

## **Pharisees and Sadducees**

While we today are content and at peace with our faith, in the very beginning, there were long and intense arguments about whether it was true or not. In the earliest decades of the Christian community, there were serious objections to it and they came from respected religious leader. We see little reason to deny Jesus because our faith has grown quite strong, but in the beginning, it was not like that.

What is hard for many to understand is why the Pharisees objected to Jesus. He and the Pharisees believed in the Resurrection. Both Jesus and the Pharisees advocated strict adherence to the Law. Some Pharisees were stricter than others, but Jesus' teachings were closer to what most Pharisees taught than to what the Sadducees taught. The Pharisees accepted the teachings of the prophets, as did Jesus, which the Sadducees did not accept. The Pharisees believed there would be a predecessor to the Messiah like John the Baptist. So, what was it about Jesus that aroused their suspicions? Actually, many things.

At the time of Jesus' crucifixion there were tens of thousands of Jews in the Roman empire. Many held the Jews in great respect, but there was also much opposition to them. Some critics felt their dietary laws were overly exaggerated and eccentric. Others objected to their extreme

monotheism and refusal of Jews to integrate other religions into their faith. But many respected them for their high ethical values and for their strong family life. They were not an insignificant element in the Roman empire, and when the Jews revolted against the Romans in 66 A.D., the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem to disperse the Jews and they renamed Jerusalem "Aelia Capitolina". The Jews at Masada revolted again in 133 and it took half of the Roman Army to suppress the revolt. The only way for Rome to prevent further revolts was to forbid any Jews in Jerusalem.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were formed after the Babylonian exile which occurred after the Assyrians and Babylonians defeated both Judah and Israel and destroyed the Temple in 587 B.C. With its destruction, the Jewish elites were carried off to slavery in Babylon where they remained for 70 years. Years after that, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and the Jews were allowed to return, and they began to rebuild their kingdom. The Pharisees and Sadducees were created during this captivity in Babylon to ensure that their new kingdom would remain faithful to the Mosaic law and, that their Temple worship was proper and that they lived in peace with the world's kingdoms. By every measure, they were exceptionally successful. They recovered the texts of the ancient law, and after they returned to Palestine, they rebuilt the temple and they

worked vigorously to assure that the ancient law was observed. In the 500 years after the Babylonian captivity, these two brotherhoods were largely responsible for preserving Jewish faith and practice.

The Pharisees were well-liked by most of the Jews because of their simplicity and poverty. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were mostly from aristocratic backgrounds and did not have a lot of popular support. They were responsible for Temple worship, and they believed that Temple worship and strict obedience to the written Torah or law, which they controlled, was the key to salvation. The Pharisees debated about the law, but they taught that the written law could be supplemented by newer laws created to deal with new situations.

The Jews who lived in Palestine took their faith quite seriously and they had seen many threats to it. They did not call Jesus the “Christ” but rather termed him the “Nazarene” which was not necessarily a flattering term. Nazareth was small town and centuries before it was the home of Samson one of the first Judges of Israel. The men of Nazareth refused to shave their beards as a sign of their holiness and devotion.

When he began his ministry, there were rumors that he had been born in strange circumstances and many were curious about his origins.

But his early life was quiet and hardly anyone expected him to erupt on the scene as he did. As expected, the Sadducees rejected Jesus because of his humble origins but also because his training did not come from the Temple.

One thing is clear and that was that when Jesus began his public ministry was that he was a “wonder worker”. He quickly began to heal people and it seemed that there was no rhyme or reason to his healing but there really was. He was doing these things because he was trying to reveal his not merely human but divine origins, purpose and nature. He was trying to show that there was divine power intrinsic to him, and physical reality was made subject to his will. He walked on water, and after his Resurrection his body appeared and disappeared at will. He could mask and cloak himself. The dead were being brought back to life, the sick were returning to health, the blind and deaf were opened up to the world and those who were mute and silent began to speak and praise God.

Jesus was mysterious to the Pharisees because he was not educated at the Temple by either priests, scribes, Pharisees or Sadducees. The Temple leaders were surprised when he appeared at twelve years old in the Temple and seemed so learned. His later claims to be the promised one were ridiculed because he did not seem to have any relationship to the

Temple, and most of the Jewish ruling class expected the Messiah to be from the Temple. Jesus was also criticized because he seemed at times to utterly disregard the prudent observance of the Law and the Temple. He seemed to have disdain for the laws of purity. He did what Pharisees and Sadducees considered to be against the Sabbath and had harsh words for the leaders. “Do what they say but not what they do” was his famous quote. He was very harsh about the priestly class and did not consider the sacrifices they offered to be valuable and effective.

What drew their attention to Jesus was the stories of his miracles, healings and signs. The Jewish leaders *did not deny that he did these things* and this caused a number of different theories about who and what he was. Some of the leaders, like Nicodemus, believed he was the promised one. Other Pharisees probably believed that he may have been some sort of prophet. No one was doubting that Jesus was healing and giving life back to people, but what the Pharisees wanted to know was where did he get the power to do these things, and by whose authority was he doing all these wonders. Was he doing these miracles because he was from God? Or did he do them because he was from Satan? Many believed that before the Messiah came, Satan would send an “anti-Satan” who would appear to be the real one and it was feared that he was that. As

the anti-Messiah, he would draw the people to him and instead of bringing salvation, he would lead a rebellion against Rome who would then come and destroy the Temple and the people.

But it was not just the miracles that aroused suspicion. He was saying and doing other things that caused concern. His followers were not among the most learned in the law or the most devout. Some of the Apostles and many disciples would arouse suspicion. “Why is he summoning these?” some asked. Most were undistinguished but some were mysteries. Matthew was a Jewish tax collector who made himself rich taking whatever he wanted from Jews. Simon was a zealot and Peter and John were fishermen. Few knew the law in depth and it is not clear how rigorously any of them practiced their faith.

In his ministry to the Apostles Jesus revealed his divine nature by appearing with Moses, Elijah and the Father in heaven. He was revealing this only to them so that they would understand after his resurrection who precisely he was. The Pharisees did not see this because they had little or no faith in him and they probably would have ridiculed him if they saw it. The Pharisees did not object to his death because they probably thought him to be Satanic.

The primary reason why the Pharisees objected to him was because he hinted at to them, or implied, that he was the Incarnate Son of God. This was not said openly, but that was what they suspected of him. The Pharisees were not theologians, they were defenders of what they considered to be the law of holiness given by God. For them, God was simply God, and our responsibility was to obey. They did not see their mission to explain who and what God was, but the Christians were forced to do this. The Pharisees would have considered his assertion to be both human and divine not only blasphemy but also impossible. The Christians from the beginning to explain that this was possible and what it meant. Aiming at giving a coherent account of who and what Jesus was, the early Christians became the first theologians.

What Jesus had done was bring to completion a constantly growing trend in divine revelations to become more concrete, visible and intimate to us. We see this after Jesus' resurrection where his physical human body became completely subject to Jesus' divine will. When Jesus needed to cloak his physical identity as he did with Mary Magdalene, it did. When Jesus needed to suddenly appear to the Apostles in the Upper Room, it did. When he needed to instantly disappear as he did after he broke bread

with Mary and Cleopas at Emmaus, it did. He truly was God in human form, bringing to an end the time of revelation.

To me it is a mystery that the Pharisees did not develop a monotheistic theology of revelation, but they were probably afraid to despite the fact that Christianity spread farther and wider than Judaism. The only concern was bringing about greater clarity of the Law, the Torah and guaranteeing compliance with it. Divine wrath was brought down by disobedience, and all they cared about was bringing about compliance. The Pharisees never delved into the mystery of the inner life and being of God. They believed that the divine plan of salvation consisted simply in obedience to the Law. They were not able to speculate about how the divine, grace or the Spirit of God could enter into the very depths of the human person.