

Question: Who were the Pharisees and Sadducees?

Answer: Through reading the gospels we know that the Pharisees and Sadducees were not looked at favorably by Jesus. This is because of the practices and hypocritical tendencies they regularly demonstrated toward him during his ministry. But just who were the Pharisees and Sadducees? Below is a brief study of each.

Pharisees: The word Pharisee in Greek is *pharisaioi*, it means “Separated Ones.” The Pharisees got their name from other groups because of their well known practices of strict avoidance of Gentiles, of people who were ritually unclean, sinners, and Jews who did not strictly adhere to the laws of the Torah or Old Testament. (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary* 75:146-148) It is interesting to know that the Pharisees were a lay group of believers and leaders. They believed that education in the Torah on the dos and don'ts of living life and worshipping Yahweh insured an individual's salvation and eternal reward. (*NJBC*) The Pharisees emphasized the strict observance of specific religious practices like the Sabbath, ritual purity regulations, and tithing. They believed if all Jews practiced and fulfilled these specific observances it would lead them as a community to ancestral pride and appreciation. (*NJBC*) Not surprisingly the Pharisees were very influential figures in antiquity. They are estimated to have come to the fore of Jewish leadership about 150 BC. The Pharisees probably never exceeded at any given time in their existence more than 6,000 individual members. (*NJBC*) While they adhered to strict observance of following the law, the Pharisees at times also took the liberty for broad and liberal interpretations of scripture to better fit the mold of their philosophies. This led the Pharisees to put great emphasis on oral interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. This meant they could adjust their beliefs or practices on any given contingency allowing them to be flexible, thus able to confront any movement they saw either as a threat or outside their belief system.

The flexibility the Pharisees allowed themselves in the oral tradition led to some unique views and understandings not necessarily found in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. For example, the Pharisees believed in a general bodily resurrection. They also believed in angels, the coming of a “Messiah,” and the gathering of all Israel's tribes together at the end of time. (*NJBC*) The Pharisees also believed that all human beings had a large amount of freedom and control of their own divine providence. (*NJBC*)

The Pharisees found their main function in the Jewish community as teachers and preachers. This is because the Pharisees, unlike the priestly class of the Sadducees, could not trace their lineage directly from a priestly family. Since they were not of priestly lineage, the Pharisees were forbidden from offering sacrifice or participating fully in temple activities. While the Pharisees have been portrayed as enemies, we as Christians are indebted to some of their beliefs and practices. Specifically, the idea of resurrection and eternal reward for commoners originally came from the Pharisees. It was first presented to Christians by the former Pharisee Saul of Tarsus or Paul. (*New Advent*) Paul is not shy to mention in his many letters to the Churches throughout the Roman Empire that he was once a Pharisee. His writings very clearly reflect his former livelihood, in particular with his use and control of the Hebrew Bible. Paul quotes the Old Testament nearly 90 times in his letters found in the New Testament! (*NJBC* 82:10) The Pharisees are also responsible in large part for Jewish spirituality, something that was not embraced by the priestly class of the Sadducees who were very dogmatic in their teachings. (*NJBC*)

Sadducees: The word Sadducee comes from the Greek word *saddoukaioi*. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees were closely affiliated with Temple ministries, and part of the priestly class in Jerusalem. (*NJBC*) The Sadducees opposed many actions and practices of the Pharisees, especially their tendencies for oral traditions. The reason for this was because the Sadducees had the title of priest. With their title, they believed they held the keys to orthodoxy and truth. Since the Sadducees were part of the priestly class, they were ultimately the institutional religion led and directed by the High Priest. In contrast, the Pharisees were lay preachers and teachers and associated themselves closely with the Jewish people. The Sadducees denied most of the fundamental beliefs of the Pharisees like belief in reward and punishment of the soul in the afterlife, and the belief in angels. (*NJBC*) In the text of the New Testament, even though both the Pharisees and Sadducees were against Jesus, they also were against each other. (*NJBC*) Since Jesus was a layman like the Pharisees, the Sadducees in particular would not have listened to what Jesus was saying. The authority that the Sadducees claimed they had explains why the priests in Jerusalem played the largest role in bringing Jesus before Pontius Pilate ultimately leading to his crucifixion. (*NJBC* 78:12) Even more than the Pharisees, the Sadducees would have attempted to denounce Jesus' ministry and teachings as heresy. While the Pharisees continued to exist after the temple destruction in 70 AD, the Sadducees completely disappeared because of their close association and reliance on the temple.