

A Brief Profile of the Pharisees

Introduction to Global Missions - Sneed

The Pharisees were one of three major sects of Judaism during the 1st century AD along with the Sadducees and the Essenes. Among the various groups and “denominations” of Judaism, the Pharisees were the most popular among the Jewish people. The Hebrew name of the Pharisees was Parus which comes from the Hebrew word paras which means “to separate.” The actual reason for this name is not clear but it may refer to the Pharisees’ desire to be separate from the pollution of the world and pagan culture.

As a group, the Pharisees were somewhat diverse in terms of geographical location even though they were all ethnically Jewish. They were also diverse in their practices to some extent. Some Pharisees advocated for violent resistance against Gentile authorities while others chose to separate themselves or even seek help from Gentile authorities. Some Pharisees were politically involved while others shunned politics. Among the Pharisees, there were also varying levels of education.

Nevertheless, some elements seem to be common among the Pharisees. They all claimed to practice strict observance of the Old Testament Law and the traditional teachings of their forefathers, often called the oral law. They were mostly drawn from the middle class in Jewish society. They held to the concept of individual responsibility to Yahweh and His laws. Although they sometimes sought help from Gentile authorities, they were generally opposed to Gentile presence in Jerusalem and foreign dominance in Israel (especially Greek and Roman rule).

The Pharisees seemed to have formed as a response to increasing Greek influence and dominance in Israel and Jerusalem. Greek authority and control in Israel had been steadily increasing since the initial arrival of Alexander the Great and his army in 332 BC as he marched toward Egypt. At first, the Greeks allowed the Jews freedom to worship and practice Jewish culture and traditions. However, later Greek authorities in the region began to impose more Greek culture and practices on the Jewish people. Greek language became the dominant language as Greek influence increased. This was happening throughout the Mediterranean world and historians call this “Hellenization.” Some Jews resisted Greek influence and control and slowly formed a group that would later be organized as the Pharisees. They determined to respond to Greek intrusion by holding even more tightly to their culture, customs, and religion. Finally, under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, Greek intrusion and dominance became unbearable. When Antiochus desecrated the Temple in 167 BC, Jewish leaders including the Pharisees decided to revolt against the Greeks. The revolt was led by a priest named Judas Maccabeus. Jerusalem was liberated in 164 BC and Israel continued to fight for independence even after Maccabeus was killed in battle in 160 BC. Jewish independence was achieved in the 150s BC and the descendants of Judas Maccabeus governed Israel as priestly kings. This family and their leadership in Israel became known as the Hasmonean Dynasty. Sometimes the Pharisees worked well with the Hasmoneans and sometimes the Pharisees opposed the Hasmoneans.

Throughout this time, the Pharisees focused on helping Jewish people retain and maintain their Jewish identity. Pharisees helped to build and operate synagogues for the purpose of teaching Judaism and establishing centers where Jewish culture could thrive. The Pharisees even went into the diaspora

(the scattered Jewish communities outside of Israel) to help preserve Jewish identity all over the world. They traveled far and wide to defend Judaism and Jewish people. By the time of Jesus, Alfred Edersheim estimates that there were 480 synagogues in Israel and in other foreign locations.¹ The Synagogues established among the Jews in the diaspora were extremely important for Jews who live in the vast minority wherever they existed outside of Israel. These synagogues and their leaders were a crucial support for Jews and the center for the practice of their religion and the teaching of their language in places where they might be even more tempted to succumb to the surrounding pagan culture. Jesus even mentioned the Pharisee's missionary endeavors in Matthew 23:15. Pharisees helped to protect and teach Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament), Jewish religious traditions (the oral tradition), Jewish language, and Jewish customs. In a way, Pharisees were heroes of intertestamental Judaism as they helped stop the erosion and decline of Judaism in the face of Greek influence and dominance. In fact, we can see in hindsight that their actions helped prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus and facilitated the spread of the early church. It is unfortunate that these heroes of Judaism became the antagonists of Jesus in the Gospels and persecutors of the church in Acts.

The Gospels describe some of the practices of the Pharisees. Major sections like Matthew 23:13-26, Mark 7:1-23; Luke 11:37-54 address the Pharisees and show us a glimpse into how they lived and what they believed during the time of Jesus. The Pharisees were so obsessed with following all the Law and the traditions that they rejected Jesus for what they considered his failure to abide by the Law. Luke, no doubt influenced by Paul, makes an interesting observation in Luke 7:30. The Pharisees were missing the point of their Torah obedience and rejecting the one to whom the Law and the prophets were pointing, Jesus. However, as early as John 3, some pharisees like Nicodemus were showing favorable interest in Jesus and his teaching. Acts also mentions how the Pharisees both attached the church and (to some extent) eventually joined the church. By the time of Acts 15, there were numerous Pharisees who had accepted Jesus.

In Acts 23:6-8, we learn from Paul's speech before the Sanhedrin that the Pharisees believed in a future resurrection of the righteous dead. Even Josephus notes that the Pharisees promoted bodily resurrection and attributes this as a reason many Jews revered the Pharisees and their teaching. L. Cohick summarizes Josephus' description of the Pharisees' belief on resurrection when he writes that they taught "a new, holy body awaits the righteous at the end of the ages."²

¹ Sketches of Jewish Social Life, 195.

² The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 676.