

Encyclopedia Article:

The Pharisees

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Definition

The Pharisees were a prominent Jewish religious group active during the Second Temple period, particularly from the second century BC until the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70.¹ They were distinguished by their commitment to the observance and interpretation of the Torah, accepting both the written Law and an oral tradition that shaped Jewish religious practice. Frequently mentioned in the New Testament, the Pharisees are often remembered for their disputes with Jesus. Modern scholarship, however, presents a more nuanced picture, recognising them as an influential movement whose traditions contributed significantly to the development of Rabbinic Judaism after the first century.²

Historical Origin

The precise origins of the Pharisees remain uncertain, although most scholars trace their emergence to the Hasmonean period during the second century BC, following the Maccabean Revolt and the establishment of an independent Jewish state.³ They appear to have developed as a movement committed to preserving and interpreting the Torah within everyday Jewish life, rather than focusing primarily on the Temple and its priesthood. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus describes the Pharisees as one of the three principal Jewish sects, alongside the Sadducees and the Essenes, indicating that they exercised considerable influence among the wider Jewish population despite not holding political authority.⁴ Their emphasis on careful observance of the Law and its interpretation enabled them to exert considerable religious authority.⁵ Following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70, many

¹ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), pp. 3–10.

² E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. 413–423.

³ Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, pp. 59–62, 79–80.

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.171–173; 18.11–17.

⁵ Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, pp. 73–75.

scholars regard Pharisaic traditions as providing the principal foundation for the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism.⁶

Beliefs and Religious Practices

The Pharisees were distinguished by their commitment to the interpretation and application of the Torah within everyday Jewish life. Alongside the written Law, they recognised an oral tradition that provided authoritative guidance for interpreting and observing the commandments, allowing the Law to be applied to changing circumstances.⁷ Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees affirmed belief in the resurrection of the dead, the existence of angels and spirits, and God's continuing involvement in human affairs.⁸ Josephus also records that the Pharisees believed God was actively involved in human affairs while maintaining that individuals remained morally responsible for their own actions.⁹

Their religious practices extended beyond Temple worship and emphasised holiness in daily life. Particular attention was given to ritual purity, prayer, Sabbath observance and the careful observance of dietary regulations, practices intended to reflect faithfulness to the covenant. Although the Gospels frequently portray the Pharisees in disputes with Jesus over the interpretation of the Law, modern scholarship cautions against reducing the movement to these encounters alone. Instead, the Pharisees are increasingly understood as a significant reform movement within Judaism whose commitment to the Law profoundly influenced the development of later Rabbinic tradition.¹⁰

⁶ Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, pp. 412–413.

⁷ Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, pp. 135–145.

⁸ Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, pp. 297–310.

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.13–15.

¹⁰ Joan E. Taylor, 'Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes in Josephus' Writings', in *The Oxford Handbook of Josephus*, ed. by Kenneth Atkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026), pp. 209–214.

The Pharisees also placed considerable importance on making holiness accessible beyond the Temple and priesthood. Rather than restricting ritual observance to priests, they sought to apply principles of purity and obedience within ordinary family and community life. This emphasis reflected a desire to ensure that all Israelites could participate in covenant living, contributing to the growing importance of synagogues, teaching and scriptural interpretation within Jewish society.¹¹

The Pharisees in the Gospels

The Pharisees appear frequently throughout the Gospels, where they are presented as significant religious leaders who regularly engaged in discussion and debate with Jesus. Many of these recorded encounters concern differing interpretations of the Mosaic Law, particularly in relation to Sabbath observance, ritual purity, fasting and the authority of oral tradition.¹² These exchanges often reflect differing interpretations of the purpose of the Law, with Jesus criticising practices that, in his view, placed greater emphasis on external observance than on justice, mercy and faithfulness (e.g. Matthew 23:23).¹³

Despite these disputes, the Gospel portrayal of the Pharisees is not uniformly negative. Individuals such as Nicodemus (John 3:1–21; 19:39) and Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:57–60; Mark 15:43–46; Luke 23:50–53; John 19:38–42) are depicted sympathetically, demonstrating that not all Jewish leaders opposed Jesus. Modern scholarship therefore cautions against viewing the Pharisees solely through the lens of conflict narratives. Many historians argue that the Gospel accounts reflect theological concerns and debates within first-century Judaism, rather than providing an exhaustive description of the

¹¹ Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, pp. 174–211.

¹² Yair Furstenberg, 'The Shared Image of Pharisaic Law in the Gospels and Rabbinic Tradition', in *The Pharisees*, ed. by Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), pp. 204–219.

¹³ Adela Yarbro Collins, 'Polemic against the Pharisees in Matthew 23', in *The Pharisees*, ed. by Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), pp. 148–169.

Pharisaic movement itself. Consequently, the Pharisees should be understood as an influential and diverse Jewish movement whose interactions with Jesus formed only one aspect of their wider historical significance.¹⁴

Legacy and Historical Significance

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70 was a landmark turning point in Jewish religious life. While groups such as the Sadducees largely disappeared following the destruction, many scholars regard Pharisaic traditions as providing the principal foundation for the subsequent development of Rabbinic Judaism.¹⁵ Their emphasis on studying and interpreting the Torah, together with worship and religious life beyond the Temple, enabled many of their beliefs and practices to continue despite major political and religious change. Modern scholarship has challenged earlier portrayals of the Pharisees as simply legalistic opponents of Jesus. Instead, they are increasingly recognised as a diverse and influential movement that made a lasting contribution to the development of Judaism.¹⁶ Their historical significance therefore extends beyond the New Testament, making them essential to understanding both early Christianity and the subsequent development of Jewish religious tradition.

Conclusion

The Pharisees were one of the most influential religious movements within Second Temple Judaism. Although the Gospels frequently depict them in conflict with Jesus, historical and modern scholarly evidence presents a more balanced picture of their beliefs, practices and significance. Their

¹⁴ Yair Furstenberg, 'Jesus against the Laws of the Pharisees: The Legal Woe Sayings and Second Temple Intersectarian Discourse', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 139.4 (2020), pp. 769–88.

¹⁵ Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, pp. 413–414.

¹⁶ Taylor, 'Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes', pp. 209–216.

commitment to the interpretation of the Torah and their enduring influence on the development of Rabbinic Judaism make the Pharisees essential to understanding both the historical context of the New Testament and the history of Judaism.

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