

Old Testament History
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Part Eight
Between the Testaments:
The Hellenistic Period

CHAPTER 92

The Origin of the Jewish Sects

The rise of the Jewish sects is traceable to the impact of Hellenism on the life and culture of the Near East. When the new clashes with the old, violent reactions frequently result. This is particularly true when the new ideology has religious and moral overtones.

Many of the Jews were willing to attempt a synthesis of Greek civilization and Hebrew religion. Jews in Palestine as well as Jews throughout the Hellenistic world, adopted Greek names, subscribed to Greek philosophies, and looked to Greek institutions as the harbingers of cultural progress. The Jews in Palestine were generally more conservative than their Greek-speaking cousins in Alexandria and the other great Hellenistic centers, but they were not unaffected. We may assume that these Jews felt that their loyalty to the faith of their fathers was in no way impaired by making peace with the new attitudes which Alexander and his successors had advocated.

Other Jews reacted violently against the Hellenizers. They saw Hellenism as a way of life which was opposed to that prescribed in their Torah. The immodesty of the Greek gymnasium and the neglect of Jewish religious rites by the Hellenistically minded younger generation seemed to indicate trouble. As idolatry had been the besetting sin of Israel before the exile, so Hellenism was regarded as the new temptation to unfaithfulness.

The Jews who reacted against Hellenism are known as the Hasidim (Chasidim) or Assidians. They were, by definition, the party of "the pious." As the Sadducees of the New Testament times continued the basic ideology of the earlier Hellenizers, so the Pharisees and the Essenes sought to preserve the basic tenets of the Hasidim. The Law of God was basic in Hasidic thought. They were willing to suffer martyrdom rather than transgress its precepts. They supported the sons of Mattathias in the early days of the Maccabean revolt, but they left the Hasmoneans as soon as their religious liberties had been won from the Seleucids. Freedom to obey the law was to them an adequate goal, and political independence was quite unnecessary.

1. The Pharisees

The party of the Pharisees is first mentioned by name during the reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.). According to Josephus, Hyrcanus expressed his friendship to his fellow Pharisees by inviting them to a feast, during which he urged any who observed anything unbecoming in his conduct to correct him. A Pharisee replied that, if Hyrcanus really wanted to be righteous, he should surrender the office of High priest and be content with his position as civil ruler. The Pharisee suggested that Hyrcanus' mother had been a captive in the days of Antiochus which, it would be presumed, would have involved her in immorality.

Hyrcanus was enraged at this suggestion, and the other Pharisees seemed to resent the charge made by one of their number. Josephus tells us that a Sadducee took advantage of the embarrassment of the situation by suggesting that Hyrcanus ask the Pharisees to suggest a suitable punishment for their offending member. In this way the attitude of the Pharisees as a sect would become apparent. When the Pharisees suggested "a moderate punishment of stripes" rather than the death penalty, Hyrcanus felt that the Pharisees were really opposed to him, and he espoused the cause of the Sadducees.

To what extent the story is to be regarded as sober history would be difficult to determine, but it suggests the antagonism between the Pharisees and Sadducees as early as the reign of Hyrcanus. It is clear that the Pharisees resented the combination of high priesthood and civil authority in the successors of the Maccabees. It has been suggested that the outspoken Pharisee who incurred the wrath of Hyrcanus may have left the more moderate Pharisees to become the founder of the Essenes. This is, of course, only a conjecture.

The word *Pharisee* means "separated ones." Although some have suggested that the separation was from the common people, it is more probable that the Pharisees were so named because of their zeal for the Law which involved separation from the influences of Hellenism. In this sense they were the heirs of the Hasidim. Josephus says that the Pharisees "appear more religious than others, and seem to interpret the laws more accurately."

The laws regarding ceremonial purity were punctiliously observed by members of the Pharisaic brotherhood. No items of food or drink were to be purchased from a "sinner," for fear of ceremonial defilement. For the same reason, a Pharisee might not eat in the house of a "sinner," although he might entertain the "sinner" in his own house. When this was done, however, the Pharisee was required to provide the "sinner" with clothes to wear, for the "sinner's" own clothes might be ceremonially impure.

The particular domain of the Pharisees in pre-Christian Judaism was the synagogue. The synagogue seems to have had its origin in the Babylonian captivity when the Jews were prevented from participating in the sacrificial offerings which could be offered only in the

Jerusalem Temple. Prayer and the reading of Scripture, however, were not subject to limitations of geography. Wherever ten Jewish families settled, a synagogue could be formed, according to later usage. After the return from exile, the synagogue was retained as the place of non-sacrificial worship in Israel, as it is to this day. The Sadducees gained control of the Temple ritual during the period that the Hasmoneans ruled, and down to New Testament times, but the scribes and Pharisees maintained the synagogue as the center of worship and instruction.

In a sincere desire to make the Law workable within the changing culture of the Greco-Roman world, the Pharisaic scribes developed the system of oral tradition which proved such a burden to Judaism during the time of Christ.

Beginning with Scripture itself, the Pharisees quoted the "case decisions" of famous rabbis who had been consulted concerning the application of Scripture to individual problems. If the revered exegetes of Scripture (the *Hakamim*, or sages) had expressed an opinion concerning the application or meaning of Scripture, this was given due consideration. Thus the observant Jew was frequently faced with conflicting viewpoints on the nature of correct Sabbath observance, the application of dietary rules to new articles of food, and the multitude of problems with which the legalistic mind was burdened.

During the first century before Christ, two influential Pharisaic teachers gave their names to the two historic schools of legal thought among the Pharisees. Hillel was the more moderate of the two in his legal interpretations. He was known for his regard for the poor and was willing to accept Roman rule as compatible with Jewish orthodoxy. Shammai, on the other hand, was more strict in his interpretation, and was bitterly opposed to the Romans. This viewpoint ultimately found expression in the Zealots, whose resistance to the Romans brought on the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The Talmud preserves the record of 316 controversies between the schools of Hillel and Shammai.

The attempts at applying the Law to new situations were rejected by the Sadducees who restricted their concept of authority to the Torah, or Mosaic Law. The medieval Jewish sect of Karaites similarly rejected the rabbinical interpretation of Scripture and appealed for a return to the Bible itself as alone valid as the standard of faith. To the Pharisees, however, tradition was not simply a commentary upon the Law, but was ultimately raised to the level of Scripture itself. To justify this attitude it was stated that the "oral law" was given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinia, along with the "written Law" or the Torah (*Pirke Aboth*. 1:1). The ultimate in this development is reached when the Mishna states that the oral law must be observed with greater stringency than the written law, because statutory law (i.e., oral tradition) affects the life of the ordinary man more intimately than the more remote constitutional Law (the written Torah) (M. Sanhedrin 10:3).

In addition to the charge that traditions had largely made void the intent of the Law, the New Testament makes it clear that the mentality of Pharisaism involved little more than a

concern for the minutia of the Law during the time of Christ. Like many worthy movements, the early piety of those who had separated themselves from impurity at great cost was exchanged for an attitude of pride in the observance of legal precepts. The Pharisee scrupulously tithed even his wild herbs (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42), but he did not hesitate to oppress the weak and needy at the same time (cf. Matt. 23:14). Fasting, ceremonial ablutions, Sabbath observance were all proper in their place, according to Jesus, but they were not enough. They must be accompanied by evidence of a heart that truly loved the Lord. Conspicuous tassels and phylacteries (Matt. 23:5) and long public prayers (Mark 12:40, Luke 20:47) gave a degree of sanctity to the Pharisees in the eyes of the people, but this must not be confused with true piety before God. If the Pharisees desire to be seen of men, "they have their reward." This must not be confused with a life lived to the glory of God, however.

In men like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Gamaliel, and Saul of Tarsus we meet some of the nobler souls of the Pharisaic tradition in the New Testament. To Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the apostle, the Pharisee represented the epitome of orthodoxy, "the most straitest sect of our religion" (Acts 26:5). The degeneracy of Pharisaism serves as a warning to those who take a stand for separation from evil. Self-complacency and spiritual pride are temptations to which the pious are particularly susceptible.

2. The Sadducees

Although the Pharisees and Sadducees are frequently denounced together in the New Testament, they had little in common save their antagonism to Jesus.

The Sadducees were the party of the Jerusalem aristocracy and the High Priesthood. They had made their peace with the political rulers and had attained positions of wealth and influence. Temple administration and ritual was their specific responsibility. In the later Hasmonean period and the Roman period which followed it, the High Priesthood had become a political football so that the religious interests of the office tended to be pushed into the background. The Sadducees held themselves aloof from the masses and were unpopular with them.

Theologically the Sadducees must be described with a series of negatives. They did not accept the oral law which developed under the Pharisees, and seem to have limited their canon to the Torah, or Pentateuch. They did not believe in resurrection, spirits, or angels (cf. Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). They left no positive religious or theological system.

The Pharisees welcomed and sought proselytes (cf. Matt. 23:15), but the Sadducean party was closed. None but the members of the High Priestly and aristocratic families of Jerusalem could be Sadducees. With the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70, the Sadducees came to an end. Modern Judaism traces its roots to the party of the Pharisees.

3. The Essenes

The Essenes and the Pharisees both continued the testimony of Hasidim. The Pharisees maintained their strict orthodoxy within the framework of historical Judaism. Their separation was from defilement, but not from institutional Judaism as such. Even though the Temple worship was conducted by the Sadducees, the Pharisees esteemed it a basic part of their religious inheritance. The Pharisee might hold himself aloof from "sinners," but he lived among them and coveted their esteem.

A more extreme reaction against the influences which tended to corrupt Jewish life was taken by the sect which the ancient writers Philo, Josephus, and Pliny call the Essenes. They seem to have lived for the most part in monastic communities, such as that with headquarters at Qumran, from which the Dead Sea Scrolls have come.

In seeking to explain Judaism to the Greek-speaking world, Josephus spoke of three "philosophies" -- Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. The term *Essene* seems to have had quite an elastic usage, however, including various groups of monastically minded Jews who differed among themselves in certain of their practices. Pliny says that the Essenes avoided women and did not marry, but Josephus speaks of an order of marrying Essenes. The excavations of the cemetery at Qumran similarly reveal that women were a part of the Qumran community.

The ancient writers deal in a sympathetic way with the Essenes. The life of the Essene was one of rigor and simplicity. Devotion and religious study occupied an important place in the community. Scripture and other religious books were studied and copied by members of the Essene community. Each Essene was required to perform manual labor to make the community self-supporting. Community of goods was practiced in the Essene communities, and strict discipline was enforced by an overseer. Those groups which renounced marriage adopted boys at an early age in order to inculcate and perpetuate the ideals of Essenism. Slavery and war were repudiated.

The Essenes accepted proselytes, but the novice was required to go through a period of strict probation before he could become a full-fledged member. Numerically the Essenes were never large. Philo says that there were four thousand of them. Pliny says that they were settled north of En Gedi, an apparent reference to Qumran, northwest of the Dead Sea. That there were other settlements is clear, for we are told that all members of the sect were welcome in any of the Essene colonies.

Although it has been suggested that the Essenes are an offshoot of Pharisaism, dating back to the time of John Hyrcanus, nothing certain is known of their early history. Considering themselves the true Israel, they trace their history back to the beginnings. Philo states that Moses instituted the order, and Josephus says that they existed "ever since the ancient

time of the fathers." Pliny agrees that their history covers "thousands of ages." It is certain that Essenes existed for two centuries before the Christian era and that they lived at first among the Jewish communities. When they ultimately withdrew, many seem to have settled at Qumran, others living in scattered communities throughout Syria and Palestine.

The question of foreign influences on Essene thinking has been the subject of much scholarly debate. While some maintain that the Essenes are a purely indigenous growth within Judaism, others suggest that they were influenced from without -- either from Western Greek ideas, or from Eastern Syrian or Persian concepts.

Josephus tells us that the Essenes believed in immortality but rejected the doctrine of bodily resurrection. This seems to be related to the philosophical concept of the evil of matter. The body is material, and if matter is evil, then salvation comes by escaping the body, and a bodily resurrection would be undesirable. Enforced celibacy fits into the same concept, which is contrary to the teaching of both Old Testament and New Testament Scripture. Early Christian theology was confronted with a similar heresy when the Docetists claimed that Jesus did not really have a body. Since they believed that matter is evil, they could not conceive of the Son of God as having a real body.

Although the Essenes either discouraged or forbade marriage, the Pharisees expected every man to take a wife at the age of eighteen. In this respect they were closer to the ideals of Biblical religion than were the Essenes.

While the Pharisees took part in the Temple services, even though they were unhappy at the position of the unorthodox Sadducees, the Essenes regarded themselves as the only true, or pure, Israel and refused to cooperate with what they believed to be the corrupt religious observances at the Jerusalem Temple. The carefully regulated life at the Essene center seems to have served as a substitute for the Temple in the eyes of the Essenes.

The strictness of Essene discipline and the rigidity with which the law was enforced are stressed by all who write about them. Josephus says that they were stricter than all Jews in abstaining from work on the Sabbath day (*Wars*, II. vii. 9). A passage in the Damascus Document, related to the Dead Sea Scrolls, says that it is unlawful to lift an animal out of a pit on the Sabbath day. Such a view was considered extreme even by the legalistic Pharisees (cf. *Matt.* 12:11).

The absence of references to the Essenes in the New Testament has led many writers to conclude that Jesus and the early church were Essene in sympathies, if not in origin. Renan called Christianity "an Essenism which succeeded on a broad scale," and E. Schure held that Jesus had been initiated into the secret doctrines of the Essenes.

Although the Essenes are not mentioned in the New Testament, they are also absent from

the Jewish Talmud. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were the groups with which Jesus had immediate contact, and it is to be expected that they would be the ones who were the subjects of His discourses.

The teaching and practice of Jesus is diametrically opposed to the legalism and asceticism of the Essenes. Although the Essenes considered that contact with a member of their own group of a lower order than themselves was ceremonially defiling, Jesus did not hesitate to eat and drink with "publicans and sinners" (Matt. 11:9; Luke 7:34). Although obedient to the Mosaic Law, Jesus had no sympathy with those who made of the Law a burden instead of a blessing. The Sabbath was made for man, and Jesus insisted that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath day (Matt. 12:1-12; Mark 2:23-36; Luke 6:6-11; 14:1-6).

Contrary to the Essene idea that matter is evil, Jesus insisted that it is from within, out of the heart of man, that evil comes. His first miracle was performed at a wedding (John 2:1).

Jesus denounced abuses in the Temple, and prophesied its destruction, but he did not repudiate the Temple services. He came to Jerusalem for the great feasts of His people, and after His resurrection we find Peter and John going to the Temple at the hour of prayer (Acts 3:1).

Asceticism and monasticism early gained entrance to the Christian church. Christianity in its earliest period, however, cannot be called an ascetic movement. The ministry of Jesus was largely to the "common people" who "heard Him gladly" (Mark 12:37), when the self-righteous despised both Him and them. He was called "a winebibber" and "a friend of publicans and sinners" -- names which would scandalize Pharisee, Sadducee, and Essene alike (Luke 7:34).

4. The Zadokites

Since the publication in 1910 by Solomon Schechter of *Fragments of a Zadokite Work* -- discovered in 1896 in the genizeh, or storage room for worn out manuscripts, of a Cairo synagogue -- the term *zadokite* has entered the discussion of sectarian Judaism. The term *zadokite* appears to be related to the word *Sadducee*, but the two groups had different historical developments. Some have suggested that a group of spiritually minded priests, alarmed at the drift toward worldliness of early second century B.C. Sadduceeism, separated from it and formed the nucleus for the new group of "sons of Zadok." Whether this movement found spiritual affinity with a group like the Essenes, or whether a new beginning is to be posited for the group at this time is not clear.

The Zadokite work speaks of a group which was compelled to migrate to Damascus where, under the leadership of a man called "the star" (cf. Num. 24:17), they entered into a New Covenant (cf. Jer. 31:31). A prominent leader of the sect, who may have been the founder, is the Teacher of Righteousness mentioned in the Zadokite work and the Qumran scrolls.

Scholars are agreed that the Zadokite work is related to the Qumran manuscripts. Style, vocabulary, and historical allusions first suggested a relationship. The discovery of copies of the Zadokite work in Cave 6, Qumran, removed any doubts. The history of the Qumran community and its relationship to known groups of pre-Christian Jews is still obscure.

The Zadokite work speaks of a migration to Damascus by the group of which the document speaks. The circumstances of this migration are not given in sufficient detail to warrant a positive statement of date. It has been thought that the removal of Onias III from his office as High Priest in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes was the occasion for the flight of the Zadokites to Damascus. Charles Fritsch in *The Qumran Community* suggests that the sojourn took place during the reign of Herod the Great (37 B.C. to 4 B.C.). Archaeological evidence indicates that the Qumran community center was unoccupied at that time, and Fritsch considered this the key to the date of the sojourn in Damascus. This gives rise to several questions: "Did the Zadokites leave Jerusalem around 175 B.C., sojourn for a time in Damascus, and then settle at Qumran? Did they go from Jerusalem to Qumran, then to Damascus during the reign of Herod, and then return to Qumran? Did the Damascus Covenanters, as the Zadokites are called, join forces with another group such as the Essenes?"

A Jewish scholar, Rabinowitz, has suggested that the withdrawal from Judea to Damascus is but another way of describing the Babylonian captivity. The faithful in Israel are thus thought of as learning lessons of loyalty to the Lord "beyond Damascus." Although this view would eliminate certain historical problems, the Zadokite work does appear to discuss a historical migration to Damascus in days following the return from Babylonian Exile.

Present knowledge seems to indicate that a group of priests, "sons of Zadok," started a movement to which lay members were attracted. In Qumran the priestly prerogatives are jealously guarded. The name *Zadokite* was applied to the movement because of its stress on its own priestly legitimacy *vis-a-vis* the Jerusalem priesthood. The latter was corrupt in the eyes of the Zadokites. If this reconstruction is correct it would seem that the Qumran community included those who are called "the Zadokites." Since the term *Essene* seems to have been a rather general term assigned to various ascetic groups with pre-Christian Judaism, it seems probable that this group of Zadokites was identified as Essene by Philo, Pliny, and Josephus. Since the historical origins of both Zadokite and Essene groups are still matters of conjecture, we cannot state which group existed first. That there were affinities, however, seems clear.

5. Zealots

Roman rule was not popular with the majority of Jews. To the Pharisees, Roman overlordship was a punishment visited upon Israel because of its sins. It was to be accepted with humility, in prayerful anticipation of the day when God would remove the

horrible Roman yoke.

A more extreme attitude was taken by the party known from the writings of Josephus as the Zealots. They first appeared in Galilee under the leadership of Judas the son of Ezekias during the early years of Roman rule. They refused to pay taxes and considered it a sin to acknowledge loyalty to Caesar. God alone was to be reckoned as King of Israel!

The Pharisee, Gamaliel, mistakenly regarded Peter and the apostles as Zealot leaders. He urged that no action be taken against them, believing that if the movement they represented were not of God it would come to naught, as in the case of Theudas and Judas of Galilee (Acts 5:35-39). The Galilean origin of most of the disciples and the fact that one of them was named Simon Zelotes (Simon, the Zealot) would make such a misunderstanding possible.

Ultimately the Zealots succeeded in winning the bulk of the people to their side. Their continual defiance of Rome brought on the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.