

The Jewish Religious Backgrounds to the New Testament

(I) Jewish Religious Groups

Pharisees

The Pharisees probably had their origins in the “Hasidim”, or holy men, from the 3rd century BC, before the Maccabean wars, when the Greeks dominated and were efforts to Hellenise the Jews. Alexander the Great conquered the whole known world in 11 years and imposed Greek culture on the lands he conquered. Many of the Jews were pressured to and accepted Greek culture and its associated pagan religious customs and idol worship. The Pharisees rose as a reaction and protested against this religious compromise by the Jews. Their aim was to maintain their national integrity and strict obedience to the Mosaic Law and to resist the Greek culture. They were supporters of the Maccabean and Hasmonaean rulers. The original Hasidim Party split into two parts, the majority because known as the Pharisees; the minority withdrew from public life and became the Essenes.

The Pharisees had great influence and public support under John Hyrcanus (134-104 BC), but he later turned to the Sadducees. They suffered under the rule of the Herods, and supported Roman rule, opposing the Jewish revolt of AD 66-70. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Pharisees were the only group able to maintain and restore the Jewish national and religious identity. By AD 200, the Pharisees became the leaders of the Jews and focus of Judaism.

During the time of the Herods there were about 6000 Pharisees, the most numerous and influential of the religious sects. They were mostly middle class tradesmen with no formal education so were more in touch with the ordinary people. They gained their understanding of the Law from the scribes. They had a passion to keep Israel spiritually and ethically clean by the observation of the law. This derived from their belief that the Babylonian exile had been caused by Israel’s failure to keep the Torah. To avoid breaking the Law, they kept themselves as far as possible apart from other men. They could not eat with a non-Pharisee in case the food had not been tithed.

They established communities around the country; a scribe led each community. They met on the day before the Sabbath for their own meetings and worship. It was most difficult to become a Pharisee; it involved a period of probation, an agreement to observe all the details of the law and the oral traditions. Other Pharisees would check that the novice was being obedient.

There were two distinct and rival rabbinical schools, which differed in their interpretation of certain parts of the law:

- a) Shammai: strict, legalistic, from aristocratic family
- b) Hill: more liberal, from more humble background

They believed the Law of Moses, but to avoid breaking it they added many oral traditions. They saw that both of these were important. They believed that every jot and title of the Law was inspired and given by God. Their oral laws extended and interpreted the Mosaic Law to cover the whole of life. They “made a hedge about the Torah” to prevent them breaking the law by accident. Unfortunately, in their eagerness to be obedient to the Law, they missed the spirit of the Law (Mt 23:23-24).

The Pharisees were the ultimate legalists, standing for rigid observance of every letter in the Law and the Jewish Traditions, especially issues of ritual purity, food laws, tithing and the Sabbath. Their rules and regulations concerning the Sabbath were contained in 24 chapters of the Jewish Mishna. It was their many detailed extra requirements of the Law that were so opposed by Jesus. There were known for their covetousness, self-righteousness, and hypocrisy. Jesus

denounced them for this most severely in Mt 23. He was opposed by the Pharisees throughout his ministry and spoke many parables against them.

Paul was brought up as a Pharisee, before his conversion (Phil 3:5), in the school of Hillel, under Gamaliel. Their basic teaching was separation from the Gentiles and everything non-Jewish. Other beliefs included:

- 1) Immortality of the soul, resurrection of the body.
- 2) A future judgment of rewards for the righteous and punishment for the wicked.
- 3) The existence of angels and spirits.
- 4) A future physical restoration of Israel by God, to a place of power and prestige.
- 5) Merit with God was earned by scrupulous obedience to all details of the law.
- 6) They were more fatalistic before an all-powerful God, who overruled the actions of men to achieve his own purpose.

Sadducees

The Sadducees probably started around the same time as the Pharisees, perhaps named after Zadok- the pure priestly line from the time of Solomon. Being more secularly minded, they adopted the Greek customs. They took no part in the Maccabean wars. They were a priestly clique, most priests were Sadducees, especially the powerful priestly families, but not all Sadducees were priests. They were irreligious, rude, and disagreeable, having no following from among the people.

Though they were few, they were very wealthy and influential, having a great power. They were the aristocracy of the Jews, their head being the High Priest. They had control over the Sanhedrin, in spite of their rationalistic and worldly mind-set. When the Romans conquered Judah, the Sadducees co-operated with the Romans, in order to preserve their wealth and privileged position. They disappeared after the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

The Pharisees were the principle opponents of the Sadducees, their main point of disagreement being over the resurrection of the body, the day of judgment and the life to come, which the Sadducees denied, a point which Paul takes to his advantage at his trial in Acts 23:6-10. This belief also inspired the question Jesus was asked by a Sadducee about the wife who had been married to 7 brothers (Mk 12:18).

The Sadducees also rejected oral law, which was much respected by the Pharisees. They accepted only the 5 books of Moses as inspired scripture.

They were not mentioned often in the NT, but were also denounced by Jesus. Jesus aroused the wrath of the Sadducees by clearing the temple and by raising Lazarus from the dead. They are mentioned more in Acts than in the gospels – the declaration of the resurrection by the apostles completely went contrary to their beliefs, so was vigorously opposed.

They disagreed with much of the teaching of the Pharisees, being far more conservative and materialistic in their outlook. They denied the following:

- 1) Bodily resurrection from the dead.
- 2) Future punishment and rewards on the day of judgment.
- 3) Existence of angels and spirits.
- 4) Authority of any writings other than the 5 books of Moses.
- 5) They said there was no fate; prosperity came from one's own choice, and actions – an emphasis in free will.

Scribes

Scribes were the recognized experts in the study of the Law of Moses (Torah) – this is why they were called lawyers. They had an undistracted commitment to copy, study, and interpret the

Law. The priests originally did this. Ezra was a priest and a scribe (Neh 8:9). The scribes rose to prominence after the Babylonian exile. Most were very wealthy, and as they were not paid, supported themselves with their private means. Most scribes were Pharisees, but were distinct from them. They clashed with the Sadducees concerning the resurrection (Acts 23).

The scribes initiated the synagogue service. Some were members of the Sanhedrin (Mt 16:21). Scribes became more important after AD 70. They preserved written records of the oral law and the Hebrew scriptures (our OT). They were the people who copied scripture – for this we owe them a great debt. The Wisdom of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) describes the ideal scribe (Sir 39:1-11). They had three major functions:

- 1) To preserve and to defend the Law. The pass on the unwritten legal decisions (oral traditions). The decisions of leading scribes became the “oral law”, or “traditions”.
- 2) To teach others. They had disciples, who were expected to memorize the law word for word. They had lectures in the synagogue and temple.
- 3) The Sanhedrin entrusted them with the Law.

(II) Jewish Law

The Sanhedrin

The government and highest tribunal of the Jewish people, the Jewish Supreme Court. It consisted of 70 members, from Numbers 11, when Moses chose 70 people to work with him in government. It probably started in the 3rd century BC. It had 70 members, including priests, Sadducees, Pharisees, scribes and elders (heads of tribes or privileged families) and was presided over by the high priest. It had great power in Jesus' days, having all internal government control, but was answerable to the Romans. Even Jews in the Dispersion respected the Sanhedrin. It decided cases of civil and criminal justice. It could order arrest, but the Romans did not allow it to pass the death sentence (Jesus had to be taken before Pilate, the Roman procurator, before he could be crucified). The one exception was if a Gentile crossed the division in the temple. On the whole, there was a good system of justice with a bias towards innocence, although all the rules were broken for Jesus' trial. The Sanhedrin was abolished after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The Chief Priest or High Priest

The Chief Priest or High priest was the president of the Sanhedrin. In the OT, there was one high priest, a descendant of Aaron, who stayed in office until he died. In NT times, the high priest was a political figure, appointed by Herod, who could replace him at will.

The Herodians

As their names suggest, they were the party which supported the family of the tyrant Herod the Great. The Herodians plotted together with the Pharisees to kill Jesus, even though normally these two groups would have been opposed to each other (Mk 3:6, 12:13-17).

Levites

The Levites came from the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe. They took care of the practical running of the temple, including being the temple guards and musicians. There were the lowest lines of priestly hierarchy.

(III) Jewish Religion

The Temple

After the return from the exile in Babylon, a simple temple was built by Zerubbabel, with encouragements from Haggai and Zechariah, the prophets. This was replaced by a magnificent structure built by command of Herod the Great. The building had started in 19 BC and was still in progress during the time of the ministry of Jesus (Jn 2:2). It was completed in AD 64, 6 years before the Romans destroyed it. Herod's temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world, built with huge stones (Mk 13:1), with gold and marble.

The temple was the only place where sacrifices were allowed to take place. Herod's temple was overlooked by the Roman garrison in the fortress of Antonia, so the soldiers could keep watch over it. The Court of the Gentiles had degenerated into a market for sacrificial animals and money changers (Jn 2:13). In the porticos, any teacher could set up and gather men to listen to him. The Christians initially continued to meet in Solomon's Portico (Acts 5:12).

The Synagogue

There was only one temple, in Jerusalem, but each community had its own synagogue. It was the local center for worship and study of the Law, but no sacrificial ritual took place in the synagogue. The Jewish community met in the Sabbath day to listen to the reading and exposition of the law and prophets (Lk4:16) and for set prayers. The synagogue was also the local school, community center and center of local government, with the elders acting as the local magistrates.

The Ruler of the Synagogue

This person took care of the physical arrangements of the synagogue service. He took no part in the teaching.

The Dispersion

This is the name for the Jewish people who did not live in Judah. These were people who had not returned with Ezra after the exile. They chose to stay in the lands of the Captivity, probably for economic reasons. There were more Jews in the Dispersion than in the land of Israel. All the provinces and major cities of the Roman Empire had large Jewish populations. There were probably one million Jews in Egypt alone and were especially numerous in Alexandria. Jews from all over the known world were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

They were sometimes referred to as Hellenistic Jews. The dispersed Jews were less conservative than the Jews in Israel and had adapted to the Greek way of life after the conquests by Alexander the Great. Many were willing to learn from Greek ideas, but maintained their distinctive Jewish-ness. Many later writings like the Wisdom of Solomon and the writings of Philo were deeply influenced by Greek philosophy. Apollos, from Alexandria (Acts 18:24) most certainly can be grouped with these people.

Proselytes

The Jews among the Dispersion were far more aware of their mission to the Gentiles and made great efforts to win converts. For a Gentile to accept the Jewish religion, he had to take the drastic step of renouncing his own nationality and becoming a Jew and obeying all the Law of Moses. He had to be circumcised and baptized, and keep all the ritual food laws. In spite of these great demands, many people became Proselytes.

God Fearers

Many people were attracted to the purity and monotheism of Judaism in contrast to the decadent polytheism of the Roman Empire. They were happy to identify themselves with the ideals and faith of the Jews, but were reluctant to go the whole way and become Jews. Many of these God Fearers responded to the gospel and joined the church (Act 10:2 – Cornelius, 13:16, 17:4 – Thessalonica).

(IV) Jewish Scriptures and Writing

The Torah

This is the five books of Moses, the Law, often used to refer to the whole of the scriptures (our OT), the written Torah.

The Targum

Translations of portions of the Hebrew OT into Aramaic, with added oral traditions, paraphrases and interpretations, made mostly after the Babylonian exile.

The Talmud

The collection of various Jewish traditions and oral explanations of the written Torah, finally written down in the 2nd century AD. The written Torah was studied and the number of commandments counted. These were protected with new laws, which, if kept, would guarantee the keeping of the basic commandments. This was known as “making a hedge about the Torah”. These were then applied to every possible area and possibility of life.

The Talmud has four sections:

- 1) The Mishnah – the oral law, which was in existence by the end of the 2nd century BC, and was collected by Rabbi Judah the Prince. The Mishnah is divided into six orders or divisions (sedarim):
 - a. Seeds – agricultural laws and associated religious duties to priest, Levite, and the poor.
 - b. Feasts – Religious feasts, Sabbath observance and associated sacrifices.
 - c. Women – Laws of marriage, divorce, adultery, levirate marriage, Nazarite vow.
 - d. Fines – Civil, commercial and legal procedures, ethical maxims by Rabbis.
 - e. Sacred Things – Sacrifices, first-born, clean/unclean animals, description of Herod’s temple.
 - f. Purification – Levitical cleanness and uncleanness, purification.
- 2) Gemara – Commentary on the Mishna made by Rabbis from AD 200 to 500.
- 3) Halakhah – Legal enactment and precepts, including the discussions which led to the conclusions
- 4) Haggadah – Non legal interpretations.

The Midrash (Midrashim)

These are older commentaries in certain parts of the scriptures (the Pentateuch, 5 rolls, Lamentations, Psalms, and Proverbs), used for exposure of the scriptures for more devotional teaching or preaching. They probably pre-date the Talmud.

(V) Other Religious Groups

The Essenes

This group is normally associated with the Qumran Community and the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1974, which formed part of their library. Essenes were a monastic sect living in isolated communities in the desert, the Qumran Community, being one near the Dead Sea. Mystery still surrounds this group, it is not certain whether the Qumran Community were Essenes or not. The Essenes were formed by someone known as "The Teacher of Righteousness" in 165 BC, and were destroyed by the Jewish revolt in AD 68.

They considered themselves as the only true people of God, all others, including the Jewish leaders, were their enemies, seeing the high priest as illegitimate. They were "The Sons of Darkness". In contrast to the Pharisees, they had no hope of changing the political situations themselves, but dreamed of a mighty intervention of God to deliver them from Roman oppression.

In their monastic communities they studied the scriptures and wrote commentaries applying the OT passages to their own situation and expectations. These gave an ascetic apocalyptic strain to Judaism, very different from the establishment in Jerusalem. They expected two Messiahs, one priestly of Aaron, and one royal of Israel.

The Zealots

The Zealots were revolutionaries and freedom fighters, who attempted to throw off the Roman government by force. They believed that to be subject to Rome was an act of treason to their true King, God. One of their great heroes was Judas Maccabeus, who led the revolt which freed Judea from Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC. Another was Phineas, grandson of Aaron, who, when the Israelites had yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor, killed an Israelite who was sleeping with a Midianite woman (Num 25:1-18).

It was the Zealots who finally sparked off the great rebellion, which led to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. There had been attempted revolts by Zealots before the time of Jesus (Acts 5:36). One of the 12 apostles was a former Zealot (Lk 6:15). A well known Zealot was Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37), who rebelled during the census for taxation in AD 6. He had a passion to overthrow the Romans.

The Samaritans

The Samaritans were the descendants of the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom who remained in the land after the fall of Samaria and intermarried with the population imported from Assyria (2 Kings 17). They were despised and hated by the Jews because they had intermarried with foreigners and were seen as a heretical sect.

They built a temple on Mount Gerizim, near Shechem (Jn 4:20), but this was destroyed by Hyrcanus in 128 BC. Their religion was very similar to the Jewish religion. They only used the 5 books of Moses as their scriptures and awaited a prophet like Moses. A small community of Samaritans still survives today.

Recommended reading:

F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*