

The Zealots | A1 Sample answer

Outline the role of one religious group during the time of Jesus in co-operating with or opposing Roman rule. Outline why they did this and their place of control. (Mock Question)

“Zealotry- a nationalism that made resistance to Roman occupation a sacred duty incumbent to all Jews”.- Reza Aslan

In Palestine at the time of Jesus there were many different religious groups. Within Judaism there were four main groups; The Sadducees, The Pharisees, The Essenes and the *Zealots*. Each group had different beliefs, messianic expectations, places of control and ways of cooperating with Roman rule. The Zealots did not cooperate with Roman rule at all.

The zealots were a violent, militant, extremist group of revolutionary Jews. Their believed role was to use force to remove Roman rule. They ordered many unsuccessful revolts against them in the years 164 BCE, 66-70 CE and 132 CE. After the failed revolt of 66-70 CE, which started due to the favouritism from Romans towards gentiles, one the largest catastrophes of Judaism occurred, the demolition of Solomon’s Temple. That summer of 70 CE the Romans destroyed the second temple to show that they were in charge. The Jewish people were outraged by this and so Zealot numbers grew tremendously. The Zealots had started a suicidal war against the Romans which was a terrible mistake. They slaughtered many but the Romans returned with more soldiers to fight back. It has been estimated that more than one million Jews have died due to the actions of Zealots.

The Zealots came about as any revolutionary group did, out of a society filled with injustice. The injustice which had been inflicted upon them was Roman rule. The Romans invaded Palestine which was the Promised Land for the Jews after God’s covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 17:8 God promised Abraham and his descendants Canaan * *“I will give you and your descendants the land in which you are immigrants, the whole land of Canaan, as an enduring possession. And I will be their God.”* (Canaan was the name of Palestine before Jesus’ time.) Since the Zealots were descendants of Abraham and had kept their covenant in being circumcised on the eighth day after birth, amongst other things, it infuriated them that the Romans took control of their sacred land.

To add to the hatred of the Zealots towards the Romans for invading Palestine, they had the audacity to ask the Jews to pay taxes for living in their promised land. The Zealots felt that it would be unfaithful to their God to pay taxes for the land which was promised to them. The invasion of the Romans threatened the survival of Judaism, the zealots felt it was their duty to remove this threat. The Romans were polytheists and had many different gods and deities which they worshipped. One Roman emperor, Caligula, ordered his statue to be put up in every temple because he believed himself

to be a deity. Obviously this angered the Zealots and Jewish people even more. This emperor was murdered violently which seemed to confirm the belief of the Zealots that **“all means were justified to attain political and religious liberty”*.

The Zealots were the only Jewish religious group which did anything with their anger other than bottle it up like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Even the quiet Essenes showed their outrage by moving out to the desert. The Zealots expected a great warrior Messiah who would help them force the Romans out of Palestine but thankfully that never happened, as it would've meant more bloodshed and violence. The Zealots would have interpreted the words of Jesus of Nazareth differently than Gentiles or Pharisees etc. they understood many things as an excuse to use violence to get the Romans out of the Promised Land. Their beliefs stemmed from the Torah, unlike the Pharisees they were not interested in interpreting it they wanted to fight for the right **“to assert all that it demanded.* (Bible.org) The Zealots liked to believe that they had control in Palestine due to their violence but in reality they had none. The Romans had all the power and put an end to Zealot attacks by slaughtering them all.

Clearly the Zealots were an extremist group of Jews and it is not surprising that they didn't survive to the present day. Especially since after the revolt of 74 more than one thousand **“kill[ed] themselves en masse at Masada”* rather than letting the Romans have the opportunity to do so. If they did this after every revolt obviously they were going to die out. The Zealots acted while the Pharisees and Sadducees sat and co-operated with Roman rule. The Essenes fled their promised land in order to live faithful lives. The Zealots deserved their name. Coming from the word Zealous the Zealots were passionate about their beliefs and were so passionate that they were willing to die for them. I in no way agree with their methods for attempting to regain control of Palestine but I can understand their reasoning. Zeal is good when practiced properly, even Jesus was zealous in his beliefs, but zeal does not necessarily have to lead to violence.

Sources: (in order of use)

1. Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth
2. The Bible, Genesis 17:8
3. Bible.org
4. eversmarterworld.wordpress.com