

The Life of Jesus Christ, Part 10

Setting the Stage, Part 9

The Pharisees and Sadducees, Part 1

Pharisees and Sadducees came to prominence during the couple of centuries before Christ.

Josephus: Maybe talk more about him another time

“Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37–c. 100) is the author of what has become for Christianity perhaps the most significant extra-biblical writings of the first century. His works are the principal source for the history of the Jews from the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes to the fall of Masada in A.D. 73, and therefore, are of incomparable value for determining the setting of late inter-testamental and New Testament times.”

Wealthy family: Son of a priest, and apparently descended on his mother’s side from the Hasmoneans

Most important works are:

- *The Wars of the Jews*: Tells of the wars from the Maccabees to the war with the Romans that resulted in the destruction of the temple; he was an eyewitness to this Roman war
- *The Antiquities of the Jews*: A history of the Jews from the creation to Josephus’ time

Much of what we know about the Jews around the time of Christ comes from Josephus

Spoke of the Pharisees and Sadducees and an ascetic group called the Essenes; he himself became a Pharisee, or at least acted like one:

Josephus: “[B]eing now nineteen years old, [I] 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” (*Life*, 12).

“At this time there were three sects among the Jews, who had different opinions concerning human actions; the one was called the sect of the Pharisees, another the sect of the Sadducees, and the other the sect of the Essenes.

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.

But the sect of the Essenes affirm, that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination.

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.” (*Antiquities*, 13:171-173)

Another contrast:

“[T]he Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them and say that 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; and concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have

arisen among them, while the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude on their side..." (*Antiquities*, 13.297-298)

More:

"Now, for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the conduct of reason; and what that prescribes to them as good for them, they do; and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason's dictates for practice. ... 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 has pleased God to make a temperament, whereby what he wills is done, but so that the will of men can act virtuously or viciously. 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; on account of which doctrines, they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people....

But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: 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 a few, yet by those still of the greatest dignity

The doctrine of the Essenes is this: That all things are best ascribed to God. They teach the immortality of souls, and esteem that the rewards of righteousness are to be earnestly striven for; ... yet is their course of life better than that of other men; and they entirely addict themselves to husbandry. It also deserves our admiration, how much they exceed all other men that addict themselves to virtue, and this in righteousness This is demonstrated by that institution of theirs which will not suffer anything to hinder them from having all things in common; so that a rich man enjoys no more of his own wealth than he who has nothing at all. There are about four thousand men that live in this way, and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants; as thinking the latter tempts men to be unjust, and the former gives the handle to domestic quarrels; but as they live by themselves, they minister one to another." (*Antiquities*, 18.12-21)

More about the Essenes:

"These Essenes reject pleasures as an evil, but esteem continence, and the conquest over our passions, to be virtue. They neglect wedlock, but choose out other persons' children, while they are pliable, and fit for learning; and esteem them to be of their kindred, and form them according to their own manners. They do not absolutely deny the fitness of marriage, and the succession of mankind thereby continued; but they guard against the lascivious behavior of women, and are persuaded that none of them preserve their fidelity to one man." (*Wars*, 2.120-121)

More:

"[The Pharisees] 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. 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.

But the Sadducees are those that compose the second order, and 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.” (*Wars*, 2.162-165)

Pharisees

- Origin is obscure
- Josephus mentions them in the time of Jonathan, son of Mattathias, in the Maccabean era
- Probably means “separated ones”: perhaps separating themselves from others, separating themselves to study of the law, or separating from pagans
- Accepted all the OT
- Developed oral law and traditions
- Believed in angels/demons
- Believed in life and rewards/punishment after death:
 - Isaiah 26:19: “Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, For your dew is as the dew of the dawn, And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits”
 - Daniel 12:2: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.”
- Opposed Jesus because He threatened their understanding and practice of the law

Sadducees

- Meaning of “Sadducee” is unknown: two primary ideas:
 - “the Righteous Ones”: Hebrew *tzadikim*
 - “Zadokites”: linked with Zadok (whose name means “righteous”), the first high priest in Solomon’s temple
- Aristocratic, wealthy, most influential priests were Sadducees
- Fairly small group, influence mostly centered in Jerusalem
- Only accepted Pentateuch as authoritative
- Denied requirements of oral law
- Leaned towards Hellenism
- Didn’t believe in angels/demons
- Didn’t believe in life after death: God rewards in this life; so the resurrection of Christ was a big stumbling block for them
- Influence ended at the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple
- Opposed Jesus because He threatened their power

D. A. Carson: “As far as we can tell, the Sadducees (and therefore the chief priests) had no interest in the question of when the Messiah would come; the Pharisees (and therefore most teachers of the law) expected him to come only somewhat later. The Essenes alone ... expected the Messiah imminently” (*Matthew*, p. 88).