

What are the differences between the Sadducees and Pharisees?

The Gospels refer often to the Sadducees and Pharisees, as Jesus was in almost constant conflict with them. The Sadducees and Pharisees comprised the ruling class of Jews in Israel. There are some similarities between the two groups but important differences between them as well.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were both religious sects within Judaism during the time of Christ. Both groups honored Moses and the Law, and they both had a measure of political power. The Sanhedrin, the 70-member supreme court of ancient Israel, had members from both the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

The differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees are known to us through a couple of passages of Scripture and through the extant writings of the Pharisees. Religiously, the Sadducees were more conservative in one doctrinal area: they insisted on a literal interpretation of the text of Scripture; the Pharisees, on the other hand, gave oral tradition equal authority to the written Word of God. If the Sadducees couldn't find a command in the Tanakh, they dismissed it as manmade.

Given the Pharisees' and the Sadducees' differing view of Scripture, it's no surprise that they argued over certain doctrines. The Sadducees rejected a belief in the resurrection of the dead (Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18-27; Acts 23:8), but the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees denied the afterlife, holding that the soul perished at death, but the Pharisees believed in an afterlife and in an appropriate reward and punishment for individuals. The Sadducees rejected the idea of an unseen, spiritual world, but the Pharisees taught the existence of angels and demons in a

spiritual realm.

The apostle Paul shrewdly used the theological differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees to escape their clutches. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and was making his defense before the Sanhedrin. Knowing that some of the court were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, Paul called out, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6). Paul’s mention of the resurrection precipitated a dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, dividing the assembly, and causing “a great uproar” (verse 9). The Roman commander who watched the proceedings sent troops into the melee to rescue Paul from their violence (verse 10).

Socially, the Sadducees were more elitist and aristocratic than the Pharisees. Sadducees tended to be wealthy and to hold more powerful positions. The chief priests and high priest were Sadducees, and they held the majority of seats in the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees were more representative of the common working people and had the respect of the masses. The Sadducees’ locus of power was the temple in Jerusalem; the Pharisees controlled the synagogues. The Sadducees were friendlier with Rome and more accommodating to the Roman laws than the Pharisees were. The Pharisees often resisted Hellenization, but the Sadducees welcomed it.

Jesus had more run-ins with the Pharisees than with the Sadducees, probably because of the former’s giving preeminence to oral tradition. “You ignore God’s law and substitute your own tradition,” Jesus told them (Mark 7:8, NLT; see also Matthew 9:14; 15:1-9; 23:5, 16, 23; Mark 7:1-23; and Luke 11:42). Because the Sadducees were often more concerned with politics than religion, they ignored Jesus until they began to fear He

might bring unwanted Roman attention and upset the status quo. It was at that point that the Sadducees and Pharisees set aside their differences, united, and conspired to put Christ to death (John 11:48-50; Mark 14:53; 15:1).

The Sadducees as a group ceased to exist after the destruction of Jerusalem, but the Pharisees' legacy lived on. In fact, the Pharisees were responsible for the compilation of the Mishnah, an important document with reference to the continuation of Judaism beyond the destruction of the temple. In this way the Pharisees laid the groundwork for modern-day Rabbinic Judaism.