

WHO ARE THEY AND WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

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I. INTRODUCTION:

I have spent the last sixty years studying, writing and teaching the Bible, systematic theology, Christian leadership, church management, etc. Yet, I have never taken time to figure out for myself the answer to a major question: WHO ARE THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT DAYS AND WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

The temporal leaders of the Lord's day were His greatest opponents – and He was theirs! He never said a kind word to or about them. He spoke His strongest words against religious leaders while speaking His kindest to the chief of sinners. Such leaders were His enemy, and peaceful co-existence with His enemies was not His goal while on earth.

Some of the major players in the religious and cultural court were: the Herods, the Sadducees, the Sanhedrin, the council, the Pharisees, the Priests, the scribes, and the Rabbis.

In this paper I want to attempt to give a working description of these groups within my own vocabulary. While I will research this information, no attempt will be made to make this a historical paper. The goal is to obtain a working understanding of these groups, what made them open enemies of Christ, and see if some of their objectionable characteristics are still around and active within the Biblical Christian church.

II. WHO WERE THE HERODS?

Herod is the name of a family that rose to power in Judea immediately preceding the complete destruction of the Jewish community as a nation. The family was of Edomite descent but accepted, converted and became Jewish in religion by 130 BC.

Actually, there are five different Herods in the New Testament days. They were the political appointed rulers over Judea. They were appointed by the Roman emperor and charged with the task of keeping the Jewish people under control. Israel was considered a troubling state by Rome. They would not give into the Caesar/God system of pagan theology, and they did not like being under the control of a gentile nation. Rome's way of conquering left the countries in good condition, appointed leaders and collected taxes from their expanding empire. A simple annual allegiance

to Rome and to Caesar was required. The ritual included bowing your head and giving a small offering to the political/god. Jewish people could not do this. Later the New Testament Christians suffered tremendously because they, unlike today's brand of compromising Christians, would break before they would bend and bow to a humanistic-god concept!

A. Original Herod, Antipater, ruled 47-43 BC

1. The original Herod, Antipater, is not mentioned in the Bible. The Herod family were descendants of Abraham through Esau rather than Jacob.
2. Was made ruler (procurator) over Judea by Julius Caesar following the conquest of Israel by Pompey.
3. Rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.
4. Was assassinated 73 BC, one year after Caesar's assassination?
5. Had sons, Herod and Phasael, who were appointed joint-tetrarchs of Judea by Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, and by Mark Anthony who defeated the opposition to Rome in Philippi, 42 BC.
6. Phasael was later captured and killed while Herod escaped to Rome where the Senate guided by Octavian and Anthony, named him King of the Jews.

B. Herod The Great, ruled 37 – 4 BC

1. Was appointed King of Judea when he was only fifteen years old by Julius Caesar and charged with keeping it under control.
2. Was a powerful ruler and caused great suffering and death to all who opposed him. He conquered Jerusalem in 37 BC. He married ten wives and fathered at least fourteen children.
3. As a great builder he rebuilt the temple and many grand structures and cities like Caesarea, Jericho and Masada, while retaining the Jewish religion. Yet he placed an eagle, a sign of Roman rule, on the temple. He also built three pagan temples in Caesarea, Sebaste and Panias.
4. His father was Idumean and his mother was an Arab Nabatean. His reign lasted 33 years.
5. This is the Herod that ordered the slaughter of all boys born in Bethlehem under the age of two in an attempt to keep Jesus from becoming King of the Jews, Matthew 2:16. Bethlehem was Herod's winter palace.
6. The wise men from the East came to this Herod seeking information about the birth of a king, Matthew 2.
7. Herod the Great died in 4BC after murdering one of his ten wives and three sons.

8. Herod the great has four sons mentioned in the New Testament, Archelaus, Antipas, Philip (Boethos) and Philip (tetrarch, meaning ruler of one fourth part of a territory).
9. Herod the great died a broken man at the age of 70. It is said that he stole the throne like a fox, ruled it like lion and died like a dog. He was hated by Jew and Gentile alike.
10. He died a loathsome death after he ruled thirty-seven years.

C. Herod Archelaus, ruled Judea 4BC – 6AD

1. Archelaus ruled Judea at the same time his brother Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Another brother, Philip, also ruled part of the land.
2. Archelaus is remembered for his brutal rule of his territory
3. Under Archelaus's rule Joseph decided it was safest for his family to move to the Galilee area. Matthew 2:22.
4. Because of his harsh rule, he was removed from ruler ship, banished and his territory was divided into a system of governors.
5. Archelaus and Herod become joint-tetrarchs following the death of their father, Herod the Great.

D. Herod Antipas, (called Herod Tetrarch) rule Galilee and Perea, 4BC-39AD

1. He had stolen his half brother Philip's wife, Herodias, who was both his wife and his niece.
2. Was impressed by John the Baptist, Mark 6:20 yet, killed him following his wife's seductive use of her daughter, Salome. This is the Herod that requested the head of John the Baptist be brought to him on a platter, Mark 6; Matthew 14:2-10
3. Jesus refused to meet with him and called him "that fox".
4. Jesus refused to do anything to impress this Herod or even answer his questions. He warned the disciples against the Pharisees and Herod because association with them was like bringing leaven into their lives, Luke 13:31.
5. He was banished to Lyons where he died in exile in 39 AD.
6. This is the Herod that desired to see Jesus do some miracle, finally met Jesus when Pilate used him to assist in questioning Jesus before Crucifixion. Jesus told him, "You would have no power over me if it was not given you from above." John 19:11
7. Both John and Peter accuse this Herod of being guilty of the execution of Jesus, Acts 4:27.

E. Herod Agrippa I, ruled 39-44 AD

1. This is the Herod that killed James the elder and because of the public encouragement, arrested Peter and had him imprisoned, Acts 12.
2. As time passed this Herod was given control over almost all the land of Palestine.
3. It is this Herod that persecuted the early believers because of their worship of Jesus as Savior, Acts 12:1-3.
4. For a brief time, 41-44 AD, the Land of Israel was united under Agrippa I.
5. This Herod's daughter, Drusilla, argued passionately for Paul's proper treatment.

F. Herod Agrippa II, ruled 53-66 AD

1. This is the Herod that listened to the case of Paul's right to a Roman hearing to support his right to worship Jesus as Savior and coming king. Paul had been in prison for two years. He clearly heard the gospel, but rejected it, Acts 25:13; 26-32.
2. Paul's pressing Agrippa to become a believer failed and Paul later was sent at his own request to Rome for trial.
3. This Herod used the word "Christian" to describe Paul, Acts 24:24.
4. It is this Herod that saw the Roman forces invade Israel, set siege to the cities and destroy the great structures his grandfather had built 66-70 AD.

G. Summary:

Few families in history have had more opportunity to become believers than the families of the Herods. They personally heard the gospel from prophets, Joseph, Mary, Wise Men, John the Baptist, James, John, Peter, Paul and even Jesus Himself. No family has more eternal accountability to God. They have no defense against their fate.

III. WHO WERE THE SADDUCEES?

1. The Sadducees were the leading opponents to the life and ministry of Jesus. They came into existence in the late second century BC and continued until the first century AD.
2. They rejected most of the Jewish laws, the doctrine of the resurrection, life with rewards and punishment after death and fostered human freedom in both will and actions. At the same time they were very strict in supporting interpretation of Bible law. An example is that because the scripture does not set a payment for a wife they said there is none in the case of death or divorce.

3. They have no Old Testament origin in Jewish theology and were perpetual enemies of the Pharisees. Only joining them in opposition to our Lord.
4. They found a voice in the synagogues and often worked to make Judaism more of a popular religion with the Greek/Roman world. At the same time they did not want the Jewish religion to use celebration as a theme of theology.
5. They seemed to attack Jesus because He did not place the rigorous rites they wanted on religion and He also taught conscious life after death with both reward and punishment. He not only taught the resurrection in the case of Lazarus, He caused it to happen.
6. They rejected any spirit world including angels.
7. They appear in Mark 12; Matthew 3; 16; 22; Luke 20 and six times in the book of Acts. In every case they are in opposition to Christ, John the Baptist and early believers.
8. Even though the Herods executed some of them, there is evidence that they associated closely with the house of the Herods.
9. The Sadducees seemed to want much of the lifestyle of the Greek culture and refused to identify with any of the laws of Judaism that was not specifically given by God in the Torah. Even this they used their own interpretations. They even wanted to make use of the Greek gymnasium approach to life for the training of boys and men. (Gymnasium means, the training of naked boys and men.)
10. Nothing is left in history of the Sadducees except the reference in the scripture on one historian, Josephus. They went out of existence following the Roman ruin of Israel and vanished from history.

IV. WHO WERE THE PHARISEES?

1. The Pharisees like the Sadducees have little historical record. Josephus, the New Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls constitute the whole information.
2. Pharisee is from the Hebrew word, *perusim*, or *prs*, meaning "separated ones." At the time of Christ their group may have numbered about 6,000.
3. They came into existence in the period between the Old and the New Testament, following the Macarena revolts, somewhere around 134-100 BC.
4. Their purpose was to train everyone, especially the boys and men in an understanding of the Torah. They established schools for this purpose.
5. While the Sadducees worked mainly with the wealthier families

and leaned toward the Greek system of education, the Pharisees identified more with the common people and resisted Greek influence by majoring on Old Testament written and oral traditions. Their positions were enacted into law.

6. Open warfare existed at times between Alexander, the Greek soldiers and Hellenistic Sadducees with as many as 50,000 people killed. Many Pharisees were taken back to Jerusalem as prisoners of war and over 800 were crucified while they were forced to watch their wives and children brutally murdered. The Greek cultural is often used as a pattern for many of our social concepts, but a closer look at their life styles around New Testament times reveal it as very morally objectionable! At his death, Alexander encouraged peace with the Pharisees. This gave them support beyond that of the Sadducees who had begun to call for his death.
7. Herod's first act as king was to have 45 Sadducean leaders executed as a display of his distrust for the once Greek supporters.
8. The Pharisees, mentioned 98 times in the New Testament, may best be remembered as powerful people who were the most legalistic leaders during the time of Christ. They were His opponents as well as He was theirs. He often preached and taught against their self-imposed piety. The Sadducees were their major rivals and enemy in part because the corrupted spiritual value of the Sadducees gave them major control over the High Priests and the temple.
9. The Pharisees are pictured in the Gospels and book of Acts as religious, pious, legalistic, without compassion on "lesser" religious people, self-serving and publicly grandiose in the hyper-spirituality, keepers of the legalistic minutia of the law. Unfortunately, this is the group that is often observable in our churches today! They were the "spirituals" and they were the open enemies of Christ precisely because of their public piety. Jesus' strongest statements were and are against this kind of people, and He never accepted them on any occasion.
10. For examples of the Pharisee/Jesus conflict see Mark 10:17; Luke 15:29; John 6:28; Luke 18:9-14, etc.
11. Paul was a second generation Pharisee, Acts 23:6. His trial caused a great division between the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes. It appears he was personally acquainted with them, Acts 26; Philippians 3:6.

V. WHO WERE THE PROPHETS AND PRIESTS?

Both the prophets and priests were religious leaders that have an Old Testament precedence. They are commission by God and given the

special tasks. The prophets were to represent God to man, and the priests were to represent man back to God.

A. THE PROPHETS:

1. The prophets were God called and gifted men who spoke on behalf of God.
2. They could not originate any message and could not speak for God. When God gave them a message for people, they were not permitted to personalize it, change or in any manner adjust what God told them to say.
3. When a prophet spoke for profit, to make personal or financial gain, or presented a false message, they were to be stoned to death. While this may sound severe, it was none the less, very effective!
4. A prophet's purpose was not to foretell the future, yet at times when they spoke the message God gave them, it did contain futuristic information.
5. New Testament prophecy was to cease (come to an abrupt end), I Corinthians 13:9, 10, when it is replaced by the scripture, written, reliable revelational inspiration.
6. The task remains for people of God to tell forth the truth of God in faithful teaching and preaching His Holy Word.
7. Christ became God's incarnate and perfect prophet to man in a total manifestation of the Father, Colossians 1:9-19.

B. THE PRIESTS:

1. The priests' duty was to represent man back to God by offering prayers and sacrifices in daily interceding.
2. The priesthood was originally conferred by God on Aaron and his successors, the Levites, Exodus 32:28-29.
3. Since Calvary, God invites all believers to come directly to him in prayer, confession and worship, acting as their own priests and without the aid of human sacerdotal religious systems, Hebrews 13:15, 16.
4. During the time of Christ, the priesthood had become so corrupt that it was in 37 BC Herod began appointing the high priests annually, though bribery, John 18:13.
5. Today, Jesus fulfills the role of both our priest and our Great High Priest, Hebrews 2:17, 18; 3:1-7; 4:14-16.
6. In the Christian faith, Jesus fulfilled the role of prophet by the incarnation, life and death; the role of our priest and great High Priest with His present ministry in Heaven representing believers; and will fill the role of King when He comes again.

VI. WHO WERE THE SANHEDRIN?

1. The Sanhedrin is believed to be instituted as the supreme legal council to Israel by Moses, Numbers 11:16.
2. This body was reorganized by Ezra following the Babylonian captivity.
3. The Sanhedrin had 70 members who were given the power over religion, to declare war, punishments and capital punishment, Acts 5:40.
4. During the New Testament days, this group could not inflict the death penalty without permission from a local procurator who acted in behalf of Rome.
5. Sanhedrin comes from the Greek word, *synedrion*, meaning "sitting together", and refers to the council leaders responsible for the leadership of Israel. It was like a supreme court of Israel.
6. All four gospels record that the Sanhedrin tried and condemned Jesus to death, Matthew 26:57-68; Luke 22:63-71; Mark 14:53-65; John 18:12-24.

VII. WHO WERE THE SCRIBES?

1. The scribes were neither a party nor a sect in the New Testament days; rather they were "learned professionals". They devoted themselves to the study of the Law and were translators and writers.
2. In short the Scribes were the equivalents to our lawyers.
3. Both Paul and his teacher, Gamaliel are believed to have been scribes. This may be suggested by II Corinthians 11:20-22.
4. The scribes were often also Pharisees, Matthew 23:2.
5. Through the centuries this group gathered the sacred writing that became the Talmud.
6. Paul and Peter considered the Scribes as opponents to the gospel. I Corinthians 1:20-25; Acts 4:5; 6:12; 23:9.
7. The Scribes were represented in the Sanhedrin.

VIII. WHO WERE THE ESSENES?

1. The Essenes were a very ascetic Jewish sect that originated in the second century BC to the first century AD.
2. The Essenes separated themselves from the strict formalism of the Pharisees and the worldliness of the Sadducees. They opposed and separated themselves from the looseness of the worship of Jerusalem and the temple.
3. Many of the Essenes became almost like monks and chose to live apart from the rest of religions. They numbered about 4,000 at the time of Christ.

4. It has been often suggested that both John the Baptist and Jesus identified with this group. However, evidence is lacking on both accounts.
5. The Essenes centered their life in a solitary community at the Dead Sea shore. The ruins of the village Qumran is evidence of their life.
6. Some Essenes lived without women, money and communication with others. Others married and had families. They attempted to live ascetic lives of total separation to God. They taught that the "truly good should be truly free", including personal and social controls. Their ultimate freedom was the release of the soul from the body at death.
7. In many ways the Essenes were fatalists. They taught that nothing befalls man that is decreed by fate. They were most particular about the correct copying of sacred material, including scripture.
8. The Essenes maintain "pools of absolution" in which they baptized themselves in repentance and cleansing in daily religious rituals. These baptismal tanks are still in existence at Qumran.
9. The Essenes are presently best known for their hiding the Dead Sea Scrolls.
10. The main theology of this group was preparation for the last day when only special elect people would be saved. They included some of Persian Dualism in the religion. They saw themselves as the "children of light" who would eventually overcome the "children of darkness."

Understanding a little about the different leaders and groups in the New Testament will make the Bible more practical. All the groups above, at some time, became the opponents of Jesus and the gospel. The extent of their hatred Christ continued to Calvary. Their hatred then shifted to the Christians who were forced underground and out of town.

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