

YOUR GUIDE TO

THE SADDUCEES

SADDUCEE HISTORY & BELIEFS

The Sadducees were a group of Jews that were active in Ancient Israel during the last part of Second Temple period—the period in Ancient Israel between the construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 516 B.C. and its later destruction by the Romans in 70 A.D.

When the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile to Jerusalem in 537 BC, they were without a king. Just as children will argue and fight when parents are absent, so too did the Jews argue without a king. Everyone had their own opinion on what to think and how to do things. The Sadducees emerged as the ruling class—the party of the high priesthood that provided the sole leadership of the Jewish people. The Sadducees represented an aristocratic, wealthy, and traditional elite—but that traditionalism showed its weakness by letting itself be influenced by the Greek and Roman cultures.

They met with mounting opposition from the emerging Pharisees from around 100 B.C. onwards. The Pharisees wanted to wrestle the authority away from the Sadducees in favor of a more democratic rule.

At the time of Jesus, the Sadducees and the Pharisees constituted the two principal factions of the Jewish people. They were not “sects,” however, in the strict sense of the word, for they were not distinct from the moral structure of the nation; nor were they religious confraternities like the Essenes, although their basic principles were religious.

Neither was their outstanding characteristic any given political position as in the case of the Herodians although they were extremely important even in the political and social field. Rather they represented two currents of thought or tendencies which, though completely opposed to each other, were both based on sacred principles of the Jewish nation.

It is generally believed that the Pharisees were the conservatives and the Sadducees the liberals, more given to innovations. This may have been true in actual practice, but from the juridical-religious point of view the designation should be reversed, for the Sadducees claimed that they were the ones who had preserved the true moral heritage of Judaism and they rejected as innovations the particular tenets of the Pharisees.

The famous Jewish historian of that time, Flavius Josephus, identifies the Sadducees with the upper social and economic strata of Judean society. As a whole, the sect fulfilled various political, social, and religious roles, including maintaining the Temple. Their group is believed to have become extinct after the destruction of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The Sadducees deny the immortality of the soul, and hence all notion of reward for the good or punishment for the bad in the next world. They reject every kind of oral or written tradition other than the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), which for them is the sole source of Divine Revelation and Divine Law.

They reject the teaching of the Prophets as coming from God. They have no respect for the teachers, but rather consider it a virtue to contradict them. Not many belonged to the Sadducees, but the few who did were members of the upper classes. They took little part in public affairs and, when they are forced against their will to do so, they act in conformity with the teaching of the Pharisees since otherwise the people would not tolerate them.

SADDUCEE “QUICK FACTS”

- ▶ Sadducees were the dominant group among Jews at the time of Christ.
- ▶ They were mainly from the upper classes — the aristocracy and the wealthy.
- ▶ Various political, social, and religious roles, including maintaining the Temple.
- ▶ Most of the Jewish priests of the Temple came from the ranks of the Sadducees.
- ▶ Became extinct after the destruction of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D.
- ▶ They liked and accepted the Roman and Greek influences of the day (Hellenism).
- ▶ Their religious focus was based on worship in the Temple, whereas the Pharisees also insisted upon additional daily prayer and study outside the Temple worship.
- ▶ They said all divine revelation was contained only in the written Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament), and refused the writings of the Prophets and all oral tradition.
- ▶ Their chief beliefs were that: (1) there is no fate; (2) God does not commit evil; (3) man has free will to choose good or evil; (4) the soul is not immortal; (5) there is no afterlife, and (6) there are no rewards or penalties after death.

BATTLE WITH THE PHARISEES

When the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile to Jerusalem in 537 BC, they were without a king. Just as children will argue and fight when parents are absent, so too did the Jews argue without a king. Everyone had their own opinion on what to think and how to do things. The Sadducees emerged as the ruling class, but they found much opposition from other groups—among them the Pharisees.



- ▶ Conflict was partially a class issue, between the wealthy and the poor—the Sadducees came mainly from the priestly and aristocratic families, while the Pharisees came from the middle or lower classes.
- ▶ Conflict was cultural—because the Sadducees favored Hellenization (Greek influence) and the Pharisees resisted it.
- ▶ Conflict was also legal-religious, with Sadducees stressing the importance of the Second Temple and worship in the Temple with its (non-daily) calendar of religious rites and services, while the Pharisees stressed the importance daily worship outside the Temple in synagogues, and the importance of other Mosaic laws and prophetic values.
- ▶ Another conflict, solely religious, involved different interpretations of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and how to apply it to current Jewish life, with the Sadducees accepting only the Written Torah and rejecting doctrines such as the Oral Torah (traditions and teachings handed down by word of mouth) and certain doctrines like the Resurrection of the Dead.

BATTLE WITH OTHER GROUPS

- ▶ **OPPOSED TO THE ESSENES:** The Dead Sea Scrolls suggest a clash of ideologies and social positions between the Essenes and the Sadducees. The Essenes began as a group of renegade Zadokites, which would suggest that the group itself had priestly, and thus Sadducean origins. The Dead Sea Scrolls suggest the Sadducees (Manasseh) and the Pharisees (Ephraim) became religious communities that were distinct from the Essenes, the true Judah. They suggest that the Essenes challenged the authenticity of the rule of the Sadducees, blaming the downfall of ancient Israel and the siege of Jerusalem on their impiety. The Dead Sea Scrolls brand the Sadducean elite as those who broke the covenant with God in their rule of the Judean state, and so became targets of divine revenge.
- ▶ **OPPOSED TO JESUS & CHRISTIANS:** Saints Matthew and Mark describe the growing hostility of the Sadducees toward Jesus and His followers. These disputes show themselves on both theological and social levels. The Sadducees challenged Jesus over the belief in divine resurrection (Mt. 22:23-33). Jesus uses quotes from their Torah to overcome them and “Jesus answering, said to them: ‘You err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God.’” Jesus challenges the reliability of the Sadducees’ interpretation of Biblical doctrine, the authority of which enforces the power of the Sadducean priesthood. St. Matthew depicts the Sadducees as “brood of Vipers,” and a perversion of the true Israel.

