

THE HEBREW HIERARCHY

While delving into Catholicism on the Internet, I repeatedly came across words such as Sanhedrin, Levites, High Priests, Rabbis, Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. I had no idea what they were, so I investigated. The following is just a very simple explanation. Before covering these, it is important to know about the history of the Hebrews. Again, this is a very brief explanation.

The Bible depicts the family of the Hebrew patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as living in northern Mesopotamia. From there, Abraham, the founder of the Hebrew people, is said to have migrated to Canaan.

From Canaan, the Hebrew ancestors migrated to Egypt, where they lived and became Egyptian slaves. A few generations later, God chose the Prophet MOSES to organise their release from Egypt and return them to occupy part of Canaan.

These freed Hebrews were made up of twelve tribes named after the sons or grandsons of Jacob, who, it was believed, wrestled with God and was later called Israel. The tribes, with land of their own, were:

Asher, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Issachar, Manasseh, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, Zebulun, Judah and Benjamin.

Although there was a thirteenth tribe called **the Levites**, they did not have any land; but were a priestly tribe dispersed among the other tribes.

Years later, ten of the twelve tribes were lost forever after the Assyrian Empire conquered their lands around 722 BC. These were:

Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Manasseh, and Ephraim.

Only the tribes of **Judah** and **Benjamin** survived, as well as some members of the priestly **Levites**. At the time of Jesus, these were all that remained of the tribes of Israel.

Some of the senior organisations and leaders in Israel at the time of Jesus were known as The Sanhedrin, Levites, High Priests, Rabbis, Essenes Pharisees, Sadducees.

The following is a very simple explanation of their roles in Jewish society.

THE SANHEDRIN

This was the Hebrew Council's name, a religious and political assembly of elders. It was responsible for enforcing the religious laws regulating Hebrew worship and legislating day-to-day affairs in Jerusalem and

throughout Judea. At the time of Jesus, Caiaphas was the leader of the Sanhedrin. Another prominent member was Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43 & John 19:38-39).

LEVITES

Levites were one of the tribes of Israel but were the only ones not to have any land. They were scattered among the other tribes of Israel as priests and High Priests. They became famous when God told Moses to use male Levites to slaughter those who engaged in idolatry. After this, they became a priestly caste. King David said God had ordained that only Levites could carry the Ark of God. Zacharia and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, were Levites.

HIGH PRIEST

All Hebrew priests were Levites. High Priest was the title of the chief religious official of Judaism. It was said that they traced their paternal ancestry back to Moses' elder brother, Aaron and that he was Israel's first High Priest. A High Priest was a secular and religious leader in the Hebrew nation. At the time of Jesus, Caiaphas was a High Priest.

RABBIS

These were Hebrew religious teachers who interpreted the Jewish law. Jesus was regarded as a Rabbi by many of his followers (Mark 10:1, 17, 35, and 51). Rabbis tended to reflect one of the three main religious schools of thought: the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees.

ESSENES

This sect held extreme religious views. It was a monastic community where all initiates pooled their belongings and lived in the Judaean desert at Qumran, not far from Jericho, apart from the rest of Hebrew society. Some historians believe that the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, found in 1949, were written by them, but others are not so sure.

PHARISEES

These were the Hebrews who re-interpreted the Law of Moses. They believed in the immortality of the soul and the transmigration of souls, which is reincarnation. They were strict observers of Jewish religious laws and added their requirements and restrictions. Jesus criticised the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and ability to twist the original intention of the Hebrew law (Matthew 15: 1-20)

SADDUCEES

This sect only believed in the written Law of Moses and rejected any later customs. They did not believe in life after death and continuously conflicted with the Pharisees. Jesus disagreed with the Sadducees because they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (Matthew 22: 23-33).

This is just a simple explanation of these fascinating and complex tribes and senior organisations of Jewish society up to the time of Jesus. More in-depth and accurate explanations can be found on the Internet.