

Some modern scholars question the translation of Josephus' term "*hairesis*" as "sect," saying a sect [in the modern sense of popular usage] is a group which sees itself as the exclusive true religion, as opposed to a "school of thought" which might be more like most of our denominations, having distinct characteristics of practice and belief but not considering itself to be the only acceptable group. [Semantic arguments lead to published papers and thus tenure.] By this system of defining terms, the Essens would be considered a sect, while the Pharisees and Sadducees would not [Josephus mentions the Zealots at one point, but since he says they ascribed to Pharisaic theology I will skip them here]. Be that as it may, we can see some distinguishing characteristics of each.

There was a difference in their roles in society and thus in their influence. According to Josephus, the Pharisees held sway over many of the common people, while the Sadducees had influence over the more affluent. Barnett suggests that the Pharisees dominated the teaching in the synagogues, which along with their reputation for being pious, was what led to their influence in a wider audience. On the other hand, except for brief periods, Sadducees seem to have dominated the Sanhedrin and occupied the position of High Priest, giving them authority over temple activities and greater interaction with holders of political power. These two groups can be seen working against each other as each jockeyed for influence, but they still were willing to interact; for example, the Pharisees would take part in Temple activities even though they were directed usually by Sadducees. The Essens tended to separate themselves more from society, offering sacrifices outside of the temple, with some establishing their own communities and others remaining in a city like Jerusalem but forming their own little community within it. Their influence was probably limited to those who would join them [and they had high barriers to entry], though Josephus speaks very fondly of them.

From the gospel accounts and Josephus, we can find differences in their theological beliefs. The Sadducees believed entirely in free will, saying God was not concerned in day to day affairs, while the Essens believed entirely in fate, and the Pharisees believed in free will but that it interacted in some way with fate or God's will. The Sadducees believed in the written law only, while the Pharisees had developed an oral law to help interpret and apply the written law which they held to be equal to the written law as the traditions dating back to their forefathers, and the Essens tended to think like the Pharisees, though their traditions differed from those of the Pharisees in some ways. For example, the Pharisees favored a simplified life free of the Hellenistic aspects of society and food delicacies, but the Essens went further, rejecting most pleasures as sinful and for the most part even forgoing marriage, and the Sadducees were thought to live more extravagantly, some being more open to Hellenistic influence and others just enjoying the benefits of their station in life. Also, while the Pharisees believed in tithing and civic duty for all people, the Essens went further and lived as though in a commune, sharing everything, and the Sadducees – while they likely supported tithing to the temple – were not known for believing the religious obligations of the common man were the same as for the priests. The Sadducees did not believe in eternal life, while the Pharisees and Essens did, though the Pharisees believed man's actions would dictate to some degree the rewards or punishments received after death and the Essens believed only in fate [but would have believed they were destined for reward as the truly pious].