**Jesus and his opponents**

In this section, we will look at Jesus’ interaction with his opponents: who were they and why did they disagree with Jesus? It is worth bearing in mind in this section, perhaps more so than in any other, that we are dealing with biased sources. Our information on this topic will come from the gospel: texts that are thoroughly ‘on Jesus’ side’ are unlikely to portray Jesus’ opponents in an entirely fair and balanced way all of the time. Remember, many of these opponents would have been alive and familiar to the original readers: the gospel writers cannot caricature their opponents too much, otherwise they will become unrecognizable to the readers and their arguments will lose credibility.

**The Pharisees**

The Pharisees are probably the most famous of Jesus’ opponents and a lot has been written about them. Rather than being a group with a defined membership, it is better to think of the Pharisees as a significant Jewish people-movement (as, say, a member of the public today may identify with a certain political party without actually being a member of that party). They were primarily concerned with the holiness of the Jewish people and making sure that they observed the law and ‘the tradition of the elders’ (Gal. 1.14; Mark 7.1-4) which is generally thought to be a set of commandments or rules to be followed that were passed down orally through generations. As a result of this striving for holiness, they placed a great importance on each person playing their individual part in the sanctification of Israel, rather than just the priests, and as such became a popular movement amongst Palestinian Jews.

Jesus may have been sympathetic with many of the Pharisees aims and beliefs such as their belief in the resurrection (Acts 23:6-8) and their zeal for Israel’s holiness. This may explain why the Pharisees took such an interest in Jesus and why they subsequently clashed so frequently. In Luke’s Gospel, the Pharisees actually warn Jesus that Herod Antipas wants to kill him (Luke 13:31) and they frequently invite Jesus to come and eat with them (Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1). What they clashed on was often the practicalities of such matters as the Sabbath, food and purity regulations (Mark 2:16-17; 3:1-6; 7:5-8). Rather than concerned with outward attempts at purity, Jesus seems concerned more with inward motivation. The main point of conflict regarding Jesus and the Pharisees seems to be the practical rules that the Pharisees put forward for people to follow. Whilst the Pharisees were keen to maintain a separation from those who were impure, Jesus frequently disregards this and approaches those whom the Pharisees would have considered impure.

**The Sadducees**

The Sadducees are perhaps the next most famous group that came into conflict with Jesus. The name ‘Sadducee’ likely comes from Zadok the High Priest and ancestor of the tribe of the Zadokites. As such, their interests were primarily linked to the flourishing of the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus certainly would have been closer to the Pharisees than to the Sadducees in terms of what they believed. They rejected belief in resurrection (Acts 23:6-8), distinguishing them from the Pharisees.
It is not surprising that the two defining elements of the beliefs of the Sadducees are also the areas around which they clashed with Jesus. They certainly clashed with Jesus about belief in the resurrection (Mark 12:18-27), as you would expect. Additionally, Jesus’ claims to – metaphorically – destroy the temple (Matthew 26:61; Mark 14:58; John 2:19) as well as his act of throwing traders out of the temple (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17) and, in doing so, undermine a major source of the temple’s financial income, are likely to have caused significant upset amongst the Sadducees. We will consider this idea in more depth when we look at Jesus’ death, in the next topic.

The Scribes

The Scribes were another group with whom Jesus frequently came into conflict with. In the broader Greco-Roman culture, a scribe was simply an official who had the ability to draw a document. However, in a Jewish context, where scripture was given great importance, the idea of a scribe also implied the role of a religious teacher and it is this role that we are best to conjure up when we think of the conflicts between the scribes and Jesus. It is also worth noting that (unlike being a Pharisee or Sadducee) being a scribe was a profession. Therefore, one may be a scribe as well as a Pharisee or a Sadducee: to say that you are a scribe would tell people what you did but not necessarily tell people what you believed in any detail. Hence, Mark can talk about both ‘the scribes’ on their own (Mark 3:22) and ‘the scribes of the Pharisees’ (Mark 2:16) – that is, a group of scribes who were also Pharisees – without having to explain what he means. As such, to ask what ‘the scribes’ believed would not be a valid question: they would have had no unifying set of beliefs.

In Mark, Jesus clashes with the scribes mainly on issues of doctrine and issues relating to law observance (Mark 9:9-11) which makes sense, given their profession, whereas with the Pharisees he mainly discusses behaviour. It is also worth noting that not all of the scribes in the gospels are hostile towards Jesus. In Mark 12:28-34, the scribe in question is presented in a much more positive manner than the corresponding accounts in Matt. 22:34-40 and Luke 10:25-28. Additionally, in Matthew’s Gospel, we are even told of a scribe who wishes to become a disciple of Jesus.

We have seen then, that it is much harder to categorize ‘the scribes’ as a group than it was with the Pharisees or Sadducees, since they are not united by any set form of belief. As such, it is difficult to say how Jesus and the scribes differed. We can only say that those scribes who were cautious about Jesus or were hostile towards him, were so because of disagreements over doctrine.

The Herodians

The last group we will look at is the Herodians, who were a group who were loyal followers of King Herod Antipas (rather confusingly, the son of the more famous Herod the Great who died in 4 B.C.E. and under whom Jesus was born). They ruled areas on behalf of the Romans in areas where it was thought that direct Roman rule would be problematic or not tolerated.
They are only mentioned in Mark 3:6 and Mark 12:13. As such, we can comfortably say that Jesus and the Herodians did not come into conflict as frequently or on the same scale as Jesus did with the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes! Consequently, there is little we can say about their conflict with Jesus and the motivations behind them. They appear in connection with ‘doing good or doing bad on the Sabbath’ (Mark 3:6) and when questioning Jesus about taxes (Mark 12:13). Whilst it makes sense that a group a loyal supporters of King Herod would want to know Jesus’ teaching on taxes, it is less clear why they would be concerned with Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath. Paying taxes directly to the Romans was a thorny issue in 1st Century Palestine, and given the Herodian’s links to authority, it makes sense that they should want to know Jesus’ thoughts on the issue. Whilst the scale and frequency of these conflicts is by no means comparable with those Jesus had with the Pharisees, Sadducees or Scribes, it is at least significant to note that Jesus’ ministry garnered the attention of those close to the Roman authorities.