

Pharisees and Sadducees

1. Origin. There is little reliable historical data about the Pharisees and Sadducees, and it is difficult to understand if they were a religious group, political party, or both with different emphasis.

Pharisees

The Greek noun “pharisaios” is the Hellenized form of the Aramaic term “p^erīšayā” which means “separated ones.” Academics debate as to what Pharisees were separated from and the two strongest views are: a) separated from Judas Maccabaeus as a protest against Hasmonians, or 2) originating from a group, around 135 B.C., who separated themselves from the rest of the Jews who did not keep the Law; they chose to precisely follow the Law.

The term is seen as early as 135 B.C. and only attested in Hellenized Judaism. From the first century B.C., Pharisees were held in high esteem and recognized as a leading group within Judaism. Their emphasis on the Torah created an aristocracy of learning and were the predecessors of rabbis.

Sadducees

The Greek noun “Saddoukaioi,” is associated with the Hebrew proper name Zadok (Hebrew: Ṣāḏōq, LXX: Saddouk). While there were several Levitical priests with the name of Zakok, as early as David (2 Sam 15:24; 17:15; 19:11) and of prominence (1 Ki 2:35; 1 Chron 29:22; Ezek 44:14), the association between Zadok and Sadducees is unclear.

Most scholars see the Sadducees arising during the intertestamental period and deeply involved with political matters thereby securing their socioeconomic position. The Bible presents Sadducees as being associated with, but distinctive, from priests by identifying some as “the sect of the Sadducees” (Acts 5:17). As leaders of the Jewish people (Matt 3:7-9; Luke 20:27-39) concerned with the interests of the Temple, Sadducees maintained the Levitical aristocracy of blood and were not held with quite the same regard as Pharisees.

2. The Law. Among various Jewish groups, there are a variety of views as to what constitutes the Law.

Pharisees

Pharisees saw themselves as representative of the pure community, obedient to the legal prescriptions of the Law in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. However, they understood the Law to include both the written Law of Moses and the oral law - oral “traditions of the fathers” (Mark 7:3-5) with its casuistic rules of interpreting the Law. For example, the Halachah, a collection of legal decisions interpreting the law, was considered as authoritative as the biblical tradition. These oral traditions would be written and systematically categorized by subject in the Mishnah (200 A.D.).

Sadducees

The Pharisee Josephus, noting that Sadducees “own no observance of any sort apart from apart from the laws” (Antiquities, 18, 17), indicated that they understood the Law as limited to the Mosaic Law.

3. Differences in Theology.

Pharisees valued the oral tradition of their fathers’ reinterpretation and updating of the written Law to the changing values of society and sought to make their law apply in all circumstances. Sadducees objected to the authority Pharisees gave to the oral law and their way of interpreting the Torah. In conflict with the Mosaic Law, the oral law affected the practice of the Mosaic Law’s prescription on ritual (i.e. Sabbath keeping, how sacrifices offered, temple ritual, etc.), ceremonial (date / observance of feasts, etc.), and judicial (conduct / penalties for criminal cases, etc.) matters.

Because of their strict personal conduct adhering to the prescriptive details of their law, Pharisees portrayed themselves as an example of keeping the Law. In a sense, Pharisees sought to transpose the holiness of the Temple to the daily life of a common Jew as a nation of priests.

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On specific doctrinal points, Sadducees believed that human beings had unlimited freedom of will; God had a limited influence on human existence and history, which led to the perception that Sadducees were secular. In contrast, Pharisees believed that human beings had conditional freedom and was unable to deter the will of God; within the framework of God's plan, human beings could do good and evil.

Pharisees believed in a definite concept of angels and demons including Satan; Sadducees less so.

Pharisees believed in the coming of the Messiah; Sadducees less so.

Pharisees believed in the resurrection and judgement; Sadducees less so.

Concerned more with political power, Sadducees and their theology was not favorably received by the people. In contrast, Pharisees and their theology was more representative of the common Jew's views and hope, and their progressive approach to the Law was more acceptable.

The theology of these two religious authorities posed considerable problems. Elevating oral tradition to the authority of the written Law produced a conflict in the understanding of God. While Pharisees see God as the One who makes demands, Jewish religious authorities believed that His love was expressed in the provision of the Torah and adherence to their law was fulfilling the Torah. Missed completely was God's central character of agape love (Ex 34:6-7; 1 John 4:7-10).

Now when He had spoken, a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in and reclined at the table. When the Pharisee saw this, he was surprised that Jesus had not first ceremonially washed before the meal. But the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish; but your inside is full of greed and wickedness. You foolish ones, did He who made the outside not make the inside also? But give that which is within as a charitable gift, and then all things are clean for you. "But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithes of mint, rue, and every kind of garden herb, and yet you ignore justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. (Luke 11:38-42)

But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Upon these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matt 22:34-40)

Because Pharisees were so concerned with separating themselves from sin, by their strict adherence to the law and from the presence of sinners, their rigorous attention to their law became an end in itself and led to a merit based system of salvation.

And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" (Matt 9:11; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30)

The addition to God's word and their judgment of others based on outward appearances prevented Pharisees from entering the kingdom of God and from leading others to it (Matt 23:1-36).

The biblical hermeneutic approaches of both Pharisees and Sadducees are not confined to these two Jewish authorities of the first century. They are examples of approaches and attitudes towards God's word today.

The Sadducees' biblical hermeneutics denied the truth of God's word and in so doing, they failed to obey it. Their role as priest was not based on faith, but instead a vocation that secured their socioeconomic position. As a group, their influence would end with the Roman destruction of the Temple, as a consequence of the First Jewish - Roman War, in 70 A.D..

The Pharisees' biblical hermeneutics also denied the truth of God's word by adding to it with their trust in the oral traditions of their fathers. Their erroneous concept of the Law of Moses and Torah was the cause of their inability to recognize and know the Messiah Jesus Christ Son of God (Deut 18:15-18; John 5:46).

Common to both groups was the strong belief in a worldview that did not have a basis in God's word. When Jesus confronted their self-deception with the truth of God's word (John 5:39-47), it caused them to harden their unwitting belief in self-deceptive falsehood. Then, as now, this human condition remains, which elevates the magnitude of God's lovingkindness (Deut 7:9-12; John 3:16-21).

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vols. 2-3, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).
2. Kohler K, "Pharisees" in *Jewish Encyclopedia* at <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12087-pharisees>.
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