

Background of the Sadducees and Pharisees

When Judah went into Babylonian captivity, the people no longer had the ability to carry out Temple worship, which lessened the influence of the *kohanim* (priests). So the first spark was ignited among the people regarding a religious life centered around Torah alone. Then the Jewish people were allowed to return to Jerusalem. But only a small percentage did—about 50,000 in four waves, and this included the *kohanim* who resumed Temple worship.

Over the centuries that followed they formed a party of priests and supporters of priestly authority. They became known as the *Tz'dukim* (Sadducees). Because of their emphasis on the Torah and temple worship, their beliefs were limited to what was established in Torah. They did not believe in the resurrection and the immortality of the soul or life after death, which became developed after the writing of the Torah when God's full revelation was given in the prophets and the other writings of Scripture. Their focus was on the here and now, primarily on temple worship. So most of the Sadducees were priests or had formerly served as priests.

The great majority of the people stayed behind in Babylon, about one million persons altogether, and they remained when Babylon was conquered by Persia. In fact it is estimated that 20% of the population at the height of the Persian Empire was made up of Jews. This was taking place while the biblical account was continuing to unfold to the west in the land of Israel. So for those in Babylon/Persia, it required much adaptation for practicing Judaism without the Temple and that meant considerable opinions how to do it.

Over time these opinions took on the weight of authority, and altogether they became an oral tradition that was regarded as being equally valid to the written Torah (considered the Word of God). Some of these sages eventually made their way to Jerusalem, but their form of Judaism remained the same as those who never left Babylon. You can see that similarity reflected in their respective writings—the Babylonian and Jerusalem versions of the Talmud. Both of those texts contained the oral commentaries of the ancient rabbis from their respective communities. The Babylonian version is larger because more rabbis lived there than in Jerusalem.

By the time of Yeshua, these men who lived in Jerusalem were known as the *P'rushim* (Pharisees). According to Josephus, they only numbered 6,000 (*Ant. 17.42*). Because of their openness to other opinions outside of Torah, they held beliefs that were more diverse than the Sadducees. The Pharisees did, in fact, believe in the resurrection and the immortality of the soul. And eventually they became the majority and formed the basis for Judaism after the destruction of the Temple.

The Pharisees were more concerned about the way that people lived their lives. They sought to codify everything that you did, from the clothing you wore and how you prayed, to how far you could travel on the Sabbath and establishing over 1,500 activities that were prohibited on that day that were not established in the Torah. They were extremely zealous for the Law, which, on the surface, sounds admirable. But it reached the point that it consumed their every thought.

So there were some fundamental differences in belief and practice between those two groups. But it is important to note that John's reaction by calling them a "brood of vipers" (Mat 3:7) is not a reflection of their actual beliefs. After all, some of the Pharisees like Nicodemus and Paul became believers. The problem was their religiously oppressive attitude about defending their beliefs.

The Meaning and Purpose of Baptism

Yeshua affirmed the ordinance of baptism in the form of a commandment: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Mat 28:19). But what exactly does the Bible say about the nature of baptism? Within Christianity there are those who teach that salvation does not occur until the moment you are baptized. This belief is parallel to the Judaizers in New Testament times who argued that circumcision was necessary for salvation, a claim that Paul vigorously rejected (Gal 5:1-12). The Bible is clear in saying that salvation is not the result of any kind of act, but is a matter of faith alone:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9)

Mikveh—the foundation of baptism in the Torah

In the Torah, it is taught that there were a variety of ways that people could become symbolically unclean (Lev 12-15). God commanded that whenever someone became ritually impure, he or she had to go to the *mikveh* bath in order to restore one’s status in the community. The word *mikveh* refers to “a collection of water. The characteristics of this practice are as follows:

- It demonstrated through obedience that a person was spiritually clean and eligible for full privileges and service within the community.
- The person was completely immersed under the water (Heb. *tevilah*).
- It had nothing to do with the salvation of the person.

The Baptism of John (Yochanan ben Zechariah)

As someone who had lived his entire life in the culture of Israel, John understood the meaning of the *mikveh* well. So as He went about preaching God’s message and people responded by repentance and faith, he confirmed their spiritual transformation with a ceremony based on the *mikveh*. There are some key parallels between the rituals of the *mikveh* and John.

- **John’s baptism did not determine a person’s salvation.** Luke 3:3 tells us that he was calling the people to repent of their sins. But we are later told in Acts 19 that when Paul met some of those people who had been baptized by John and had later believed in Yeshua, he had them baptized again.
- **John completely immersed people under the water.** Both *baptizo*, the Greek word from which we get baptism, and its Hebrew equivalent *tevilah*, mean “to dip,” not “sprinkle.”

Baptism in the greater context of Scripture

- **Baptism follows a previous inward change** (baptism follows after repentance in Acts 2:37-41; 8:12; 18:8; 19:1-7).
- **The practice of the early church was by immersion.** This was the exclusive means of baptism from the beginning. Even in the historical sources cited by Catholicism as justification for sprinkling, the actual instructions say that you may only pour instead of immerse if water is scarce or unavailable (*Didache*, c. 70 A.D.; Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 21 [A.D. 215]).