

Great Controversies



Second Temple Era and Talmudic Times

The Sadducees and the
Pharisees: Challenges to
Rabbinic Authority and the
Oral Law

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Dedicated by
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in memory of
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ben Usher Zelig z"l,

grandfather of Rabbi
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Great Controversies in Jewish History:

The Sadducees and Pharisees

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A. Historical Background

- a. Two major events in Jewish History set the stage
 - i. Return to Israel and the rebuilding and Second Temple
 1. No longer miraculous Presence of Hashem
 2. Idolatry no longer primary "villain" in Jewish Life
 3. The Sages (not the Prophets) take center stage and prepare the Jews for a long survival in *galus* (exile)
 - a. Returning community was weak and small, dominated by foreign tribes (Shomronim) and outside dominion (Persia, Greece, Egypt), localized around Jerusalem
 - b. Developed vehicle to survive: loyalty not to a nation, government or place, but to an ideal, a belief and a faith: Torah. The Jew would become independent of place, of wealth, of power; they could live anywhere under any condition because Torah was its government and its Sages were its leaders. The synagogue replaced the Temple as the center lifeline of the community.
 - ii. Greece takes over the World stage, bringing beauty, culture, art, music, philosophy, architecture
 1. Jews are enraptured, large segment becoming Hellenists
- b. Chanukah story was so decisive and miraculous a victory for the Jews, Hellenist elements go underground
 - i. Will reappear as Sadducees (Tzudikim) a generation later
 1. Powerful political and religious heretical sect, espousing essentially Greek philosophy from within and identifying as Jews
 2. Opposed by Perushim (Pharisees): literally separatists
 - a. Majority of the population, Traditional Rabbinic Judaism
 - b. Essenes were a third sect, extreme (never married, constant mikvah immersions), messianic, isolated

B. Sadducee Philosophy

- a. What they believed is clearly recorded in the Talmud; how they got there is of note
 - i. R' Wein: the Hellenist lifestyle came first; the philosophy to justify it, second

Antigonus, leader of Socho, received the tradition from Shimon HaTzadik. He used to say: Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward; instead be like servants who serve their master not for the sake of receiving a reward. And let the awe of Heaven be upon you. (Pirkei Avos 1:3)

Antigonus had two students (Tzadok and Baytus) who studied his words, and then taught them to their students and their students taught it to their students. Those students questioned: "What did our teachers see (i.e. know) that they would say such a thing? Is it a possible that a laborer could toil an entire day and not receive his wages at night? If our teachers knew that indeed there was a World to Come and a concept of The Resuscitation of the

Dead they would not have said this." They left the way of the Torah and splintered into two groups – the Tz'dukim and the Baytusim. They were particular to always use gold and silver utensils. Not that they were haughty, but they said: "The Perushim have a tradition: They abstain from indulgences in this world, but in the next world they have nothing!"
(Avos D'Rebbe Nossan Perek 5)

They left Jewish life and abandoned the Torah. But they saw that they could not gather the multitudes to their movement. So they said that they believed in the Torah, but were only arguing on the Tradition (the Oral Law). All this was to absolve themselves from the mitzvos and rabbinic decrees as they could now expound upon any verse as they saw fit without any previous tradition.
(Rambam Commentary to Pirkei Avos)

- b. They didn't believe in anything not explicit in the Torah (addendum # 1) or explained or created by the Sages
 - i. The World to Come (addendum # 2)
 - ii. Eternity of the Soul
 - iii. Punishment and Reward
 - iv. Moshiach
 - v. Resuscitation of the Dead
 - vi. Divine Providence
 - c. Stripped Judaism of its Judaism, but claimed to be Torah Jews
 - i. "zachur" and "shamur" of Shabbos. Riding horses, swimming, reading newspapers all Rabbinic. Sadducees resented the inhibiting nature of the "fences"
 - ii. Rabbis fought them fiercely; there would be no Judaism to fight for if they succeeded
 - d. 13 recorded disputes, but they were many more (not a single record survives from them - everything we have is from what's recorded about them in the Talmud)
- C. Sadducees in Power
- a. Major class and economic difference
 - i. Tzdukim were wealthy, Greek educated aristocrats, heavily populated by kohanim who wanted control and centralization of the Temple
 - 1. Many of the disputes were centered on Temple practice
 - ii. Perushim were supported by the masses, middle working class Torah observant and loyal Jews
 - 1. The Rabbis did away with class, power and lineage. Talmud tells us the professions of the Sages – blacksmith, tailor, shoemaker – everyone has an equal voice in Torah. "A mamzer Talmud Chachom is greater than a Kohen *am ha'artz*"
 - b. Yochanan Hyrchanus: Second Chasmonai King was (son of Shimon the Maccabee)
 - i. Like his father Shimon, was both King and High Priest (reigned 134-104 BCE)
 - 1. Rabbis opposed to the idea but tolerated it as long as Kings were righteous
 - a. Coins never declared themselves King ("Kohen Gadol v'chever hayehudi")
 - b. Diffusion in power necessary: "inefficiency always trumps disaster"
 - ii. Towards the end of his reign began to come under the influence of Sadducees
 - 1. Rabbis had always been cold to him

- a. King-High Priest issue, rumors about his wife being taken captive, forced the conversion of the Idumians in the South, strong bonds with Rome
- 2. Evicted members from the Sanhedrin and installed Sadducees

R' Elazar ben R Tzadok said: "An incident once occurred with a daughter of a Kohen that committed adultery, and the Court surrounded her with bundles of branches and burned her." They said to him: "That Court were not experts in the Law." Rav Yosef said: It was a court of Sadducees. (Mishna Sanhedrin 52a, Gemarah 52b)

Zomemin witnesses are not executed for testifying falsely unless the verdict condemning the accused has already been handed down (but not during deliberations, nor after the sentence has been carried out.) The Sadducees said only if the accused was already executed. (Mishna Makkos 5b)

Rabbi Yehudah ben Tabbai said: "[May I see consolation] that I once executed a lone zomeim witness to counter the view of the Sadducees who said witnesses are not executed unless the accused has also been executed." Shimon ben Shetach said to him, "You have shed innocent blood!" (Makkos 5b)

- iii. Had two young sons when he dies in 104
 - 1. Older was Yehuda Aristobulus, married to Shlom-Tzion (sister of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach, head of the Perushim and the Sanhedrin)
 - 2. Alexander Yannai (Jannaeus), was fierce warrior, charismatic, handsome, tall, arrogant and self-confident
 - 3. Yehuda inherited the throne and had Alexander arrested, but took ill and died childless. Alexander claimed Yibum, married Shlom-Tzion and took the throne
- c. Alexander Yannai (reigned from 103-76 BCE)
 - i. Great conqueror king expanded back to King David's borders, but highly unpopular with the Rabbis and the people
 - ii. First 15 years was constantly involved in war
 - 1. Exacted a heavy toll in lives and resources
 - 2. Introduced Greek mercenary soldiers: low class, foreign gods, culture, behaviors and attitudes, Idumians rose in rank and leadership
 - iii. Expensive and gaudy crown made for himself
 - 1. Perushim were concerned
 - iv. Civil War
 - 1. Celebratory banquet. One instigator stirred up his paranoia that the Perushim were against him, who indeed told him, "Take off your crown of Priesthood" (addendum #3)
 - 2. Water Libation on Sukkos (addendum #4)

Whosoever did not see the celebration of the Water Drawing never saw rejoicing in his life...there were four golden candelabra, and four golden bowls atop each, and four ladders for each candelabra, and four young Kohanim each with pitchers containing 120 lugin of oil...There was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illuminated by the light of the Celebration. Pious men and men of good deeds would dance before them with flaming torches in their hands, and say before them words of praises and songs to G-d. The Leviim had harps, lyres, cymbals, trumpets, and countless other musical instruments, and sing songs to G-d... (Mishna Sukkah 51a)

3. Six years of open warfare ensued. Uprisings against the King were mercilessly crushed by his mercenary army. Alexander Yannai openly persecuted Perushim, Shimon ben Shetach and his colleagues went underground, he executed any he could catch (estimated up to 50,000 were killed), completely turned the Sanhedrin over to the Tzedukim, and official Jewish Law became Sadducee. Josephus records the troughs around Jerusalem ran red with Jewish blood
4. Perushim appealed to Cleopatra's son in Egypt, who sent a battalion (filled with Alexandrian Jews) who defeated Alexander Yannai, but deserted on the way to sack Jerusalem.
5. Alexander saw the debacle, and made peace for the last 10 years, allowing the Perushim to run religious life while he ran the government.

The Sages of the court put the Kohen Gadol in the care of the Sages among the Kohanim who took him up to the Avtinas Family Chamber. They administered an oath to him and took their leave: They said to him, "My master, Kohen Gadol, we are agents of the court, and you are our agent and the agent of the court. We charge you with an oath by Him who domiciled His Name in this House that you will not change anything of all that we have told you. He would turn aside and weep, and they would turn aside and weep. (Mishna Yoma, 18a)

6. Tzedukim would last another 200 years but never return to power. Their base of power was a Hellenistic philosophy and Temple power and when the Temple was destroyed they soon thereafter disappeared, though the challenge to Rabbinic authority will reappear throughout history.

King Yannai said to his wife, 'Do not fear the Pharisees or the non-Pharisees, but the hypocrites who mimic the Pharisees; because their deeds are the deeds of Zimri but they expect the reward of Pinchas. (Sotah 22b)

The Jews of the Second Temple period were righteous and pious and steeped in Torah learning. But they weren't yasher in regards to dealing with the world. Because of the baseless hatred in their hearts, they accused anyone who was not practicing according to their understanding of Yiras Hashem to be a Sadducee and a heretic. This led to murder and all evils of the world until the Temple was destroyed.

For this Hashem was justified in its destruction. For the Holy One is yasher and cannot tolerate such "righteous" individuals; only those who behave in the ways of yasher also in their dealings with the world, and not with corruption even though it is for the sake of Heaven, because that causes destruction in the settlement of the world.

This is the praise of the Avos; not only were they righteous, pious and true Lovers of Hashem, but they were also yasher. They treated the heathen nations, even the despicable idolaters, with love and sought only their good...

(From the Introduction of Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (the Netziv) commentary to Beriehis)

Addendum:

1) Horayos 4a

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel: the court is not liable (to bring a communal-error bull for a mistaken ruling which caused the people to sin) unless they rule about a matter about which the Sadducees do not agree. But if they rule about a matter to which even the Sadducees agree, they are exempt. Why? Because "Go read it in the schoolhouse!" (i.e. it is explicit and everyone should have known it had they studied properly)

2) Mishnah Berachos 54a

All those who would conclude blessings in the First Temple would say, "Blessed is Hashem, G-d of Israel, until the World." When the Sadducees corrupted the faith and said there is but one world, Ezra instituted that they should say "from the World until the World."

3) Kiddushin 66b

It happened that King Yannai went to Kochalis in the desert, and there he conquered sixty cities. Upon his return, he was exceedingly happy, and he arranged a celebration, to which he called all the Sages of Israel...

But a certain person was there, a scoffer, a man of wicked and lawless heart, and Elazar ben Po'irah was his name. And Elazar ben Po'irah said to King Yannai, "King Yannai! The hearts of the Pharisees are upon you" (i.e., in their hearts, the Sages hate you; they are not truly joyful over your battlefied successes.)

King Yanni replied to him, "And what shall I do to see whether what you say is true?" Elazar ben Po'irah responded, "Cause them to rise by placing the tzitz between your eyes, and they will show their true opinion of you." He caused them to rise by placing the tzitz between his eyes.

Now, there was a certain elder there whose name was Yehudah ben Gedidyah. And Yehudah ben Giddyah said to King Yannai, "King Yannai! Be satisfied with the crown of kingship; leave the crown of the kehunah for the progeny of Aaron. Now, the reason this Sage challenged Yannai's fitness to be a Kohen was because [people] had said that [Yannai's] mother was once captured by idolaters in the town of Modi'im, before Yannai was born. (If she was in fact captured, Yannai would have been unfit to serve as a Kohen.) Nevertheless, the matter was investigated and no evidence was found to substantiate the report. In any case, [Yannai] angrily removed the Sages of Israel from the feast.

Then Elazar ben Po'irah said to King Yannai, "If an ordinary Jew were treated in this way, it would be his lot to submit to the indignity, but you are a king and now the kohen gadol; Is this your lot?"

King Yannai replied, "But what, then, shall I do?" Elazar responded, "If you listen to my advice, kill [these Sages] who have dishonored you." Yannai replied, "But the Torah, what will be with it? If the Sages are killed, who shall perpetuate Torah Knowledge?" Elazar responded, "Behold, [the Torah scroll] is rolled, and it rests in the corner; anyone who wishes to study it, let him come and study!"

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said: At that moment, heretical ideas were cast into the mind of [Yannai]. For [Yannai] should have replied, "This answer is satisfactory for the Written Torah, but what of the Oral Torah? How will this be perpetuated?"

Immediately thereafter the evil burst forth on account of Elazar ben Po'irah, and [Yannai] executed all the Sages of Israel, and the world was bereft of Torah knowledge, until Shimon ben Shetach came and returned the Torah to its former standing.

4) Mishna Sukkah, 48b

And to the pourer of the Water Libation they would say, "Raise your hand" (so they might see he was indeed pouring it into the bowl). For one time a Kohen poured it onto his feet. And the people pelted him with their esrogim.

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