

## YOUR GUIDE TO

# THE PHARISEES

## WOULD YOU BELIEVE IT !?!



The Pharisee was a member of a Jewish religious party that emerged and grew in Palestine during the latter part of the Second Temple period (515 B.C. to 70 A.D.). During the 70-year exile in Babylon, to help preserve the faith in exile, there arose Jewish houses of assembly and prayers (called “synagogues” in Greek), in addition to houses where the Torah and religion were studied, a partner to the synagogue.

Once Babylon fell to the conquering Persians in 539 B.C., their king, Cyrus the Great, allowed Jews to return to Judea and rebuild the Temple. He did not, however, allow the restoration of the Judean monarchy, which left the Judean priests as the dominant authority. It was around this time that the Sadducee party emerged as the party of priests and united social elites.

However, the Second Temple—finished by 515 B.C.—had been constructed with the help of a foreign power, and there were thorny questions about the lawfulness of the project. This led to the birth of various “schools of thought” or opinions, each of which claimed to be the rightful authority to represent “Judaism,” and which typically shunned social contact, especially marriage, with members of other groups.

The Temple was no longer the only institution for Jewish religious life. After the building of the Second Temple in the time of Ezra the Scribe, the houses of prayer and study that had preserved the Jewish religion in exile, now remained an important part of Jewish life. Outside of Judea, the synagogue was often called a house of prayer. While most Jews could not regularly attend the Temple service, they could meet at the synagogue for morning, afternoon and evening prayers. On Mondays, Thursdays and the Sabbath, a weekly Torah portion was read publicly in the synagogues.

Although priests controlled the rituals of the Temple, the scribes and sages, later called *rabbis* (Hebrew: “my master”), dominated the study of the Torah. They identified with the Prophets and developed and maintained an oral tradition that they believed had originated at Mount Sinai alongside the Torah of Moses. The Pharisees had their origins in this new group of authorities.

The Pharisees emerged as a distinct group shortly after the Maccabean revolt, around 165–160 B.C. They are thought to be spiritual descendants of the Hasideans. The Pharisees were a party of laymen and scribes and very different to the Sadducees, (the party of the high priesthood that had traditionally provided the sole leadership of the Jewish people). Around 100 B.C., a long struggle began as the Pharisees tried to make the Jewish religion more of a democracy and remove it from the control of the Temple priests. The basic difference, that led to the split between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, lay in their different attitudes toward the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) and the problem of finding in it answers to questions about legal and religious matters in the circumstances of their day, which were far different from those of the time of Moses.



Model of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, built by 515 B.C.

## PHARISEE “QUICK FACTS”

- ▶ “Pharisee” is from the Hebrew “Perushim” (to separate oneself from or be a separatist).
- ▶ They resisted the Roman and Greek influences of the day (Hellenism), even separating themselves from “inferior” Jews, who did not hold the Pharisee’s high standards.
- ▶ They founded synagogues for additional prayer and study outside of the Temple.
- ▶ They were laymen, experts and teachers of the Torah (first 5 books of the Old Testament).
- ▶ They came mainly from the middle and lower classes.
- ▶ Known as “the strictest sect” of the Jews.
- ▶ Held in awe by the public, but, as a rule, but they did not join in their religious fervor.
- ▶ The general population of first-century Palestine did not live as Pharisees, nor as Sadducees, nor as Essenes.
- ▶ About 6,000 Pharisees in Herodian times.



The priestly Sadducees held the written Torah was the only source of revelation, the laymen Pharisees held to the principle of evolution in the Law; men must use their reason to interpret the Torah and applying it to current problems. The Pharisees believed that the Law that God gave to Moses was twofold, consisting of the Written Law and the Oral Law—teachings of the prophets and the oral traditions of the Jewish people—interpreting the Law according to its spirit.

Though they did influence politics greatly, the Pharisees were not mainly a political party, but a group of scholars and religious devotees. They enjoyed a large popular following and appear as spokesmen for the majority of the population. The Pharisees insisted that God could and should be worshiped even away from the Temple and outside Jerusalem.

To the Pharisees, worship consisted not in bloody sacrifices—the practice of the Temple priests—but in prayer and in the study of God’s law. This is why the Pharisees fostered the SYNAGOGUE as an institution of religious worship, outside and separate from the Temple. The synagogue may thus be considered a Pharisaic institution, since the Pharisees developed its growth, and raised it to its high importance in Jewish religious life.

The traditional Catholic finds much in common with the Pharisee—like the Pharisee, they are laymen who want to preserve the Faith in a kind of “Exile among Modernism.” They devote themselves to prayer and study of the Faith. They have the right principles, but they must apply those principles correctly and not become inflated with pride, to the point where they indirectly and unwittingly work against the Faith that they love and wish to preserve.

## WHAT’S THE FIGHTING ABOUT?

When the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile to Jerusalem in 537 BC, they were without a king. Just as children will argue and fight when parents are absent, so too did the Jews without a king. Everyone had their own opinion on what to think and how to do things. The Sadducees emerged as the ruling class, but they found much opposition from other groups—among them the Pharisees.

▶ Conflict was partially a class issue, between the wealthy and the poor—the Sadducees came mainly from the priestly and aristocratic families, while the Pharisees came from the middle or lower classes.

▶ Conflict was cultural—because the Sadducees favored Hellenization (Greek influence) and the Pharisees resisted it.

▶ Conflict was also legal-religious, with Sadducees stressing the importance of the Second Temple with its religious rites and services, and the Pharisaical emphasis on the importance of other Mosaic laws and prophetic values.

▶ Another conflict, specifically religious, involved different interpretations of the Torah and how to apply it to current Jewish life, with the Sadducees accepting only the Written Torah and rejecting doctrines such as the Oral Torah and the Resurrection of the Dead. Pharisees claimed prophetic or Mosaic authority for their interpretation of Jewish laws, while the Sadducees represented the authority of the priestly privileges and prerogatives established since the days of Solomon, when Zadok, their ancestor, officiated as High Priest.

## THE FIGHT BETWEEN JESUS AND THE PHARISEES

The Pharisees were not in principle bad people. They had the principles to be good, but they did not use their principles correctly. They were pious, observant of the Law of God, and sought to please Him. But they were so observant of the Law that they became legalists. They made an absolute of outer forms and rites, carried out meticulously to the minimum detail. This led them to leave aside more important things, like the charity and mercy. Jesus does not question their authority to teach, nor their legitimacy; He does not call to disobedience. He only warns that their conduct is not to be imitated: “Do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice” (Mt 23:3).

Jesus says that true piety and religion goes beyond mere words. Actions speak louder than words. He quotes Isaiah, saying: “*And the Lord said: For as much as this people draw near Me with their mouth, and with their lips glorify Me, but their heart is far from Me, and they have feared Me with the commandment and doctrines of men*” (Isa. 29:13; Mt. 15:8). Jesus emphasizes their incoherence. What they say is not false, but their works deny their words. The words are beautiful in the mouth of him who puts them into practice! To speak is easy, to act is more difficult. We speak much but we do little.

Another defect that Jesus indicates is the double measure they had to judge the conduct of others. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them (Mt 23.4). We also easily accuse our brother of his or her faults and we do not see the beam that we have in our eye. Jesus said: Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? (Mt 7:3).

