

Who were the scribes that often argued with Jesus?

Scribes in ancient Israel were learned men whose business was to study the Law, transcribe it, and write commentaries on it. They were also hired on occasions when the need for a written document arose or when an interpretation of a legal point was needed. Ezra, “a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses,” was a scribe (Ezra 7:6).

The scribes took their job of preserving Scripture very seriously; they would copy and recopy the Bible meticulously, even counting letters and spaces to ensure each copy was correct. We can thank the Jewish scribes for preserving the Old Testament portion of our Bibles.

Jews became increasingly known as “the people of the Book” because of their faithful study of Scripture, particularly the Law and how it should be followed. In the New Testament era, scribes were often associated with the sect of the Pharisees, although not all Pharisees were scribes (see Matthew 5:20; 12:38). They were teachers of the people (Mark 1:22) and interpreters of the Law. They were widely respected by the community because of their knowledge, dedication, and outward appearance of Law-keeping.

The scribes went beyond interpretation of Scripture, however, and added many man-made traditions to what God had said. They became professionals at spelling out the letter of the Law while ignoring the spirit behind it. Things became so bad that the regulations and traditions the scribes added to the Law were considered more important than the Law itself. This led to many confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shocked His audience by declaring that the righteousness of the scribes was not enough to get anyone to heaven (Matthew 5:20).

A large portion of Jesus' sermon then dealt with what the people had been taught (by the scribes) and what God actually wanted (Matthew 5:21-48). Toward the end of Jesus' ministry, He thoroughly condemned the scribes for their hypocrisy (Matthew 23). They knew the Law, and they taught it to others, but they did not obey it.

The scribes' original aim was in earnest—to know and preserve the Law and encourage others to keep it. But things turned horribly wrong when man-made traditions overshadowed God's Word and a pretense of holiness replaced a life of true godliness. The scribes, whose stated goal was to preserve the Word, actually nullified it by the traditions they handed down (Mark 7:13).

How did things get so far off course? Probably because the Jews, after surviving centuries of persecution and enslavement, clung in pride to the keeping of the Law and how it marked them as God's chosen people. The Jews of Jesus' day certainly had an attitude of superiority (John 7:49), which Jesus opposed (Matthew 9:12). The bigger problem was that the scribes were hypocrites at heart. They were more interested in appearing good to men than they were in pleasing God. Eventually, it was these same scribes who played a part in having Jesus arrested and crucified (Matthew 26:57; Mark 15:1; Luke 22:1-2). The lesson every Christian can learn from the hypocrisy of the scribes is that God wants more than outward acts of righteousness. He wants an inward change of heart that is constantly yielding in love and obedience to Christ.