

The Late Second Temple Period

200 B.C.E. - 70 C.E.

In 168 B.C.E., the Maccabees (or Hasmoneans), led by Judah Maccabee, wrested Judea from the rule of the Seleucids -- Syrian rulers who supported the spread of Greek religion and culture. The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah commemorates the recapture of Jerusalem by the Maccabees and the consecration of the Temple in 164 B.C.E. The Maccabees ruled Judea until Herod took power in 37 B.C.E.

Contemporary historian Flavius Josephus divided Judeans into three main groups:

Sadducees

The Sadducees were priestly and aristocratic families who interpreted the law more literally than the Pharisees. They dominated the Temple worship and its rites, including the sacrificial cult. The Sadducees only recognized precepts derived directly from the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, and the existence of angels. The Sadducees were unpopular with the common people.

Pharisees

The Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, maintained the validity of the oral as well as the written law. They were flexible in their interpretations and willing to adapt the law to changing circumstances. They believed in an afterlife and in the resurrection of the dead. By the first century C.E., the Pharisees came to represent the beliefs and practices of the majority of Palestinian Jewry.

Essenes

The Essenes were a separatist group, some of whom formed an ascetic monastic community and retreated to the wilderness of Judea. They shared material possessions and occupied themselves with disciplined study, worship, and work. They practiced ritual immersion and ate their meals communally. One branch did not marry.

In 6 C.E., Rome formed Judea, Samaria, and Idumea into one province governed by procurators. A Judean revolt against Rome in 66 C.E. was quickly put down. Qumran fell to the Roman legions in ca. 68 C.E., the Temple in 70 C.E., and Masada in 73 C.E.

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