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Sadducees, the Resurrection, and an Early Date for Matthew

David P. Scaer

New Testament scholarship leans toward dating Matthew at the end of the first century or maybe even a little later. Most scholars view it as the third and last of the synoptic Gospels, written after Mark and Luke. Should this be the case, Matthew would have been written about seventy years after the events in Jesus' life. His words, which Matthew purports to record, would have been derived from oral tradition that was passed through at least two or three generations rather than recalled from the memory of those who participated in the events, were eyewitnesses of them, or heard them from those who were present.

However, taken at face value, it is unlikely that the Gospel was composed at the end of the first century. The evangelist Matthew claims that at the time of his writing the Gospel, the account of the Council of Elders bribing the soldiers to say that the disciples of Jesus had taken the body out of the tomb is still a topic of conversation among the Jews (Matt 28:15). In comparison with the Gospels of Mark and Luke, each of which has only one explicit reference to the Sadducees, the Gospel of Matthew has eight references, which points to its being written not long after the resurrection, when it is likely that they were a force still to be reckoned with.¹

I. Sadducees and Pharisees

The importance of the Sadducees in the life of Jesus may be considered by reassessing the Greek word ἀρχιερεῖς, which is commonly rendered in English translations as “chief priests.” There is no reason that this word cannot be better translated as “high priests,” which it often is, considering that in the singular it is consistently rendered not “chief priest” but “high priest.” In the same verse, the singular and plural forms are often rendered differently: “Then the chief priests [ἀρχιερεῖς] and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest [ἀρχιερέως], who was called Caiaphas” (Matt 26:3 RSV). This may give rise to the view that the high priests and the chief priests had to do with different ranks of priest, something like commissioned and noncommissioned officers. Its cognate “high priesthood” is used of

¹ Even where the Sadducees are not explicitly mentioned, as in Mark and Luke, they were members of the council (συμβούλιον) that is the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:1).

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Annas and Caiaphas, who alternated in holding the office: “in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” (Luke 3:2).²

In each of the references to “chief priests” in John’s Gospel, “high priests” would better fit the context, since the exalted title of “high priest,” at least in English, fits their having immediate access to Pilate and daring to instruct him, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews’” (John 19:21). After all, since Pilate had appointed them and had entrusted them with the civil and religious affairs of the Jewish population, consultation with him would have been customary. So also in Matthew, the title of “high priests” is preferable to “chief priests.” Their “high” position explains how they were well situated to ask Pilate to place a guard at the tomb (Matt 27:62) and how they were so confident of their access to him that they knew he would accept a bribe if he heard of the events at the tomb on the third day (Matt 28:11). Likewise, in Acts, all ten instances of ἀρχιερεῖς would be better rendered as “high priests.” For example, Paul was authorized by the high priests to carry out the arrest of Christians in Damascus (Acts 26:10–12). Rendering the eighteen references in Hebrews to Jesus as the “chief priest” and not the “high priest” would sound strange to the ears of English speakers.

High priests, like other priests, were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, and Zadok, the high priest during the days of David, from whose name “Sadducee” was derived. The right to appoint the high priest was given to Herod by Caesar Augustus in 37 BC. At Herod’s death, his kingdom was divided among four of his sons, with a fifth part, Judea, including Jerusalem, becoming a province whose governance was entrusted to a prefect or governor, who assumed the right of appointing the high priest. At the time of Jesus, the governor was Pontius Pilate (Luke 3:1). Although Jewish religious and civil matters were put into the hands of the high priest, imposition of the death penalty was reserved for the Roman governor. Luke provides the names of the high priestly family: Annas, who is explicitly called the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander (Acts 4:6).

Even before the Sadducees come to the baptism of John, Matthew has already introduced them in his birth narrative as those who, together with Herod and all of Jerusalem, are troubled about the magi coming to look for another king (Matt 2:1–4). Had the news of the birth of a legitimate descendant of David reached Caesar Augustus, he might have been all too happy to find a substitute for Herod, who was neither Roman nor Jewish and who sided with Anthony on who should succeed the assassinated Julius Caesar as the first Roman emperor. In responding to what he sees as a potentially political unsettling situation, Herod consults with the high priests and the scribes to determine in which city the heir to David’s throne has been born

² Unless otherwise noted, all Bible translations are my own.

(Matt 2:1–4). Should a descendant of David be found, not only might Herod lose his position, but also the Sadducees would lose the political influence they have with Herod, and the Pharisees and the Sadducees would lose their standing among the people, who are content, even complacent, with the arrangement, evidence that they have compromised their position as the people of God.

The Sadducees did not have the influence on the people that the Pharisees had, but the Sadducees, from whom high priests were chosen, were politically well connected with the Roman occupational government. Their influence with Pilate was decisive in the events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus. In spite of being greater in number than the Sadducees, the Pharisees by themselves might not have succeeded in sentencing Jesus to crucifixion. From the family of Annas, Pilate had chosen Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas (John 18:13–24), as high priest in the year of Jesus' death. It was Caiaphas before whom Jesus acknowledged he was the Son of God (Matt 26:63).

Like many Jews since the time of the Maccabees, the Sadducees saw salvation chiefly in terms of being rewarded in this life for their good deeds,³ a belief not uncommon today among Jews who identify themselves as liberal or conservative. Along with their denial of the resurrection, they also did not believe in angels or the existence of the soul after death (Acts 23:8).

In contrast to the elite Sadducees, who offered little of what was supernaturally concrete to the people to grasp, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection and offered a way to justification that the resurrection would bring by following ceremonial instructions. The Pharisees had come into existence as a countermovement to the Sadducees, who were lackadaisical in carrying out the rituals of the temple sacrifices prescribed by the book of Leviticus (Exod 30:17–21). Troubled that God's wrath would descend on the people due to the dereliction of the ceremonial duties, the Pharisees prescribed some of these rituals to the common people (Matt 15:2; Mark 7:3; Luke 11:38). Prescribed handwashing before eating, originally intended for the priests in carrying out the sacrifices, could be and was done by ordinary people in their homes (Exod 30:19; Matt 15:2; Mark 7:3). It was literally "a hands-on" religion, which consisted in doing things like rituals. These rituals continued to be practiced by some Pharisees who found their way into the early church, a matter that had to be addressed by Paul, as discussed below.

Belief in the resurrection of the dead and a better life after death gave the Pharisees a grip on the hearts of the people, who lived under Roman domination that could be cruel in imposing arbitrary crucifixion.⁴ This kind of hope could not be

³ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 138–139.

⁴ For a discussion of the Jewish concept of the afterlife, see Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 189–206.

offered by the Sadducees. Disciplined rituals and a survival after death comprised a religion that the people could believe and practice. They had something to hang on to. At best, the Sadducees offered a religion that was more of a philosophy. It was not as if all the people, or even most of the people, at the time of Jesus were Pharisees. However, their ideas and practices became part of the lives of the ordinary people concerning how they lived their lives and what it meant to be Jewish, as it remains for much of the Orthodox branch of Judaism to this day. In contrast, the people had less in common with the Sadducees, who constituted the upper crust and whose leaders were well placed by the appointment of their Roman overlords.⁵

Though the Pharisees are presented as the opponents of Jesus, they are regarded by Jesus as those who know how to interpret the Scriptures (Matt 23:2–3). A similar honor was not given to the Sadducees. Unlike the Pharisees, who held to the books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings—that is, the Old Testament Scriptures—the Sadducees held only to the Pentateuch and had come under the influence of Greek philosophy, as did Jews living elsewhere in the Roman Empire.

In Matthew, the Sadducees go with the Pharisees to the Baptism of John (Matt 3:7). The parallel accounts in Mark and Luke have no mention of either group. Though high priests are not listed among the Sadducees who go to be baptized, it is highly unlikely that they were not involved in sending the delegation to John. Though theological rivals, the Pharisees and the Sadducees found a common cause in their concerns about what John was preaching about the coming of the kingdom of God.

Together they go to the Jordan River under the pretense of wanting to be baptized by him. John suspects their repentance, which is required for receiving his Baptism, lacks sincere regret for sin. The promise of a Messiah (Christ), who will actualize the kingdom of God, whom John identifies as Jesus (John 1:29, 1:36), would undermine their positions in Jewish life. Since the Pharisees and the Sadducees are placed together in their coming to the Jordan for Baptism, it is most likely that they had already shared their concerns with each other about John as soon as reports of his preaching had reached them in Jerusalem. This was enough reason for them to agree to a joint course of action to travel to the Jordan to hear for themselves what he had to say and to take further action, if necessary. The best John can say of them is that they want to avert the impending wrath of God—that is, if John should prove to be the prophet that his hearers thought he was. By calling them a brood of vipers who are about to face the judgment of God (Matt 3:7), John references Genesis 3, in which Satan appears as a serpent in tempting Eve. They are snakes, offspring of the

⁵ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 52. “The Sadducean party was aristocratic, and few if any would be found in the Galilean villages.”

devil. (Similarly, Jesus speaks of Satan as the father of the Pharisees, who from the beginning—that is, Genesis—was a murderer [John 8:44].)

Judgment was the theme of what John the Baptist preached: “The mightier one coming after [him] has his winnowing fork in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:11–12). Judgment had to be on the minds of those who came to hear John preach. Judgment belonged to Jesus as the Son of Man who was coming with great power (Matt 25:21–46, 26:64).

At the heart of the collaboration of the Pharisees and the Sadducees was the preservation of their privileged positions in the religious and political establishment of Jerusalem. Should Jesus be identified as the Christ, as the voice from heaven said (Matt 3:16–17) and as John proclaimed (John 1:36), each group would lose its standing in Jewish society and the financial benefits that came with it (Matt 16:6–12). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus would say that the pursuit of money stands in opposition to faith in God (Matt 6:24), and in the acquisition of wealth the Sadducees and Pharisees found good reason to set aside their differences.

Pharisees and Sadducees shared a common belief that acquiring wealth was the chief benefit of religion. The Sadducees were aristocrats in regard to their wealth and their adoption of the Greco-Roman lifestyle. Although the Pharisees intended to live religiously regulated lives, for them religion was also all about money. This is at the heart of Jesus’ admonition to the disciples to be wary of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Though at first Jesus’ disciples thought he was speaking about actual bread (Matt 16:6, 16:11–12), he explains that leaven is a metaphor for their teaching. Leaven is used in a positive sense in showing how the kingdom of God will expand (Luke 13:21). It can also have the opposite connotation in that a little evil can pollute what is otherwise good (1 Cor 5:8). In warning the disciples against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus was saying what he had said in the Sermon on the Mount: that his followers are not to be anxious about their lives, what they shall eat and drink (Matt 6:25). Jesus’ admonishment to be wary of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees did not have to do with any particular doctrine or, in the case of the Sadducees, lack of doctrine, but with their shared attitude that religion is about acquiring things that make existence in this life possible. The money given to the tomb guards bribing them to be silent about the events at the tomb of Jesus on the third day provides an example of how the Pharisees and Sadducees could, in spite of their differences, come together to use money to advance their own purposes. Financial benefits in keeping the resurrection of Jesus under cover outweighed the negative effects that its proclamation would have on them.

Warning the disciples against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees follows after miraculous feedings of the five and four thousand, in which the disciples were

more focused on the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and the fish than on Jesus, who had performed the miracles. If they truly believed that Jesus was the Son of God, they would have not been concerned about not having brought any food with them for their trip on the road (Matt 16:6–12). Mark and Luke do not mention the Sadducees in the discourse on avoiding the leaven. In Luke, Jesus speaks of the leaven of the Pharisees and not of the Sadducees (Luke 12:1) and in Mark of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod (Mark 8:15). For the Herodians, who worked to keep the family of Herod the Great in a position of power, religion was more about politics and less about particular beliefs.

Close to the beginning of his Gospel, John records a discourse in which Jesus asserts that his authority to raise the dead was given to him by the Father, who had appointed him the judge (John 5:26–29). Resurrection involves an inevitable moral accountability to God and his judgment. Resurrection is not a mere resuscitation of dead bodies but is followed by appearing before God in judgment. Jesus said, “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28–29). The Sadducees are not mentioned as taking part in this discourse, but since this discourse had to do with a teaching they were known to deny, it is likely that what Jesus had said about the resurrection did come to their attention.

Following Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead, the Sadducees had become aware that if the movement of those following Jesus was not quelled, it would lead to their Roman overlords destroying Jerusalem and taking the people into exile (John 11:48–51). While John recognizes that what Caiaphas said was an apt description of the vicarious satisfaction by which Jesus would save the world, according to the evangelist, the high priest intended to state that the execution of Jesus was necessary to avoid the destruction of Jerusalem. What would happen with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 was seen about forty years before as inevitable unless something was done to avert it.

The adulation of the people for Jesus in his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem moved the two groups to put their dislike for him into action in what would be the last week of his life. Each group would have been content to avoid bringing him to trial, if they could dispose of him by showing that his teaching compromised what the Jews believed. The Sadducees tried to do this with the doctrine of the resurrection and the Pharisees by asking him which is the most important commandment.

Matthew records three theological confrontations in Holy Week, formal enough as presented in the Gospels to be considered disputations. The first was instigated by the Pharisees, the second by the Sadducees, and the third by Jesus. Dogmatic implications can be recognized in Matthew’s and Mark’s sequence in

presenting these three disputations, beginning with that on the resurrection. This doctrine became the gateway doctrine for everything that the early church believed about Jesus. At first, one might not fully grasp who Jesus is, but without belief in his resurrection the discussion of whether he is the Son of God, a prophet, or an impostor cannot continue. Without the conviction that Jesus was raised from the dead, debate over other doctrines is inconsequential.

Questions posed by the Sadducees and the Pharisees reflect what each saw as essential to how religion is to be understood. This was also the case with Jesus, who saw recognition of himself as God as the climax of faith. Sadducee adherence to only the five books of Moses provided a framework for the response of Jesus to their question about the resurrection.

In these confrontations in the three synoptic Gospels, the Sadducees take the lead in asking Jesus whose wife a woman would be in the resurrection. They posed a scenario in which, after the death of her first husband, she had been married in succession to his six remaining brothers, each of whom died without fathering a child (Matt 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–39). Jesus might have responded to the Sadducees with an explicit reference to Ezekiel 37, in which the Spirit of God brings the dead back to life. However, to accommodate his opponents, he cites a passage from the Pentateuch, Exodus 3:6. Rather than interpreting Deuteronomy 25:5–6 or citing references to the resurrection in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, books the Sadducees did not accept, Jesus refers to the Genesis account of creation, in which God creates the heavens—that is, the angels, whom mankind will resemble in the resurrection in being neither male nor female. Jesus then modulates his response to an even higher level by showing that the resurrection of the dead is not incidental to who God is, but belongs to who he is as the Creator. The God who brought Adam into existence from the dust of the ground to which he returned later made himself known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and showed thereby he was a God of the living and not of the dead (Matt 22:32; Mark 12:27; Luke 20:38).

As N. T. Wright notes, in this controversy, neither party believed that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had already been raised from the dead. But they believed that if they were alive in the presence of God, they would be raised in the future.⁶ At the time, the majority Jewish population believed in the resurrection, as would the earliest Christians. It would be hard to show that the recording of these three accounts was intended to address the denial of the resurrection in the apostolic churches—for example, Corinth (1 Cor 15)—but the first of the synoptic evangelists had the precognition that this doctrine was foundational for the church as no other doctrine would be. The denial of the resurrection in these congregations can best be traced to

⁶ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 425.

converts who had not rid themselves of the common Greco-Roman thought that had no place for resurrection or, for that matter, any kind of meaningful afterlife. (Plato was an exception, and his belief in the immortality of the soul should not be confused with what Jesus and the apostles taught about survival after death.⁷)

Putting the best construction on the question, the Sadducees could be seen as asking a question with practical consequences about how Deuteronomy 25:5 might be applied to a particular situation in which a man dies without issue, a situation that required his younger brothers in the order of their births to marry the widow of the previously deceased brothers. The firstborn sons of the six subsequent marriages would, according to Levitical law, receive a share of the inheritance twice the size of their younger brothers'. In the case presented to Jesus, the double inheritance of the first brother to die would go eventually to the oldest son of the seventh brother. Should there be other brothers from the final marriage, each would receive half of what that older brother would receive.

As ridiculous, or should we say amusing, as the question of whose wife the woman would be in the resurrection is, all three synoptic evangelists thought it important enough to record the episode of how intent the Sadducees were to undermine belief in Jesus' resurrection. The Sadducees had everything to gain for themselves in getting Jesus to raise doubts about the resurrection. Should there be no resurrection, the Sadducees would be spared at the judgment of giving an account of how they lived.

Since the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, they were not asking for clarity on what they believed. For them "people ceased to exist after death."⁸ Therefore, their question borders on sophistry. Any answer to their question Jesus proposed would have been of no consequence. Posing the question to Jesus about whose wife a woman would be in the resurrection was intended to force Jesus to concede that it would better to say there is no resurrection than to agree with the absurdity that any woman had seven brothers as husbands. Their intent was to entrap Jesus in a dilemma from which he could not extricate himself, and so demonstrate that he was not the prophet of God that he said he was and that some people believed him to be. Caught in this dilemma, Jesus would have taken himself off the stage and the position of the Sadducees in Jewish civil and religious life would have remained secure. No drastic action like calling for his crucifixion would be necessary. But the Sadducees came up short in getting Jesus to deny the resurrection. Jesus had placed

⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 49.

⁸ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 424. "The sect [the Sadducees], which had its beginning sometime after the Maccabean revolt, died out in A.D. 70, and we must construct its convictions from secondary sources." W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997), 1:302.

his Sadducee interrogators in a corner, and for their own survival as religious and civil authorities in Judea, they had to take him out of the public square.

Among the evangelists, Luke alone reports that some scribes, who were tasked with preserving and interpreting the written Scriptures, commended Jesus for refuting the Sadducees (Luke 20:39). There is good reason to think that they were Pharisees. Obviously, they were not Sadducees. While Luke has no room for the self-justification of the Pharisees (Luke 18:10–18), because of their belief in the resurrection he is not totally negative toward them. No such latitude is shown to the Sadducees. For Luke, the Sadducees were without redeeming qualities.

In Matthew and Mark, the question of the Sadducees is followed by one posed by the Pharisees about which commandment in the Old Testament is the greatest—that is, the most important (Matt 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34). In a third confrontation in the temple, in the earshot of the Sadducees, Jesus took the initiative and on the basis of Psalm 110:1 asked how David could call his son Lord: “The Lord says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.’” How could David’s son also be his Lord (Matt 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44)? The question goes unanswered by the Pharisees; however, Jesus would soon provide an answer in his response to the high priest Caiaphas that he is the Christ, the Son of God—that is, he is David’s son and Lord (Matt 26:63–64; Mark 14:61–62; Luke 22:66–71).

John’s Gospel does not record this or other encounters in which the disputants are specified as Sadducees; however, Jesus was tried by the high priests Annas and Caiaphas, who were Sadducees.⁹ These were trials and not disputations in which each party could set forth its position. Jesus’ trial before these high priests was accusation by interrogation (John 18:13). The question of the high priest to Jesus whether he was the Christ, the Son of God, required a yes or no answer. It was not asked as an opportunity for discussion, though in Luke Jesus adds to his answer, saying that his interrogators will face judgment when they see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the power of God (Matt 26:63–64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:66–71). While John has a definite interest in the resurrection, by the time he wrote his Gospel, most likely at the end of the first century, the Sadducees had fallen off the political and theological radar screen, and this may have been reason enough for the evangelist not to mention them by name.

After Jesus responded to the high priest’s question positively, he was sent to Pilate to impose the sentence of death by crucifixion for the crime of insurrection

⁹ The high priests played crucial roles in the arrest and trial of Jesus. They were the ones to whom Judas went to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Matt 26:14–16) and who authorized the soldiers to arrest Jesus in the garden and bring him to trial, for which they found witnesses to testify against him (Matt 26:47).

against the Roman government in claiming to be the king of the Jews, an accusation that Pilate did not take seriously (Matt 27:11, 27:23).¹⁰ Then the Sadducee high priests led the chorus at the cross, saying that since Jesus said he was the Son of God, he should of his own accord come down from the cross. Since he said that God was his Father, his Father should come to his aid (Matt 27:41, 27:43).

On the day after Jesus expired, the Sabbath, the Sadducee high priests went with the Pharisees to ask Pilate to place a guard at his tomb to prevent the disciples from removing his body and proclaiming that he had risen from the dead (Matt 27:62–66). Conspiracy was in the air. While the Sadducees may have been lax in following Sabbath regulations, the Pharisees were not. In going into the residence of a Gentile, ruler or not, they were breaking Sabbath regulations, which the followers of Jesus avoided by postponing the completion of his burial until the first day of the week, two days later, on the third day. All three synoptic evangelists make the decisive point that the Pharisees were intent on showing that Jesus and his followers were breaking the Sabbath regulations (Matt 12:1–15; Mark 2:23–3:7; Luke 6:6–11). Yet going to Pilate on the Sabbath was, according to their own standards, a flagrant violation.

The Sadducees were involved from Jesus' arrest to his resurrection, events that would constitute the gospel, which his disciples would later proclaim. At the very dawn of Christianity, the Sadducees had to be reckoned with. "And as they [the apostles] were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (Acts 4:1). Jesus' resurrection more than any other event in his life would provide the foundation for the veracity of the claims that he made for himself and would constitute the content of apostolic proclamation. "And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:33).

After the resurrection, the apostles preached in the synagogues and won many Jews over to Christianity. A shared belief in the resurrection with the Pharisees was a bridge for some of them to find their way into the church. But some, perhaps only a minority, insisted that Gentile converts had to be circumcised (Acts 15:5). Circumcision remained an option in identifying with Jews in the synagogues where Paul worked to win them over to the gospel. Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3) but resisted that Titus be circumcised (Gal 2:3). We can only presuppose that the majority of these former Pharisees joined the rank-and-file converts without raising

¹⁰ It is generally understood that the "chief priests" and those of lower rank stirred up people to call for the crucifixion of Jesus: "Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the people to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus" (Matt 27:20). It is more likely that the high priests who arranged for the trial of Jesus were careful enough to make sure that crowds were on their side.

questions about circumcision. But some were not able to divest themselves of their adherence to circumcision, which identified them as descendants of Abraham and hence as the people of God (Gen 17:10), a sign that had been replaced by Baptism (Col 2:11), which makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile, male or female. Adherence to the ceremonial laws imposed by the Pharisees presented the greater problem (Rev 2:9, 3:9). Some claimed that these practices had been authorized by James, the brother of Jesus, who had taken over the leadership of the church in Jerusalem following Peter. They came to be known as the party of the circumcision (Gal 2:12), and at the council of Jerusalem they failed in persuading others that Gentile converts would be required to follow Jewish regulations (Acts 15:5).

Some rabbis, in repudiating Jesus as the Christ, succeeded in providing Judaism with an anti-Christian bias that has lasted into the present.

It would be hard to show that any Sadducees could find common ground with the Christians, simply because their denial of the resurrection stood at odds with the crucial Christian doctrine that Jesus had risen from the dead. One noticeable exception might be Ananias, who is sent to relieve Saul of his blindness and baptize him. This Ananias could have been named for Annas, maybe his grandfather, and would have been a Sadducee, though this can hardly be proved. He had the kind of information that a close family member would have: that the high priests had sent Saul to arrest believers in Damascus and to bring them to trial in Jerusalem (Acts 9:10–15). With the success of the apostles in Jerusalem, the high priestly family must have discussed among themselves how to prevent what they considered the scourge of Christian heresy from spreading to Damascus, with its Jewish population large enough that there was more than one synagogue.

That said, the Roman authorities were not able in every case to prevent their Jewish subjects from forming lynch mobs, as in the case of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:57–59) or, in AD 62, when James, the brother of the Lord, was thrown down from a tower while the governor was out of town. This was one reason among many for Roman general Titus laying siege to Jerusalem in AD 66. At the arrest and trial of Peter for preaching the resurrection of Jesus, Annas had resumed the position of high priest (Acts 4:6). John and Alexander, presumably sons of Annas, and Caiaphas may have also participated in the deliberations on the fate of Peter, who had healed a forty-year-old lame man. No reason is given for Annas to refrain from imprisoning the apostles (Acts 4:21). It is likely that through their preaching of Jesus' resurrection, the apostles had gained so many adherents in Jerusalem that the high priests could no longer have the confidence that they had with the people on their side, as they had in calling for the crucifixion of Jesus. The three thousand that were added to the church by Peter preaching the resurrection of Jesus was not an insignificant number in a city with a population of about twenty-five thousand (Acts 2:41). Add

to this number the five thousand who later believed (Acts 4:4). The high priests who had been successful in having Jesus crucified were aware that in imprisoning the apostles, they might bring the wrath of the people upon themselves. In that case, the governor might have exercised his option of depriving the family of Annas of its privileged position in Jewish society.

Even if the imprisonment of the apostles was not the best option open to the high priests in stifling the Christian movement, there were other ways to keep the Christian movement at bay. Another option was intimidating believers not only in Jerusalem but also in Damascus. This task was assigned to a Pharisee by the name of Saul: to search out and arrest believers in the synagogues in Damascus and to bring them to Jerusalem for trial (Acts 9:1–2). This also was done under the authority of the Sanhedrin, who had authority over Jews outside of Jerusalem. Saul was well qualified for the assignment, since he had located the houses where the Christians were worshipping in Jerusalem and was dragging them off to court (Acts 8:3). These houses may have served as synagogues in which some Christians may have continued to congregate with family and friends. Paul knew of the events at the tomb accompanying the resurrection of Jesus either from the members of the Sanhedrin or from the synagogues where these matters were discussed or where the Christians themselves were members.

In being taken to court, Christians were probably asked the same question addressed to Jesus: whether they believed that he was the Christ, the Son of God. How could it have been otherwise? A positive response was enough for an arrest. Though improbable, it was not impossible that Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin. Either way, he certainly was at home with both its Sadducee and Pharisee members. It cannot be overlooked that he had access to the one who acceded to his request for authorization to arrest believers in Damascus and to provide him with a military detail to transport believers, most likely in chains, back from Damascus to Jerusalem for trial (Acts 9:1–2). When Paul wrote to the Philippians that he been a Pharisee who had persecuted the church (Phil 3:5), he must have had in mind that he was the one who asked for authorization from the Sadducee high priest to carry out the persecution of the believers in Damascus. His pride in being a Pharisee did not prevent him from making common cause with the Sadducees. He not only persecuted the church but also expanded persecution outside of Jerusalem.

In the salutation in his epistle to the Romans, Saint Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, who by the resurrection was designated as the Son of God (Rom 1:1–4). Christ's resurrection is the irrefutable sign that Jesus is the Son of God.¹¹ Matthew makes seven references to the Sadducees, who, unlike the Pharisees,

¹¹ Thus, Wright titled his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

did not allow for a resurrection of the dead of any kind. On this issue both the Sadducees, in denying a resurrection of any kind, and the Christians, in making Jesus' resurrection the evidence that he is the Son of God, had something to lose that would challenge the very heart of what each believed.

Luke finds a place for presenting the doctrine of the resurrection in Paul's three trials that follow his return to Jerusalem at the completion of his third missionary journey. In his trial in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin, he found allies for his doctrine of resurrection among the Pharisees (Acts 23:6–9). Ananias, the high priest, before whom the trial was held (Acts 23:1–10), was most likely the son or grandson of Annas, for whom he might have been named and who had presided at the first trial of Jesus and had been present when Peter and the other apostles were called before the Sanhedrin for preaching the resurrection (Acts 4:6). Though the apostles preached that the resurrection is accomplished in Jesus, Paul preached about the resurrection as a doctrine that is true in and of itself. On this point the Pharisees could agree with him.¹² The God who returns man to the dust of the ground from which he was created would bring man back to life from the dust of the ground by the resurrection.¹³

With Titus beginning his siege of Jerusalem, the Sadducees found themselves without a hook on which to hang their political ambitions. Since they believed in close to nothing, they had no beliefs to preserve and were left without religious offspring. To their Roman benefactors they were expendable, as were the Pharisees who managed to gather themselves into synagogues wherever they found themselves. Anyone who survived the Roman slaughter and remained had to work in a desolate land ravaged by the conqueror's armies. Whether in the ravaged land of Judea or the more welcoming diaspora, the Sadducees were without patrons and lost their places of honor and authority. Their denials of the resurrection and the afterlife would hardly have earned the sympathy of their erstwhile competitors, the Pharisees. Wright says it well: "After AD 70 there were no Sadducees left to answer back or put the record straight."¹⁴

¹² See Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 453. Wright lists the passages in his own translation: "I am on trial here concerning the hope, and the resurrection of the dead [ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν]" (Acts 23:6). "... having a hope toward God which these men themselves are awaiting, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous" (Acts 24:15). "I am on trial before you today concerning the resurrection of the dead [ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν]" (Acts 24:21). "Why should it be judged incredible by you that God should raise the dead [εἰ ὁ θεὸς νεκροὺς ἐγείρει]?" (Acts 26:8). "... that the Messiah would suffer, and that he would be the first out of the resurrection of the dead [πρῶτος ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν]" (Acts 26:23).

¹³ In colloquial Lutheran terms, the resurrection is also a First Article matter in the Creator restoring what he had created.

¹⁴ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 131.

With the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, about forty years after Jesus stood trial before Annas and then Caiaphas, the Sadducees would literally disappear from the face of the earth, leaving behind no noticeable legacy, or, as N. T. Wright says, only an odd gravestone.¹⁵

Pharisees, most of whom were in exile after the fall of Jerusalem, had to survive what was for them a religiously catastrophic event. Now they had to constitute a religion without a temple and its sacrifices. Without sacrifices, there was no need for priests, and with the passing of time, there was less certainty about who could meet the qualification for a priest as a descendant of Aaron. With the exile to Babylon, they had created a Judaism that centered around the synagogue, whose worship services centered on the reading of Moses and the prophets. Thus, the destruction of the temple in AD 70 presented an experience that was not entirely new.

Whereas the Sadducees are prominent in Matthew, there is no trace of their influence in the epistles or hardly any even among the Jews after AD 70.¹⁶ Whatever Platonic influence, with its exclusive attention to the soul and its degradation of the body, entered the church did not come by way of the Sadducees but through a Hellenism that was already morphing into Gnosticism, in which the soul was said to progress through different phases.¹⁷ With the Roman siege of Jerusalem, the Sadducees had no place to go. As aristocrats, they had not identified with the general population, who under the influence of Pharisees observed their rituals and, for all their shortcomings, looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, as the Orthodox Jews do now. Had this not been so, Jesus' question to them concerning how David's son could be his Lord would have been unintelligible (Matt 22:42–45; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44.) The Sadducees had been at home in the social and intellectual world of the Roman occupiers, with whom they shared a common attitude to life and death.

¹⁵ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 139.

¹⁶ Wright notes that 1 Maccabees and Tobit show no concern for afterlife and that many Jews up to AD 70 also held to this view. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 139.

¹⁷ Like the Greek philosophers before and after him and the ancient world in general, Plato did not hold to the resurrection of the body but was an exception in holding that the soul survived death. He also held that the soul existed before it was placed in the body and that at death it was released from this imprisonment, a belief that would resonate with some Christians. Furthermore, quite contrary to a view popular in the mid-twentieth century that an early Jewish Christianity had, in copying the Greek gods, morphed at the end of the first century into a more hellenized form with miracles, Jerusalem under Herod during the time of Jesus could already be regarded as a hellenized city. A Roman eagle was placed on the side portico of the temple, and it was not unlikely that the people knew it stood for Jupiter, king of the Roman gods. It is arguable that during the time of Jesus, the Jews were more at home with the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, than they were with the Hebrew texts.

II. On an Early Date for Matthew

A date for the composition of Matthew even as late the 60s is unconvincing, since by that time the Jews were in rebellion against their Roman oppressors and the account of the disciples stealing the body of Jesus would have been of less importance among the inhabitants of Jerusalem than the turmoil that was in store for them. From the siege of Jerusalem until the city's destruction, the fate of the body of Jesus as a topic of conversation would have paled in comparison to the impending loss of Jewish national identity. Jesus predicted the destruction of the Jerusalem temple that was at the center of Jewish worship (Matt 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6). By including four references in the genealogy of Jesus to the Babylonian Captivity, Matthew was reflecting on the signs that it could happen again (Matt 1:11–12, 1:17).

Since Mark and Luke do not include the accounts of the high priests covering up the events at the tomb of Jesus, it is unlikely that the story of the disciples stealing the body of Jesus gained traction anywhere outside of Jerusalem. It was the kind of story that, along with other accounts that took place at the tomb of Jesus, invited those who heard it to check out its veracity. This could be done by a visit to the place where Jesus was buried and to the field of blood, which had been bought by the money given to Judas by the high priests to betray Jesus and which Judas returned to them (Matt 27:3–8). These were places in the center of Jerusalem with which the inhabitants of Jerusalem were familiar.

Matthew wrote at a time when the places associated with the resurrection were still intact. With Titus laying siege to Jerusalem in 66 and reducing it to rubble in 70, a date for the composition of Matthew even in the 60s is unlikely, since in this decade its inhabitants were consumed in setting up a rival government to Rome. Survival and victory over the Romans had to be on their minds. Because their past influence with the conquerors had compromised them in the eyes of the people, the Sadducees would be rejected by those who were intent on establishing a government in opposition to their oppressors.

This presents a problem for dating the composition of Matthew anytime after 70, let alone 100. No allusion to the Sadducees is found in Paul's classic defense of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, indicating that outside the reach of Jerusalem, the Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, did not seek followers in the congregations Paul established, or at least they were unsuccessful. Unlike the Pharisees, they were not mission minded. Paul's defense of the resurrection in his trial before Agrippa, in which the Pharisees sided with him against the Sadducees on the doctrine of the

resurrection, took place in Jerusalem (Acts 23:6–8), where it remained at that time a hotly contested issue between the two groups.¹⁸

Another factor in coming to terms with when Matthew was written is the council of Jerusalem in 49. It met about fifteen to twenty years after the resurrection and at a time when, in spite of prior persecution, the early Christians were finding a place for themselves in the ordinary life of the city. Oddly, Matthew lacks a reference to the circumcision controversy or even an allusion to the topic that consumed the council in deciding whether it would be required of Gentile converts. These circumstances point to Matthew having been written before 49, when the church, whose members were predominantly Jewish, had not yet faced the issue.¹⁹

Supporting an early date for Matthew is not only the prominence of the Sadducees but also the absence of any reference in Matthew, either positive or negative, to Paul's doctrine of justification that comes through faith and not works of the law (Gal 2:16). If a doctrine of justification were to be drawn out of Matthew, it would be one in which the eschatological dimension would be prominent, according to which Jesus as the Son of Man returns to reward those who have done good to his disciples and to bring judgment on those who have not (Matt 25:31–46). Justification is understood from the perspective of the judgment, when God vindicates himself in rewarding the followers of Jesus for what they have done. In Christ's acknowledging those who have done good to his brothers and rejecting those who have not, he shows that he is righteous in doing the just thing.

This is a difference of perspective and not substance. Paul speaks of justification in terms of how the believer understands himself as acceptable to God, and he challenges any idea of self-justification in which one's confidence for salvation depends on his having kept the law. Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple is best understood within the terms of Paul's perspective of justification, according to which one is justified with a self-awareness of sin but without self-

¹⁸ Herod Agrippa came close to being convinced in the argument that Paul made for Christianity, which would have included belief in the resurrection. "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.' And Agrippa said to Paul, 'In a short time you think to make me a Christian!'" (Acts 26:27–28). It is likely that in order to bolster his credentials as a Jewish king, Herod had his children brought up by teachers who were likely Pharisees, who represented prevailing Jewish thought at the time. Paul's question assumed that Agrippa knew and believed the prophets.

¹⁹ The debate over the necessity of circumcising converts was an issue for the apostles in the Gentile churches and remained so into the second century, but not a hint of this controversy found its way into the pages of Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels. Absence of a reference to circumcision is hard to explain, unless Matthew was written before Paul's first missionary journey to Galatia, his epistle to that church, and the council of Jerusalem. It is understandable that the practice of circumcision remained a rallying point for Jews, since it had been commanded by the God of Abraham and identified them as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9).

confidence in one's accomplishments (Luke 8:10–14). Paul sees justification existentially in that the believer, wanting to know that he is acceptable to God, looks not within himself but to Christ's atonement for sin and his resurrection: Christ, who "was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25). Jesus typically speaks of justification as that event bringing time to an end, at which he will raise all the dead and welcome into his Father's kingdom those who in his name have shown mercy to others. The resurrection is the occasion for that justification, when he will show to all men and angels that he did the right thing in saving believers. This was a justification the Sadducees worked to avoid by denying the resurrection.