ezekias** (Josephus *Ant.* 17.10.5; *J.W.* 2.4.1); **Simon**, servant of King Herod (Josephus *Ant.* 17.10.6); and **Athronges** (Josephus *Ant.* 17.7). Josephus clearly indicates that they aspired to be Israel’s king (Josephus *J.W.* 2.4.1; *Ant.* 17.10.8). All of these messianic figures were of humble origins, and their followers were primarily peasants.

The principal goal of these revolutionaries was to overthrow Herodian and Roman domination of Palestine. In addition to fighting the Romans, these revolutionaries attacked the mansions of the aristocracy and the royal residences. This undoubtedly reveals the frustration of years of social inequality. In response, Varus, legate of Syria, dispatched two legions (6,000 troops each) and four regiments of cavalry (500 each). This was in addition to the troops already in Judea and the auxiliary troops provided by the city-states and client kings in the area. In spite of this military might these messianic movements were difficult to subdue.

Because of the lack of sources it is difficult to identify any messianic movements between the above-mentioned revolts and those surrounding the First Jewish Revolt (except, of course, the followers of Jesus). With regard to the First Jewish Revolt, Josephus notes two messianic movements that bear mentioning. The first is **Menahem**, son of Judas, the Galilean, who took his followers and marched off to Masada. There he broke open king Herod’s arsenal and armed other brigands, in addition to his own

² S E Porter and C A Evans. Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship (electronic ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

group. With these men as his bodyguards, he returned to Jerusalem as a king, and becoming a leader of the insurrection, he organized the siege of the palace. (Josephus *J.W.* 2.17.8; cf. 2.17.5)

The second messianic movement mentioned by Josephus was built around **Simon bar Giora** (i.e., “Simon son of a proselyte”). In A.D. 66, at the outbreak of the war, Simon helped aid the Jews against Cestius by attacking the Roman rear guard. Simon’s messianic movement was also motivated by the social oppression exerted by Israel’s aristocracy. When Simon had gained control of the Judean and Idumean countryside, the citizens of Jerusalem invited him to lead the defence against Rome. After a power struggle in which he forced the Zealots and John of Gischala aside, Simon took control of Jerusalem. Simon was a strict disciplinarian and did well in his struggle against the Romans, but the Roman army was overwhelmingly powerful. Adorned in a white tunic and a purple cape as the king of the Jews, Simon surrendered and was taken to Rome. There he was ritually executed. The messianic movement led by Simon was the largest of all the movements described by Josephus, lasting nearly two years. It may have been fueled by eschatological hopes. [W. J. Heard]

During the reign of Trajan, the Jewish inhabitants of Judea, Egypt, and Cyrene revolted (A.D. 114 or 115). According to Eusebius, they rallied to one Lukuas, “their king” (Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 4.2.1–4). Dio Cassius mentions this revolt, but calls the Jewish leader Andreas (Dio Cassius *Hist.* 68.32; 69.12–13). Eusebius says that General Marcius Turbo “waged war vigorously against [the Jews] in many battles for a considerable time and killed many thousands” (Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 4.2.4). Although Dio’s claim that hundreds of thousands perished is probably an exaggeration, the papyri and archaeological evidence confirm that the revolt was widespread and very destructive (see Schürer, 1:530–33). [C. A. Evans]

The final messianic movement in recorded Jewish antiquity (A.D. 132–35) was led by Simon ben Kosiba. Rabbi Aqiba proclaimed that Simon was indeed the Messiah, and a large portion of the Judean peasantry responded to the claim. Simon had three years of independence and even minted coins (inscribed “Year 1 of the liberation of Israel”). When Rome sent in a massive army, Simon resorted to guerrilla warfare and forced the Romans into a prolonged war of attrition. Nevertheless, the Romans finally did “annihilate, exterminate and eradicate” them from the land (Dio Cassius *Hist.* 59.13.3).

TM2116 Week 2.2 (11 August 2011)

Josephus comments...	Temple	Torah	Purity	Kingdom of God	Romans	Jesus
Pharisees. They say that certain events are the work of [God], but not all; as to other events, it depends upon ourselves whether they shall take place or not	If all of Israel will keep all of the Torah for just one day, God will act.					
	Accepted the importance of the Temple	Sought full faithfulness to the Torah and used “oral Torah” to achieve this	Sought to live out priestly level purity	God was waiting for them to bring Israel to full faithfulness to Torah	God will deal with them if they deal with Israel	Jesus undermined their plans to make Israel Torah-observant
Sadducees. They do away with [God]...all things lie within our own power, so that we ourselves are responsible for our own well-being...	If it is to be, it is up to we.					
	The Temple was their source of power.	Accepted only the Torah and did not want to “update it”	Ensured they followed the ritual purity laws for priests	Now is the only time. God will not act in the future.	Cooperate with those who control your destiny.	A threat to the Temple and to Roman peace.
Essenes. They declare that [God] is master of all things, and that nothing befalls men unless it be in accordance with his decree	We are the purified remnant of Israel.					
	The Temple is no longer truly a holy place.	<i>pesher</i> – looking for contemporary events and people in their reading of Torah	Ascetic. Strict rules of purity observance (including staying away from that which makes you unclean)	They would join the “sons of light” against the “sons of darkness” (Romans and impure Jews)	No worse (or better) than the rebellious Jews	ignored
Zealots. 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.	We have no King but YHWH.					
	Jewish leaders have compromised with Rome	(Pharisees??)	?	God will repeat Maccabean triumph	No king but YHWH	ignored
Jesus, a wise man who was a doer of wonderful works... He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles.	“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”					
	Challenged the Temple authorities	Challenged Pharisaic interpretation	Challenged defensive purity practices	Announced the arrival of the Kingdom	Ignored – not Israel’s chief problem	Who did Jesus think he was?