

Who Were the Pharisees?

Contributed by Hegomen Antonious Henein
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The Pharisees were one of the three sects of Judaism in the time of our Lord, the other two being the Sadducees and the Essenes. It was, according to St. Paul's testimony, "the most straightest sect" (Acts 26:5.)

Introduction

This sect is mentioned frequently in the Gospels, almost entirely as extremely hostile to our Lord. The Gospel writers often mention them together with the chief priests (Sadducees), scribes and lawyers (two names for the same group), all of whom were hostile to Jesus. These writers make no careful distinction in attributing remarks to one group or to the other or to all together. Their opposition to the Gospel, after the foundation of the Christian Church, continued as eager as before. Although they are seldomly mentioned by name in the Book of Acts, their opposition is frequently mentioned when the "council" is mentioned (Acts 5:15, 5:27, 6:12, 22:30; 23:6.) That "council" is the Sanhedrin and the seventy-two doctors of which it was composed. The more influential part of the Sanhedrin apparently consisted of the Pharisees.

Their Name

The name "phariseos" is the Greek form of the Hebrew "parush," which has uncertain meaning, but possibly means "separated." The name is defined as "one who separated himself from Levitical impurity and unclean food," which necessarily implies separation from those who were defiled by Levitically impure objects.

It must be observed that the name Pharisees is given to them in the Mishna, which is the name given to the first constituent part of the Jewish book, the Talmud, by their opponents, the Sadducees.

Their Origin

The historian Flavius Josephus, as well as some allusions in the Talmud, are the only sources of information on the Pharisees outside of the New Testament. They are usually considered as essentially the same with Hassideans (also known as "Chasidim," which means "godly or saintly men,") mentioned in 1 Macc. 11:42, 7:13-17, and 2 Macc. 14:6. Some find allusions to the Hassideans in Psalms 129:2, 97:10, 132:9, 16, and 149:9, where chasidim is translated "saints."

Their immediate origin may be traced to the period before the Maccabean war, in a reaction against the Hellenizing spirit that appeared among the Jews, and manifested itself in the readiness of a part of the people to adopt Greek customs. Those who regarded these practices with abhorrence and alarm were urged onto a strict and open conformity with Mosaic (Jewish) law. They were drawn even more closely together by the fierce persecution which Antiochus Epiphanes, 175-163 B.C., directed against the Israelites who would not abandon Judaism and accept Greek religion. "And when [the messengers of the king] had rent in pieces the Books of the Law which they found, they burnt them with fire. And wheresoever was found with any of the Books of the Testament, the king's commandment was that they should put him to death (1 Macc. 56-57.) The Hassideans, who were the mighty men of Israel, even all such as were voluntarily devoted to the Law (1 Macc. 11:42; c.f. 1:62-63), participated in the Maccabean revolt as a distinct party. When the war ceased to be a struggle for religious liberty and became a contest for political supremacy, they ceased to take an active interest in it.

The Pharisees appear under their own name in the time of John Hyrcanus, 134-103 B.C., from the Maccabean family. He was their disciple, but left them to join the Sadducees (Antiquity 13:10, 5-6.) John's son and successor, Alexander Jannaeus, endeavored to exterminate them by the sword, but they attained to almost supreme power under his wife and successor, Queen Alexandra, 76-67 B.C., and obtained seats in the Sanhedrin. Pharisaism was, after the return from Babylonian captivity, and is to the present day, the national faith of Orthodox Jews.

Doctrines and Beliefs

The Pharisees were a lay group who stood in opposition to the Sadducees, the party of the Jewish priesthood. The New Testament and Josephus's histories allude to some distinct Pharisaic beliefs, particularly in contrast with the beliefs of the Sadducees. Some of these beliefs are as follows:

- The Sadducees admitted only the Law and the five books of Moses as imposing obligations upon Jews. The Pharisees accepted also the oral traditions of the elders, which was attributed to a chain of elders going back to the Prophet Moses.

These traditions erected a "fence" around the Law. St. Matthew stated, "Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, 'Why do Thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they wash not their hands when they eat bread.'" (Matt. 23:1-2; see also Mk. 7:5.) When the Mishna was compiled around 200 A.D., it incorporated the teachings of the Pharisees on Jewish law.

- The Pharisees were the true representatives of the people, whose high calling they endeavored to develop by making them realize, both in practice and life, that "God has given to all alive the kingdom, priesthood, and holiness" (2 Macc. 11:17.) Also, Exodus 19:6 states, "And e shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel."

- The Sadducees, on the other hand, set the highest value upon their priestly aristocratic office, and who, by virtue of their hereditary rights, tried to appropriate everything unto themselves. Ultimately, they manifested little sympathy for the common Jew and the people at large. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul; in the resurrection of the body; and in the existence of angels and spirits (Acts 23:6-8.)

Josephus states that the Pharisees "say that every soul is imperishable, but that the souls of good men only pass over (transmigrate) into another body, while the souls of bad men are chastised by eternal punishment (War 2:8, 14; see also 3:8,5.) Josephus' words might be interpreted as an affirmation that the Pharisees believed in the transmigration of souls. There are two passages in the Gospels that may support this notion. One, in Matthew 14:3, where Herod the Jewish King is represented as fearing that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead (though a different tone is given to Herod's thoughts in the corresponding passage from Luke 9:7-9.) The other, in John 9:2, where the question is put to Jesus whether the blind man himself had sinned or his parents that he was born blind, may also confirm Pharisaical belief in transmigration of souls (thereby explaining transmigration of sin.)

That the Pharisees believed in the full resurrection of the dead, much in the same sense as Christian patristic thoughts, is certain. Christ's teachings concerning the future life assume it as already adopted by His hearers, except the Sadducees, although He condemns some unspiritual conceptions about its nature as erroneous (Matt. 22:30; Lk. 20:34-36.) St. Paul's statement to the chief priests and council (Acts 23:6) that he was a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee, and that he was called in question for the hope of the resurrection of the dead is another example of this belief.

Pharisaism

These doctrines of the Pharisees distinguish them from the Sadducees, but did not constitute the essence of Pharisaism. This latter is the final and necessary result of that conception of religion which makes it consist in conformity to the Law, and promises of God's grace only to the doers of the Law. Religion becomes external; the disposition of the heart becomes less vital than the outward act. The interpretation of the Law, and its application to the details or ordinary life accordingly become a matter of grave consequence.

Our Saviour's great effort with regard to the Old Testament dispensation, was to unfold the principles which are the basis of that dispensation. TO carry them out to their legitimate conclusions; that is, to "fulfill" the Law in its remarkable character as pointing forward to something greater than the mere letter of the Law. The basic error of the Pharisees was their refusal to admit that Judaism could reach any further development beyond themselves; they called a halt to the activity and power of God.

Among the Pharisees, however, there were men like Nicodemus and Gamaliel, who was St. Paul's teacher and mentor when he was Saul of Tarsus.

GLORY BE TO GOD FOREVER, AMEN.