

Question: Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees reject Jesus as the Messiah?

Answer: In 586 BC the dynasty of Davidic Kings came to an end when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered the Jews and took their land from them. From this point onward, the Jewish people hoped that someday the king would return, bringing the people back into the glory they once had. This monumental task could only come through the works of God and his Messiah (= anointed one). This Messiah would be a powerful king whose authority had been given by God. They believed he would bring into order what had fallen to chaos in the conquest of King Nebuchadnezzar. There were many idealistic qualities the Jewish people believed the Messiah would possess. These qualities, while very important, were not necessarily consistent amongst the different camps of Judaism. For many Jewish people, the idea of a peasant Messiah (which Jesus revealed himself to be) who would ultimately suffer and die at the hands of the authorities was never envisioned as the role the Messiah would fulfill. Some sects of Judaism even believed that there would be two Messiahs. The Essenes, an ascetic group of Jews who lived on the shores of the Dead Sea at Qumran, believed there would be a priestly and kingly Messiah (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary* 77:153).

The many different hopes of who the Messiah would be played an integral role in the Pharisees and Sadducees rejection of Jesus as the chosen one of God. From the beginning of his public ministry Jesus attacked the institutional church that the Pharisees and Sadducees had worked extremely hard to protect. The Mosaic Law which is made up of 631 laws and ordinances was the centerpiece in the Code of Holiness for the first century Jewish people. The laws and ordinances were enforced, interpreted, and explained by both the Pharisees and Sadducees with the intention of keeping Jewish people in the eyes of God. One of the most captivating challenges that plays itself out in the gospels is the challenge Jesus makes against the institution regarding the dichotomy between "clean" and "unclean." According to the Mosaic Law, certain foods are clean and unclean for consumption. Animals which have scales are clean animals and thus safe for Jewish people to eat (Leviticus 11:9-10). A fish without scales however is unclean, and if eaten by a Jewish person would make them unclean and unable to participate in regular prayer and worship of Yahweh. Similar to clean animals, humans could also become unclean for several different reasons. For example, if they contracted a skin disease, or if they bled naturally a person was deemed unclean. In these instances, the person who had unnatural deformities or flowing blood would be forced from the community in order not to contaminate others. When (and if) their situation improved and the individual who had been marked as unclean was no longer showing physical signs of deformity or irregularity, they were deemed clean and could come back into the community and worship Yahweh. If those who were unclean violated the Jewish laws of sanctity, the entire group's holiness was jeopardized, thus causing disconnection between the group and God. The enforcement of such ordinances was the lifeblood of the institutional church that the Pharisees and Sadducees had created.

Jesus realized in his ministry that the Law had become a hindrance to the purpose it was created for. He discovered that people had become slaves to the Law instead of God. With the Pharisees and Sadducees more worried about traditions than God, Jesus told those who listened, "Do not think that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Matthew 23:19) Words like these from Jesus directly challenged the authority of the institutional church. The Pharisees and Sadducees knew that the authority to teach and altar laws had been a part of their traditions for hundreds of years. They believed a peasant from Galilee had no right to make new traditions and new interpretations of the Law. At the core of the Pharisees and Sadducees rejection of Jesus was the simple fact that he was changing and changing the institution they had fought so hard to protect.

Another revolutionary feature of Jesus' ministry foreign to the authorities was his reaching out to peoples outside of the Jewish faith. Unlike the Sadducees and Pharisees whose only concern was the protection of Jewish Orthodoxy, Jesus brought the word of God to all peoples. He transcended the boundaries the institution had created to protect itself. Instead of embracing the institution (which is what the Pharisees and Sadducees expected the Messiah to do) Jesus challenged them at every turn, telling them how far they had fallen out of touch with God. This is illustrated in Jesus' dispute with the authorities regarding whether or not it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good or evil on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). Jesus' own answer to his question is to do good when good can be done, no matter the day. Thus, Jesus heals on the Sabbath, a direct violation of the Law.

The Pharisees and Sadducees idea of the Messiah was one who would fulfill the Law not change it. In all likelihood, they believed the Messiah would be a great king, bringing swift destruction to those who did not obey his will found in the Law. Jesus was not the Messiah that was expected. He believed in a peaceful revolution that started with changes in the church itself. More than anywhere else, Jesus' impact was felt upon the institution and the ways in which it had overstepped, and mis-stepped its role of shepherding the people of God. With their hardened hearts, the authorities ignored the fundamental message Jesus brought of unconditional love and subordination to God, thus rejecting him as their long awaited Messiah and ultimately sending him to the cross.