Episode Book

EPISODE #5501

Pharisees vs Sadducees: What We Actually Know

PUBLISHED	23 September 2026 at 23:48 UTC
DURATION	21:30
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/pharisees-sadducees-second-temple/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:36 UTC

SYNOPSIS

The Pharisees and Sadducees are two of the most famous groups of the Second Temple period, and almost everything we think we know about them comes from sources that either loved them or opposed them. This episode works through the actual evidence: where the names come from, who belonged to each group, how a movement of roughly six thousand Pharisees came to be credited with dominating Jewish religious life, and why scholars have spent forty years arguing about it. Along the way we get into the real disputes — the Oral Law, resurrection and the afterlife, fate and free will, and two very concrete Temple arguments over who pays for the daily sacrifice and where the high priest kindles the incense. Then the harder question: what happened to both groups after the Temple fell in 70 CE, and what the Pharisees have to do with the Judaism that came after.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Two groups whose names you've heard your whole life, and almost everything you think you know about them came from people who either loved them or hated them.



Herman

And the people who hated them got to write first.



Corn

Right. Daniel's got a whole set of questions here, so let me put them across properly. He wants to know who the Pharisees and Sadducees actually were. Where they came from, what place they occupied in Jewish society during the Second Temple period, who tended to belong to each group, and how influential they really were. Then the beliefs. What did each of them hold, and where did they split, on Jewish law, on religious tradition, on the Temple, on the priesthood, on resurrection, on the afterlife. Then the harder question, which is what we actually know about their relationship with one another, and where our information comes from in the first place. And finally, what happened to both groups after the Temple came down in seventy CE, and what connection the Pharisees have to the Judaism that came after.



Herman

That last question is the one that turns this from an ancient history exercise into something live. Because the answer is contested, and it's been contested hard for about forty years.



Corn

So the tension underneath all of it is that these are two of the best-documented groups of the period, and the documentation is a mess.



Herman

Every source is either an outsider, an admirer, or an opponent. There's no Pharisee writing a Pharisee book that survives. There's no Sadducee writing anything at all. So you're reconstructing two movements from other people's paperwork.



Corn

Let's set the scene before we get into the disputes.



Herman

Late Second Temple period, roughly a hundred and fifty BCE to seventy CE. Hasmonean rule, then Roman encroachment, and underneath all of that an intense internal argument about what Judaism should look like. Josephus is our main narrator, and he names three schools of thought: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes. He also describes a fourth, the Fourth Philosophy, tied to Judas the Galilean around six CE.



Corn

Four, not two.



Herman

Four. And the thing that gets lost constantly is that most Jews belonged to none of them. This was not a country of Pharisees and Sadducees with a few Essenes off in the desert. The vast majority of people were farmers, artisans, laborers, and they weren't card-carrying members of anything.



Corn

So when we say "the Pharisees and the Sadducees," we're talking about a small slice of a small slice.



Herman

And the word "sect" is doing damage here. It carries Christian baggage. We hear "sect" and we think denomination, a church with a membership roll and a building. These were closer to schools of thought and political factions that overlapped with each other.



Corn

Terminology first, then origins, then who belonged, then beliefs, then the source problem, then what happened after seventy.



Herman

That's the arc.



Corn

Start with the names, because the names are already an argument.



Herman

Pharisees comes from the Hebrew perushim, "separate." And the strong likelihood is that it started as a slur. It's what opponents called them, referring to their habit of separating themselves from ritually impure food and from the tables of the am ha-aretz, the "people of the land," who were lax about purity and tithes.



Corn

So the name means "the separators," and it was probably thrown at them before they picked it up.



Herman

That happens more often than you'd think. Sadducees is a different story. The name probably derives from Zadok, the high priest under David and Solomon. Ezekiel designated that family to control the Temple, and Zadokites ran the Temple hierarchy down to the second century BCE.



Corn

So one name is a nickname from enemies, and the other is a claim to a bloodline.



Herman

A claim to a bloodline that the Sadducees may or may not have actually had. That's part of the point.



Corn

When do they show up in the record?



Herman

Both groups first appear by name in the Hasmonean period. Around a hundred and fifty BCE, in Josephus's account of Jonathan the Hasmonean taking the high priesthood. And Schiffman makes a point I think is important here. He says the Pharisees "appear suddenly, as a distinct entity" in Hasmonean times. But their theology and their organization must have developed earlier. How much earlier?



Corn

And the answer is?



Herman

"We simply cannot say." That's his line, and I think it's the honest one. There's a common theory that identifies the Pharisees with the Hasidim of the Maccabean era, the pious ones from the books of Maccabees. Schiffman says that identification cannot be substantiated.



Corn

Which is a nice way of saying it's a guess that got repeated until it sounded like a fact.



Herman

There's also a medieval Jewish tradition that traces the Sadducees' founding to two pupils of Antigonus of Socho, which would put their origin at the close of the second century BCE. The Schaff-Herzog encyclopedia calls that chronologically impossible, because the groups demonstrably existed earlier than that.



Corn

So the origin stories are themselves later constructions.



Herman

Which is the theme of the whole episode, honestly.



Corn

Who actually belonged to each group?



Herman

Josephus is blunt about it. He says "the Sadducees have the confidence of the wealthy alone but no following among the populace, while the Pharisees have the support of the masses."



Corn

That's a class distinction, not a theological one.



Herman

It's both, but the class part is the part that gets underplayed. The Sadducees were the party of high priests, aristocratic families, merchants. The wealthier elements, Hellenistically influenced, with good relations with Roman rulers. Schiffman describes the Pharisees as representing primarily the middle and lower classes, largely non-Hellenized in culture.



Corn

And the number.



Herman

Six thousand. Schiffman estimates the Pharisees numbered only six thousand in Herodian times.



Corn

Out of a population of what?



Herman

Depends who you ask, but we're talking hundreds of thousands in Judea. So six thousand is a rounding error, demographically. And yet Schiffman says their influence grew steadily until they eventually came to dominate the religious life of the Jewish people.



Corn

That's the sentence that should make you sit up. A group of six thousand dominating the religious life of a nation.



Herman

And that's exactly the claim that's been challenged. Lee Levine points out that two of our three main sources, Josephus and rabbinic literature, both identify with the Pharisees. So they're tendentious. They're not neutral observers describing a small group. They're heirs describing their own ancestors.



Corn

What does the third source say?



Herman

The New Testament. And this is interesting. The New Testament puts the Pharisees in Galilee as Jesus's adversaries, but in the Jerusalem accounts, which are considered the most historically accurate portion, the Pharisees get only a secondary and peripheral role.



Corn

So the source that's most hostile to the Pharisees doesn't actually put them in charge of Jerusalem.



Herman

Right. Which complicates the dominance claim considerably.



Corn

Both groups sat in the Sanhedrin, though.



Herman

Both parties served in the Great Sanhedrin. Seventy-one members, the body that interpreted civil and religious law.



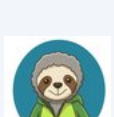
Corn

So they're not just arguing in the abstract. They're in the room where the rulings get made.



Herman

And the political history is a pendulum. Under John Hyrcanus, a hundred and thirty-eight to a hundred and four BCE, there's a decisive Hasmonean tilt toward the Sadducees, and the Pharisees move into opposition.



Corn

Then Janneus.



Herman

Alexander Janneus, a hundred and three to seventy-six BCE. Open warfare between the Pharisees and the king. Actual violence. And then after Janneus is defeated by the Seleucid king in eighty-eight BCE, there's a reconciliation.



Corn

A reconciliation that lasts about a decade.



Herman

Under Salome Alexandra, seventy-six to sixty-seven BCE, the Pharisees become the dominant political element. So within a single century you get: Sadducees ascendant, Pharisees in revolt, Pharisees ascendant.



Corn

It's not a theological debate happening in a seminar room. It's a power struggle with real bodies attached to it.



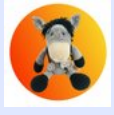
Herman

Which is why the Temple disputes matter so much. Because whoever controls the Temple controls the country's central institution.



Corn

We've established who they were and where they sat. Now the beliefs.



Herman

The single most important difference is the Oral Law. This is the Pharisees' most outstanding characteristic. They held that alongside the written Torah, Moses received an Oral Law at Sinai, and that this Oral Law is as binding as Scripture itself.



Corn

That's a massive claim.



Herman

It's the whole ballgame. Josephus describes it directly. He says the Pharisees "had passed on to the people certain regulations handed down by former generations and not recorded in the Laws of Moses, for which reason they are rejected by the Sadducean group, who hold that only those regulations should be considered valid which were written down."



Corn

So the Sadducees are the scriptural literalists.



Herman

That's the standard picture, and Levine argues it needs revision and fine-tuning. The common view that Sadducees rejected all non-biblical rules is too simple. They had their own exegetically derived rules. They even had something called a Book of Decrees.



Corn

So what's the actual difference?



Herman

The difference may be that for the Sadducees, everything had to be derived exegetically from the Torah itself. You could have rules, but they had to be pulled out of the text. For the Pharisees, the Oral Law could be independent of Scripture. It could stand on its own authority.



Corn

That's a much sharper distinction than "one group liked rules and the other didn't."



Herman

It's a question of where authority lives. In the text alone, or in the text plus a living tradition.



Corn

Resurrection.



Herman

Acts 23:8, and it's about as plain as it gets. "The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees confess both."



Corn

Why did the Sadducees deny it?



Herman

Because it's not in the Torah. That's the whole reason. The Pharisees believed in an afterlife where God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous, and they believed in a messiah. The Sadducees denied the afterlife on the grounds that the Torah doesn't mention it.



Corn

And that's the exegetical principle in action.



Herman

If it's not derivable from the text, it doesn't bind. And they applied that consistently.



Corn

Fate and free will.



Herman

Josephus lays out three positions. The Pharisees say some events are Fate and others depend on ourselves. The Essenes make Fate mistress of all things. And "the Sadducees do away with Fate... all things lie within our own power."



Corn

So the Sadducees are the most radical free-will party.



Herman

Which is a strange position for a group of aristocrats, if you think about it. The people with the most to lose from randomness are usually the ones most invested in providence.



Corn

Or the least. If you're on top, you'd rather believe you earned it.



Herman

Actually.



Corn

The Temple disputes. Give me the concrete ones.



Herman

There are two that I think are perfect illustrations. First, the daily sacrifice. The Sadducees claimed the daily sacrifice should be paid for by individual donors. The Pharisees said it should come from the Temple treasury, to which all Jews contributed.



Corn

And both sides quoted a verse.



Herman

Both sides quoted a verse. Same Torah, opposite conclusions, each with a proof text.



Corn

What's the second one?



Herman

The incense. The Pharisees insisted the high priest kindle the incense inside the Holy of Holies. The Sadducees did it outside.



Corn

That's a spatial argument about the most sacred room in the world.



Herman

And it's not trivial. It's about where the boundary of the holy actually sits. If you get it wrong, you're either profaning the inner chamber or you're not entering where you're supposed to.



Corn

The priesthood.



Herman

The Sadducees focused on Temple ritual and guarded the priestly prerogatives. The Pharisees held that priests were "but deputies of the people."



Corn

That's a democratizing claim.



Herman

It's a claim that the priesthood serves the nation rather than owning it. Which is exactly the kind of thing you say when you're not the priesthood.



Corn

And on Hellenism?



Herman

Sadducees were for it. Pharisees selective. Essenes against. That's the standard chart.



Corn

Now the source problem, because it's the real story here.



Herman

The Sadducees left no writings. Nothing. All texts about them were written by opponents or outsiders, and the Cambridge History of Judaism says they are necessarily selective and tendentious.



Corn

So the Sadducees are a group we know entirely through people who disagreed with them.



Herman

Entirely. And our main witness is Josephus, who came from a high-ranking priestly family. He has his own position in all of this.



Corn

Does that make him unreliable?



Herman

Schiffman makes a useful distinction. He says Josephus "dresses these various sectarian views in Greek philosophical garb." He makes the Pharisees sound like Stoics and the Sadducees sound like Epicureans. But Schiffman says the disputes clearly emerged from differing interpretations of biblical tradition, so "the basic outlines of the controversy may be accepted as authentic."



Corn

The framing is Greek, the substance is Jewish.



Herman

That's a fair summary.



Corn

Is there anything that breaks the deadlock? Any source that isn't one side or the other?



Herman

There is, and it's the best part of this whole topic. The Qumran Halakhic Letter. Four Q M M T.



Corn

From the Dead Sea Scrolls.



Herman

And what it shows is that views assigned to the Pharisees in several Mishnaic disputes are exactly those in practice in the Jerusalem Temple.



Corn

So the Pharisaic position wasn't just a theory in a debate. It was what people were actually doing.



Herman

Which is real evidence that Pharisaic halakhah was operative. Though whether that was because of political power or because it was broadly accepted, Schiffman says cannot be determined with certainty.



Corn

So we know they were right about the practice. We don't know why.



Herman

Correct.



Corn

Seventy CE.



Herman

The Great Revolt runs sixty-six to seventy-three. The Second Temple is destroyed in seventy. And the Sadducees disappear around seventy, after the destruction.



Corn

They just vanish?



Herman

They lose their livelihood and their power base in a single afternoon. The Sadducees were the party of the high priests, the aristocratic families, the Temple hierarchy. Take away the Temple and you've taken away the institution that made them who they were.



Corn

The Pharisees had a different problem. They had a movement that could survive without the Temple.



Herman

Which is the standard story, and it's mostly right, but the details are where it gets interesting. The rabbis gather at Yavneh, roughly seventy to a hundred CE. And the traditional account is that Yavneh was a Pharisaic synod that defined orthodoxy and expelled heretics.



Corn

And Shaye Cohen's essay.



Herman

Shaye J.D. Cohen, 1984, "The Significance of Yavneh." And he takes that whole picture apart. He argues the evidence is inadequate. The Yavnean rabbis were probably mostly Pharisees, but they showed no Pharisaic self-consciousness. And their goal was not the expulsion of those with whom they disagreed but the cessation of sectarianism.



Corn

Say that again, because it's the key line.



Herman

Cohen says the goal was not the triumph over other sects but the elimination of the need for sectarianism itself.



Corn

So Yavneh isn't Nicaea.



Herman

Cohen explicitly contrasts it with Nicaea. At Nicaea, one party wins and expels the others. At Yavneh, nobody wins and nobody gets expelled. The whole point is to stop the fighting.



Corn

And the rabbis' relationship to the Pharisees themselves?



Herman

This is the part that surprised me most. Cohen says, "at no point in antiquity did the rabbis clearly see themselves either as Pharisees or as the descendants of Pharisees."



Corn

They didn't call themselves Pharisees?



Herman

No rabbi is ever called a Pharisee in tannaitic texts. The identification becomes secure only in an early medieval text, the scholia to the Scroll of Fasting. That's a thousand years later.



Corn

So the link between the Pharisees and the rabbis is a later claim.



Herman

Joshua Ezra Burns makes the point that the rabbis' silence about their Pharisaic lineage is no less significant than the circumstantial evidence supporting it. And he offers a reason. The Pharisees' agitation helped trigger the disastrous revolt. So survivors may have reinvented themselves as rabbis specifically to efface their sectarian pedigree.



Corn

They buried their own origin story because it was dangerous.



Herman

That's the suggestion. And I find it plausible, though it's not provable.



Corn

Cohen's bigger insight, though.



Herman

Jewish sectarianism was primarily about halakhah, about law, not theology. And the laws most often at issue were the laws of the Temple cult. So when Cohen says, "with the disappearance of the temple, the focal point of sectarianism also disappeared," he's explaining why the sects dissolved.



Corn

They weren't arguing about ideas in the abstract. They were arguing about what to do in a specific building. And the building was gone.



Herman

Which is why the Mishnah is such a strange and wonderful document. It's the first Jewish work to attribute conflicting opinions to named individuals who remain in the same fraternity.



Corn

They disagree and they stay in the room together.



Herman

That's Yavneh's legacy. Not orthodoxy. Tolerated disagreement.



Corn

Okay. I think that's the argument.



Hilbert

So the card was wrong about the incense too, but nobody ever asked about the incense.



Corn

Sorry, go on.



Hilbert

I did six months at a museum that had the traveling Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit. Not the scrolls. The educational experience around them. I had a laminated card with the halakhic disputes printed on it, and I explained four Q M M T to school groups, which is harder than it sounds because fourteen-year-olds do not care about ritual purity.



Herman

How many groups?



Hilbert

Two a day, sometimes three. Six months of it. The card said the Pharisees controlled the Temple. I never said that to a group. I'd tell them the Pharisees were like a very effective lobbying group. Small, well organized, able to shape policy without holding formal power.



Corn

That's the six thousand number.



Hilbert

That's the most interesting fact in the whole thing. Six thousand people. You don't control an institution with six thousand people. You influence it. And I think the card said "controlled" because that's what the people who made the card believed, and they were repeating something they'd read.



Herman

And the card flattened the Sadducees too.



Hilbert

It said they denied the afterlife. It didn't say they denied it because it wasn't in the Torah. Which is the entire point. If you leave that out, they just sound like pessimists.



Corn

Do you still have the card?



Hilbert

It's in a drawer somewhere. I think. I'd have to look. Anyway, I'm due at the pharmacy before they close, and I would rather be early in that queue than late.



Herman

The pharmacy queue is the real deadline.



Corn

So the laminated card is a small version of the whole problem. Somebody compressed a contested scholarly question into a sentence, and the sentence became what people learned.



Herman

That's exactly what happened with the Pharisees and the Sadducees themselves. Somebody wrote the first summary, and the summary outlived the argument.



Corn

Which leaves the question of how much of what we "know" is actually a later reconstruction. If the rabbis deliberately effaced their Pharisaic lineage, what else got smoothed over?



Herman

The outline is secure. The details are contested. And that's not a failure of the scholarship. That's the honest state of the evidence.



Corn

The takeaway I'd leave people with is Cohen's. Sectarianism was about law, not theology. And when the Temple went, the thing they were arguing about went with it.



Herman

Which is why Yavneh is the interesting part. A decision to stop needing one.



Corn

Hilbert Flumingtop produces this show. We should say that.



Herman

We should.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed it, leave us a review on your podcast platform of choice. It helps other listeners find the show.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.