

Biblical Backgrounds

The Pharisees and the Sadducees

The information in this presentation was gleaned from several sources. It is intended as a summary, not to take the place of personal study, but to be used as a quick guide to the two main Jewish sects of the first century.

The Pharisees

Name and General Character

- A prominent sect of the Jews. The earliest notice of them in Josephus occurs in connection with Jonathan, the high priest. Immediately after the account of the embassy to the Lacedaemonians, there is subjoined (Josephus, *Ant.*, XIII, v, 9) an account of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, therefore implying that then and in this connection they had been prominent. It would seem that not only the Pharisees, but also the Essenes, were derived from the Assideans.
- The name means *separatists*, those who carefully kept themselves from any legal contamination, distinguishing themselves by their care in such matters from the common people, who had fewer scruples.

History of the Sect

- The Assideans were at first the most active supporters of Judas Maccabeus in his struggle for religious freedom. A portion of them rather than fight retired to the desert to escape the tyranny of Epiphanes (1 Macc 2:27 f). The followers of these in later days became the Essenes.

The Assideans were a sect, characterized by religious zeal and piety. They flourished in the 2nd century BC during the time of the Maccabees and vigorously resisted the Hellenization of Jewish culture and religion. The sect eventually became the Pharisees.

- When Judas Maccabeus cleansed the temple and rededicated it with many sacrifices, it is not expressly said, either in the Books of Maccabees or by Josephus, that he acted as high priest, but the probability is that he did so. This would be a shock to the Assidean purists, as Judas, though a priest, was not a Zadokite; but his actions would be tolerated at that time on account of the imminent necessity for the work of reconsecration and the eminent services of Judas himself and his family.
- As the later Hasmoneans became more involved in worldly politics, they became more and more alienated from the strict Assideans, yet the successors of Judas Maccabeus retained their connection with the party in a lukewarm fashion, while the Sadducean sect was gaining in influence.
- About this time the change of name seems to have been effected. They began to be called Pharisees, “separatists” instead of saints.
- The earliest instance of the Pharisees' intervening in history is that referred to in Josephus (*Ant.*, XIII, x, 5), where Eleazar, a Pharisee, demanded that John Hyrcanus should lay down the high-priesthood because his mother had been a captive, thus insinuating that he - Hyrcanus - was no true son of Aaron, but the bastard of some nameless heathen to whom his mother had surrendered herself. This unforgivable insult to himself and to the memory of his mother led Hyrcanus to break with the Pharisaic party definitely. He seems to have left them severely alone.
- The sons of Hyrcanus, especially Alexander Janneus, expressed their hostility in a more active way. Alexander crucified as many as 800 of the Pharisaic party, a proceeding that seems to intimate overt acts of hostility on their part which prompted this action.
- He scandalized them by calling himself king, although not of the Davidic line, and further still by adopting the heathen name “Alexander,” and having it stamped in Greek characters on his coins.

In New Testament Times

The Herodians were a party mentioned three times in the Gospels (Matt. 22:16 Mk. 12:13; Mk. 3:6) as acting with the Pharisees in opposition to Jesus. They were not a religious sect, but a court or political party, supporters of the dynasty of Herod. Nothing is known of them beyond what the Gospels state.

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- When the New Testament records open, the Pharisees, who have supreme influence among the people, are also strong, though not predominant, in the Sanhedrin. The Herodians and Sadducees, the one by their alliance with the Roman authorities, and the other by their inherited skill in political intrigue, held the reins of government.
- The Pharisees appear in the Book of Acts to favor in a latent way the apostles as against the high-priestly party. The personal influence of Gamaliel, who was highly respected, was exercised in their favor.
- The anti-Christian zeal of Saul of Tarsus, though a Pharisee, may have been to some extent the result of the personal feelings which led him to perpetuate the relations of the earlier period when the two sects were united in common antagonism to the teaching of Christ. He, a Pharisee, offered himself to be employed by the Sadducean high priest (Acts 9:1,2) to carry on the work of persecution in Damascus. In this action Saul appears to have been in opposition to a large section of the Pharisaic party. The bitter disputes which he and the other younger Pharisees had carried on with Stephen had possibly influenced him.
- When Paul, the Christian apostle, was brought before the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem, the Pharisaic party were numerous in the Council, if they did not even form the majority, and they readily became his defenders against the Sadducees.

Doctrines of the Pharisees

Conditional Reincarnation

- In connection with this was their doctrine of a future life of rewards and punishments. The phrase which Josephus uses is a peculiar one: "They think that every soul is immortal; only the souls of good men will pass into another body, but the souls of the evil shall suffer everlasting punishment."
- From this some believe that the Pharisees held the transmigration of souls. This is highly unlikely. Josephus was probably attempting to state the doctrine of the resurrection of the body in a way that would not shock Hellenic ideas. The Greek contempt for the body made the idea of the resurrection abhorrent, and in this, as in most philosophical matters, the Romans followed the Greeks.
- Josephus also declares the Pharisees to be very attentive students of the law of God: "they interpret the law with careful exactitude."

Spirits - Resurrection

- The Pharisees believed in angels and spirits (See Acts 23:8). Possibly, the present activity of such beings was the question in Luke's mind. In that same sentence he ascribed belief in the resurrection to the Pharisees.

Traditions Added to the Law

- Another point is that to the bare letter of the Law they added traditions. While the existence of these traditions is referred to in Gospels, too little is said to enable us to grasp their nature and extent (Matt 15:2 ff; Matt 16:5 ff; Mk 7:1-23). The evangelists only recorded these traditional glosses when they conflicted with the teaching of Christ and were therefore denounced by Him.
- The Pharisaic theory of tradition was that these additions to the written law and interpretations of it had been given by Moses to the elders and by them had been transmitted orally down through the ages.
- Additions to these traditions were made by prophets by direct inspiration, or by interpretation of the words of the written Law. All this mass, as related above, was reduced to writing by Jehuda in Tiberias, probably about the end of the 2nd century AD. Jehuda was born, it is said, 135 AD, and died somewhere about 220 AD.

Traditional Interpretations of the Law by Pharisees (Sabbath, Etc.)

- Less valuable, at times burdensome and hurtful, were the minute refinements they introduced into the Law. Sometimes the ingenuity of the Pharisaic doctors was directed to lighten the burden of the precept as in regard to the Sabbath. Thus a person was permitted to go much farther than a Sabbath day's journey if at some time previous he had deposited, within the legal Sabbath day's journey of the place he wished to reach, bread and water; this point was now to be regarded as the limit of his house, and consequently from this all distances were to be ceremonially reckoned.

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- An act was right or wrong according as some external condition was present or absent; thus there was a difference in bestowing alms on the Sabbath whether the beggar put his hand within the door of the donor or the donor stretched his hand beyond his own threshold.
- A man did not break the Sabbath rest of his ass, though he rode on it, and hence did not break the Sabbath law, but if he carried a switch with which to expedite the pace of the beast he was guilty, because he had laid a burden upon it.
- On the turn of a sentence they suspended many decisions. So much so, that it is said of them later the Text of that they suspended mountains from hairs. This is especially the case with regard to the Sabbath law with its burdensome minutiae.

Messianic Hopes

- The Pharisees maintained the Messianic hopes of the nation when their rivals (zealots, Sadducees, Herodians) were ready to sacrifice everything to the Romans, in order to gain greater political influence for themselves. Their imagination ran riot in the pictures they drew of these future times, but still they aided the faith of the people who were thus in a position to listen to the claims of Christ.

Almsgiving

- They elevated almsgiving into an equivalent for righteousness. This gave poverty a very different place from what it had in Greece or among the Romans. Learning was honored, although its possessors might be very poor. The story of the early life of Hillel brings this out. He is represented as being so poor as to be unable sometimes to pay the small daily fee which admitted pupils to the rabbinic school, and when this happened, in his eagerness for the Law, he is reported to have listened on the roof to the words of the teachers. This is probably not historically true, but it exhibits the Pharisaic ideal.

One of the earliest tasks of the scribes was to establish the contents of the written law. They determined that it contained 613 commandments, 248 positive, 365 negative. The next step was to ‘make a hedge’ about them, i. e. so to interpret and supplement them that there would be no possibility of breaking them by accident or ignorance. The best-known example is the frequently cited thirty-nine principal species of prohibited acts on the Sabbath. There is, however, nothing unreasonable or illogical about them once we grant the literal prohibition of Sabbath work. The commandments were further applied by analogy to situations not directly covered by the Torah. All these developments together with thirty-one customs of ‘immemorial usage’ formed the ‘oral law,’ the full development of which is later than the NT. Being convinced that they had the right interpretation of the Torah, they claimed that the ‘tradition of the elders’ (Mk. 7:3) came from Moses on Sinai.

The New Testament Account

- The Pharisees were scrupulous in keeping their traditions. The special way in which the ceremonial sanctity of the Pharisees exhibited itself was in tithing, hence the reference to their tithing “mint and anise and cummin” (Matt 23:23). In the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, one of the things that the Pharisee plumes himself on is that he gives tithes of all he possesses (Luke 18:12). He is an example of the Pharisaic arrogance of those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and set all others at nought.” Their claiming the first seats in feasts and synagogues (Matt 23:6) was an evidence of the same spirit.
- Closely akin to this is the hypocrisy of which the Pharisees were accused by our Lord. When we call them “hypocrites,” we must go back to the primary meaning of the word. They were essentially actors.
- Our Lord’s condemnation of them (*hypocrite*) has to be interpreted in the light of the undoubted fact that they stood ethically higher than most of their contemporaries. The special Pharisaic stress on tithing and their refusal to buy food from or to eat in the homes of non-Pharisees, lest the food should not have been tithed, as was often the case, was due to the very heavy burden created by tithes superimposed on Hasmonaean, Herodian or Roman taxation. For the Pharisee full tithing was a mark of loyalty to God.

The Sadducees

Their Origin

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- There are four theories of the origin of the Sadducees.
 1. M. H. Segal, following Wellhausen, thought that they were mainly a political party, derived ultimately from the Judaean Hellenists.
 2. G. H. Box, following Geiger, thought that they were a religious party, and that some of the scribes in the Gospels were Sadducee scribes.
 3. L. Finkelstein thought that they were originally a rural aristocratic body, as opposed to the urban Pharisees.
 4. T. W. Manson thought that they were originally state officials.

Their Description

The origin of the name Sadducee is involved in great difficulties, but the most satisfactory conjecture is that the Sadducees, or Zadokites, were originally identical with the sons of Zadok, and constituted what may be termed a kind of sacred aristocracy, this Zadok being the priest who declared in favor of Solomon, when Abiathar took the part of Adonijah. (1 Kings 1:32-45.) Later, to these sons of Zadok were attached all who, for whatever reason, considered themselves as belonging to the aristocrats; such, for example, as the families of the high priest, who had obtained consideration under the dynasty of Herod. These were for the most part judges, and individuals of the official and governing class.

- In manner the Sadducees were rather boorish, being rude to their peers as to aliens, and counting it a virtue to dispute with their teachers.
- They had no following among the populace, but were restricted to the well-to-do.
- They were more severe in judgment than other Jews.
- Many, but not all, priests were Sadducees; nearly all Sadducees, however, appear to have been priests, especially of the most powerful priestly families.

Their History

- Under the early Hasmonaeans some Sadducees held office in the Sanhedrin. John Hyrcanus, taking offense at the request of Eleazar, member of a Pharisaic deputation, that he resign the high-priesthood, transferred his allegiance from the Pharisees to the Sadducees.
- The Sadducees enjoyed the favor of the Hasmonaean rulers until the reign of Salome Alexandra (76-67 BC), who preferred the Pharisees.
- Under the Herods and Romans the Sadducees predominated in the Sanhedrin. The party died out with the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Josephus says that, even when in power, the Sadducees were compelled for fear of the people to concur with the Pharisees.

Their Religion

- In religion the Sadducees are marked for their doctrinal limitations.
- They denied the permanent validity of any but the written laws of the Pentateuch. They rejected the later doctrines of the soul and its after-life, the resurrection, rewards and retributions, angels and demons. At the time this would have been considered a very conservative view, but theologically it produced views that today would be associated with liberalism.
- They believed that there was no fate (an idea they received from the Greek philosophers), men having a free choice of good and evil, prosperity and adversity being the outcome of their own course of action. Because of this they were weak on the issue of God's sovereignty and His dealings with Israel, which gave them a decided political slant in Jesus' day.