

Sadducees and Pharisees

Explanation

The most influential religious groups in Jesus' world were the Sadducees and Pharisees. As chart 3-2 shows, the Sadducees are rarely mentioned by name in the New Testament. They were influential, however, in the political sphere. They probably controlled a majority of the Sanhedrin and may be identified or closely associated with the Chief Priests (see chart 3-9).

Chart 3-3 shows the most likely legal differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees during biblical times and perhaps later. These issues have been reconstructed out of later Jewish writings, especially the Talmud. One of the main differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was what they counted as "law." Jesus was frequently asked questions about how the law should be understood, and from all appearances, this was a controversial topic of the day. The Pharisees included the oral law, or traditional rules that go beyond the legal materials found in the written Torah (the first five books of the Bible). Knowing something about the kinds of legal arguments that were controversial at the time of Jesus helps modern readers understand some of the questions that were asked of him and how his audiences may well have understood the contemporary significance of his answers and teachings.

References

- Anthony J. Saldarini, "Pharisees," *ABD*, 5:289–303.
Gary G. Porton, "Sadducees," *ABD*, 5:892–95.
Chart 3-3 is drawn from Gregory R. Knight, "The Pharisees and the Sadducees: Their Respective Outlooks on Jewish Law," *BYU Law Review* (1993): 925–48.

Legal Views of Pharisees and Sadducees

Issue	Pharisees	Sadducees
POSSIBLE CONTROVERSIES DURING BIBLICAL TIMES		
The use of fire on the Sabbath	Prohibited the <i>igniting</i> of fire on the Sabbath but permitted the <i>use</i> of fire kindled on Friday before the start of the Sabbath.	Prohibited the use of any fire on the Sabbath.
The <i>Omer</i> and the date of <i>Shavuot</i>	Interpreted <i>sabbath</i> in Lev 23:11 to mean “festival day,” the first day of Passover. Thus, the <i>Omer</i> was to be performed on the second day of Passover. The festival of <i>Shavuot</i> occurred 49 days thereafter.	Interpreted <i>sabbath</i> in Lev 23:11 and 16 to mean the weekly Sabbath. Thus, the <i>Omer</i> occurs on the Sunday of the Passover week with the <i>Shavuot</i> festival taking place 7 weeks later.
Impurity of metals	Believed that metal is subject to impurity and that, just like anything else, it must be purified properly.	Believed that the impurity of metals is limited strictly to the context of Num 31:21–24 (metals captured in war).
Liability for damages caused by a slave	Held that a master is not liable for damages or wrongs committed by his slave as long as the master did not know about or sanction the slave’s action.	Believed that a master is liable for the acts of his slave.
Capital punishment	Rejected the idea that a money ransom could be paid in lieu of executing a properly condemned criminal.	Allowed a compensatory payment to substitute for the execution of a criminal.
The water-libations on <i>Sukkot</i>	Believed that, although not in the Torah, these ceremonies were part of the oral Torah, which had been given to Moses and handed down by the prophets. All these rituals should be followed.	Rejected these ceremonies and traditions as not having any basis in the written Torah.
The <i>nizzok</i>	Believed that the <i>nizzok</i> is not unifying. An unbroken stream of liquid will not render the pure pouring vessel impure.	Believed that the <i>nizzok</i> is unifying. The impurity of the receiving vessel is transferred to the pure pouring vessel.
Leniency in punishment	Tended toward leniency in enforcing the strict penalties of the Torah.	Tended toward a strict interpretation of the Torah’s harsh punishments.

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BASIC BELIEFS		
Resurrection	Believed that souls are immortal. Good souls will be resurrected while evil souls are eternally punished.	Believed that the soul perishes with the body.
Angels	Believed in personal angels.	Rejected the existence of angels or spirits.
Fate	Believed that men are bound by fate in all that they do—both good and evil.	Believed that men have free will and can choose either good or evil. The consequences of our actions are reaped in mortal life.
PROBABLE POST-BIBLICAL CONTROVERSIES		
Hand washing	Pharisaic scholars held that the hands must be washed before worshiping or eating any sacred food or heave offering. Emphasized purity in all situations.	Believed that washing the hands before eating sacred meals was not necessary.
The <i>'Erub</i>	Sanctioned the carrying of burdens in or out of the house on the Sabbath based on the legal fiction that a group of houses or even a whole neighborhood could be “merged” into a single household by erecting a symbolic wire around the area.	Rejected the concept of <i>'Erub</i> . It is simply inappropriate to carry any burden on the Sabbath.
POSSIBLE LATER CONTROVERSIES		
<i>Lex talionis</i> : “Eye for an Eye”	Allowed monetary compensation to substitute for literal retribution except in capital cases.	Applied the doctrine of <i>lex talionis</i> literally. No leniency in retribution.
Impurity of women after childbirth	Believed that during the respective 33- and 66-day cleansing periods, there was no prohibition against marital intercourse.	Forbade marital relations during the cleansing period.
Virgin bride suspected of fornication	Ruled that husband had to produce witnesses to testify that his wife had been unfaithful during the period of the betrothal.	Held that parents had to produce the blood-stained garments as proof of the bride’s virginity.
<i>Halizah</i> ceremony	Held that a childless widow must take off her shoe and spit before her brother-in-law in order to release him from the obligation to marry her.	Believed that the childless widow is to spit, literally, in his face.