

- This "I AM" statement likely came on the next morning (8:2) after the Feast of Booths (7:2).
- The torches would have been extinguished at the end of the feast.
- Jesus came back to the temple on that morning (8:2), and He was in the treasury (8:20)

On the first day of the Feast of Booths, three 75 ft. tall candlesticks (torches) were erected in The Court of the Women where the treasury was located. This is the same treasury where Jesus noted a poor widow who gave her sacrificial gift (Mark 12:41-42)

John 8:12-20 (ESV)

¹²Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."** <- 1Jn 1:5-10 - Why is walking in the light essential?

¹³So the Pharisees said to him, **"You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true."**

¹⁴Jesus answered, **"Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going."**

¹⁵**You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one.**

¹⁶**Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.**

¹⁷**In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true.**

¹⁸**I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me."**

¹⁹They said to him therefore, **"Where is your Father?"**

Jesus answered, **"You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."**

²⁰These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

"light" (12)

-Compare to Jn 1:4-5
"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

-Jesus professed to be not only the eternal source of spiritual nourishment (bread of life) but He also is the genuine light by which His followers can learn the truth and avoid the darkness.

"the" - He is the only source of truth

"your testimony is not true" (13)

-In the legal sense of "true" as evidence for trial.

-One who testifies about himself needs supporting witnesses to validate his testimony.

-The Law required two witnesses for testimony to be valid (Dt 17:6; 19:15).

-Jesus admitted as much Himself (5:31) if He was the only one bearing witness.

-As in 5:31-47, Jesus invokes the testimony of God the Father to validate His claims, but first He disputes the Pharisees' right to charge Him with error.

"I alone..." (16)

"bears witness..." (18)

-After claiming that His testimony is actually exempt from their requirement because of His unique origin, Jesus demonstrates that He is indeed compliant with their legal procedure anyway.

-There are two witnesses: Jesus Himself and God the Father. (5:31-47)

Pharisees - Members of a Jewish party that exercised strict piety according to Mosaic law. They became active around 150 BC and endured as a distinct party until being subsumed into the Rabbinic movement around AD 135.

"I know where I came from" (14)

-No earthly witness is capable of testifying on His behalf because of His divine origin (3:13; 5:19-24).

"I judge no one" (15)

-In the sense of condemning people, which is what the Pharisees were doing. There was no need for the Savior to come into the world to condemn it; it was condemned already (3:17)

"Where is your Father" (19) A typical example of misunderstanding in John's gospel (2:21; 3:4; 4:11; 6:52; 7:35)

"You know neither me nor my Father" (19) A common charge in John (55; 14:7; 16:3). The religious leaders of Jesus' day were especially proud of their knowledge of Scripture, but Jesus accuses them of missing the point. If they had understood it, they would know God and recognize Him. Compare 5:37-38.

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Teacher's Notes

Context

John 7:2 (ESV)

² Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was at hand.

John 8:2 (ESV)

² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.

Mark 12:41–42 (ESV)

⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny.

"light" (12)

John 1:4–5 (ESV)

⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

1 John 1:5–10 (ESV)

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

"your testimony is not true" (13)

Deuteronomy 17:6 (ESV)

⁶ On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.

Deuteronomy 19:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

John 5:31–47 (ESV)

³¹ If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. ³² There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. ³³ You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴ Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. ³⁶ But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, ³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. ³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. ⁴¹ I do not receive glory from people. ⁴² But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. ⁴³ I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. ⁴⁴ How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵ Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

"I know where I came from" (14)

John 3:13 (ESV)

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

John 5:19–24 (ESV)

¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. ²¹ For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. ²² For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

"I judge no one" (15)

John 3:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

"Where is your Father" (19)

John 2:21 (ESV)

²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

John 3:4 (ESV)

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

John 4:11 (ESV)

¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

John 6:52 (ESV)

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

John 7:35 (ESV)

³⁵ The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?"

"You know neither me nor my Father" (19)

John 8:55 (ESV)

⁵⁵ **But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word.**

John 14:7 (ESV)

⁷ **If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."**

John 16:3 (ESV)

³ **And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.**

Pharisees

Pharisees (fair'i-seez), a group of specially observant and influential Jews, mainly in Palestine, from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D. The name is obscure. It may mean 'separate ones' in Hebrew, referring to their observance of ritual purity and tithing, or less probably 'the interpreters,' referring to their unique interpretations of biblical law. The Pharisees are described by two first-century sources, the NT and the historian Josephus, and also by rabbinic literature, which covers a broader period of time. Each literature gives a different account of the Pharisees and modern descriptions differ widely depending on which sources are accepted and how conflicts are resolved. The picture of the Pharisees derived only from the Gospels and formerly accepted as historical, that they were little more than legalists and hypocrites and were culpably blind to Jesus' message, has largely been discredited as early Christian polemic against Jewish and rabbinic leadership. The interpretation of the Pharisees as religious liberals emanated from modern Jewish apologetics and is ill suited to antiquity. Though a comprehensive and secure description of the Pharisees eludes us, some insight can be gained from each of the ancient sources.

According to Josephus: Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century who wrote for non-Jews in Greek, calls the Pharisees a 'choice [of life]' and a 'philosophy.' He gives some general characteristics of the Pharisees in contrast to the Sadducees and Essenes; he recounts some of the activities and influence of this group; and he mentions occasional influential Pharisees. According to Josephus, the Pharisees were the group most influential with the people, were noted for their accurate and therefore authoritative interpretations of Jewish law, and had their own traditions and way of life to which they were faithful. They had a simple standard of living and cultivated harmonious relations with others. On the issue of free will, a distinguishing factor among Greek philosophies, Josephus places the Pharisees between the Essenes and Sadducees because they accepted the influence of both fate (or providence) and free will on human actions. They believed that the soul survives death and is punished or rewarded with another life. Though Josephus acknowledges the Pharisees' prominence and even claims to be one in his *Life*, he criticizes their total power over Queen Alexandra (76-67 B.C.), their opposition to other rulers, and their attacks on their enemies. He often refers to their reputation as accurate interpreters of the law, without affirming it himself. Some Pharisees incited opposition to the government, though others worked with the chief priests to keep order. In the first century Josephus says they numbered six thousand.

At no time do we learn how one 'joined' this group and what was required to stay in it. It may have been like a Hellenistic school, teaching a way of life, or a political, social faction competing for recognition and power within Judaism, or a sect separating itself from the parent body. The Pharisees exhibited various tendencies at different times, so they probably changed over the two centuries of their existence as different persons and groups from the Pharisees exercised diverse roles in society.

In the NT: In the NT the Pharisees play the role of Jesus' opponents and are almost always cast in a negative light, because they are presented as proponents of a way of living Jewish life that differed from Jesus' way. They are associated with the scribes alone (in Matt. and Luke) but seldom with the elders, chief priests, *and* scribes, who are the leaders in Jerusalem. The Pharisees were zealous observers of the law, prominent among the people and especially concerned with ritual purity, tithing food according to OT law, and correct observance of Sabbath. These are typical sectarian interests. They were learned in the law and sometimes contrasted with the Sadducees from whom they differed especially on resurrection (Acts 23:1–8; in Mark 12:18–26 Jesus agrees with the Pharisees against the Sadducees). When Paul wishes to identify his own place in Judaism, he says he is a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5; Acts 23:6). Yet, in the Gospels the Pharisees are condemned as hypocrites (Matt. 23) because they are used as opponents of Jesus. In general, the Gospel writers, who wrote several decades after Jesus, manifest little accurate and consistent knowledge of Jewish leadership and groups from the period before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

In Rabbinic Literature: Rabbinic literature, which in its present form dates from A.D. 200 and later, contains three types of data. The laws associated with the names of pre-70 Pharisees and with the schools of Shammai and Hillel, first-century Pharisaic leaders, concern ritual purity, tithing, and Sabbath observance, sectarian concerns that also surfaced in the Gospels. These laws may be accurately attributed to them, according to the contemporary scholar J. Neusner. Stories about these Pharisaic leaders present them as authoritative and dominant figures in Jewish society, religion, and politics. But since the rabbis who wrote these stories traced their lineage to the Pharisees, it is likely that they portrayed the Pharisees in their own image two or three centuries later. Another group of rabbinic texts speak of the 'separatists' (Heb. perushim), often presumed to be the Pharisees. But sometimes this term refers to dissidents who are clearly not Pharisees, and sometimes it refers to ascetics. In passages where the Pharisees are contrasted to Sadducees, the Pharisees are scholars who accept the written and oral law. They are the leaders who set the law for Jewish society and the judges who enforce it. Yet this portrait fits the rabbis after A.D. 70 rather than the Pharisees in the Temple period.

Though a full history and description of the Pharisees is impossible, some characteristics are probable. The Pharisees had their own traditions on how to live a life faithful to the Judaism to which they were devoted. Their internal rules were sectarian with an emphasis on ritual purity, food tithes, and Sabbath observances. They were admired by the people and functioned at least some of the time as a social and political force against foreign and hellenized Jewish leaders (i.e., those Jewish leaders who were sympathetic to Greek language and culture). Some or all were learned in the law and some were politically powerful. **See also** Essenes; Josephus; Parables; Rabbi, Rabboni; Sabbath; Sadducees.

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¹ Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). In [Harper's Bible dictionary](#) (1st ed., pp. 782–783). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

PHARISEES

I. History

Reconstructing any Jewish sects (including *SADDUCEES, *ESSENES, *ZEALOTS, *SAMARITANS, and probably many others) is very difficult. Apart from the Jewish historian, Josephus, all the sources we have are 'travellers' tales' (e.g. Pliny, *NH* 5.73) and passing references, with the later rabbinic traditions which are of questionable value and strongly influenced by the destruction of the *TEMPLE. All authors are biased, and most modern reconstructions use these sources far too uncritically.

While not presuming his readers to be familiar with the Pharisees, Josephus says nothing about aspects we would find most significant: their origins, doctrines, self-understanding and social structures.

His discussion of Jewish sects is part of his overall purpose to explain the downfall of God's chosen people. He therefore focuses on divine providence, predestination and free will. Josephus' Pharisees appear to occupy a mediating position between the rigid predestinarianism of the *ESSENES and the human freedom asserted by the *SADDUCEES. He regards them as an attractive, popular and powerful faction, ascetic in lifestyle, concerned to present themselves as rigorists for the Torah. They have a body of additional interpretations and traditions, and religious practises are performed according to their interpretation (see especially *Ant.* 18.12–17). But he sees their major role as political, claiming they effectively controlled the state from Alexandra Salome (76–67 BCE) to Herod. Yet his narratives of this period hardly mention them, and certainly fail to demonstrate their political power. Hence many scholars see Josephus' claims as exaggerated, if not mere propaganda.

Rabbinic traditions say nothing about politics: the concerns are exclusively religious. We cannot assume the terms 'Pharisees', 'sages' or 'rabbis' refer to the group we know as Pharisees. The majority of the earliest traditions focus on purity laws; particularly washing, eating, tithing and festival Sabbath observance. Neusner therefore suggested that the Pharisees saw themselves, though laymen, as the 'kingdom of priests' of Ex. 19:6, observing the legislation relevant to a priest on Temple duty. (Similar motivation and concerns, interestingly, appear in the *DEAD SEA SCROLLS.) In the NT, too, cultic purity seems to be a major Pharisaic concern.

II. Relationship to other groups

All four gospels link *SCRIBES and Pharisees (Mt. 5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23; Mk. 2:16; 7:1; Lk. 5:21, 30; 6:7; 7:30; 11:53; 15:2; Jn. 8:3; c/ Acts 23:9). This only indicates that some scribes were Pharisees, and likely from their learning to take leading roles within the movement.

Matthew alone links Pharisees with *SADDUCEES (3:7; 16:1, 6, 11, 12). They might thus represent the leaders of the people, but generally the evangelists see various combinations of chief priests, elders and scribes in that role. Perhaps these two were seen as most doctrinally

distinctive from other strands of Judaism. The opposition between them is important to Josephus and the rabbis; cf. also Acts 23:6–10.

Matthew once links Pharisees with the chief priests (21:45), and in John this combination is the moving force behind the formal opposition to Jesus (7:32, 45; 11:47, 57; 18:3). This might support Josephus' claims that they wielded political power. Although Matthew appears to intend two separate groups, Josephus notes that some priests were themselves Pharisees.

III. Teaching

The problems discussed above make it hard to be certain what was distinctively Pharisaic. Josephus' statements about the Pharisees being 'accurate interpreters of the Law' (e.g. *BJ* 2.162) must be tempered by his other comments attributing such accuracy to all Jewish sects, especially the priesthood. That they were conservative on some parts of the Law and liberal on others, adding also their own traditions, is neither surprising nor unique to their group. Any claim to be the definitive exponents of the Law would, however, give a cutting edge to Jesus' fierce denunciations.

The only point on which all sources agree is the Pharisees' belief in an afterlife. Josephus appears to contrast their position with Essene dualism: unrighteous souls are punished while the righteous pass into 'other bodies' (*BJ* 2.163), perhaps at a general resurrection.

IV. Influence

The traditional image of the all-powerful legalistic Pharisee is manifestly incorrect. Claims that they controlled cultic practice are incredible and contradicted by the evidence. However, our sources do suggest a disproportionate influence on society. There is, though, no reason to suppose that they exercised any direct influence in the synagogues or other parts of everyday Jewish life. Josephus, the rabbinic materials and the Gospel of John would also suggest their influence was limited to the environs of Jerusalem, though Mark and Luke locate Pharisees in Galilee (see Lk. 5:17).

An important factor in assessing their influence is the impression given by the synoptic writers that it was the Pharisees who took it upon themselves to vet Jesus' credentials and to seek to destroy his subversive new teaching. Hence they are portrayed as natural authorities in the community of faith, or at least in that part of most interest to the early Christian community. This coheres with both Josephus' report of their claims to 'accuracy' in interpretation, and with what we know of the early life of the erstwhile Pharisee, Paul (Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:5f). In Luke, in particular, they appear to regard Jesus as an equal, even while suffering his biting criticisms. In Acts they appear as a voice of moderation in the *SANHEDRIN. But in general 'the Pharisees' quickly became a stereotype for the opponents of Jesus.

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Pharisees

—separatists (Heb. persahin, from parash, "to separate"). They were probably the successors of the Assideans (i.e., the "pious"), a party that originated in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes in revolt against his heathenizing policy. The first mention of them is in a description by Josephus of the three sects or schools into which the Jews were divided (B.C. 145). The other two sects were the Essenes and the Sadducees. In the time of our Lord they were the popular party (John 7:48). They were extremely accurate and minute in all matters appertaining to the law of Moses (Matt. 9:14; 23:15; Luke 11:39; 18:12). Paul, when brought before the council of Jerusalem, professed himself a Pharisee (Acts 23:6–8; 26:4, 5).

There was much that was sound in their creed, yet their system of religion was a form and nothing more. Theirs was a very lax morality (Matt. 5:20; 15:4, 8; 23:3, 14, 23, 25; John 8:7). On the first notice of them in the New Testament (Matt. 3:7), they are ranked by our Lord with the Sadducees as a "generation of vipers." They were noted for their self-righteousness and their pride (Matt. 9:11; Luke 7:39; 18:11, 12). They were frequently rebuked by our Lord (Matt. 12:39; 16:1–4).

From the very beginning of his ministry the Pharisees showed themselves bitter and persistent enemies of our Lord. They could not bear his doctrines, and they sought by every means to destroy his influence among the people.³

² De Lacey, D. R. (1996). [Pharisees](#). In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., pp. 914–915). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

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Pharisees

(Φαρισαῖος, *Pharisaïos*). Members of a Jewish party that exercised strict piety according to Mosaic law. The Pharisees were a sect within early Judaism, becoming active around 150 BC and enduring as a distinct party until being subsumed into the Rabbinic movement around AD 135.

Introduction

Although the origin of the Pharisees is disputed (they may date as far back as the period of resettlement in Palestine following Babylonian exile), the group appears to have become the primary voice of Judaism following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. The Pharisees developed a tradition of strict interpretation of the Mosaic law, developing an extensive set of oral extensions of the law designed to maintain religious identity and purity.

The origin of the term “Pharisee” comes from the Aramaic word פְּרִישׁ (*prsh*), which means “to separate,” “divide,” or “distinguish.” Greenspoon asserts that the sect emerged from the Hasidim, a group of strictly devout separatists known as the “righteous” or “pious” (see Greenspoon, *Between Alexander and Antioch*, 343). The Pharisees kept themselves apart both socially and theologically from aristocratic sympathizers with Hellenism and the uneducated commoners. Some were so committed to separation from Hellenism that they were willing to take up arms in defense of their beliefs, even against fellow Jews.

Understanding the Pharisees

Even though a substantial amount of information about the sect is available from the New Testament and other first- and second-century AD literature, any conclusions reached about the Pharisees are tentative for the following reasons:

1. The nature and value of the early sources concerning the sect are debated.
2. Pharisaism likely consisted of diverse elements of beliefs and practices at any one time, thus confounding a one-dimensional understanding of the group.
3. The sect likely changed in form and function over time; as a result, the immediate historical context of the occasion within which the Pharisees are being viewed must be considered.

New Testament Sources

The New Testament—especially the Gospels—provides the majority of information regarding the Pharisees. Viewed as a collective witness of the time of Jesus, the Gospels demonstrate common features of the Pharisaic sect as well as each writer’s individual perspectives on that sect.

Mark

Mark’s Gospel offers the briefest treatment of the Pharisees, and the available information predominately consists of a quick series of questions early in his account:

- Mark 2:16—Some of the scribes of the Pharisees ask the disciples why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, insinuating that Pharisees would not do so.

- Mark 2:18—People come to Jesus and ask Him why the disciples of John the Baptizer and those of the Pharisees fast, while His disciples do not.
- Mark 2:23–24—The Pharisees ask Jesus why His disciples break the Pharisaic rules of Sabbath-keeping by plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath.

Mark later provides a more extended treatment of the Pharisees and their practices. The Pharisees and their scribes approach Jesus and ask Him why the disciples eat bread without first washing their hands (Mark 7:5). In framing the episode, Mark notes that “all the Jews,” not just the Pharisees, practice ritual hand-washing (Mark 7:3). He explains that the Pharisees observe a great many “traditions of the elders” (τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, *tēn paradosin tōn presbyterōn*), including ritual purification between visiting the marketplace and eating, and washing cups, pots, and other eating instruments (Mark 7:4). In response (Mark 7:6–13), Jesus chastises the Pharisees by distinguishing their observance of the “traditions of men” (τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, *tēn paradosin tōn anthrōpōn*) from the “commandment of God” (τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ θεοῦ, *tēn entolēn tou theou*; Mark 7:8). He frames His condemnation in a contrast between internal and external piety.

The Pharisees then pose a set of challenges to Jesus, hoping to entrap Him in His speech. These challenges come at the midpoint of Mark’s Gospel, just as Jesus begins to anticipate His passion.

- They demand a sign from heaven (Mark 8:11).
- They question the lawfulness of divorce (Mark 10:2).
- They (accompanied by Herodians) ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–14).

It is unusual that Mark records the Pharisees interacting with the Herodians (Mark 3:6; 8:15; 12:13) because the Pharisees were generally completely opposed to the accommodating nature of the Herodian court. This element of Mark’s account may suggest that the Pharisees were not a unified body, but were comprised of diverse elements—some of whom actually cooperated with the Herodians.

Matthew

Matthew’s account is unique in that he presents a disdain for the Pharisees. Matthew includes much of Mark’s treatment of the Pharisees in his Gospel and expands on it. For example, in the account of John the Baptist’s ministry, Matthew is the only Gospel writer to record John’s words to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for baptism: “Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee the coming wrath?” (Matt 3:7). Jesus’ words near the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel reflect this language: “Serpents, brood of vipers, how are you to flee the judgment of Hell?” (Matt 23:33). In Matthew’s Gospel, it appears that the beliefs and practices of some of the Pharisees serve as a foil to reveal the genuine righteousness of Jesus.

Though He admits that the Pharisees are pious, Jesus recasts true righteousness as an inward disposition opposed to the merely external form of righteousness. For example, in His

Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1–7:29), Jesus warns His would-be followers that His true disciples must demonstrate righteousness that exceeds even that of the Pharisees (Matt 5:20), suggesting that formal piety lacks the force of genuine internal righteousness. The Pharisees object to Jesus' stance and are indignant (Matt 15:1–20, especially 15:12). Jesus instructs His followers to do as the Pharisees say, but not as they do (Matt 23:2–3).

In the extended discourse that follows, Matthew records Jesus' condemnation of Pharisaic practices, including:

- Public demonstrations of piety, such as wearing phylacteries and fringed garments (Matt 23:5)
- Claiming seats of honor in public settings (Matt 23:6)
- Claiming titles of distinction (Matt 23:7)

In Matthew 23:8–12, Jesus rebuts these practices by offering a different model of piety; He follows this by a series of "woe" statements to the Pharisees in which He:

- Condemns their practices of recruitment (Matt 23:15), oath-making (Matt 23:16), and tithing (Matt 23:23)
- Criticizes their emphases on trivial matters of the Law while ignoring more weighty aspects (Matt 23:23–24)
- Accuses them of presenting the outward appearances of holiness while being consumed with inward vainglory (Matt 23:25–28).

In his account, Matthew pairs the Pharisees with various other groups, including:

- The Sadducees (Matt 3:7; 16:1, 6, 11–12)
- The scribes (Matt 12:38; 15:1; and Matt 23:1–39)
- The chief priests (Matt 21:45; 27:62)

As in Mark, the Pharisees—in combination with different groups—challenge Jesus by demanding signs as a means of testing Him (Matt 12:38; 16:1).

Luke

Although Luke's Gospel shares much material with Matthew and Mark, he provides a number of unique accounts of the Pharisees—many of which provide a slightly less decisive view of the Pharisees. The Pharisees first appear in Luke 5:17–26 during the healing of the paralytic, when Jesus uses the physical healing of the paralytic to demonstrate His authority in forgiving sins. The scribes and Pharisees respond with charges of blasphemy (Luke 5:21). However, Luke also notes that the entire assembly is awed by the healing of the paralytic (Luke 5:26).

Luke includes several accounts of Jesus interacting with Pharisees and using them as negative examples in His teaching. In Luke 7:36, Jesus dines with a Pharisee. When a sinful woman anoints His feet, Jesus offers a parable in which He contrasts the gratitude and hospitality of the woman with that of His host (the Pharisee; Luke 7:37–50). When Jesus dines

at the home of a Pharisee another time, the meal serves as a channel through which He offers a corrective to Pharisaic rules governing the Sabbath. This establishes a series of contrasts between the Pharisees and their antitheses: tax collectors and sinners. Jesus portrays this contrast by comparing the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:10–14), and in His parables of “lost things” (Luke 15:1–32). In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the dutiful son seems to exemplify the pious Pharisees, whereas the prodigal son represents the repentant sinner.

Jesus’ encounters with the Pharisees provide insights into the nature of some of their members. Luke records that they rejected the baptism of John (Luke 7:29–30). He also characterizes them as “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14). At the same time, however, at least some of the Pharisees seemed to have been curious about Jesus: they ask Him when the kingdom of God is to be expected (Luke 17:20), and some of them even warn Jesus of Herod’s plot to seize Him (Luke 13:31).

John

John’s Gospel shares few points of contact with the first three in terms of the Pharisees. In John 3:1, John introduces Nicodemus, a “ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1) who comes to Jesus when it is dark and addresses Him as “teacher” or “rabbi” (ῥαββί, *rhabbi*; John 3:2). He seems to be speaking for a larger group of people, acknowledging that Jesus’ signs do authenticate Him as one sent by God. The questions Nicodemus asks do not seem to be tests or traps, but reflect a genuine desire to learn more (John 3:4, 9). Later verses indicate that Nicodemus remained at least somewhat sympathetic to Jesus, urging the religious officials to give Him a fair hearing (John 7:50–51). These deliberations demonstrate a developing division among the people (including the officers sent by the Pharisees to arrest Jesus) over the issue of Jesus (John 7:43–48). Later, John relates that even some of the authorities become advocates of Jesus, but were reluctant to proclaim their opinions publicly for fear of being excommunicated by the Pharisees (John 12:42–43).

Nicodemus appears to be a standout among the Pharisees, even attending to the crucified body of Jesus (John 19:39). Although some Pharisees at large refer to Jesus as “teacher” or “rabbi” (ῥαββί, *rhabbi*; John 8:4), this ascription appears more sarcastic than genuine, as evidenced by John’s report that their inquiry was part of an attempt to entrap Him (John 8:6). John records a scene where a woman accused of adultery is brought before Jesus, followed by an account of the healing of a young blind man (John 9:1–41); together, these accounts serve as extended narratives in which the Pharisees figure prominently. Although Jesus seems to draw a growing number of loyalists from the sect (John 9:16), the majority view of the Pharisees is antithetical to Jesus, indicating opposition to His claims of authority.

Acts

Although it is an extension of Luke’s Gospel narrative, Acts provides a unique perspective by providing information about the Pharisees during the dawn of the church age. In Acts 5:34, Gamaliel—a respected scribe of the Pharisees—settles a commotion prompted by the

preaching of Peter and the apostles by inviting the providence of God to determine the apostles' fate (Acts 5:34–39). This account demonstrates a positive characteristic of the Pharisees: in their high view of divine providence, they maintain that God cares deeply enough about His people to ensure that His will is accomplished. Acts 15:5 indicates that some of the Pharisees were becoming followers of Jesus, but maintained that Gentile Christians must be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses. Paul later capitalizes on his doctrinal sympathies and identification with the Pharisees by setting them against the Sadducees (Acts 23:6–10). Amid these proceedings, Luke notes that Pharisees were in part defined by their belief in bodily resurrection, angels, and spirits (Acts 23:8). Later accounts record Paul's involvement with the Pharisees (which Paul calls "the strictest party of our religion," Acts 26:5).

The only other explicit mention of the Pharisees by name in the New Testament comes in Phil 3:5, where Paul asserts his status as a Pharisee.

Josephus

Josephus is the most significant Jewish source for a study of Pharisaism. Noting that he himself "lived as a Pharisee" beginning at age 19 (see *Life* 1:12), Josephus lists the Pharisees as one of three primary sects of Judaism (the other two being the Sadducees and Essenes; *Life* 1:10; *Antiquities* 13:171–72; 18:11; *Jewish War* 2:119). He reports that the Pharisees rose to power during the reign of the Hasmonean prince, John Hyrcanus (135–105 BC). Hyrcanus seemed to have some sort of relationship with the Pharisees, but broke with them when a dinner guest named Eleazar confronted Hyrcanus concerning his usurping of the high priesthood. When the Pharisees failed to respond to Eleazar's accusations in ways he expected, Hyrcanus became opposed to them, abolishing their decrees and banning their practices of religious piety (*Antiquities* 13:296). However, the large base of popular support was with the Pharisees (*Antiquities* 13:298). Within a generation, the Pharisees emerged as the dominant ruling political and religious party under the reign of Queen Alexandra Salome (76–67 BC; *Antiquities* 13:401–10; compare *Jewish War* 1:110–12). Although the Pharisees' political party seemed to have lapsed under Herod, they nevertheless retained some degree of influence within the Sanhedrin and a great deal of influence among the populace. Josephus records that, at one point, there were 6,000 Pharisees (*Antiquities* 17:42).

Josephus' description of the Pharisees focuses on their strict devotion and the refined skill they had in the Law (*Antiquities* 17:41; *Jewish War* 2:162; *Life* 1:191). He records their primary traits, indicating that they:

- despised delicacies in diet (*Antiquities* 18:12)
- followed reason—possibly an allusion to the pragmatic nature of their political-religious posture (*Antiquities* 18:12; *Life* 1:191–92)
- honored their elders (*Antiquities* 18:12; *Life* 1:191–92)
- held in tension both a divine fatalism and human agency (*Antiquities* 18:13; *Jewish War* 2:162–63)
- believed in the immortality of the soul

- believed in punishments and rewards in the afterlife (*Antiquities* 18:14; *Jewish War* 2:163)

Josephus also notes that the masses of commoners accepted many of these doctrines (*Antiquities* 18:15), so much so that even the Sadducees were subject to the Pharisees in some measure (*Antiquities* 18:17). He further characterizes the sect, in contrast to the Sadducees, as fraternal, peaceable, and civic-minded (*Jewish War* 2:166), noting especially how some of the Pharisees tried to diffuse an insurrection of Jews (*Jewish War* 2:411).

Additional Jewish texts may allude to the Pharisees, but the value of these texts is disputed:

- The rabbinic writings
- The Dead Sea Scrolls
- 1 Maccabees
- Psalms of Solomon
- The Lives of the Prophets
- The Scroll of Fasting
- Pseudo-Philo and 4 Ezra

Recent Scholarship

Modern scholarship concerning the Pharisees can be roughly divided into three primary eras.

First Era

The first era follows Saldarini's sociological approach to understanding the history and function of Pharisaism (*Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*). Geiger suggested that Pharisaism consisted of two schools of thought (*Sadducäer und Pharisäer*, 11–54):

1. The conservative school of Rabbi Shammai, which sought to preserve ancient models of piety consistent with the Sadducean commitment to Torah in its written form.
2. The liberal school of Rabbi Hillel, which sought to enliven Judaism by accommodating the Law to changing social and political circumstances.

Geiger's conclusion has been influential since the mid-19th century, and has been widely perpetuated in various forms. For example, Wellhausen, in the tradition of the "history of religions" approach (*Religionsgeschichte*), argued that first-century Christianity was an inevitable response to the degenerating legalism of the Pharisees (*Pharisees and Sadducees*). Voices within this period largely emphasized the negative portraits of the Pharisees in the New Testament writings.

Second Era

The second era sought to correct the seemingly anti-Semitic tone of interpretation. For example:

- Lauterbach followed Geiger's analysis of the conservative-liberal factions within Pharisaism, arguing that the group was a progressive lay movement arising in opposition to the accommodating tendencies of the Sadducean priestly aristocracy (*Rabbinic Essays*).

- Ginzberg noted that the differences between the two factions of Pharisaism were less concerned with commitments to the written Torah, and more focused on audience: whereas Sadducean and Shammaite interpretations of the Law were targeted toward the urban aristocracy, the more conservative Pharisaic tendencies were in the direction of the uneducated agrarian class. In this way, different interpretations addressed different constituencies (*Religion of the Pharisees*, 88–108).
- Finkelstein maintained the distinctiveness of the conservative and liberal elements of Judaism, but argued that the Pharisees were largely associated with the emerging class of urban commoners, while the Sadducees maintained a relationship with the rural patricians (*Pharisees*).
- Baeck, writing during the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany amid the 1930s, suggested that the Pharisaic movement should be understood as a populist movement committed to piety as a means of resisting the encroachments of a hostile culture (*Pharisees*). Those empathetic with the persecuted German Jews were supportive of Baeck's argument.

Herford and Moore supported and expanded upon Lauterbach's proposition:

- Herford argued against Wellhausen, asserting that an abiding commitment to the ancient ethical code of the Old Testament prophetic tradition was at the heart of Judaism. He maintained that a religious vitality can be clearly discerned in this movement of Pharisaism (*Pharisees*).
- Moore summarized several of the major themes of Jewish thought, employing the Puritans of the 15th and 16th centuries as an approximate analog to ancient Pharisaism (*Judaism*).

Third Era

The third era in Pharisaic studies dawned during the latter part of the 20th century when Rivkin (*Defining the Pharisees*) and Neusner (*Rabbinic Traditions*) advanced the discussion by employing historical-critical methods of interpreting early sources. Through these methods, they reoriented the debate by noting the various layers of tradition within the rabbinic literature. Though Neusner and Rivkin employed similar methods, their conclusions were fundamentally opposed:

- Rivkin concluded that Pharisaism revolutionized Judaism by institutionalizing it.
- Neusner concluded Pharisaism did the exact opposite: it diffused the cultural center of Judaistic experience (which, prior to AD 70, was the temple) into the arena of domestic life. He viewed the home as the center of Pharisaic religious experience, and argued that the primary rabbinic emphases on food, sex, and marriage reflect the remaining realm of religious control for an increasingly powerless people.

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