

## Pharisees and Sadducees

Pharisees and Sadducees figure prominently in the gospel narrative. We take these rather strange names for granted, usually lumping them together in our minds. But what do we know about them? In their confrontations with Jesus, both sects come across as narrowly legalistic in the practice of their faith, and both are criticised for this. But actually they were at loggerheads with each other and represented quite distinct factions in the tense and troubled world of Roman-occupied Galilee and Judaea. If we ignore their differences, we limit our appreciation of the political and religious complexities that Jesus had to contend with throughout his ministry.

‘Pharisee’ means ‘separation’. It was first applied to them by their enemies, but they accepted it as a badge of honour since they aimed to set themselves apart through their strict and legalistic Judaism. Alongside the Law of Moses, they also accepted certain oral traditions that had become attached to the Law and they gave these traditions the same authority as the Law itself. This increased the complexity of their legalistic observance, and it was also the chief reason why they were at odds with the Sadducees who, though equally legalistic in their approach, did not accept these oral additions.

But the hostility between the Pharisees and Sadducees was also rooted in politics. The Pharisees, with their very strict interpretation of the Law of Moses including the wealth of well-established oral tradition, presented themselves as upholding Judaism and all it stood for. This was a particularly powerful stance at a time when foreign influences in the eastern Mediterranean and now finally Roman occupation were threatening Jewish life. Not surprisingly, then, although Pharisees were comparatively few in number, by the time of Christ they had a strong following among the common people, who admired their austerity and shared their hatred of the non-Jewish rulers. It was easy to see them as a kind of nationalistic sect. The Sadducees, by contrast, were drawn mainly from the priestly class (which the Pharisees did not like) and they were responsible for running the Temple together with the associated administrative and judicial structures. Working with the occupying Romans was consequently unavoidable, since it was only through this compromise that they were able to maintain their powers and privileges.

Because of their position in the formal structures under the Romans, it was the Sadducees who were largely instrumental in bringing about Jesus’s death, their hostility towards him being as much political as religious. Understandably, given their position, they were afraid that he would cause trouble with the Roman power, which was the last thing they wanted.

There is one further dimension which sets Pharisees and Sadducees apart. The Pharisees believed in a resurrection and in a retribution in the next world, in angels, in human freedom, and in Divine Providence. The Sadducees did not, and in consequence they were implacably hostile to the new Christian teaching in ways that we see continuing in Acts. But not all Pharisees behaved in this way. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and engaged in a discourse on resurrection (John 3), subsequently showed some sympathy for Christ’s teaching (John 7) and helped with his burial (John 19). Gamaliel, Paul’s teacher in his pre-conversion days, spoke up in support of the apostles after they had been imprisoned by the Sadducees (Acts 5). And there is of course Paul himself, brought up as a Pharisee before his conversion on the road to Damascus led him to become the great missionary-teacher of the early church.