

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #84:
POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND ETHNIC GROUPS
IN BIBLE TIMES
By John Temples

When you read the New Testament, you often come across references to various sects or groups that existed in Jesus's day. Here is a list (in alphabetical order) of the main sects and groups that existed in Israel in the first century with some information about them. Most groups in this list are actually named in Scripture; a few are not but I've included them because of their relevance.

CENTURIONS: Some seven or eight centurions are mentioned in the Bible. A centurion was an officer in the Roman army. Centurions got their name because they commanded 100 men (centuria = 100 in Latin). Remarkably, every centurion who is mentioned in the New Testament appears in a favorable light. Ryle said, "It is worthy of remark that in no case is there the slightest hint that the profession of a soldier is unlawful in the sight of God." Here is a list of centurions mentioned in the New Testament:

1. The centurion whose servant was healed (Luke 7:2-10).
2. The centurion who confessed Christ at the cross (Matthew 27:54).
3. The centurion who rescued Paul from a mob (Acts 21:32).
4. The centurion who bore Paul's message to his superior (Acts 22:25).
5. Cornelius, the first Gentile convert (Acts 10:1).
6. The centurion who saved Paul's life on the voyage to Rome (Acts 27:3, 43).
7. The centurion who escorted Paul to Caesarea (Acts 23:23).

EPICUREANS: Acts 17:18 tells us that when Paul delivered his famous address on Mars Hill in Athens, he encountered certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Here is some information about them: "The Epicureans and the Stoics belonged to two Greek schools of philosophy very popular with the common people because they taught how to achieve pleasure and happiness despite one's circumstances. The Epicureans believed everything in the world was made up of atoms and that everything was governed by physical laws. The best way to achieve happiness and pleasure, therefore, was to submit to these laws of nature, live simply and

virtuously without burdening one's self with worldly cares, and do everything to avoid physical pain. Though they figured the gods did exist, somewhere far away, religion was not important. Theirs was a practical search for happiness. The Stoics, on the other hand, believed that God was everywhere, in nature, in the universe and in man, and, therefore, to live in harmony with the universe, one should strive toward godly perfection of character, and of submission to the divine will. This was achieved through virtuous living and self control. Man conquered the world by conquering himself. Evil happened when man allowed passions to control him. Whereas the Epicureans believed pleasure and happiness were the ultimate end, for the Stoics, virtue, wisdom, and goodness toward every living thing enabled the individual to reach perfect union with this pantheistic or universal presence that governed all."

(<https://biblesources.info/who-are-the-philosophers-stoics-and-epicureans-in-acts1718/>)

Burton Coffman says in his comments on Acts 17:18, "Both philosophies ... were outcroppings of a single basic error, that of the deification of humanity, an error that blinds the present generation no less than theirs."

ESSENES: The Essenes were a shadowy group of people who lived around the Dead Sea during the time of Christ. They are not mentioned in the Bible, but Josephus the Jewish historian speaks of them. They are best known as the makers of the Dead Sea scrolls. The Essenes were Jews who believed that Judaism in their day was corrupted. They abandoned Jerusalem and lived a monastic life in the desert, adopting strict dietary laws and a commitment to celibacy. They originated about 100 BC and disappeared from history after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

GALILEANS: A Galilean was a resident of Galilee. But there was also a political party that went by the name "the Galileans." Their leader was a man named Judas, who led a rebellion against Roman occupation. Their slogan was "Galilee for Galileans." They were the "extreme right" fanatics of their day. Because of their hatred of Rome, they were often at odds with Roman authorities. They may be the ones mentioned in Luke 13:1 as incurring the wrath of Pilate: "There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Their leader, Judas of Galilee, is specifically mentioned in Acts 2:37, where Gamaliel says, "...Judas of Galilee rose up in the

days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.”

HEBREWS: The term “Hebrews” is a general descriptor of the Jewish people.¹ But in at least one Bible passage a specific group of people is meant. Acts 6:1 records a problem in the early Jerusalem church: “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.” Both Hebrews and Hellenists were Jews; however, “Hebrews” designated Jews native to and living in Israel and speaking Aramaic or Hebrew; “Hellenists” (which see) were non-native Jews sojourning in Israel but speaking the Greek language.

HELLENISTS: Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews not native to Palestine. They are mentioned in Acts 6:1. The term *Hellenists* comes from the name of Greece before it was known as Greece. Wikipedia says, “The Greeks called themselves Hellenes and their land was Hellas. The name 'Greeks' was given to the people of Greece later by the Romans.” Commentator Albert Barnes explains the dispute of Acts 6:1: “In the time when the gospel was first preached, there were two classes of Jews--those who remained in Palestine, who used the Hebrew language, and who were appropriately called ‘Hebrews’; and those who were scattered among the Gentiles, who spoke the Greek language, and who used in their synagogues the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint. These were called ‘Hellenists,’ or, as it is in our translation, ‘Grecians.’ These were ... those of Jewish origin who were not natives of Judea, who had come up to Jerusalem to attend the great festivals.... Dissensions would be very likely to arise between these two classes of persons. The Jews of Palestine would pride themselves much on the fact that they dwelt in the land of the patriarchs and the land of promise; that they used the language which their fathers spoke, and in which the oracles of God were given; and that they were constantly near the temple, and regularly engaged in its solemnities. On the other hand, the Jews from other parts of the world would be suspicious, jealous, and envious of their brethren, and would be likely to charge them with partiality, or of taking advantage in their contact with them. These occasions of strife would not be destroyed by their conversion to Christianity, and one of them is furnished on this occasion.”

¹ There are three names for the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob: Jews, Israelites, and Hebrews. *Jew* distinguishes them on the basis of ancestry, the term being derived from the name Judah. *Hebrew* distinguishes them as to language spoken. It also connects them with Abraham, who was called “Abraham the Hebrew” in Genesis 14:13. *Israelite* commemorates the change by God of Jacob’s name to Israel.

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THE HERODS: The Herods were a line of non-Jewish rulers appointed by Rome to govern the territory of Israel. Some six Herods ruled from 37 BC to AD 93. Aside from their cruelty, they were hated by the Jews because they were of Edomite blood. Three members of Herod's family figure prominently in the life of Jesus. Herod the Great was the king when Jesus was born. It was he who tried to kill the baby Jesus. When he died Herod Archelaus ruled in his place. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee during the time of Jesus' public ministry. He was the one who had John the Baptist executed. Herod thought that Jesus was actually John raised from the dead. Herod wanted to kill Jesus as he had done John the Baptist. Herod saw Jesus during His trial but was disappointed that Jesus performed no miracle in His presence.

HERODIANS: The Herodians were a political party loyal to the rulership of Herod. The Herodians favored submitting to the Herods, and therefore to Rome, as a matter of political expediency. They regarded Jesus as a revolutionary fanatic and on three occasions joined forces with the Pharisees to silence Him (Mark 3:6, 12:13; Matthew 22:16). Jesus condemned them (Mark 8:15, 12:13-17).

LAWYERS: A lawyer was not what we think of as an attorney, but a theologian--an expert or scholar of the Mosaic Law. A lawyer seems to be identical to a scribe (which see). Lawyers constantly challenged Jesus with what they thought were unanswerable questions (Matthew 22:35, Luke 10:25). In Titus 3:13, Paul mentioned a lawyer named Zenas who was a believer (yes, it is possible for a lawyer to be a Christian!).

NAZARENES: Like the term *Galilean*, the term *Nazarene* was a general term for a citizen of Nazareth. Jesus was called a "Nazarene" because of His residence there (Matthew 2:23). However, the city of Nazareth was not looked upon with favor ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", John 1:46). Accordingly, the first Christians were called "Nazarenes" by their enemies as a term of contempt and derision. Jewish leaders accused Paul before the Roman governor Felix of being "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). The Hebrew equivalent of "Nazarenes", Notzrim, occurs in the Babylonian Talmud, and is still the modern Israeli Hebrew name for Christians.

NAZIRITES OR NAZARITES: The terms *Nazirite* and *Nazarene* are not synonymous. A Nazarene was a citizen of Nazareth; a Nazirite was a man or woman who was under a voluntary vow of consecration to God as described in Numbers 6:1–21. "Nazirite" comes from the Hebrew word נזיר *nazir* meaning "consecrated" or "separated." While under this vow, a Nazirite had to abstain from all wine and anything else made from grapes. The individual was also forbidden to cut his or her hair until his vow was fulfilled. A Nazirite vow could be taken for a specific length of time or for life. Samuel was a lifelong Nazirite (his mother Hannah vowed to God that he would be consecrated to God all his life and no razor would come upon his head, 1 Samuel 1:11). Samson was also a lifelong Nazirite, and we remember how much trouble he got into when he allowed his hair to be cut! John the Baptist was put under a Nazirite vow at birth (Luke 1:13-17). (Advocates of long hair on men take note: Jewish men under this vow had long hair, but as a sign of humility and submission to God, not as a sign of rebellion against cultural norms!)

PHARISEES: The Pharisees were nationalistic Jews who were zealous for the preservation of the law of Moses and the national purity of Israel. Along with the Sadducees, they constituted the bulk of the opposition to Jesus. (See under Sadducees for a chart comparing the two sects.) The name "Pharisee" comes from a Hebrew word meaning "separated." They separated themselves from those they considered unclean, which was just about everybody besides themselves. The Pharisees' cause was originally a noble one; unfortunately, their zeal led them to become legalistic and self-righteous. They particularly hated Jesus, whom they saw as a threat to their popularity and self-righteousness. The Pharisees have gotten a lot of bad press, most of which they richly deserved. If they were around today, they would be the religious people you would love to hate. However, the Pharisees were not all bad. Nicodemus, who helped bury Jesus, was a Pharisee, as was the apostle Paul. There were many Pharisees in the early church according to Acts 15:5. Jesus even paid them some compliments on occasion. But for one of the most scathing rebukes in the entire Bible, read Jesus's assessment of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-36.

PUBLICANS: The publicans were Jews who contracted with Rome to collect taxes for the Roman government. (The term "publican" in older Bible versions has largely been replaced by the term "tax collector" in newer versions.) Any money

they collected above the amount set by Rome was theirs to keep. Because of this, many publicans were dishonest and exceedingly aggressive in their tax collecting. Moreover, they were regarded by most Jews as traitors who had sold out to Rome. Jesus was severely criticized by the Pharisees for eating with them (Matthew 9:10-11, Luke 15:1-2). There are three publicans, however, who are spoken of favorably. There was Matthew, the apostle, who abandoned his tax business to follow the Lord (Matthew 9:9). Also, there is the humble publican who prayed for mercy in Jesus's parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14), whom Christ used as an illustration to condemn the self-righteous disposition of many of the Pharisees. Finally, there was Zacchaeus, the chief publican at Jericho (Luke 19:1-10), whom Jesus honored by being a guest in his home.

SADDUCEES: Taking their name from Zadok, high priest during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 2:35), the Sadducees came into prominence at about the same time as the Pharisees, a century before Christ. The Sadducees were an aristocratic, worldly class of Jews who held influential positions in the Sanhedrin (which see) and the government. They were the opposite of the Pharisees, in that they placed little importance on "being religious" and they disavowed many doctrines plainly taught in Scripture, such as resurrection, judgment, and an afterlife. They accepted only the books of Moses as authoritative Scripture. The Pharisees and Sadducees were normally bitter enemies, but they briefly set aside their differences to try to get rid of Jesus. Here is a summary of the main contrasts between the Pharisees and the Sadducees:

PHARISEES	SADDUCEES
More of a religious party	More of a political party
Conservative and fundamentalist with regard to religion; scrupulous about fasting and tithing (Mark 7:3, Luke 18:11-12)	Liberal, secular, and materialistic
Opposed to Roman occupation	Pragmatists--willing to "go along to get along"
Popular with the people (Acts 5:33)	Elitist and aloof from the people

Sticklers for Biblical integrity and their own traditions	Accepted only the books of Moses as Scripture
Believed in angels and life after death (Acts 23:8)	Denied the existence of angels and an afterlife
Opposed Jesus because they saw Him as stealing their prestige and influence with the people ²	Opposed Jesus because they thought He would upset their cozy relationship with Rome

SAMARITANS: Samaritans were residents of Samaria (northern Israel). When the ten northern tribes were carried away into Assyrian captivity in 722 BC, the poorest and least educated Israelites were left behind. Later, Assyrian settlers came in and intermarried with these Israelites, creating a mixed race and corrupting the people with their pagan religions (2 Kings 17:24). Because of this, Samaritans were held in contempt by “pure-blood” Jews. The Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Temple in 536 BC, but their offer was refused (Ezra 4:1-3). By the time of Christ, the hatred between Jews and Samaritans had reached a peak. However, a Samaritan was a hero in one of Christ’s parables (Luke 10:30-37). When He healed ten lepers, the only one who thanked Him was a Samaritan (Luke 17:11-19). Just before His ascension, Jesus named Samaria as being one of the first areas to receive the gospel (Acts 1:8).

SANHEDRIN: The Sanhedrin was the Jewish Supreme Court for both legal and religious matters. It had 71 members including the high priest, who served as president. In the New Testament, the Sanhedrin is variously referred to as "the chief priests, the elders, and all the council" (Matthew 26:59) and the "chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people" (Matthew 26:3). They are also called the "chief priests and elders of the people" (Matthew 27:1) and in several places referred to as "the council" (Mark 15:1, Matthew 5:22, Acts 5:21, etc.). There were Pharisees and Sadducees in the Sanhedrin, but the real power was held by the Sadducees. Jesus was tried before the Sanhedrin and condemned to death in a mock trial. Since Israel was subject to the Romans in Jesus's day, the Sanhedrin had to defer to the Romans in civil and religious matters. They were not allowed to put anyone to death. Therefore they sent Jesus

² Someone said that the reason the Pharisees couldn't stand Jesus was that He was not a fake like they were!

to Pontius Pilate to have Him executed. Several leaders of the early church were also tried before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:5-22, 5:21-40, 6:12-15, 22:30-23:10).

SCRIBES: New Testament scribes, whose activity began at the time of Ezra the prophet, were men trained to write. At first they were merely transcribers of God's law and synagogue readers. They later became interpreters of God's law.

“Scribes in ancient Israel were learned men whose business was to study the Law, transcribe it, and write commentaries on it.... The scribes took their job of preserving Scripture very seriously; they would copy and recopy the Bible meticulously, even counting letters and spaces to ensure each copy was correct. We can thank the Jewish scribes for preserving the Old Testament portion of our Bibles.... The scribes went beyond interpretation of Scripture, however, and added many man-made traditions to what God had said. They became professionals at spelling out the letter of the Law while ignoring the spirit behind it. Things became so bad that the regulations and traditions the scribes added to the Law were considered more important than the Law itself. This led to many confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shocked His audience by declaring that the righteousness of the scribes was not enough to get anyone to heaven (Matthew 5:20).... Toward the end of Jesus’ ministry, He thoroughly condemned the scribes for their hypocrisy (Matthew 23). They knew the Law, and they taught it to others, but they did not obey it.”

(<https://www.gotquestions.org/scribes-Jesus.html>)

STOICS: (See Epicureans)

ZEALOTS: The Zealots were a group of Jewish nationalists who strongly opposed Roman rule. Here is some information on them: “The Zealots were members of a first-century political movement among Judean Jews who sought to overthrow the occupying Roman government. The word zealot derives from the Greek zelotes, meaning ‘emulator or (zealous) follower.’ The Zealots led a rebellion when Rome introduced imperial cult worship. A great Jewish revolt began in AD 66. The Zealots successfully overtook Jerusalem, but their revolt was ultimately unsuccessful. In AD 70, the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple. A remnant of nearly a thousand Zealots then took refuge in Masada. They held off the Roman army for over a year before committing mass suicide.

Because of their often-violent tactics, the Zealots have been called some of the world's first terrorists. Though the label is only partially true (not all Zealots were violent), the reputation of Zealots as forceful, aggressive agitators carries a significant lesson for us. Jesus chose Simon the Zealot, a man who likely desired to forcibly remove the Roman government, and He also chose Matthew, a tax collector working for the Roman government. Both Simon and Matthew, though natural enemies, were part of the Twelve. What a beautiful illustration of the peace Jesus brings! Today, God still brings healing and changes lives. Those with a violent past or extremist tendencies can be transformed as God uses them to spread the good news of Christ's love for all people."

(<https://www.gotquestions.org/Zealots-Bible.html>)

--John Temples