

Phariseeism within Judaism

Commentary for September 1, 2016 — after New Testament Times

Before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, Judaism had a wide diversity of sects and doctrines. Three sects were the best known and had the most influence: the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Pharisees.¹ The Sadducees and Essenes ceased to exist.

Read the "[September 2016 Newsletter](#)," then enjoy this month's article, "The Strange Ending to Sotah," which presents Dr. Martin's understanding of the Sotah portion of the Mishnah. The Mishnah is the written version of the "oral law" of the Pharisees.

As you will read in the article, the quality and dedication of recruits to the Pharisees greatly diminished. Centuries later, they decided to write down their memorized "oral law" before those who memorized it all died and lesser scholars perverted the true beliefs. The Sotah mentions Christ and His relationship to the beliefs of the Pharisees.

Josephus tells us about the Pharisees in the time of the apostles and later:

"... the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason ... the Sadducees reject them, and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers. ... the Pharisees have the multitude on their side."

• *Antiquities of the Jews 13:297–298*

"Now, for the Pharisees, they live lowly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the conduct of reason, and what that prescribes to them as good for them, they do; and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason's dictates for practice. They also pay a respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to oppose them in anything which they have introduced ...

They also believe that souls have an immortal rigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter [the vicious] are to be detained in an everlasting [αἰδιον, continuing] prison, but that the former [the virtuous] shall have power to revive and live again;

on account of which doctrines, they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatever they [the Pharisees] do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they [the people] perform them according to their direction ..."

• *Antiquities of the Jews 18:12, 14–15*

The Sadducees did not believe in immortality of the soul (which is biblically correct), and that the written Torah (the Law of Moses) was what they should follow (also biblically correct),

¹ The Essenes are not mentioned in the New Testament, but are discussed in Josephus' writings, by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, and by other ancient writers. John the Baptist called both the Sadducees and Pharisees in his day a "**generation of vipers**" (Matthew 3:7).

and not follow laws from a mystical oral tradition, termed **“philosophy”**:

“... the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins them, for they think it an instance of virtue to dispute with those teachers of philosophy whom they frequent.”

• *Antiquities of the Jews 18:16*

The apostle Paul even used the differences between the Sadducees and Pharisees to his advantage to help him avoid being injured or even killed:

“But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, ‘Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.’ And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.”

• *Acts 23:6–8*

The Sadducees denied a resurrection (see also Matthew 22:23–32; Mark 12:18; Acts 4:1–2), but, as stated above, they also denied the existence of angels and other spirits.

After three wars (70 AD, in Cyprus in 117 AD, and 135 AD), Jews were out of favor with Rome, and the land of Judah and Galilee were devastated and depopulated.² The heirs of the Pharisees who survived the wars with Rome were scattered during the time of Christianity’s institutionalization and corruption when non-biblical and even idolatrous teachings came into the *ekklesias* in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD.

The Mishnah (the “oral law” itself) first was compiled and written in the 3rd century AD. Later the commentaries of the Mishnah, called the Gemara, were written, first in Palestine, and another set later in Mesopotamia. Together the Mishnah and Gemara formed the Talmuds. The Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud was first, then the Babylonian Talmud was produced. Each had roughly the same text of the Mishnah in common, but the commentaries differed.

Today Judaism has a wide variety of belief as it did in the 1st century AD. There is Sephardic Judaism, Karaite Judaism, Orthodox (commonly termed Ashkinaz) Judaism, Reformed Judaism, Conservative Judaism, and others. Like Christian groups, within each Jewish group is a diversity of thought, particularly about the relative importance of the written and oral law. According to a 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews, “[A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews](#),” 10% of American Jews are Orthodox, 35% are Reformed, 30% have no denomination, and 18% are Conservative. The percentages differ in Israel. Whatever their differences, most religious Jews today have their roots in the teachings of the ancient Pharisees.

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² Chapter 9, “[Neighboring Nations of the Jews in Palestine](#)” describes how Palestine was devastated due to repeated warfare. This is from Dr. Martin’s book [The People That History Forgot](#), online free.