

Lesson Supplemental – The Pharisees

Sources:

- Saldarini, Anthony J. J. *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*.
- Wellhausen, Julius. *The Pharisees and the Sadducees: An Examination of Internal Jewish History*
- Stemberger, Gunter. *Jewish Contemporaries of Jesus*.
- Simmons, William A. *Peoples of the New Testament World*:

The word 'Pharisees' comes from the Greek word *φαρισαῖος*, meaning "separated ones." It is theorized that this theme of religious separation, both in belief and in practice, established the paradigm for the emergence of the Pharisees dating back to the time of Ezra.

Origins and Practices Traced to Ezra

After the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in 597 BC., the Jews were left in a desolate state; scattered among the land with the poorest ones having to defend themselves, while the gifted ones taken to Babylon to serve King Nebuchadnezzar (2Kings 25). In order to preserve their identity in this exiled state, the Jews had to adopt strategies towards this new way of living that still involves God in their lives. Adoption of these various strategies ultimately led to the formation of various groups; the Pharisees may have been one such group.

In 538 BC., King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and to reestablish their nation (Ezra 1:1; 2Chronicles 36:20-23). Those Jews who were scattered throughout the region then began to migrate back to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple, and to re-establish their worship practices (Ezra 1-6). Many of those who arrived earlier began to intermarry with the inhabitants of the land at the time (Ezra 9:1-3), which was strictly prohibited according to Law of Moses (Deut 7:1-4). Such was the condition that Ezra found when he arrived roughly 80 years later (458 BC) during the reign of King Artaxerxes.

After Ezra discovers that many of the Jewish men have ignored the law against marrying non-Jewish women, he called upon the Jewish nation to reconcile with God by separating themselves from the people of the land and from their foreign wives (Ezra 10:1-11). Many of the Jews followed Ezra's leadership and began to separate themselves from the locals, and returning to their roots in their walk with God by observing various ordinances as established in the Law of Moses (Nehemiah 8 - 10). As time passes, this practice of separation became part of the culture of the Jews (Nehemiah 13:1), leading to the term "separated ones;" hence, the term "Pharisees."

Moreover, the Pharisees in the New Testament are often viewed as one party with the same tendencies and character as that of the scribes. What is true of one is also true of the other. This characterization also fits with the narrative of their origins being traced to the time of Ezra, given that Ezra himself was also a scribe with priestly roots. Scripture describes Ezra as a scribe, a descendant of Aaron, who was "skilled in the law of Moses," and "sets his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:1-10). These characteristics used to describe Ezra would later become the Jews' perception of the Pharisees in the New Testament (Luke 11:45-6).

Earliest Evidences / Citations of the Pharisees

There are scant traces of documented evidences that specifically identifies the term 'Pharisees'. The work of Flavius Josephus has been one of the primary sources. Although Josephus himself was a Pharisee, from the viewpoint of the Jewish culture as a whole, he does not seem to view any of the Jewish groups that existed at the time -- Pharisees, Sadducees, or others -- as major importance unless they have some political effect on the society. His citations for the Pharisees – or

Sadducees – are focused primarily on their political influence, and not so much on their religious influence.

Two of Josephus' major work that discusses the Pharisees' role in society are *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities*. Taken collectively, these two volumes shared with us the ascendancy and influences of the Pharisees, dating back to the Hasmonean period (140-104 BC). The fact that Josephus would mention this group's influence by name during this period would indicate that this group is already in existence by that time; meaning that his work does not state the origins of the Pharisees, just that this group already exist. Through the work of Josephus, we can know with certainty that the Pharisees is officially recognized as a group of influence in the Jewish society as early as this period.

Other evidences of the Pharisees might be traceable further back to the Maccabean Period. The central evidence to this claim can be found in book of 1Maccabees. 2:29-42 (Apocrypha collection; part of the Catholic bible). The discussion in this context involves a group of pious Jews -- called the Hasideans (or Hasidim) -- who supported Judas Maccabeus in the struggle against Antiochus in the Maccabean Revolt. The root of the revolt is the secularization of the priesthood, effectively, to the highest bidder. This group was very much against the Hellenization of the Jews. The implication is that the Hasideans were predecessors to the Pharisees; but this association is not well defined, as it could easily have also included the Sadducees and the Essenes -- groups that either rivals or evolves out of the Pharisees. Those who hold true to this view could then trace the origins of the Pharisees to as early as 164 BC. *There is strong support for this view.*

Additional analysis of this period through the reconstruction of history, focusing on the ideas and tendencies of the Pharisees as well as its rival groups – the Sadducees the Essenes — could lead to the conclusions that the Sadducees and the Essenes were groups that evolved out of the Pharisees; which would trace the roots of the Pharisees as far back as 340 BC. This analysis, at best, demonstrates that the three groups functions as one under the 'Hasidean' reference. The dated origins are supported by questionable evidences, and thus, can only serve as speculation.

Pharisees in the New Testament

Although the Pharisees are mentioned often in the New Testament in all four of the Gospels, the origins of the Pharisees, however, are not stated in the New Testament. Moreover, Josephus' account of the Pharisees during this period up to the point of the war against Rome (AD 67) is incomplete; thus, any information regarding the Pharisees must rely primarily upon the text of the New Testament. The chart below summarizes how the authors of the gospels paints the Pharisees in the NT era:

Book	# times cited	Main Idea
Matthew	30	Legalism; over emphasis on religious practice over principles
Mark	12	Opposition to Jesus or to the ministry of Christ
Luke	27	Relational similarities to Jesus; closeness to Jesus
John	20	Leader / representatives of the Jews in opposition to Jesus

Influences of the Pharisees

The aim of the Pharisees is primarily to ensure the survival of Israel and the Jewish faith against the wave of religious compromise and political threat. To be successful in this task, the Pharisees would need to have a certain level of influence over the government authorities, if not the Jewish people themselves.

During the Hasmonean period (140-37 BC), the main issue that made this period controversial was the combining of the priesthood with the kingship into one office; which is against the alignment of the Torah. Many of the Jewish groups are opposed to this move, including the Pharisees. Be that as it may, John Hyrcanus became the first of the rulers to hold the office in this state. Josephus, in *Jewish War*, cites the conflict that the Pharisees had with John Hyrcanus, who was one of their own and greatly loved by them until a fallout occurred due to a deceitful act by a Pharisee named Eleazar. This Pharisee spread false rumors that led many to doubt Hyrcanus' heritage, leading to doubts about his fitness to be High Priest. The fallout was solidified when a Sadducee named Jonathan convinced Hyrcanus to join their interest. Josephus made no other mention of the Pharisees during this period in *Jewish War*, but notes in *Antiquities* about the relationship of the Pharisees with Hyrcanus' successors. Of particular interest is Josephus' comment about Alexander Jannaeus' suggestion to his wife prior to his death; in which he encouraged his wife and heir successor, Salome Alexandra, to cede powers to the Pharisees. By doing so, Josephus claims that during Alexandra's reign (76-67 BC), the Pharisees were the real power behind the throne. This demonstrates the amount of influence that the Pharisees had over the people, where the governing authority were deferred to them in order to maintain a peaceful rule.

During the Herodian period (37 BC – 73 AD), the Pharisees continued their influence at the highest levels in society. They also had a strong relationship with Herod, though not necessarily with the same influential power. They were favored by Herod as supporters and clients until they joined a faction that is opposed to Herod, leading to catastrophic fallout in their relationship. Josephus characterized the Pharisees relationship with Herod in *Antiquities* as being poor when he noted how six thousand Pharisees refused to take an oath of loyalty to Caesar and the King's government; a policy instituted by Herod. However, it is unclear if this refusal to take part in this oath is a sign of rejection towards Herod, towards Caesar, or simply in principle. Josephus, however, also referred to the Pharisees as the "people's party," out numbering all major sects and had the influential power to oppose kings. Based on these descriptions, it is clear that the strong influence that the Pharisees enjoyed in the office of kingship under Alexandra are all but gone by the time of Herod. However, their influence over the Jewish nation remains very strong, enough for the governors to take caution.

During the time of Jesus Christ, the Pharisees have effectively withdrawn from their pursuit of political influence, and focused more on the influence towards spirituality. They were regarded as the group who knew Scripture better, and are more accurate interpreters of the Law. As such, they wield this spiritual influence over the Jewish nation. Evidences regarding this form of influence by the Pharisees during this period are revealed to us primarily in the Gospel of John, where the Pharisees are painted as representatives of the Jews. They were presented in that Gospel as both inquisitive (John 1:19-24, 3:1) and a threat (John 4:1-3) to the ministry of Jesus Christ. Their influence over the religious authorities are also on full display when the Pharisees tried to have Jesus arrested (John 7:32-45).

Summary on the Pharisees

The Pharisees represented a religious reformation group dedicated to the preservation of Judaism by an adherence to the written Torah and disciplined practice of the oral Torah. By this definition, their origins can be traced back to the period after the Babylonian exile during the time of Ezra. However, documented evidence of their existence places them first around the period after the Maccabean war, where they were known possibly as the Hasideans. The aim of their existence is to preserve the Jewish faith against the intrusion of other religious practices. They accomplish this by imposing influences in both the political and religious avenues. Their greatest influence, however, is over the people; to the point where the even authorities acknowledges this influence as part of the strategy to maintain peace.