



Conducted by
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“We read, especially in the gospel records, of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Scribes, the Elders, and the Chief Priests. Please tell us something about each of these.”

THIS question gives us a chance to do something that, perhaps, we don't do too often, that is, to examine in some detail scriptures which are very familiar to us and of which we may be contemptuous because of their familiarity. I feel sure that when we have learned something of each of these groups of people we shall feel that the questioner has done us a service. Let us, then, look at them in the order in which they are presented.

The Pharisees

The Greek word is PHARISAIOS which is from an Aramaic word PERAS. If you recall, PERES was one of the words written on the wall at Belshazzar's feast and the meaning according to Daniel was, “Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the

Medes and Persians" Daniel 5:28. Hence in the N.T. as related to the Pharisee the word was used to signify one who was separated, owing to a different manner of life from that of the general public. According to Hebrew transcriptions they were known as the 'pious ones', and were a society with a remarkable zeal for religion. They acted, generally, under the guidance of the scribes.

They were a strictly legal party and their fundamental aim was a complete separation from non-Jewish elements. They observed the Law to such an extent that they almost deified it and consequently their attitude became external, extremely formal, and mechanical, so much so, in fact, that righteousness had to take second place to formalism. This inevitably led them into conflict with Jesus whose life and teaching was a standing indictment of theirs. Even though Jesus was a compassionate and loving person He could not and would not tolerate the brand of hypocrisy and legalism as demonstrated by the Pharisees, and He scathingly denounced them as hypocrites, falsifiers of the truth, and extortioners. Read Matt. 23. Needless to say, the opposition of the Pharisees to the gospel continued unabated during apostolic times.

They believed in a resurrection, Acts 23:8; one of them, Simon, entertained the Lord, Luke 7:36ff; they mocked and derided Jesus, Luke 16:14; and they were not loath at any time to question Him, Luke 5:33. It is as well to recall that there were Christian Pharisees, Acts 15:5, and the most famous Pharisees mentioned in the N.T. are Simon, Luke 7:36; Nicodemus, John 3:1; Gamaliel, Acts 5:34; and Paul, Acts 23:6.

The Sadducees

This was a Jewish sect of doubtful origin. Robert Young in his Analytical Concordance of the Bible says that they derived their origin from one Sadok, a follower of Antigonus of Socho, B.C. 250, a president of the Sanhedrim. They were a distinct party from the Pharisees, and it would appear that their immediate progenitors were the Hellenizers. As such, their aim would be to remove from Judaism the narrowness and restrictions which were features of it, and to introduce some form of sharing in the so-called advantages of Greek life and culture. Thus they would be looked upon by the Judaizing teachers as a godless party.

Unlike the Pharisees, they denied the resurrection, Matt. 22:23, and also the existence of angels and spirits, Acts 23:8. When they put the case to Jesus of the woman who had been married to seven husbands, the Lord indicated certain faults concerning them. He said that they were in error; that they did not know the scriptures; and that they had not appreciated the power of God, Matt. 22:29. It is worth noting here that the doctrine of Jesus silenced them, 22:34. Jesus warned that the leaven, of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees should be guarded against, which was, of course, the doctrine they taught, Matt. 16:12. It would seem that the Sadducees were quite close to the ruling priestly class, Acts 4:1; 5:17, and as such would be motivated towards the achievement of political ends rather than religious ones.

It seems quite evident that there was not much love lost between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, Acts 23:7,8, but they were united in their opposition to what they called the 'new sect' of christianity.

The Scribes

The Greek word in the N.T. is GRAMMATEUS which means 'a writing'; therefore, the scribe was a writer, a man of letters, a teacher of the law. In O.T. times the scribes, like Ezra, were found originally among the priests and Levites, Ezra 7:12. It would seem that they occupied quite a high station in the affairs of the nation, Jeremiah 36:12, and would no doubt be looked upon as secretaries of state.

In N.T. times it seemed that they virtually formed one party with the Pharisees, Luke 5:21, and sometimes with the chief priests, Luke 9:22. It seemed that they were naturally qualified to teach in the Synagogues, Mark 1:22. They were ambitious of honour, and certainly enjoyed self-exaltation, but they bound heavy burdens on the people which, says Matthew, were grievous to be borne, Matt. 23:5-11.

Their function regarding the law was to teach it, develop it, and use it in connection with the Sanhedrin and various local courts. Like the Pharisees they reduced their piety to external formalism. and by their traditions of the law they prevented people from finding a true moral and spiritual life and so barred access to God, Luke 11:52. For this they were as scathingly rebuked as were the Pharisees, Matt. 23:16ff.

It is interesting to note that the word GRAMMATEUS describes the town clerk at Ephesus, Acts 19:35.

The Elders

The word here is PRESEBUTEROS and is used to denote seniority in age; rank or positions of responsibility in the Jewish nation and in the Christian churches. I think our comments must be confined to the Jewish nation, In the Jewish nation the elders were the heads or leaders of tribes and families, and in Numbers 11:16 we read of how Moses selected seventy of such to assist him. It would seem that along with the chief priests and scribes they supplied members of the Sanhedrin Matt. 16:21; 26:47. It would seem that Luke 7:3 indicates that the elders sent by the centurion to Jesus would be those who managed the public affairs in towns and cities, while Luke 22:66 denotes them as PRESBUTERION, an assembly of aged men, probably the Senate or Council among the Jews.

The Chief Priests

The word used to describe the high priests of the Levitical order is ARCHIEREUS; the high priests are frequently called 'chief priests' in the N.T.

Israel was primarily designed as a nation to be a kingdom of priests, offering service to God, Exodus 19:6. When the Israelites renounced their obligations the Aaronic priesthood was set up, and then the Levites were given unto Aaron and his sons and it was out of the Levitical order that the high priests came. It would seem that the high-priesthood included ex high-priests and members of high priestly families, e.g. Matt. 3:4. In Luke 3:2 we are told that Annas and Caraphas were the high priests, but it would appear that by the time referred to Annas, who was the high priest from A.D. 7 - 14, had been deposed for some years; his son-in-law, Caraphas, who was the fourth high priest since his deposition, was appointed about A.D. 24. In the O.T. in Numbers 35:25 we are told that the high priest was to be in office until his death, i.e., he was appointed for life. The people would know this, of course, and would still look upon Annas as high priest for the simple reason that he was still alive. The deposition of Annas and the appointment of Caiaphas was a capricious act of the Roman procurator. and it would seem at this period that the high priests were mere puppets of the Roman authorities. Lev. 4:15,16 tells us that it was the duty of the high priest (i.e. the priest anointed) to represent the whole people.

Christians should note that Christ is our Great High Priest, and we, as God's children are a 'royal' and holy priesthood 1 Pet. 2:5-9. Christ's High Priesthood is different from and higher than that of Aaron, in that He is the Son of God, with a priesthood of the Melchizedek order. It is as well to study the whole of the Epistle to the Hebrews so that the contrasts can be identified.

(All questions please to brother Alf Marsden, 66 Mitchell Street, Newtown, Wigan Lancs.)