

## UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL WORLD OF JESUS

To understand the political conflicts in Judea, I propose we need to understand that the Religious parties in Judea in the First Century were distinct forms of Judaism, which were forged in the main by the Diaspora and Gentile Dominion. In this paper, I will attempt to describe the basic positions of the 5 major religious sects of Judaism, outline the various factors which created these positions, propose a way of understanding the Pharisees and Sadducees which will illuminate the discussions that occur in Mark 12.

### THE PARTIES

Judaism in the first century is a misnomer.<sup>1</sup> Not because Judaism did not exist, but because the term Judaism, suggests singularity. Rather, it is well to think of the worship of Yahweh as Judaisms.<sup>2</sup> The manifold expressions of religious life in Judea and the Diaspora reflect the intense pressures: social; political; historical; and devotional, which had forged the disparate systems of theology and praxis represented in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Herodians, and Zealots all had their own answer to the questions of how Jews could live in the Roman world; they desired to determine the course of the development of work and worship, believing that their system was superior and the solution to the problems, internal and external, which were facing the people of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), vii,viii.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Sharot, *Comparative Perspectives on Judaisms and Jewish Identities* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011). *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 7, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Bock has lectured on the social pressures helping to create the religious phenomena discussed in this paper. What follows, largely, follows his premise: the Jewish Sects of the Second Temple Period were responses to the contemporary Gentile domination of Israel and the Diaspora.

<sup>4</sup> It must be remembered that although these groups may have occasionally worked together for a common cause, they were in competition to influence the nation as they saw fit.

These positions can be represented as a spectrum of theologies.<sup>5</sup> This spectrum, from left to right would be the Herodians, Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots. While imperfect, we see there is a tendency to move from pro-Roman advocacy to anti-Roman terrorism. There is also a spectrum of reactions to the status quo. From the Herodians who wanted to maintain and embellish Roman/ Herodian Power, to the Zealots who wished to violently overthrow the Herodians and Romans. Moreover, while the Herodians had become secularized, the Zealots had become anti-social.

While this spectrum only describes the general relationships between a few key issues, it is useful to display that there was a variety of opinion, beyond “conservative” and “liberal”. While polarities are useful for pedagogical purposes, too much can be said of a “religious binary” in Judea in Jesus’ day.<sup>6</sup> While the Pharisees and Sadducees did, indeed, represent a liberal/ conservative divide – this divide was more than their interpretations of the

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<sup>5</sup> Hillel Newman and Ruth M. Ludlam, *Proximity to Power and Jewish Sectarian Groups of the Ancient Period : A Review of Lifestyle, Values, and Halakhah in the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Qumran.* (Leiden: Brill, 2006). eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed January 7, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> To presume that there was simply Sadduceism and Pharisaism, set as two polar opposites whose competing narratives defined Judaism in Jesus’ day is an attractive argument. But it fails to deal with all the data. Certainly, these were the two most popular positions, but they were far closer to each other than Herodianism and Essenism – or Zealotism! Describing Judaism this way at best causes groups like the Herodians, Essenes, and Zealots to merely be subsets of the Sadducees or Pharisees. And while that is ONE way to organize the partisans, it certainly is not the ONLY way, nor is it, perhaps, the best. For one thing, it ignores the important differences in their socio-political-religious beliefs. Moreover, it ignores the cultural impetus which erected these worldviews in the first place. As below, these groups had unique answers to the question “how will Jews live in a Gentile world?” To simply lump all these answers into two groups not only delegitimizes the answers of the non-Pharisees/ Sadducees, but it also makes the error of a non-balanced position. Of the five positions, the Pharisees, take the moderating position – their attempt is to be “in the world but not of the world”. If anything, if we are going to cluster positions, we should cluster Herodians and Sadducees; Essenes and Zealots; and the Pharisees by themselves. This would be more representative of the population at large – at least of their affiliation and sympathy, if not their outright membership. There are many more ways we could divide these groups: Temple/ Synagogue; Pro/ Anti-Tax; Priesthood/ Rabbinate *et cetera*. But choosing any singular aspect of their positions to use as a continental divide must needs oversimplify. Worst of all, it fails to take these groups for who they, themselves, claimed to be. The bible differentiates Zealotry and Pharisaism, because they were different, and their adherents viewed themselves as different.

Law and Prophets that neatly and conveniently can be superimposed on the Fundamentalist/Modernist debate or conservative and liberal Evangelicalism!<sup>7</sup>

It was a divide between Rome and Judea, the Priesthood and the Rabbinate, between Temple and Synagogue, the Aristocrats and the Poor<sup>8</sup>. Moreover; the Pharisees, though much derided by Christians, represented the best Israel had to offer.<sup>9</sup> They struck the balance between sycophantic and obsequious engagement with Rome which the Herodians displayed and the murderous and, as history would prove, foolish engagement with Rome which the Zealots lived out. The Pharisees did not revel in the status quo, like the Sadducees, but neither did they attempt to escape the world in which they lived, by becoming hermits, like the Essenes.

As above, the pressures of the world in which these parties lived created them. These socio-political-religious phenomena were the culmination of centuries of history – from the Exile, to the Seleucids, to the Hasmoneans, to the Romans, to the Herods, with the rising and falling of the nation economically, religiously, politically, these events shaped the worldviews espoused by the several parties.

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<sup>7</sup> Greenspahn argues that much of what we know about the Sadducees in the Second Temple Period comes from Josephus, a political enemy, and therefore, his representation of them is dubious. His position is that the Sadducees were not the anti-spiritualists (presumably he also means secularists) that their detractors labeled them to be. Nor were, the bible-onlyists. Rather, they rejected Rabbinism and the creation of a tradition that outweighed the Torah. Whether his arguments are valid or not, he does bring up a good point, namely, that much of our knowledge of the Sadducees comes from their adversaries, the representation of them we read should not be accepted out-of-hand. While Christians will take the New Testament's descriptions of their doctrine to be inspired, secular historians and non-Christians will not. All told, Greenspahn gives us a good reminder, that we should not presume that we know too much about the various political groups within the First Century.

Frederick E. Greenspahn, "Sadducees and Karaites: The Rhetoric of Jewish Sectarianism." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2011): 91–105.

<sup>8</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Baker: 2002), 133-6.

<sup>9</sup> J Vernon McGee. "The Man Behind the Mask." [www.ttb.org](http://www.ttb.org), 2006.

<http://www.ttb.org/docs/default-source/Booklets/man-behind-the-mask.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

While it would be reductive to impose upon these various systems of belief a singular cause, it seems best to understand these theologies as the sundry answers to the question: how does the Jew live in a Gentile world?

The Herodians said, “seek profit from and control over the Gentiles”. The Sadducees said, “seek internal power with Gentile help”. The Pharisees said, “be a light to the Jews and the Gentiles”. The Essenes said, “get away from the Gentiles, collaborating Jews, and those corrupted by them”. The Zealots said, “kill the Gentiles and remake the world”.<sup>10</sup>

Because the focus of this paper is the disparate views on the Resurrection held by the Pharisees and Sadducees, and how those views led to a confrontation so violent that a Roman officer was afraid, it is beneficial to understand the overall cultural milieu, and the factors which created such disparate views. Again, these various positions were the outworking of different worldviews shaped, not only by the Torah, Jewish social culture and history, but also by unique circumstances – Gentile domination and the Diaspora.

These two major factors, with all their consequences forged the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees’ answer to living in a Gentile world, was created out of the Diaspora and Seleucid imperialism. The Pharisees had seen the consequences of idolatry and failure to keep the Law. Traditions, and extra-biblical rules, were passed down to ensure ritual and moral purity.<sup>11</sup> This is perfectly sensible, and reasonable. The Pharisees saw that there was no escape

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<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, it seems that Jesus’ disciples, in some ways represented some of these opinions. Matthew had sought profit through Rome, and Simon was a Zealot!

<sup>11</sup> This is to say nothing about whether the Pharisees believed Law-Keeping was salvific. While Christian theologians search for the *sine quo non* of Jewish salvation, the debates between the sects discussed in this paper did not seem to hinge on soteriological concerns.

It is worth mentioning however, that Covenantal Nomism seems to fit well within the Pharisaical framework – namely that Pharisaism was a hedge against Gentile oppression. See NT Wright’s *Justification* and *The New Perspective on Paul* by Michael B Thompson. Contra John Piper’s *The Future of Justification*.

from the power the Gentiles were wielding, so the best they could do was to ensure that whilst living in such a world, God would be with them.<sup>12</sup> If Daniel was right and there was going to be Gentile hegemony until the rise of Messiah, then the need for Jews to rely on Yahweh was all the more apparent, as Judea lacked the strength to resist Rome solely in militaristic terms.<sup>13</sup> Pharisaism, then should be seen as the attempt by Jewish leaders to protect the people through holiness.<sup>14</sup>

The Sadducees, unfortunately, have no extant writings. All we know of them comes from their detractors. Yet, from these, and the Biblical witness, a composite can be ascertained, that certainly is closer than further from the truth. The Sadducees were the party of the Priesthood; beginning with John Hyrcanus the Temple became gradually overcome by the party of the Sadducees.<sup>15</sup> The Sadducees, were a “reaction” against Pharisaism, an attempt to be moderate.<sup>16</sup> While I understand the rise of Sadduceeism as more than a reactionary and politico-economically opportunist response to Pharisaism, the data fail to yield clear alternative causes, and my understanding is, merely, conjectural.<sup>17</sup> What we can say with confidence is that the

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<sup>12</sup> This may have been part of what fueled Pharisaical proselytization. See Matthew 23:15

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the Maccabees could not resist the Seleucids without Roman intervention.

Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 94,5.

<sup>14</sup> While Jesus clearly has severe criticisms of Pharisaism: it was full of hypocrisy, it seems best to attempt to understand Pharisaism on its own terms. Whether the Scribes and Rabbis were unselfconsciously or deliberately hypocritical is a question for another paper.

<sup>15</sup> Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 95.

<sup>16</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans' Co.: 1990), 96.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, beginning with the assumption that any worldview is “rejectional” and reactionary (whether it is or not) presumes that that worldview did not have positive arguments and assertions. It is easy to say that “Sadduceeism was a rejection of Pharisaism” but it seems strange that a large, powerful, influential Party would simply be against Pharisaism and not offer its own solutions to the questions of the day. Perhaps the Sadducees truly were nothing more than the bitter nemeses of the Pharisees, but to believe that for several centuries a Party was created, grew, and rose to power on nothing more than “being not *them*” strains credulity. While it is not my focus, *per se*, it

Sadducees, for reasons unknown, rejected Pharisaism, sought aristocratic power, controlled the Priesthood, and the Sanhedrin in Jesus' day, and also rejected bodily, psychological, and Spiritual resurrection.<sup>18</sup> Until more is known, the best one can say is that Sadduceeism was a reaction against Pharisaism and its excesses; in rejecting much that was false within Pharisaism, certain truths, such as Resurrection, were jettisoned as well. As a reactionary worldview, its causes are the same as those which caused Pharisaism: the Diaspora and Gentile Domination.

### CONCLUSION

In Conclusion we should note several factors that will give exegetical clarity to the disorder and chaos that existed in the religious and political world in which Jesus lived.

First, to speak of First-Century Judaism as a monadic belief system is to misunderstand the breadth and depth of the differences of the various parties which strove for primacy and influence amongst the Jews. There was no more one "Judaism" than there is one "Philosophy". This does not deny that the various sects were united by several factors: ethnicity, the Scriptures, the Patriarchs, Circumcision, Temple Worship, *et cetera*. It does, however recognize that these parties represented unique worldviews in and of themselves. They drew different conclusions about life, death, and the afterlife. They drew different conclusions about

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seems best to attempt to understand Sadduceeism as its own coherent worldview (errant though it was). Without so doing, we will not be able to empathize with the Sadducees, which we must do to understand their response in the Sanhedrin.

I propose that their rejection of the Pharisees was because they viewed Pharisaism as an inferior answer to the problems that faced Jews and Judaism. The Sadducees believed the Torah, Priesthood, the Aristocracy, and Herodian cooperation would best preserve the people and nation – Pharisaism was a threat to each of these several solutions. And, certainly, while the Party of the Sadducees is younger than that of the Pharisees, the Priesthood and Aristocracy certainly are not. Yes, the Party of the Sadducees is later, but, perhaps they viewed the formation of a party, not as a novelty, but a formalization of a system, largely already existent, to respond to the novelties of the Pharisees: the Talmud, the Synagogue, Rabbinism, Messianic Expectation, and the hope of Resurrection.

<sup>18</sup> Benedict T Viviano and Justin Taylor. "Sadducees, Angels, and Resurrection (Acts 23:8-9)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 3 (1992): 496–498.

God and how He acts. Their belief systems were lived out differently and produced opposing worldviews and parties.

Second, these parties developed because of cataclysmic historical events: the Babylonian Exile and the ensuing Diaspora, and Gentile dominion in Judea. These sects were presented with a world wherein Israel had no hope of becoming a world power, as it had been under David/ Solomon. Judea's people were scattered throughout the Empire, in Judea, Alexandria, Babylon, Rome, and everywhere else. The people were separated, weakened, and under the boot of the Legs of Iron. Jews had to decide how to live in a Gentile world, and they drew significantly different conclusions.

Third, the issue of Resurrection was a watershed. It exposed the vast differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and as such was an issue weighted with far more significance than it might otherwise have held. The vitriol expressed amongst the Sanhedrists that we will see when we study the Acts, evidences that this debate was emblematic of the enormous differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees: Temple/ Synagogue; Rabbi/ Priest; Aristocrat/ Theocrat. The divide between the parties had grown so wide, and egos had been so rubbed raw, that the Sanhedrin was a powder-keg – Paul simply struck the match.

These facts should remind us that people and groups in the New Testament were not hatched, nor are they paper-men, invented by Apostles and Evangelists. People like the Pharisees and Sadducees were real people, who lived in a real world, and who were trying, with varying degrees of success, to square the Scriptures with the world in which they lived. When we come to the Biblical text we need to come with a desire and will to understand people not only from the Divine perspective, but on their own terms as well. This leads to the final point.

The desire to understand the people in the Bible on their own terms, and in light of God's perspective, both humanizes them, and forces us to reevaluate ourselves. Scriptural exegesis should not end with God's declaration about certain doctrines and behaviors but should lead to introspection and a desire to see how we are living up to the "high calling of God in Christ Jesus" as well as how we need to improve. A failure to see people in the Bible how they saw themselves, leaves us blind to differentiating how we see ourselves with how God sees us.

Bible Study, well done, should lead to life well-lived. I pray that seeking to understand the factors that influenced the people of Jesus' day, will help us to better understand the *casus belli* behind the internecine debates dividing Christianity today. Understanding another worldview is not a weakness – sympathy for one's opponents must exist before reconciliation can. In seeking to understand the Jewish parties and partisans, we exercise sympathy that, by God's grace, we can and will extend to our contemporaries.

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