

The Pharisees

Introduction

The Pharisees were an influential Jewish religious movement during the Second Temple period and are frequently mentioned in the New Testament. They are particularly familiar to readers of the Gospels because they regularly appear in discussions and disputes with Jesus. However, the Pharisees should not simply be understood as opponents of Jesus. They formed part of the diverse religious world of first-century Judaism and were deeply concerned with interpreting the Torah and applying its commandments to everyday life. Our knowledge of them comes principally from the Jewish historian Josephus, the New Testament and later rabbinic literature.¹ Although these sources must be interpreted carefully, together they provide important evidence concerning Pharisaic beliefs, practices and influence.

Historical Background

The precise origins of the Pharisees remain uncertain. They emerged as a recognisable group during the Second Temple period, probably during or following the Maccabean era in the second century BC. Their Hebrew or Aramaic name is commonly connected with a term meaning 'separated ones', although the exact significance of this description remains debated.²

First-century Judaism was not a single uniform movement. Josephus describes several Jewish groups, particularly the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes.³ The Pharisees differed from the priestly and aristocratic Sadducees on significant questions of religious interpretation and belief. Nevertheless, it is important not to exaggerate their control over Jewish society. E. P. Sanders argues that the Pharisees were influential but should not be regarded as exercising complete authority over Jewish religious life.⁴ The Jerusalem Temple remained at the centre of Jewish worship, while ordinary Jews shared many beliefs and practices regardless of their association with particular groups.

Beliefs and Interpretation of the Torah

One of the most important characteristics associated with the Pharisees was their concern for the interpretation of the Torah. They believed that God's law had practical implications beyond the Temple and should shape ordinary life. Josephus distinguishes them from the Sadducees partly through their acceptance of traditions inherited from earlier generations.⁵

The Pharisees were therefore concerned with questions such as Sabbath observance, ritual purity, tithing and food. Their debates about such matters were not necessarily attempts to make religion unnecessarily difficult. Rather, they reflected an effort to determine how Israel could live faithfully according to God's commandments.

The Pharisees were also associated with beliefs concerning resurrection and the future judgement of humanity. Acts contrasts the Pharisees and Sadducees by stating that the Sadducees denied resurrection, angels and spirits, while the Pharisees accepted such beliefs.⁶ This distinction is significant because belief in resurrection also occupies an important place within early Christianity.

The Pharisees and Jesus

The Pharisees feature prominently in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus debates with them over several issues, including Sabbath observance, purity, fasting and the interpretation of the commandments. For example, Mark records a dispute after Jesus' disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath. Jesus responds that 'the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath'.⁷

Such passages demonstrate genuine disagreements about how the Torah should be interpreted. However, they should not be taken to mean that Jesus opposed Judaism itself. Jesus and the Pharisees operated within the same Jewish religious environment and shared important convictions, including belief in Israel's God and the authority of Scripture. Their disputes can therefore be understood as internal Jewish debates concerning the correct interpretation and practice of the law.

Matthew contains some of the New Testament's strongest criticism of the Pharisees. In Matthew 23 Jesus repeatedly condemns scribes and Pharisees for hypocrisy.⁸ These passages have strongly influenced later Christian perceptions of the group. Nevertheless, historians must distinguish between the Gospel writers' theological presentation and what can confidently be reconstructed about the historical Pharisees. The New Testament is an essential source, but it was not written as a neutral history of the Pharisaic movement.

The Gospels themselves also present a more complicated picture than simple hostility. In Luke, for example, Pharisees invite Jesus to meals, creating settings for conversation and debate.⁹ The New Testament therefore provides evidence of both conflict and interaction between Jesus and members of the Pharisaic movement.

Paul and the Pharisees

The apostle Paul provides another important connection between Pharisaism and early Christianity. In Philippians he describes himself as 'as to the law, a Pharisee'.¹⁰ Acts similarly presents Paul declaring, 'I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees', during his appearance before the Jewish council.¹¹

Paul's background demonstrates that the relationship between the Pharisees and the earliest Christian movement cannot be reduced to straightforward opposition. One of Christianity's most influential early missionaries emerged from a Pharisaic background, and aspects of the Jewish religious world in which Paul was educated continued to shape the language and questions addressed in his letters.

The Pharisees after the Destruction of the Temple

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in AD 70 dramatically transformed Jewish religious life. Without the Temple and its sacrificial system, Jewish communities faced the challenge of preserving and practising their traditions under very different circumstances.

The relationship between the Pharisees and the later rabbinic movement is complex. Rabbinic literature preserves traditions concerning earlier Jewish teachers, some of whom are associated with the Pharisaic world. However, later rabbinic Judaism should not simply be treated as identical to pre-AD 70 Pharisaism. The surviving evidence was written and edited later, and historians therefore use it cautiously when reconstructing the Pharisees of Jesus' lifetime.¹² Nevertheless, Pharisaic traditions concerning Torah interpretation contributed significantly to the religious environment from which rabbinic Judaism eventually developed.

Significance

The Pharisees are significant for understanding both ancient Judaism and the New Testament. They represent one expression of the diversity that characterised Judaism during the Second Temple period. Their concern with interpreting Torah, their acceptance of inherited traditions and their beliefs concerning resurrection distinguish them in ancient descriptions from groups such as the Sadducees.

They are equally important for interpreting the ministry of Jesus. Gospel controversies involving the Pharisees reveal debates about how God's commandments should be understood and practised. Reading these passages within their historical Jewish setting prevents the mistaken conclusion that Christianity and Judaism were already completely separate religions during Jesus' ministry.

The Pharisees should therefore be understood not merely through the negative stereotype that later developed from certain Gospel passages, but as participants in the lively religious debates of their age. Their history illuminates the Jewish environment of Jesus, the origins of Christianity and the development of post-Temple Jewish tradition.

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