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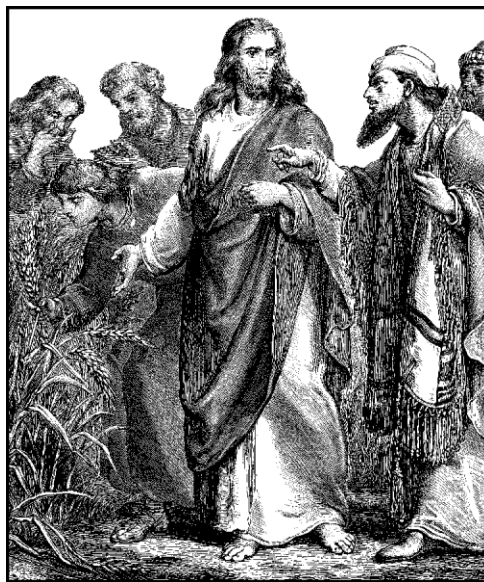
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Jewish Religious Parties at the Time of Christ

Part One: Pharisees and Sadducees



Written by Robert Jones
Acworth, Georgia

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Christian Theology and History Adult Sunday School Courses

Robert Jones

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I've always been a strong believer in adult Sunday School classes and Bible studies in our churches. And many churches have quality, Biblically-based adult-focused programs. Unfortunately, just as many churches tend to downplay adult education, focusing on children's education (not a bad thing in itself), or focusing on the needs of the "unchurched", where topics such as church history and theology are often purposely ignored.

Yet there is a strong need for adult education focused on both the Bible and the basic tenets and history of the Faith. Among the reasons:

- Not all adults come from a strong childhood background in the church – adult Sunday School classes/Bible studies may be their first serious introduction to what Christianity is all about
- Christianity (and especially Evangelical Christianity) is under constant attack from the media and popular culture (movies, music, etc.). We need to give fellow Christians the tools to defend the Faith against attack (or to provide a "ready defense" as Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15)
- Even adult Christians that have a strong Biblical background often know little about the origins and history of their Faith

To better meet the needs of adult Christians (both those mature in their Faith, and those just starting out in the "School of Christ"), I've written a series of courses that focus on the history of the Christian Church (including the Jewish roots), as well as the development of doctrine in the Church. The topics represented in these courses are intended to both further the participant's walk in the Faith, as well as serve as a starting point for Christian apologetics.

While the primary purpose of these courses is for use in churches, they also may be useful for High School and College projects, especially the courses focused primarily on historical aspects.

One note: these courses are primarily written from an Evangelical Protestant viewpoint (I come from a Reformed Church background), but I hope I've given ample time to other points of view throughout the various courses.

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Introduction

Flavius Josephus (c. 37 – 95 A.D.), in his massive 1st century A.D. works *Jewish Antiquities* and *Jewish Wars* describes that there were three Jewish religious “parties” or “sects” during the period ranging from the Hasmonean Dynasty to the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D.:

“For there are three philosophical sects among the Jews. The followers of the first of which are the Pharisees; of the second, the Sadducees; and the third sect, which pretends to a severer discipline, are called Essenes.” (*Jewish Wars*, Book 2, Chapter 8, William Whiston, Translator)



Two of those groups feature prominently in the New Testament – the Pharisees (“separatists”) and the Sadducees (“sons of Zadok” or “to be righteous”). None of the three are mentioned in the Old Testament or the Apocrypha. The Essenes may have been the sect associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls.

While we have a great deal of information about the three sects from various ancient sources, we have almost no reliable information as to the *lineage* of any of the three groups. Commentaries often state that the Pharisees are descendents of the scribes who arose in the synagogues during the Diaspora; other times they are associated with a mysterious sect mentioned a few times in 1st and 2nd Maccabees called the Hasideans. The Sadducees are typically associated with the priesthood in Jerusalem, but their origins are even murkier than the Pharisees (are they descendents of Aaron? “Sons of Zadok?” Associated with the Hasmoneans?) And the origins of the Essenes are hotly contested – are they descendents of the Hasideans? Formed during the Hasmonean dynasty in protest against non-Levites assuming the priesthood? Considering that all three are household names 2000 years later, we have remarkably little solid knowledge of where they came from. The terms seem to spring into existence in several 1st century A.D. sources, with no obvious pedigree.

As far as the theology and characteristics of the three sects, though, we have more information. Josephus describes the Essenes with loving detail, the Pharisees slightly less so, and the Sadducees the least. We can glean much about the Pharisees and Sadducees from the New Testament, although the information is generally presented in a negative light, as they often (not always) opposed the ministry of Jesus. Philo of Alexandria also discusses the Essenes in great detail (but doesn’t mention the Pharisees or Sadducees at all).

The purpose of this study is to attempt to present a survey of knowledge regarding these three sects from these sources:

- Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* – JA; *Jewish Wars* – JW)
- Philo of Alexandria
- Pliny the Elder
- The New Testament
- The Apocrypha
- The Dead Sea Scrolls

The last two sources will require a bit of interpretation, as none of the three sects are mentioned by name in either.

Part One of this study will cover the Pharisees and Sadducees. Part Two will cover the Essenes.

Quiz on the Pharisees and Sadducees

1. T/F The Pharisees and Sadducees are mentioned by name in the Dead Sea Scrolls
2. T/F The Pharisees and Sadducees are mentioned by name in the Apocrypha
3. T/F The Pharisees and Sadducees are mentioned by name in the Old Testament
4. T/F The New Testament links the Sadducees with the chief priests of the Temple
5. T/F The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, angels, or spirits
6. T/F Paul (Saul of Tarsus) was a Sadducee by training
7. T/F Paul (Saul of Tarsus) persecuted the early Christian Church by authority of the chief priests
8. T/F There is no record of any Pharisees following Jesus
9. T/F The earliest historical mention of the Sadducees is in the times of Ezra the prophet
10. T/F One possible meaning of "Sadducee" is "sons of Zadok"
11. Name three Pharisees mentioned in 1st century A.D. sources
12. Name a Sadducee mentioned in 1st century A.D. sources

Pharisees

Origins/History

The Pharisees are mentioned by name in the New Testament and by Josephus (they are also mentioned in later rabbinical works). The name is not mentioned in the Old Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Apocrypha. The earliest chronological reference to the Pharisees is by Josephus. He mentions the Pharisees as having existed during the reign of Hasmonean High Priest Jonathan (160-143 B.C.) The description is brief:

"Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate." (*Jewish Antiquities*, 13.172)

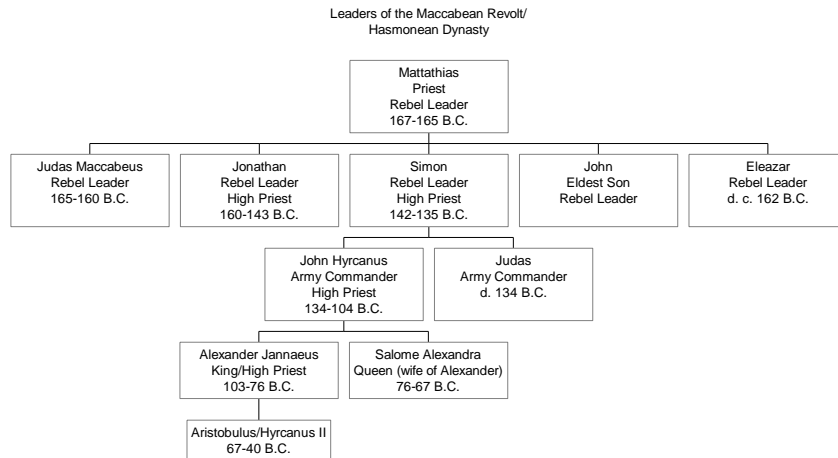


The next reference chronologically in Josephus is an ambiguous discussion of the relationship between the Pharisees and Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.). The passage begins with the following paragraph, which would tend to indicate that Hyrcanus and the Pharisees were at odds:

"However, this prosperous state of affairs moved the Jews to envy Hyrcanus; but they that were the worst disposed to him were the Pharisees, who are one of the sects of the Jews, as we have informed you already. These have so great a power over the multitude, that when they say anything against the king or against the high priest, they are presently believed." (JA, 13.10.5)

Josephus then turns right around and indicates that John Hyrcanus was a disciple of the Pharisees!

"Now Hyrcanus was a disciple of theirs, and greatly beloved by them. And when he once invited them to a feast, and entertained them very kindly, when he saw them in a good humor, he began to say to them, that they knew he was desirous to be a righteous man, and to do all things whereby he might please God, which was the profession of the Pharisees also."



Regardless of the exact situation, Josephus goes on to recount that at the aforementioned feast, a man of “ill-temper” named Eleazar shoots his mouth off to Hyrcanus, and questions the legitimacy of his high priesthood because “We have heard it from old men, that thy mother had been a captive under the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes.” The other Pharisees at the feast quickly disavow themselves of any connection to the opinion of Eleazar. However, egged on by a Sadducean friend named Jonathan, Hyrcanus eventually removes his allegiance from the Pharisees.

The Pharisees next show up in Josephus during the reigns of King Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.), and his wife Queen Salome Alexandra (76 - 67 B.C.). Alexander was perhaps the most hated leader the Hasmonians ever produced. Josephus describes a protracted Civil War, which culminates in Alexander slaying 50,000 of his opponents:

“From thence he fled to Jerusalem, where, besides his other ill success, the nation insulted him, and he fought against them for six years, and slew no fewer than fifty thousand of them; and when he desired that they would desist from their ill will to him, they hated him so much the more, on account of what had already happened; and when he had asked them what he ought to do, they all cried out, that he ought to kill himself.” (JA, 13.13.5)

On his deathbed, Alexander tells his Queen Alexandra that to survive she should “put some of her authority into the hands of the Pharisees; for that they would commend her for the honor she had done them, and would reconcile the nation to her...” (JA 13.15.5). In the same dialogue, Alexander recounts why she should make this move, and indicates that the Pharisees were indeed opponents of his:

“...for that they [the Pharisees] are then believed best of all by the multitude when they speak any severe thing against others, though it be only out of envy at them. And he said, that **it was by their means that he had incurred the displeasure of the nation**, whom indeed he had injured.” (JA, 13.15.5, emphasis added)

We now begin to see that the Pharisees were not just a religious sect, but also had strong political leanings. Alexandra does indeed enlist the aid of the Pharisees, and they take full advantage of their return to power:

“...she...permitted the Pharisees to do everything; to whom also she ordered the multitude to be obedient. She also restored again those practices which the Pharisees had introduced, according to the traditions of their forefathers, and which her father-in-law, Hyrcanus, had abrogated. So she had indeed the

name of the Regent; but the Pharisees had the authority; for it was they who restored such as had been banished, and set such as were prisoners at liberty, and, to say all at once, they differed in nothing from Lords.”

“But these Pharisees artfully insinuated themselves into her favor by little and little, and became themselves the real administrators of the public affairs; they banished and reduced whom they pleased; they bound and loosed [men] at their pleasure; and, to say all at once, they had the enjoyment of the royal authority, whilst the expenses and the difficulties of it belonged to Alexandra.” (JW, 1.5.2)

One of the incidents described by Josephus during the previously mentioned Civil War under Alexander Jannaeus was when he crucified 800 of his opponents, and murdered their wives and children:

“...the Jews fought against Alexander, and being beaten were slain in great numbers in the several battles which they had, and when he had shut up the most powerful of them in the city Bethome, he besieged them therein; and when he had taken the city, and gotten the men into his power, he brought them to Jerusalem, and did one of the most barbarous actions in the world to them; for as he was feasting with his concubines, in the sight of all the city, he ordered about eight hundred of them to be crucified; and while they were living, he ordered the throats of their children and wives to be cut before their eyes.” (JA, 13.14.2)

Scholars have long postulated that the 800 crucified were Pharisees, because the Pharisees retaliate under the reign of Salome Alexandra. However, the text doesn’t explicitly make that linkage:

“...and the country was entirely at peace, excepting the Pharisees; for they disturbed the queen, and desired that she would kill those who persuaded Alexander to slay the eight hundred men; after which they cut the throat of one of them, Diogenes: and after him they did the same to several, one after another...” (JA, 13.16.2)

Interestingly enough, the Dead Sea Scrolls may provide the missing link in this equation. Geza Vermes in his book “The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English” believes that a reference in the *Commentary on Nahum* links the Pharisees to the 800 crucified men:

“Interpreted, this concerns the furious young lion [who seeks revenge] on those who seek smooth things and hang men alive...”

According to Vermes, the young lion is Alexander Jannaeus, and “those who seek smooth things” are the Pharisees. Vermes also believes that another code word in the scrolls for the Pharisees is “Ephraim”. The passage below links “Ephraim” with “those who seek smooth things”:

“Interpreted, this is the city of Ephraim, those who seek smooth things during the last days, who walk in lies and falsehood.”

This leads to the speculation that the mysterious “Teacher of Righteousness” mentioned in several scrolls might have been a member of the ruling party under Alexander (the Sadducees?), and was displaced when Salome Alexandra brought the Pharisees (back) into power. The invective against the (presumed) Pharisees continues:

“...this concerns the dominion of those who seek smooth things, from the midst of whose assembly the sword of the nations shall never be wanting. Captivity, looting, and burning shall be among them, and exile out of dread for the enemy. A multitude of guilty corpses shall fall in their days; there shall be no end

to the sum of their slain...Cities and families shall perish through their counsel; honourable men and rulers shall fall through their tongues...[their] evil deeds shall be uncovered to all Israel at the end of time..." (Commentary on Nahum, Geza Vermes translation)

In the same vein, Michael Wise, in his book *The First Messiah* believes that the Dead Sea Scrolls *Thanksgiving hymns* were written by the Teacher of Righteousness, after his loss of power to the Pharisees. An example follows – the “party of the Seekers of Accommodation” refers to the Pharisees, according to Wise:

“I praise You, O Lord, because Your eye re[mains] upon me, and You deliver me from the zeal of false advisors. From **the party of the Seekers of Accommodation** have You rescued the life of the poor one whom they plotted to destroy, whose blood they planned to spill over the issue of Your Temple service...” (Thanksgiving Hymn 3, Michael Wise translation, emphasis added)

If the Wise premise is correct, the above passage also indicates what one of the main differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees was “the issue of Your Temple service.” It should be noted that none of the three Jewish religious sects are mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls by the names that we know them today – Pharisees, Sadducees, or Essenes. However, considering that the Scrolls were written from about 2nd century B.C. – 1st century A.D., we might expect to see the parties alluded to *some-where* in the 600 non-Biblical scrolls – even if they are mentioned under different names.

The Pharisees show up again in Josephus in about 20 B.C. when they run afoul of King Herod. Again, they seem quite involved in court intrigues, receiving support from the wife of the brother of Herod:

“...for there was a certain sect of men that were Jews, who valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers, and made men believe they were highly favored by God, by whom this set of women were inveigled. These are those that are called the **sect of the Pharisees**, who were in a capacity of greatly opposing kings. A cunning sect they were, and soon elevated to a pitch of open fighting and doing mischief. Accordingly, when all the people of the Jews gave assurance of their good will to Caesar, and to the king’s government, these very men did not swear, **being above six thousand**; and when the king imposed a fine upon them, Pheroras’s [brother of Herod] wife paid their fine for them. In order to requite which kindness of hers, since they were believed to have the foreknowledge of things to come by divine inspiration, they foretold how God had decreed that Herod’s government should cease, and his posterity should be deprived of it; but that the kingdom should come to her and Pheroras, and to their children. These predictions were not concealed from Salome, but were told the king; as also how they had perverted some persons about the palace itself. So the king slew such of the Pharisees as were principally accused...” (JA, 17.2.4, emphasis added))

The figure of 6,000 in the text above is interesting. Some scholars believe it refers to the total number of Pharisees in existence at the time of Herod. Other scholars believe that it only refers to the number of Pharisees who were fined by the king.

There is one other interesting mention of the Pharisees as the 1st century A.D. dawns. Josephus introduces a Pharisee named Sadduc (or Zadok, or Zaddok) who was part of a revolt in 6 A.D.:

“...yet there was one Judas, a Gaulonite, of a city whose name was Gamala, who, taking with him Sadduc, a Pharisee, became zealous to draw them to a revolt...” (JA, 18.1.1)

Josephus then goes on to refer to the movement started by Judas and Sadduc as being a “fourth philosophy” of the Jews, and one that eventually led to the Zealots. Their philosophy is described as essentially Pharisaic in nature:

“...for Judas and Sadduc, who excited a fourth philosophic sect among us, and had a great many followers therein, filled our civil government with tumults at present, and laid the foundation of our future miseries, by this system of philosophy, which we were before unacquainted withal...” (JA, 18.1.1)

“But of the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy, Judas the Galilean was the author. These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty; and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord. They also do not value dying any kind of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man Lord...” (JA, 18.1.6)

Chronologically, we now move into New Testament times, which will be covered in a separate section in some detail. However, it can be said that the Pharisees were a dominant group in the time of Jesus, being key members of the ruling Sanhedrin (sharing power with the Sadducees), and operating throughout all of Palestine.

Since the title of this section includes the word “Origins”, the sharp-eyed reader might note at this point that we still haven’t identified where the Pharisees came from – did they suddenly spring into existence during the reign of Hasmonean High Priest Jonathan? Or do they have an older pedigree?

At this point, we can only offer speculation as to their predecessors and antecedents. One theory is that the Pharisees were descendants of the Diaspora (c. 722 B.C.–532 B.C.) scribes. The scribes arose as the interpreters of the law in the local synagogues after the destruction of the Temple by King Nebuchadnezzar (c. 586 B.C.). As power shifted from the keepers of the Temple (the Levitical priesthood) to the “interpreters of the law” in the synagogue, a bitter rivalry was created that we may see echoes of in the discussions by Josephus of the Pharisees and Sadducees during the Hasmonean Dynasty hundreds of years later. And while the Temple was rebuilt in 515 B.C., many Jews remained in exile, scattered around the Mediterranean – and remained under the influence of the scribes in the synagogues. We get an interesting description of the scribes by Jesus ben Sirach, in the Apocryphal Wisdom of Sirach, written around 200 B.C.:

The Activity of the Scribe

How different the one who devotes himself
to the study of the law of the Most High!
1 He seeks out the wisdom of all the ancients,
and is concerned with prophecies;
2 he preserves the sayings of the famous
and penetrates the subtleties of parables;
3 he seeks out the hidden meanings of proverbs
and is at home with the obscurities of parables.
4 He serves among the great
and appears before rulers;
he travels in foreign lands
and learns what is good and evil in the human lot.
5 He sets his heart to rise early
to seek the Lord who made him,

and to petition the Most High;
 he opens his mouth in prayer
 and asks pardon for his sins.
 6 If the great Lord is willing,
 he will be filled with the spirit of understanding;
 he will pour forth words of wisdom of his own
 and give thanks to the Lord in prayer.
 7 The Lord will direct his counsel and knowledge,
 as he meditates on his mysteries.
 8 He will show the wisdom of what he has learned,
 and will glory in the law of the Lord's covenant.
 9 Many will praise his understanding;
 it will never be blotted out.
 His memory will not disappear,
 and his name will live through all generations.
 10 Nations will speak of his wisdom,
 and the congregation will proclaim his praise.
 11 If he lives long, he will leave a name greater than a thousand,
 and if he goes to rest, it is enough for him.

(Sirach 38:34 – 39:11, NRSV)

While this is an interesting description, it is hardly conclusive in identifying the Pharisaic movement exclusively with the scribes. However, the New Testament does seem to associate the scribes (“teachers of the law” in the NIV) and the Pharisees to some extent (22 times they are mentioned together), so the connection is not without some merit for consideration.

Another theory for the antecedents of the Pharisees are the mysterious Hasideans (meaning “the pious”), mentioned only in 1st and 2nd Maccabees. The references to the Hasideans are quoted in full below

“⁴²Then there united with them [Mattathias and his sons] a company of Hasideans, mighty warriors of Israel, all who offered themselves willingly for the law. ⁴³And all who became fugitives to escape their troubles joined them and reinforced them. ⁴⁴They organized an army, and struck down sinners in their anger and renegades in their wrath; the survivors fled to the Gentiles for safety.” (1 Mac. 2:42-43, NRSV)

This would seem to indicate that the Hasideans were war-like – “mighty warriors of Israel”. But wait, we next meet the Hasideans when they seek peace from the Seleucids. Alcimus was a high priest appointed by the Seleucids:

“¹²Then a group of scribes appeared in a body before Alcimus and Bacchides to ask for just terms. ¹³The Hasideans were first among the Israelites to seek peace from them, ¹⁴for they said, “A priest of the line of Aaron has come with the army, and he will not harm us.” ¹⁵Alcimus spoke peaceable words to them and swore this oath to them, “We will not seek to injure you or your friends.” ¹⁶So they trusted him; but he seized sixty of them and killed them in one day, in accordance with the word that was written...” (1 Macc 7:12-16, NRSV)



One reading of the above, of course, could indicate that the Hasideans were scribes. We can also ascertain that it was important to the Hasideans to have someone from the Levitical priesthood as high

priest. This section doesn't seem to reflect well on the Hasideans, because they seem to be willing to abandon the Maccabees. However, there is one more reference to the Hasideans, in 2 Maccabees. The speaker is the evil priest Alcimus:

⁶"Those of the Jews who are called Hasideans, whose leader is Judas Maccabeus, are keeping up war and stirring up sedition, and will not let the kingdom attain tranquility..." (2 Macc 14:6)

In this passage, the Hasideans are viewed as the fomenters of the revolt, who faithfully follow Judas Maccabeus! So, warriors, seditionists, or pacifists – take your pick from the references to the Hasideans in 1st and 2nd Maccabees. So, is there enough information here to definitely associate the Hasideans with the Pharisees (or even with the scribes, who are associated somewhat with the Pharisees in the New Testament)? The answer is no - one could equally speculate that the Hasideans are the predecessors of the Essenes! However, it is at least an interesting (and somewhat romantic) theory.

After the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the Pharisees became the dominant form of Judaism, leading to the rabbinical movement that is still the center of Judaism today.

Beliefs and attributes

In this section, we will examine what the beliefs and characteristics of the Pharisees were, based on our two primary first century sources – Josephus and the New Testament. Starting with Josephus, we should first mention that Josephus identifies himself as a Pharisee (although his descriptions of the Pharisees are not always especially sympathetic!):

"...when I was about sixteen years old, I had a mind to make trial of the several sects that were among us. These sects are three: — The first is that of the Pharisees, the second that of the Sadducees, and the third that of the Essenes, as we have frequently told you; for I thought that by this means I might, choose the best, if I were once acquainted with them all; so I contented myself with hard fare, and underwent great difficulties and went through them all. Nor did I content myself with these trials only; but when I was informed that one, whose name was Banus, lived in the desert, and used no other clothing than grew upon trees, and had no other food than what grew of its own accord, and bathed himself in cold water frequently, both by night and by day, in order to preserve his chastity, I imitated him in those things, and continued with him three years. So when I had accomplished my desires, **I returned back to the city, being now nineteen years old, and began to conduct myself according to the rules of the sect of the Pharisees, which is of kin to the sect of the Stoics, as the Greeks call them.**" (*The Life of Flavius Josephus*, Chapter 2, emphasis added)

The portrait that Josephus paints of the Pharisees beliefs and characteristics is generally sympathetic (certainly more so than some of the statements he makes about them in an historical context!). The table below lists Josephus' views of the beliefs and attributes of the Pharisees, but we may summarize here first:

- The Pharisees believed in a mixture of predestination and free will (in contradistinction to the Essenes, who were strict believers in predestination)
- The Pharisees had great popularity with the masses
- They believed in the importance of oral tradition, in addition to the written Law of Moses
- They believed in an afterlife in which the virtuous are rewarded and the evil are punished. With a few exceptions (Daniel 12, for example), this doctrine is not present in the Old Testament.

Josephus

Reference	Description
JA 13.5.9	“...they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate.”
JA 13.10.5	“These have so great a power over the multitude, that when they say anything against the king or against the high priest, they are presently believed.”
JA 13.10.6	“...are not apt to be severe in punishments...”
JA 13.10.6	“...have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses...”
JA 17.2.2	“...who were in a capacity of greatly opposing kings. A cunning sect they were...”
JA 18.1.3	<p>“...they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet...”</p> <p>“...and they follow the conduct of reason...”</p> <p>“They also pay a respect to such as are in years...”</p> <p>“...when they determine that all things are done by fate, they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit; since their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a temperament, whereby what he wills is done, but so that the will of men can act virtuously or viciously.”</p> <p>“They also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again...”</p> <p>“...the cities gave great attestations to them on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives and their discourses also.”</p>
JW 1.5.2	“These are a certain sect of the Jews that appear more religious than others, and seem to interpret the laws more accurately.”
JW 2.8.14	<p>“These ascribe all to fate [or providence], and to God, and yet allow, that to act what is right, or the contrary, is principally in the power of men, although fate does cooperate in every action.”</p> <p>“They say that all souls are incorruptible; but that the souls of good men are only removed into other bodies, — but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment.”</p> <p>“...the Pharisees are friendly to one another, and are for the exercise of concord and regard for the public.”</p>

New Testament

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are typically depicted as opponents of Jesus. Jesus clashes with them on a number of important Jewish doctrines, including Mosaic hygienic law, the Sabbath, and the relationship of religion and the state. The Pharisees are generally skeptical about Jesus being the messiah (believing, for example, that his power to exorcise demons comes from Beelzebub), and flatly reject any claim that Jesus could be the Son of God. The Pharisees are part of the plot to kill Jesus, and are actively involved in his capture. Jesus and John the Baptist use some especially severe language to describe the Pharisees (“you brood of vipers”).



All that being said, the portrait is not uniformly negative. At one point in Luke, the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. A prominent Pharisee on the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, is a follower of Jesus. In Acts, the apostles are released from prison by the intervention of the Pharisee Gamaliel, under whom Paul studied. Acts 15 records that there were Pharisees among the early Christian Church. And, of course, Paul announces on several occasions with some pride that he was trained as a Pharisee.

The Pharisees are connected with the scribes (“teachers of the Law”) on 22 occasions in the Gospels. They are also connected several times with their assumed rivals, the Sadducees, and the unidentified Herodians.

In terms of doctrine, we are told in the New Testament that the Pharisees believe in the resurrection of the dead, in angels, and in spirits – all doctrines of the early Christians.

Reference	Description
Matt 3:7-10	John the Baptist calls them “You brood of vipers!”
Matt 5:20	“...unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees...”
Matt 9:11-13; Mark 2:15-22; Luke 5:29-34	Pharisees question why Jesus eats with a tax collector
Matt 9:34	“It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.”
Matt 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-11	Questions about Sabbath Law; “But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.” (Math 12:14)
Matt 12:24	“It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”
Matt 12:38; Mark 8:11-15	“...we want to see a miraculous sign from you...” (Matt)
Matt 15:1-14; Mark 7:1-15	Questions on hand washing
Matt 16:1-12	Warnings against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees
Math 19:1-9; Mark 10:2-9	“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”
Matt 21:45-46	“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about

Reference	Description
	them..."
Matt 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17	Pharisees and Herodians – "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"
Matt 22:34-46	Pharisees unsuccessfully question Jesus – "and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions."
Matt 23	"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!"
Matt 27:62-66	"...the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate"
Mark 3:1-6	Healing on the Sabbath – "Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus."
Luke 5:17-26	"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"
Luke 7:29-30	"...the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John..."
Luke 7:36-50	Simon the Pharisee
Luke 11:37-53	Woe to Pharisees and teachers of the law
Luke 12:1	"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."
Luke 13:31	Pharisees warn Jesus "Herod wants to kill you."
Luke 14:1-6	"One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched..."
Luke 15:1-2	"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."
Luke 16:14-15	"The Pharisees, who loved money..."
Luke 17:20-21	"...when the kingdom of God would come..."
Luke 18:9-14	"God, I thank you that I am not like other men..."
Luke 19:39-40	"Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"
John 1:24	Pharisees question John the Baptist
John 3:1-21	"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council..."
John 4:1-2	"The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John..."
John 7:32	"Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him..."
John 7:45-52	Nicodemus defends Jesus to the chief priests and Pharisees
John 8:1-11	"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery."
John 8:13-29	"Where is your father?"
John 9:13-34	"Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath."
John 9:40-41	"What? Are we blind too?"
John 11:45-57	"Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin."
John 12:19	"Look how the whole world has gone after him!"
John 12:42-43	"But because of the Pharisees they would not

Reference	Description
	confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue.”
John 18:3	“So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees.”
Acts 5:33-40	“But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.”
Acts 15:5	Pharisee believers in the early church
Acts 22:3	“Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers”
Acts 23:6-9	Pharisees defend Paul in the Sanhedrin; Pharisees believe in resurrection, angels and spirits
Acts 26:5	“They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee.”
Phil 3:3-6	“...of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee...”

The Apocrypha

As already noted, the Apocrypha doesn’t mention the Pharisees by name. They may have been the Hasideans described in 1 Maccabees, but the association is unsure.

That being said, are there any writings in the Apocrypha that could be described as Pharisaic? Several apocryphal books show a keen interest in angels and demons, such as Tobit, 2 Esdras, and 1 Enoch (although the Essenes also believed in angels and demons). Several apocryphal books express a belief in an afterlife, and resurrection of the dead, including Wisdom of Solomon, 2 Maccabees, 2 Esdras and 1 Enoch. However, we can’t for certain describe any of these as absolutely Pharisaic.

Sadducees

There are no known extant writings *by* the Sadducees. Thus, all information that we have about them is written by someone who was not a Sadducee – Josephus, the New Testament, early rabbinical works (and, possibly, the Dead Sea Scrolls).



Origins/History

The first mention chronologically of the Sadducees (“sons of Zadok”?) is by Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* where they are said to have been in existence as one of the three “sects among the Jews” during the reign of Hasmonean High Priest Jonathan (160-143 B.C.):

“And for the Sadducees, they take away fate, and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but they suppose that all our actions are in our own power, so that we are ourselves the cause of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly.” (JA, 13.5.9)

The next time the Sadducees are mentioned chronologically in Josephus is in the previously mentioned incident between the Pharisees and John Hyrcanus. After the intemperate Pharisee Eleazar insults Hyrcanus,

canus, a Sadducee encourages the King to think that the insult is representative of the feelings of the Pharisees as a whole:

“Now there was one Jonathan, a very great friend of Hyrcanus, but of the sect of the Sadducees, whose notions are quite contrary to those of the Pharisees. He told Hyrcanus that Eleazar had cast such a reproach upon him, according to the common sentiments of all the Pharisees...” (JA, 13.10.6)

It is at the instigation of Jonathan the Sadducee that John Hyrcanus leaves the Pharisees:

“It was this Jonathan who chiefly irritated him, and influenced him so far that he made him leave the party of the Pharisees...” (JA, 13.10.6)

The Sadducees don't show up again in an historical setting in Josephus until the 1st century A.D. However, some scholars believe that the Civil War under Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.) was in fact one between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, which resulted in the Sadducees losing political power upon the death of Alexander. However, this can only be considered speculation at this point.

Josephus includes a long discussion of High Priest Ananus who puts James the brother of Jesus to death. The passage also notes that the priesthood was 1) bestowed by the Romans at this time in history and 2) was a family affair (as discussed in the New Testament). Ananus is explicitly identified as a Sadducee – does this mean that we should presume that the rest of his family is also Sadducean?

“And now Caesar, upon hearing the death of Festus, sent Albinus into Judea, as procurator; but the king deprived Joseph of the high priesthood, and bestowed the succession to that dignity on the son of Ananus, who was also himself called Ananus. Now the report goes, that this elder Ananus proved a most fortunate man; for he had five sons, who had all performed the office of a high priest to God, and he had himself enjoyed that dignity a long time formerly, which had never happened to any other of our high priests: but this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent; **he was also of the sect of the Sadducees**, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews, as we have already observed; when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority]. Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so **he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned...**” (JA 20.9.1, emphasis added)

There is even less hard evidence about the origins of the Sadducees than there is about the Pharisees and Essenes. Many commentaries and dictionaries connect the Sadducees with the Levitical priesthood that descended from the first chief priest of Solomon's Temple - Zadok (hence “sons of Zadok”). And certainly, it appears in Josephus and in the New Testament, that there was some link between the chief priests of the Temple and the Sadducees, but one cannot really go any further. It would be a mistake to assume that all chief priests were Sadducees, or that all Sadducees were priests.

Some scholars view that the Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) sectarians were a breakaway group of Sadducees. The word *sadducee* is a derivative of *zadokite*, and the one label that the scrolls seem to apply to the sectarians is “sons of Zadok”. The view of sectarians-as-Sadducees is represented here by Professor Lawrence H. Schiffman:

“I believe the sect was formed when a group of Sadducean priests left the Temple service in the aftermath of the Hasmonean takeover of the Temple soon after the Maccabean revolt, probably by about 152 B.C.E.” (*New Light on the Pharisees*, Lawrence Schiffman, Bible Review, June '92)

As mentioned previously, Michael Wise in his book *The First Messiah* believes that the author of the *Thanksgiving Hymns* was the mysterious “Teacher of Righteousness”. Wise believes that the Teacher was a member of the ruling Sadducean party under the reign of Alexander Jannaeus, who was thrown out of power after the Pharisees assumed power under Alexander’s widow. If this is true, then parts of the Dead Sea scrolls could be Sadducean writings.

One possible argument against the sectarians-as-Sadducees view is that some of the beliefs found in the Dead Sea Scrolls seem to be against what we know of as Sadducean beliefs (the Scrolls show a strong belief in predestination, a high opinion of the writings of the prophets, etc.)

Beliefs and attributes

Josephus

Josephus seems to mention the Sadducees’ beliefs and characteristics primarily in contradistinction to the Pharisees. At the end of the day, Josephus doesn’t tell us much, but we’ll summarize what he does tell us here:

- They were on the “free will” side of the eternal predestination vs. free will debate (early Baptists?)
- They trusted only in the written word of the scriptures, not in the “tradition of our forefathers”
- They believed that souls die with the body – there is no afterlife, and no resurrection of the dead
- Their appeal was primarily to the rich, or to the aristocracy. They were not popular with the masses.

Reference	Description
JA 13.5.9	“And for the Sadducees, they take away fate, and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but they suppose that all our actions are in our own power, so that we are ourselves the cause of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly.”
JA 13.10.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers...” • “...the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them...”
JA 18.1.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...That souls die with the bodies...” • “...nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins them; for they think it an instance of virtue to dispute with those teachers of philosophy whom they frequent; but this doctrine is received but by

Reference	Description
	a few, yet by those still of the greatest dignity; but they are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates, as they are unwillingly and by force sometimes obliged to be, they addict themselves to the notions of the Pharisees, because the multitude would not otherwise bear them."
JA 20.9.1	"Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews, as we have already observed..."
JW 2.8.14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "But the Sadducees...take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men's own choice, and that the one or the other belongs so to every one, that they may act as they please." • "They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades." • "But the behavior of the Sadducees one towards another is in some degree wild; and their conversation with those that are of their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them."

New Testament

The Sadducees are mentioned by name only 14 times in the New Testament, and not once in the Gospel of John. Many commentators also connect all references to the "chief priests" in the Gospels to the Sadducees. The New Testament reference that links the "high priest and all his associates" to the Sadducees is Acts 5:17:

"Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy..."

In this study, we will look at the New Testament references to "Sadducees" and "chief priests" separately.

Taking the 14 New Testament references to the Sadducees on their own, we might say the following about them:

- In Matthew, the Pharisees and Sadducees are often mentioned in the same context
- They believe there is no resurrection, and appear to have attempted to trick or ridicule Jesus with a complex question regarding brothers and widows at the resurrection
- They do not believe in "angels nor spirits"
- Jesus warns against their teachings
- The Sadducees appear to have been enemies of the early church – especially Peter, John and Paul

Reference	Description
Matt 3:7-10	John the Baptist calls them "You brood of vipers!"
Matt 16:1-12	Warnings against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees
Matt 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-38	"...the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection..."
Acts 4:1-22	"The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people."
Acts 5:17-40	"Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy..."
Acts 23:6-9	"The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits..."

If we include the references to the "chief priests" in the New Testament as being representative of Sadducean policy as a whole, a much darker portrait emerges. In summary:

- Jesus knows in advance that he will suffer death at the hands of the chief priests
- The high priest Caiaphas was one of the chief instigators in the plot to kill Jesus. The chief priests also wished to kill Lazarus.
- They paid Judas Iscariot 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus, and also sent the Temple guards to capture Jesus (the Gospel of John intimates that the chief priests were themselves present at the capture)
- They looked for false evidence upon which to convict Jesus in the Sanhedrin, and were among those that voted to put Jesus to death
- Paul the Pharisee persecuted the early Christians under the authority of the chief priests
- They appear to have been loyal to Rome
- They plotted to kill Paul



Reference	Description
Matt 16:21; Mark 8:31	"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law..." (Matt)
Matt 20:18; Mark 10:33-34; Luke 9:22	"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death..." (Matt)
Matt 21:15	"But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did...they were indignant."
Matt 21:23-46; Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8	"By what authority are you doing these things?"
Matt 26:3-4	"Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest,

Reference	Description
	whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him..."
Matt 26:14-16; Mark 14:10-11; Luke 22:1-5	"So they counted out for him thirty silver coins..." (Matt)
Matt 26:47; Mark 14:43; John 18:3	"With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests..." (Matt)
Matt 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65	"The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death..." (Matt)
Matt 27:1-10; Mark 15:1	"Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death." (Matt)
Matt 27:20; Mark 15:11	"But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead." (Mark)
Matt 27:41-43; Mark 15:31-32	"In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him."
Matt 27:62-64	"The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate."
Matt 28:11-15	"When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money..."
Mark 11:15-18	"The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him..."
Mark 14:1-2	"The chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him..."
Mark 14:53	"They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law came together."
Mark 15:9-11	"...it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him [Pilate]..."
Luke 19:47-48	"...the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him..."
Luke 20:19-26	"But they were afraid of the people."
Luke 22:52-53	"Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs?"
Luke 22:66-71	"'If you are the Christ,' they said, 'tell us.'"
Luke 23:4	"I find no basis for a charge against this man."
Luke 23:10	"The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him."
John 7:32	"Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him."
John 11:47-53	"So from that day on they plotted to take his life."
John 11:57	"But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him."
John 12:10-11	"So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well..."

Reference	Description
John 18:35	"It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me [Pilate]."
John 19:6-15	"'We have no king but Caesar,' the chief priests answered."
John 19:21	"Do not write 'The King of the Jews...'"
Acts 9:14,21	"And he [Paul] has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."
Acts 22:30	"The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble..."
Acts 23:12-15	"The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy..."
Acts 25:1-5	"Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him..."
Acts 26:10,12	"On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison..."

A question always arises in any discussion of the chief priests in the time of Jesus – why did they want to kill Jesus? There are many interpretations. One is that they were afraid that Jesus would interfere with their cozy relationship with the Romans. Another theory is that they were afraid that Jesus would be recognized by the populace as the Davidic messiah, thus undercutting their importance as keepers of the Temple. However, the true answer may be an economic one - many scholars believe that the key act by Jesus that led to his denunciation and death sentence by the chief priests and Sanhedrin was his "cleansing of the temple". This act could have interfered with one of the major sources of income for the priests – the sale of sacrificial animals.

After the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., the Sadducees (the presumed keepers of the Temple) faded into history.

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Notes

About the Author

Robert C. Jones grew up in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. He made his living as a hotel lounge band leader/musician from 1974-1981. In 1981, he moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area, where he received a B.S. in Computer Science at DeVry Institute of Technology. From 1984-2009, Robert worked for Hewlett-Packard as a computer consultant.



Robert is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. He has written and taught numerous adult Sunday School courses (see front inside cover). He has also been active in choir ministries over the years, and has taught the *Disciples* Bible Study six times.

Robert is also President of the Kennesaw Historical Society, for whom he has written several books, including "The Law Heard 'Round the World - An Examination of the Kennesaw Gun Law and Its Effects on the Community", "Retracing the Route of the General - Following in the Footsteps of the Andrews Raid", and "Kennesaw (Big Shanty) in the 19th Century". A new book, "Images of America: Kennesaw", was published by Arcadia in 2006.

Robert has also written several books on ghost towns in the Southwest, including in Death Valley, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Mojave National Preserve.

In 2005, Robert co-authored a business-oriented book entitled "Working Virtually: The Challenges of Virtual Teams". His co-authors were Lise Pace and Rob Oyung.

His interests include the Civil War, Medieval Monasteries, American railroads, ghost towns, hiking in Death Valley and the Mojave, and Biblical Archaeology.

Robert is available as a guest speaker on Christian history and theology topics in the Atlanta Metro area, and North Georgia. See <http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/speaker.htm> for more information.

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