

The world of Jesus- Life in 1st. century Palestine study 4

Religion: The Sadducees and the Sanhedrin



THE SADDUCEES

Four “Philosophies”

Josephus, trying to interpret Jewish customs and belief to a non-Jewish audience, wrote of there being *three sects of philosophy...the sect of the Essenes [Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls], and the sect of the Sadducees and...that of those called the Pharisees...But of the fourth sect of Jewish philosophers, Judas the Galilean was the author [i.e. Zealots].* However these were not schools of philosophy as Greeks would understand them but rather schools of very different theological outlook and practice.

The Sadducees - their name

1] Either derived from Zadok the priest, the loyal friend and supporter of King David (2 Sam.15v24f; 17v15; 19v11), who continued into the reign of Solomon (1 Kngs 2v35; 1 Chron.29v22) and whose family provided the nucleus of the priesthood for the nation. It is his descendants alone whom Ezekiel envisions, serving the Lord in the ideal Temple (Ezek.40v46; 43v19; 44v15; 48v11; 49v14).

2] Or from *Tsaddiqim* – the “righteous Ones”, perhaps in reaction to the *Hasidim* – the “Holy Ones” who were the forerunners of the Pharisees.

Who were they?

The Sadducees were mostly (although not exclusively) drawn from the wealthy and influential priestly and aristocratic families . Certainly their influence was limited *to* and their support mainly came *from* the upper classes, as opposed to the Pharisees, whose zeal for the Law and knowledge of the Law gained them the ear of the majority

They formed part of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish ruling council. After the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple in AD 70, the Sadducees disappear from Jewish life, finally giving way to the Pharisees. Unlike the Sadducees whose milieu was the Temple and the Temple ritual, the Pharisees – as experts in the Law – found their natural place in the local synagogues, and consequently their power and influence grew as synagogue worship of necessity replaced worship in the Temple.

What did they believe?

As their power base was Jerusalem and the Temple, and as most were wealthy men with much to lose, it was in their interests to accommodate foreign rule, be that Seleucid or Roman, in order to preserve the status quo. Their watchword might be summarised in the words on the lips of Caiaphas the High Priest in Jn.11v45-50.

Most especially they accepted only the authority of the *written* Torah and rejected completely any notion of an oral Law – *the traditions of the elders* with all its multitude of rabbinic interpretations and additions. Although they had their own traditions, these came with priestly authority and did not claim to come from the mouth of God at Mount Sinai. This adherence to the primacy of not just the written Law but of the Torah – the first five books of the Bible – determined their theological outlook in other areas as well. If the doctrine was not to be found in the Pentateuch, then it was to be rejected. Such a theological outlook inevitably put them on a collision course with the Pharisees.

Areas of Difference between the Sadducees and the Pharisees

Sadducees	Pharisees
The supreme authority of the written Law. (Although the Writings and the Prophets – i.e. the rest of the OT, were also acknowledged, they were not regarded as having the same level of authority as the Pentateuch).	The supreme authority of the oral Law, which was considered of higher authority than the written Torah, being the interpretation, explanation and completion of the written text.
It was permissible to question and even to contradict one’s teacher.	The “plastered cistern” which lost not a drop was the ideal model for the Pharisee. The disciple who was the receptacle for his rabbi’s knowledge and wisdom.

Theirs was a <i>clerical</i> authority, derived from <i>status</i> and from <i>birth</i> .	Theirs was a <i>lay</i> authority, derived from <i>study</i> and <i>knowledge</i> of the <i>Law</i> .
They rejected any notion of a bodily resurrection or of reward in the after-life. Indeed they rejected any idea of personal existence after death (Acts 23v6-9).	They accepted both resurrection and reward in the life to come.
They rejected any belief in angels or spirits.	They believed in angels and in spirits.
They believed in complete free will. God did not intervene in human affairs or exert any influence upon human actions.	They believed in divine intervention into the affairs of humankind.
They were basically secularists, whose focus and emphasis was exclusively on this life.	They had a more religious outlook on this life and on the life to come.

Clashes with John the Baptist

They were part of the delegation from Jerusalem sent to check out John, whom he in turn challenges to repent and to turn to God (Mt.3v7-10; Jn.1v19-21).

Clashes with the Apostles

When Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin for the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 4v1-22) and when further persecution breaks out against the Church (Acts 5v17-42).

Clashes with Jesus

Where Jesus demonstrates from the Pentateuch (Ex.3v6) that resurrection is Scriptural (Mt.22v23-33; Mk.12v18-27), and gets a "Bravo" from some of the Scribes in the process (Lk.20v27-39)!

The Two Great Challenging Actions of Jesus

1. He cleanses the Temple – twice (!) and apparently speaks of its destruction (Jn.2v12-22; Mt.21v12-17; Mk.11v12-18; Lk.19v45-48). By so doing He strikes directly at the heart of the Sadducean power base and their whole reason for existence. And see the implications of Jesus quoting from Jeremiah ch. 7 – to quote from a part is to quote from the whole!
2. By rising to life on Easter Day. Whereas the Pharisees taught the resurrection as a future event (e.g. Jn.11v23-24), by His resurrection and in their preaching, Jesus and the Apostles brought the resurrection into the here and now (Acts 4v1-2).

THE SANHEDRIN

By the time of the NT the Sanhedrin was the supreme Jewish ruling council. Situated in Jerusalem it was responsible for the oversight and administration of all religious, political and legal matters and had (in theory at least) jurisdiction over every living Jew.

Background

In the Old Testament there had been various "councils" (e.g. Deut.17v8-13; 19v15-21) and "Elders" (Ex.3v16; Ex.18v13-26; Deut.5v32; Jud.8v14;). However these were nothing like the formal Sanhedrin of later years.

Originally called a *Gerousia* – a "council of old men", (Josephus describes it by the word *senate* and in Acts 5v21 Luke uses *Sanhedrin* followed by *Gerousia* to explain what a *Sanhedrin* is). The development of the Sanhedrin was given impetus and shape after the return from Exile in Babylon, under Ezra and Nehemiah where a council arbitrated for the people and represented the nation to their Persian overlords as they sought to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple (e.g. Ezra 10v14). Subsequently the High Priest Joshua and the Davidic governor Zerubbabel ruled Jerusalem together (Hagg.1v1; Zech. 4v14). On the death of Zerubbabel, the Davidic line came to an end and the High Priest emerged as head of the Jewish state and head of the *Gerousia*.

Unsurprisingly priests were the dominant party and the Sanhedrin further developed its shape and influence under the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III (223-187BC). However under the Maccabees, whose great allies were the Hasidim, not only did the Sanhedrin's power decline but the role of the priests was also

reduced. This was especially so when Simon took to himself both the role and title of ethnarch and of High Priest, thereby founding a new High Priestly dynasty. Under Queen Alexandra (76-67BC), the Sanhedrin's power returned but the Pharisees were favoured over the priests and nobility. However to those in power and as the Pharisees increasingly turned against the Maccabees, their natural allies were the Sadducean party, the party of the rich and influential, centred in the capital of Jerusalem. Consequently the Sadducees grew in influence during the latter years of the Hasmonean dynasty.

Gabinius, the Roman governor of Syria (57-55BC) divided the nation up into five administrative areas, each with its own Sanhedrin – Jerusalem; Gadara; Amethus; Jericho; Sepphoris. However in 47BC, Julius Caesar replaced these five Sanhedrins with just one – centred in Jerusalem and ruled over by the High Priest, although the local Sanhedrins still continued but now in a subservient role – (Mt.10v17; Mk.13v9) and Josephus writes of *village clerks* in the time of Herod the Great.

Indeed so confident did the Jerusalem Sanhedrin feel in its new supreme position, that it summoned Herod (the Great) to appear before it on charges of imposing the death penalty without their authorisation, when he ruthlessly put down a rising in Galilee. Herod did not forget this slight and on taking power in Jerusalem in 37BC he murdered all (or some) of the Sanhedrin.

Under the Roman procurators (AD 6-41), the power of the Sanhedrin continued to increase and the Council came to be seen as the supreme court of justice (cf Mt.5v22; Mk.14v55). After the revolt against Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin transferred first to Jamnia, in NW Judea and then to Galilee, but its days as the supreme priestly ruling body for a non-existent nation and Temple were over.

Membership

There were always 71 (Num.11v16)

1. The High Priest was always the president of the Council Mt.26v57; Acts 5v17
2. The Chief Priests i.e. the senior priestly families (from whose ranks the High Priest was drawn), and those with senior positions of responsibility in the Temple. (Mt.27v41; Mk 14v53).
3. The Scribes / Pharisees for their knowledge of the Law (Acts 23v6) – NB the Pharisaic interpretation of the Law was the dominant one in the days of Jesus, however much the Sadducees resented and resisted this. We are given the name of one such prominent Pharisee, Gamaliel Acts 5v34.
4. The Elders – the priestly and lay nobility (Mt.26v3; 27v1; 28v11-12).

As Josephus puts it: *The High-Priests and the men of power and those of the greatest eminence in the city*
Admission to the Sanhedrin was through the laying on of hands.

Their Powers and their Function

Theoretically they were the supreme body for the spiritual, political and legal affairs of all Jews [m.Ta'an 3.6]. Thus if there was a disagreement over the interpretation of law it would be referred to one of the courts in Jerusalem. If that court could not agree the matter was referred to the Sanhedrin, whose decision was absolutely binding on pain of death. In reality the Sanhedrin had as much authority as the Romans allowed them and for example tax collection throughout Judea appears to have been one of their responsibilities.

After the death of Herod the Great, when his kingdom was subdivided, Galilee and Perea became separate administrative districts where the writ of the Sanhedrin did not officially run. Therefore whenever Jesus withdrew to these areas, He took Himself outside the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin. However the fact that Saul was travelling to Damascus with authority from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (Acts 9v1-2; 22v5) illustrates something of their actual authority and reach. The Sanhedrin had the power to pass a death sentence but the Romans reserved the right actually to execute (Jn.18v28-32).

Times and Procedures

The Sanhedrin met on the western boundary of the Temple Mount, in the *Hall of Hewn Stone*.

NB: Compare the normal procedures of the Sanhedrin acting as a criminal court [below] with their actions and behaviour during the trial of Jesus.

Trials could only be held during the day (cf Mk.15v1) and Jesus' appearance at night was thus irregular to say the least. It may be that this was a preliminary hearing to try to ascertain guilt (Mt 26v57; Mk.14v53; Lk.22v54).

There was both a Great Sanhedrin and a Lesser Sanhedrin, composed of 23 members. It is uncertain as to whether there were several "Lesser Sanhedrins" throughout the country or simply the one which was also based in Jerusalem. It may have met on a more regular basis than the Great Council.

The following is based on accounts of this Lesser Sanhedrin's meetings but it is logical to assume that it in turn, based itself upon the Greater Sanhedrin.

The members would sit in a half circle, as if on a threshing floor (which would have been a discrete and public meeting place in any village or town, harking back to Israel's more agricultural past). The half circle was so that everyone could see everyone else. Before them stood two Scribes, one to record what was said in favour of the accused and one to write what was spoken against him. Before them sat three rows of students who were allowed to participate in the trial in the following way. In a non capital matter they were permitted to speak either for the prosecution or on behalf of the defence. In a capital trial they were only allowed to speak on behalf of the accused.

The accused had to demonstrate humility before his judges, and would have his hair long (a sign of mourning) and would wear black. Capital trials had to begin with the case for the defence and whereas a simple majority was needed in a non capital matter, a majority of 2 was required for a guilty verdict which carried the death penalty. i.e. In the case of the Lesser Sanhedrin, a vote of 12 to acquit and 11 to condemn would result in an acquittal: a vote of 12 to condemn and 11 to acquit required them to add two more people to the Council and continue this process up to 71 members or until a verdict was reached with the required 2 vote majority in favour of a guilty verdict.

Verdicts to pass the death penalty could be reversed but innocent verdicts couldn't be changed. Similarly it was permissible for a prosecution witness to change sides and to speak on behalf of the accused but not vice versa.

For non capital trials the decision was reached that same day but for capital trials a slightly different system was followed. An acquittal verdict could be reached that same day but a conviction had to wait until the next morning. This gave members of the Sanhedrin time to have something to eat and to drink (but no wine!) and space to continue discussing amongst themselves, before reconvening the next day. Consequently such trials should never take place before a Sabbath or before a Festival.

Each person stood to deliver their verdict, beginning with the youngest, except in complex matter concerning the Law, in which case the senior members spoke first.

CONCLUSION

On the very first occasion that Jesus cleansed the Temple, His disciples remembered the words from Scripture – *Zeal for Your house will consume me* (Jn.2v17). Tragically it was those people who themselves were most passionate for God's House but had forgotten how to be passionate for God, who were the fulfilment of that prophecy.