

Context of Christ's Passion and Death

Romans

1. The nation of Israel, including Jerusalem, was under the control of the Roman Empire.
2. The Roman Empire was so large that it was divided into provinces with a governor in charge of each province.
 - a. Roman governors had two main functions: (1) maintain peace, and (2) collect taxes
 - b. Pontius Pilate was governor of the province of Judea (26-36 AD) during the time of Jesus' public ministry.
3. The Romans were polytheist, they believed in multiple (many) gods. Jews were monotheist, they believed in the one, true God
4. The Jewish people despised the Romans because:
 - a. Lack of freedom: The Jewish people were living under the control and domination of the Romans. The fact that the Jewish people were living under Roman rule in the land God had given them (Promised Land) made their situation even more problematic.
 - b. The Romans regarded the Caesars/emperors as gods and "worshipped" them as gods. For the Jews, this was a violation of the First Commandment: "I am the Lord your God ... You shall not have other gods besides me" (Exodus 19:2-4). The Jewish people regarded God as their ultimate authority, not any worldly power.
 - c. The Romans forced those they conquered to pay high taxes.
 - The Romans "hired" Jewish citizens to collect the taxes for them. These individuals often collected more than was required by the Romans and kept the difference for themselves. These people were viewed as collaborators with Rome and traitors of Israel.
 - The apostle Matthew was a Jewish tax collector who Jesus called to follow him (Matt 9:9-13). Zacchaeus was a Jewish tax collector who Jesus called to repentance (Luke 19:1-10).
 - d. The Jewish people had been awaiting a messiah, a powerful ruler who would bring freedom and peace to the nation (Davidic Covenant, see 2 Samuel 7). Roman occupation indicated the fulfillment of the messianic promise would not be realized anytime in the near future.

Jewish Religious Authorities

Pharisees:

1. From *parash* or "to separate."
2. The Pharisees held great political power among the Jewish people. They were the political and religious rivals of the Sadducees.
3. The Pharisees opposed Roman occupation, they viewed it as a punishment for Israel's sin, however they did not advocate revolt. The Pharisees recognized that not following the Law of Moses led to defeat (similar to the Babylonian Exile)
4. The Pharisees accepted the written Law of Moses, but also the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the "tradition of the elders."
5. The Pharisees wanted to restore the nation of Israel to its former greatness through religious means. To do this they taught ...
 - a. Strict adherence to the Mosaic Law - They held that the Law of Moses contained 248 prescriptions stating what one should do, and 365 prescriptions stating what one should not do.

- b. There should be no cultural or religious amalgamation (mixing, merging, consolidation) with non-Jewish people (gentiles, Samaritans).
 - c. God will restore Israel's greatness if the people are faithful to God (theme of blessing and curse from Hebrew Scriptures).
6. The Pharisees' strict adherence to the Mosaic Law led to an extreme legalism. They taught that one must very strictly observe (or adhere to) the written Law of Moses, as well as the body of oral traditions related to it, that had been handed down over the generations (for example *corban* - Matthew 15:1-9). This extreme legalism was the basis for Jesus' condemnation of them.

Sadducees

1. The Sadducees were composed of wealthy and educated men, drawn from the aristocracy of Jewish society and its priestly families. They represented the power structure of Israelite society.
2. The Sadducees "controlled" the Temple rituals and sacrifices, and they were well represented in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious court.
3. The Sadducees believed that only the written word of the Torah, or Law of Moses, was authoritative. As such, they rejected any oral interpretations of it as well as any teachings that came from these oral interpretations (resurrection of the dead, reward and punishment in the afterlife). Because they rejected the oral traditions (among other issues), the Sadducees and Pharisees were rivals.
4. The Sadducees had nothing to gain through revolt so they assented to Roman rule and were essentially collaborators with the Romans. Because of this, they were disliked by many in the Jewish community.

Other Groups

Essenes

1. The Essenes were a small group of monastic-type men who lived in area of the Dead Sea. They were likely the holders of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
2. As separatists, they sought to live an ascetic (renouncing worldly pleasure, lures, influences) and holy life apart from society which they believed to be corrupt.
3. They opposed Roman rule but did not advocate armed revolt. The Essenes lived for a future where the Kingdom of God would be ushered in through the messiah who had been promised to King David (Davidic Covenant).
4. They believed they were living in the "last days" => John the Baptist preached repentance.
5. The Essenes were never condemned by Jesus

Zealots

1. From *ze/los* – zeal
2. The Zealots shared similar beliefs with the Pharisees in religious matters.
3. Politically, the Zealots were extremely anti-Roman.
 - They believed God alone is Lord so they rejected Roman authority
 - Some Zealots advocated a holy war that would expel the Romans and return Israel to a theocracy (revolt from 66-70AD).
 - Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15)