

THE ORIGIN AND CONTENTION OF THE PHARISEES

The Pharisees were a very prominent sect of the Jewish nation. As the New Testament opens the writers assume that the readers know and understand the tenants of the Pharisees. They don't go into the character or background of this sect but only point and lay stress on points where they were in opposition to our Lord. To understand how these various groups or sects came into being we must look into secular history and to writers as Josephus and books such as the Talmud and the Gemara.

The sect of the Pharisees is thought to have originated in the third century BC in days preceding the Maccabean wars, when under Greek domination and the Greek effort to Hellenize the Jews, there was a strong tendency among the Jews to accept Greek culture with its pagan religious customs. The rise of the Pharisees was a reaction and protest against this tendency among their fellow-countrymen. Their aim was to preserve their national integrity and strict conformity to the Mosaic law.

As stated in the International Standard Bible Dictionary they were active supporters of Judas Maccabaeus, who was one of the leaders of a revolt against Epiphanes for religious freedom. Judas, in this rebellion, cleansed and rededicated the temple and set himself up as a high priest. But as time went by, Judas began to make alliances with the Roman state and this was the beginning of a separating gulf between those

who followed the allegiance of Judas and those who felt it wrong to ally themselves with a pagan power. Some Jews believed themselves to be saints of God and a personal treasure of His so an alliance with Rome was hateful to them. The patriots who stood by Judas Maccabeus desired religious freedom and out of this group came the Pharisees. The word "Pharisee" means "separatist." The earliest instance of a Pharisee intervening in history is when Eleazer, a pharisee, demanded that John Hyrcanus should leave the high priesthood since he wasn't of the Aaron line.

As the words of the New Testament open, there is the strong feeling and influence of Pharisees among the people. Pharisees were the most numerous and influential of the religious sects of Jesus' day. They were strict legalists and stood for the rigid observation of the letter and forms of the law and also traditions. The Pharisees believed in a personal God whose will was providence. According to Josephus, "They think that every soul is immortal, only the souls of good men will pass into another body, but the souls of the evil shall suffer everlasting punishment." He also ascribes the Pharisees to be strict students of the law of God. The New Testament sheds a little more light on the subject such as in Acts 23:8 where it tells of them believing in Angels and spirits. In the same place the belief in the resurrection is stated. The Pharisees were also adding traditions to the written word. Christ denounced these traditions when they conflicted with His teachings. They believed these traditions and their interpretations were given to Moses and then passed down orally

through the generations. Additions to these traditions were given by prophets by direct inspiration they said. The doctrines concerning the resurrection, judgment and immortality were an important part of these traditions to the Pharisees. One most important fault of the Pharisee tradition was that sin was so external and was determined by external acts or some external condition.

The Pharisees maintained close relationship with one another and were often united in actions. They despised ones who did not agree with them. They had high ideals and placed high value on thinking, learning and character. The Pharisees were scrupulous and hypocritical. Their attitude toward Christ was critical and later this criticism led to opposition. Christ disregarded their interpretations of the law, ridiculed their refinements and distinctions and denounced their hypocrisy. The Pharisees were denounced by Jesus more than any other class of people. The opposition by the Pharisees was brought about by the teachings of Christ---He taught spiritual things and they relied on physical things and traditions.

In religious circles today, when one speaks of hypocrisy and contempt, the Pharisees come into view, and these were the ones who wanted religious purity in the beginning.

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