

“FROM MATTHEW’S POINT OF VIEW”

SESSION THIRTEEN – JESUS AND THE JUDAISM OF HIS DAY –

PHARISEES, SADDUCEES, ESSENES, ZEALOTS

Jesus’ homeland was a volatile place. In the 500 years prior to the birth of Jesus, it had been conquered

- by the Babylonians, who deported much of the population (586 BC);
- by the Persians, who allowed a partial return (518 BC);
- by the Greeks, who attempted to force the adoption of Hellenistic culture and religion (329 BC);
- by the Maccabees, who re-established Jewish sovereignty, but soon centred power in their own family (110 BC);
- by the Romans, who imposed heavy taxation and strong military presence (63BC);
- by a puppet king Herod, loyal to the Romans; not considered fully Jewish (38BC);
- following Herod’s death, by a series of Tetrarchs and Roman governors (from 4 BC, through the lifetime of Jesus, up to 70 AD, when Romans took full control).

Various religious groups had emerged in response to Judaism’s various crises. The Jewish historian, Josephus, lists four different such groupings - or, as he calls them, ‘philosophies’ (Antiquities 18:1:2-6). The majority of ordinary people did not belong to any of these ‘parties’, but they would have known well what they stood for: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots.

By far the most important group in terms of the reading of the Gospels are the Pharisees, over mentioned a hundred times in the New Testament (often together with the Scribes). The Sadducees were second in importance, named fourteen times.

We know of the Essenes from the Jewish historian Josephus, and from the Dead Sea Scrolls. Despite not being explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, they may have contributed to the preaching of John the Baptist, who many scholars link with the Essenes.

One of Jesus’ disciples is described as being a Zealot (Simon the Zealot). They were a nationalist political faction dedicated to freeing the country from the power of the Romans. Their activities ultimately led to the war with Rome in 66-70 AD, and the destruction of the Temple. Their struggle ended at Masada.

The Pharisees (The “Separate”)

The Pharisees were well respected, being the largest religious group within Judaism. They were particularly strong in Galilee, the area of Jesus’ early ministry. According to JOSEPHUS, their number at the zenith of their popularity was more than 6,000. They fostered a vision for a distinctively Jewish life amongst those who lived far from the Temple. They were involved with the local synagogues, ensured that the commands of Torah (Law) were applied closely to daily life (for example, ritual purity and tithing) and they valued oral traditions (in addition to the Bible) which offered guidance on these matters.

Pharisaism is usually associated with legalism, although this term has a strong negative connotation that can lead to an inadequate understanding of the movement. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., much of the nation was taken into exile in Babylon, where Judaism had to develop in a radically new setting – Judaism without a temple or a homeland! And so, the observation of religious customs and laws became the major form of religious identification and practice.

These circumstances gave rise to the scribal movement, with its focus on the preservation of both the text and the relevance of Scripture. The scribes (NIV, “teachers of the law”) became the legal experts and developed an extensive exegetical tradition that came to be known as the oral law. The precise connection between scribes (who were professional religious leaders) and Pharisees (who apparently were regarded as laymen) is disputed, but there was obviously a very close association between the two—as indicated by the fact that in the Gospels they are mentioned together some twenty times (e.g. Matt. 5:20; Mk. 2:15; Lk. 5:21; Jn. 8:3).

The Pharisees became a closely organized group, very loyal to the society and to each other, but separate from others, even many of their own people. They pledged themselves to obey all facets of the traditions to the minutest detail and were sticklers for ceremonial purity. As a result, they often made life difficult for themselves and bitter for others. Jesus accused the Pharisees of making the tradition of the elders more binding than the law that God gave to Moses (Mk. 7:9-13).

It is only natural that such an attitude could lead to a religion of externals and not of the heart, and that God’s grace was sometimes thought to come only from doing the law. As a whole, however, the Pharisees were perceived by most other Jews as paragons of virtues and were regarded highly as religious leaders.

Many Pharisees bitterly opposed Jesus and his teachings. They hated Jesus’ doctrine of equality and claims of messiahship, and his (in their opinion) failure to observe the

requirements of religious law (resulting in most of Jesus' run-ins with them, and their rejection of him as Messiah). Jesus in turn condemned both their theology and life of legalism. They often became a background against which he taught God's free salvation by grace through his own death and resurrection.

Clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees were frequent and bitter, as examples in the Gospels reveal:

- he called them a generation of vipers and condemned them for impenitence (Matt. 3:7),
- criticized their view of righteousness (5:20),
- upbraided their pride against others (Matt. 9:12; Lk. 19:10),
- scorned their lovelessness on the Sabbath (Lk. 12:2),
- rebuked them for not being baptized (7:30),
- taught them regarding divorce (Matt. 19:3) and taxes (Mk. 12:17),
- accused them of hypocrisy (Mat 23)
- and condemned them for their covetousness (Lk. 16:14).

The Pharisees, in turn, accused Jesus:

- of blasphemy (5:21),
- of being in league with the devil (Matt. 9:34),
- of breaking the law (12:2).
- They often planned to destroy him (12:14).

Jesus' longest and most scathing rebuke of the Pharisees is found in Matthew chapter 23: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean" (23:27).

The picture of the Pharisees painted by the New Testament is almost entirely negative. Many modern scholars point out that Jewish rabbinic literature, when taken as a whole, provides a rather different perspective. Moreover, some of the Pharisees became adherents of the Christian movement (cf. Acts 15:5), including Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1) and the apostle Paul (Acts 26:5; Phil. 3:5).

The Apostle Paul does not speak the name Pharisee with reproach but as a title of honour, for the Pharisees were highly respected by many Jewish people. Identifying himself as a former Pharisee, he did not think of himself as having been an arrogant fraud; rather, he was claiming the highest degree of faithfulness to the law.

A Summary of Pharisee Beliefs

- They held to the supreme place of Torah, with a rigorous interpretation of it.
- Their chief characteristic was their adherence to the oral tradition, which they obeyed rigorously as an attempt to make the written law relevant to daily life.
- They claimed to hold to 613 commandments, and their halakot (binding interpretations) produced an overwhelmingly complicated approach to life.
- They had a well-developed belief in angelic beings.
- They had concrete messianic hopes, as they looked for the coming Davidic messianic kingdom. The Messiah would overthrow the Gentiles and restore the fortunes of Israel with Jerusalem as capital.
- They believed in the resurrection of the righteous when the messianic kingdom arrived, with the accompanying punishment of the wicked.
- They viewed Rome as an illegitimate force that was preventing Israel from experiencing its divinely ordained role in the outworking of the covenants.
- They held strongly to divine providence, yet viewed humans as having freedom of choice, which ensures their responsibility.
- As a lay fellowship or brotherhood connected with local synagogues, the Pharisees were popular with the common people. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, it was mostly Pharisaic Judaism which survived, developing into the Rabbinic / Synagogue based Judaism of today.

The Sadducees (“Descendants of Zadok the Priest”)

In Jerusalem the predominant group was the Sadducees. They were more establishment figures, often forming the upper class of the city. They were heavily involved with the Sanhedrin (Judaism’s ruling council) and with the Temple priesthood. They were eager to defend the status quo with the Romans and therefore wary of nationalistic or revolutionary tendencies. Their beliefs matched this.

They played down the hope of God’s future vindication, denied the doctrine of resurrection, and only accepted the authority of the Pentateuch (the five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy in the Bible) - thus omitting the prophetic writings that stirred popular hopes for a better future. Many High Priests (such as Caiaphas) were Sadducees, who controlled the workings of the Temple. Their cooperation with the Romans ensured their dominance of Temple life, as the Romans (not officially, but effectively) both appointed and removed the High Priests.

The Sadducees came into direct conflict with Jesus only near the close of his ministry. When he cleansed the temple he threatened their prestige as well as their livelihood. Of greater concern to them was the unrest and potential rioting that they feared would result, if Jesus' followers became militant and demanded recognition of him as Messiah. They feared this would lead to the Romans losing confidence in the ability of the Sanhedrin and religious authorities to maintain the peace, leading to the military assuming full control of the city. This is outlined in the Gospel of John very clearly:

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:47-50)

So in the last hours before Christ was condemned and crucified the Sadducees, particularly the chief priests, were those who led the opposition. They were the ones who agitated the people to demand his death. After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the Sadducees largely disappeared.

A Summary of Sadducee Belief and Practice

- They held a conservative attitude toward the Scriptures, accepting nothing as authoritative except the written word, literally interpreted.
- They accepted only Torah (the five books of Moses) as authoritative, rejecting any beliefs not found there.
- For that reason they denied the resurrection from the dead, the reality of angels, and spirit life.
- They produced no literature of which we are aware.
- They had no expressed messianic expectation, which tended to make them satisfied with their wealth and political power.
- They were open to aspects of Hellenism and collaborated with the Romans.
- They tended to be removed from the common people by economic and political status.

The Essenes

The Essenes were quite different. Some 200 years earlier, perhaps led by a Temple priest (the ‘Teacher of Righteousness’), they had split away from the Jerusalem Temple authorities, setting up alternative communities that could embody the best values of the Temple in worship and lifestyle. The most famous of these to date was discovered over the years 1946-57 on the shores of the Dead Sea at Qumran.

The Essenes engaged in extensive denial of physical and worldly luxuries, were frequently celibate, and committed to a close reading of all the Scriptures (hence the Biblical commentaries amongst the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, found near Qumran). Yet they were politically quiet, preferring to wait ‘in the desert’ for God himself to act against the ‘sons of darkness’.

They believed the Priesthood and Temple Authorities in Jerusalem to be corrupt. They even rejected the religious calendar used by the Temple for the scheduling of holy days such as Passover, believing it to be a Babylonian-era replacement of the original Mosaic calendar. This may be the source of some confusion regarding New Testament dates, such as the Last Supper, which seems to take place prior to the Temple celebration of Passover – but coincides with the Essene dating.

The Zealots

Unlike the other groups, The Zealots preferred to fight, not retreat. Although the term ‘Zealot’ may not strictly have been coined till the 60s, there were numerous violent uprisings throughout this period (e.g. in 4 BC and AD 6, culminating in the two Jewish Revolts of AD 66-70 and 132-35). For Zealots, Jews had no ‘king’ but God, and the pagan overlords – the Romans - must be removed.

Matthew and the Pharisees

“Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” This phrase is repeated again and again in Matthew 23, as Jesus strongly criticises the Scribes and Pharisees. He does so 30 times in Matthew, far more than the other Gospels. Perhaps this is because Matthew, as a former tax collector, would have been hated by the Pharisees, and suffered under their contempt. Perhaps Matthew’s community in Antioch, for which the Gospel was written, had deep struggles between living by faith and living according to legalism.

Either way, the challenge is for us not to criticise the Pharisees, but to ensure we don’t fall into the same patterns of self-righteous, self-absorbed behavior. Our salvation is dependent upon Christ, not our own moral perfection or superiority.