

## The Pharisees

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by Bill Crews

Most scholars trace the Pharisees back to a party known as the “Assidaeans” (or “Hasidaeans”) in the days of the Maccabees (in the 2nd century before Christ). “Assidaeans” means “the pious ones,” “the saints,” or “the holy ones.” This name they assumed for themselves. The name “Pharisees” is from an Aramaic word (“Perushim”) meaning “separatists” or “separated ones.” It was applied to them by their opponents (because of their determination to keep themselves from those regarded as unclean or defiled), and later accepted by them. They preferred to call themselves “habherim,” a word meaning “associates, neighbors, fellow members” (of the true Israel).

As the New Testament opens, the Pharisees have great influence among the common people and are looked upon as pious or devout followers of God. They are popular, admired and respected. Jesus shattered this image, much to the chagrin of the Pharisees and the resentment of the people.

The Pharisees devoted themselves to the most scrupulous (but mostly outward) fulfillment of the law of Moses as expounded by the scribes. The scribes were a class, apart from the priests, of specialized students and teachers of the law of Moses. Most of them were also Pharisees (Matthew 2:4 speaks of the “*scribes of the people*,” and Acts 23:9 of the “*scribes of the Pharisees*”; often the Bible puts them together as “*scribes and Pharisees*”). Sometimes they are called “*lawyers*” and sometimes “*doctors of the law*” (literally, “teachers of the law”). They were honored with such titles as “rabbi” (“rab” — master; “rabbi” — my master; “rabboni” — our master), “*teacher*” and even “father.” They dressed elaborately and demanded and received great honor.

The Pharisees distinguished themselves from both the non-Jews of the land and the multitudes of Israel. They were careful to keep themselves separate from others, not wanting to touch or be touched by them, lest they become defiled and unclean. They made sin almost purely external and righteousness almost entirely outward.

They recognized an oral law transmitted (they claimed) from Moses orally (taught and memorized by generations of teachers) as an explanation of the written law. In the 2nd century A. D. this oral law was written in the first portion (the Mishna) of the Talmud. By using the law of Moses as a starting point and proposing to keep it intact, the Pharisees developed a mass of minute regulations. (For example, they decided how far one would be allowed to travel on the sabbath day — so as not to be guilty of forbidden “work” — and called this “*a sabbath-day’s journey*”; then they found a way to get around this limitation by deciding that one’s “home” on the sabbath could be any place where he had previously placed bread and water. A beggar could put his hand within your door on the sabbath, but you could not put your hand without. On the sabbath you could ride upon a donkey if you did not carry a stick; a stick would be a forbidden “burden.”) Their teaching and practice developed self-righteousness, hypocrisy and indifference to the plight of others. While all believing in the immortality of the soul, a future state, the resurrection from the dead, divine providence, miracles, angels and spirits, and the coming of the Messiah, they were still divided into different schools by their doctrinal interpretations.

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