



“Builders of the Wall”

IN 538 BCE THE PERSIAN EMPEROR, Cyrus I, issued a decree permitting the Judean exiles in Babylon to return to their homeland. By this edict he began to restore the theocracy or divine government of Judah under the hereditary Zadokite (Aaronic) priesthood.^{1,2} Over 200 years later, in 332 BCE, Alexander the Great of Macedonia overthrew the Persian empire but left the Judean theocracy intact under the same traditional priesthood.

Upon Alexander’s death in 323 BCE, his top generals, known as the Diadochi, fought to divide the empire among themselves. Eventually, Ptolemy gained control of Egypt together with “Palestine and the islands of the Mediterranean.”³ “From 301 to 200 BCE Judah was part of the Egyptian kingdom” of the Ptolemies.⁴ Nevertheless, Judah still retained its theocratic rights under the Zadokite priesthood.

[Meanwhile,] Seleucus obtained the largest portion of Alexander’s empire; [with] all the countries of Asia from the frontiers of India to the Mediterranean littoral . . . under his rule.⁵

Around 200 BCE the Seleucids took control of Judah, as their power waxed greater than that of the Egyptians. The Jews had quietly accepted the Ptolemies as their [secular] rulers, and now they acquiesced to the rule of the Seleucids.⁶

. . . [Later, f]or reasons unknown to us, the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, began interfering in internal Jewish affairs. In 175 BCE Antiochus overthrew [Onias,] the . . . last of the Zadokite high priests. Antiochus appointed a certain Jason as high priest, then a certain Menelaus. . . [Finally,] in 169 BCE Antiochus eliminated the high priesthood, rededicated the Jerusalem Temple to a Greek god, and outlawed the Torah. The Greeks made the Jews worship the Greek idol and eat pork sacrificed in its honor. Anyone who refused was executed. The Greeks killed anyone who circumcised a newborn boy, and also the child. To obey the law of the Torah was now to disobey the edict of the king.⁷

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By these actions the traditional theocracy of Judah was profoundly threatened. Within three years, however, the priestly family of the Hasmoneans under Mattathias (Matthew) and his five sons began a successful rebellion against Antiochus IV with the help of pious Jewish peasants known as the Hasidim.

In 165 BCE King Antiochus sued for peace. He granted the Jews the right to live by their ancestral [theocratic] customs. The Jews, in turn, pledged loyalty to the king. Judah [the middle son of Mattathias] and his followers gained control of the Temple, but the Hellenizers retained the citadel for their protection. . . . Ultimately Simon the Hasmonean, the youngest and only surviving brother [of Judah], triumphed over all his enemies. He defeated the Tobiads, the Hellenizers in the Jerusalem citadel, and all other enemies. In 142 BCE Simon became the high priest. In 140 he called himself *Nasi* — “prince,” a royal title. . . . Judah was now a sovereign state, and Simon was the king.^{8,9}

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The Temple was first and foremost the religious center of Judaism; but besides its religious value it had considerable economic importance. . . . Great wealth accumulated in its store rooms; the half-shekel which the Jews paid each year to the cult probably covered most of the daily rites, and in the course of generations this income grew and amounted to a considerable sum. . . . The Temple treasury, therefore, played the part of a state exchequer, which was otherwise lacking in Judaea, and this was the direct outcome of the fact that the government of Judaea was “theocratic” . . . , that is, the priests who stood at the head of the cult also held the secular power. In addition to the public moneys, the money of private individuals was also kept in the Temple treasury on deposit, since this was the safest place in Jerusalem and acted as a sort of bank in the modern sense.¹⁰

The Sectarrians

However, the political unification of both kingship and priesthood under Simon the Hasmonean incited sectarian differences and conflicts that lasted over 200 years. Three principal sectarian parties emerged:

1. In reaction to the politicization of their religion, the sect known as the Essenes left Jerusalem for the desert hills overlooking the Dead Sea. Here they established isolated, ascetic and celibate communities that rejected the ruling monarchical priesthood. The Essenes regarded the uncreated “spiritual” alone as good while claiming that the created “material” world was evil. As proto-Gnostics, they were instrumental in inaugurating the movement later known as Gnosticism.¹¹⁻¹³

2. On the other hand, the Sadducees, which “probably means ‘Zadokites,’ . . . [were] supporters of the ancient hereditary Zadokite priesthood.” They remained

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in Jerusalem, in Temple worship, and in fidelity to the Torah — the Written Law of Moses.¹⁴ The Sadducees allied themselves with the Hasmonean (Maccabean) power groups in the hope of eventually regaining theocratic power for themselves.

3. The third sectarian party were the Perushim — the Pharisees or separatists. They were the Protestants of their time. They rejected both ascetic isolation from the “powers that be” as well as allegiance to those same powers. They strongly opposed the Hasmonean preemption of the priesthood and, as a result, suffered greatly under the successive regimes of Simon (143-134 BCE), John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE), Aristobulus I (104-103 BCE), and Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BCE). At the same time, however, the Pharisees won consistent support from the Jewish peasants and other lower classes within Judaism.

The Pharisees were the Protestants of their time.

Legend says that on his deathbed Alexander Yannai [Jannaeus] repented of his persecution of the Pharisees. He told his wife Salome Alexandra that she must honor the Pharisees and grant them authority, for due to their popularity with the masses no one could effectively rule without their support. Whether or not the legend of the deathbed confession is true, Salome did support the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, once in power, took vengeance on those who had persecuted them during Yannai’s reign. . . . [T]hey enacted their program of piety for the Jewish people, promoting observance of the Torah laws for which they were famous. Queen Salome was herself pious and observant. She approved of the religious agenda of the Pharisees.

According to the Talmud’s reconstruction of history . . . the Pharisees gained control of the institutions of Jewish self-rule during the reign of Salome Alexandra. They never relinquished that control. They accomplished this by replacing Sadducees in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court of seventy-one elders. The Pharisees made themselves a majority in the high court. As a result, the Sadducees, and even the high priests, had to obey the Pharisees’ commands and live by their legal rulings.¹⁵

Whether the Talmudic account is correct or not, the Pharisees did play a very significant role within Judaism for over 200 years. Of all the Jewish sects, only the Pharisees and the Christians survived the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. With official permission from the Roman emperor, Vespasian, the Pharisees reestablished the Sanhedrin in the village of Yavneh, on the Mediterranean coast, in 70 CE. There they began what was eventually to become known as Rabbinic Judaism.¹⁶

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The Pharisees

We have surveyed the Pharisees’ valiant opposition to the Maccabees and their inaugural role in Rabbinic Judaism. Because of this and their puzzling relationship to the Christ event and the emergence of Christianity, it is now essential to summarize the Pharisees’ fundamental practices, beliefs and underlying presuppositions:

1. The Pharisees upheld the Written Torah or Law of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy — as the official canon. It was inspired, inerrant, infallible. The Torah was therefore the ultimate authority for Judaism.

2. The Pharisees claimed that the Oral (unwritten) Torah was the divine interpretation of the Law of Moses. They believed that the Oral Torah also originated with Moses and was passed down through history as the protective “wall” around the Written Torah. For this reason those who opposed the Pharisees called them

‘bonei hachaytiz’ (the builders of the wall), a reference to the concept later mentioned in the Mishna (Avos 1:1) to “build a fence around the Torah.” This is the Rabbinic approach of developing laws not found in the Torah in order to ensure that the Torah’s laws are not transgressed.¹⁷

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3. When the Hasmoneans refused to restore the hereditary Zadokite priesthood and subsequently appropriated the priesthood for themselves, the Pharisees emphatically claimed the priesthood of all believers. They based their “Protestant” declaration on the promise of YHWH that Israel would become a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6).

The Pharisees held the ideal that the Jews were to be “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation,” as the Torah promised. For this to come true, every Jewish man had to be literate in the scriptures, in the manner of a priest.¹⁸

4. While accepting the external Temple and Temple worship, the Pharisees declared that their own communal table fellowship — which included bread and wine — constituted symbolic sacrifices that they as priests had the right to administer. This belief sustained them when the Temple and its sacrificial rituals were finally abolished by the Romans in 70 CE.¹⁹

5. Underlying their belief that they constituted the unending priesthood authorized to minister the priestly sacrifices, the Pharisees also contended for the divine immortality of the soul together with the ultimate resurrection of the body.^{20,21}

6. In harmony with their belief in life after death, the Pharisees came to believe that the Law of Moses was actually mediated before YHWH by Moses himself. While Moses had died on the other side of the Jordan, he had reputedly been raised from the dead and had ascended to heaven. Thus, although the prophetic voice was stilled below, the prophet Moses was alive above and ministered the Torah before God and to his people on earth. The prophetic office had not been terminated. Rather, with Moses as the archetypal mediator in heaven, it had in effect been divinized and now stood at YHWH’s right hand.²²⁻²⁵

7. The Pharisees believed that their community embodied the Temple itself and its services. Just as the Greek philosopher, Empedocles (490-430 BCE),

“assumed . . . that all matter was composed of four essential ingredients, fire, air, water, and earth,” so the Jewish Temple and its services rested on the laver (water), seven-branched candlestick (fire), table of shewbread (earth), and altar of incense (air). By partaking of their ritual sacraments, the Pharisees believed that they embodied these primal elements. Not only were they priests ministering symbolic sacrifices. They themselves were the symbolic sacrifices. They therefore constituted the reality of the Outer Court and the Holy Place of the Temple.²⁶

8. But the Temple metaphor did not end here. Along with their bodies, the Pharisees claimed to possess immortal souls, and they believed that this represented the fulfillment of the Second Apartment or Most Holy Place of the Temple. Here, in the sacred precincts of their minds or souls, was enshrined the Torah. The Law of Moses was therefore in their hearts.²⁷

9. The Pharisees not only believed that the Written Torah was inscribed in their hearts. They also believed that the Oral Torah indwelt them, forming a protective wall around the Law of Moses. Metaphorically, therefore, the Oral Torah was the mercy seat and the covenantal ark that surrounded and supported the commandments.

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10. Finally, the Pharisees assumed that both the written and oral Law, mediated to them by Moses, enshrined the divine presence — the Shekinah or Holy Spirit in their midst.²⁸

Thus, both explicitly and implicitly, the Pharisees believed that they themselves were the ultimate fulfillment of the Mosaic covenant. As a united community, they were the embodied and ensouled Temple. They were the place of the divine presence. They enshrined the Torah. They were not only the “builders of the wall” around the Torah. They themselves constituted that protective wall. They were the holy priesthood and offered the symbolic sacrifices. They themselves represented the earthly presence and sovereignty of God himself. As the earthly manifestation of divine reality, they were the fulfillment of God’s purpose. They were his exemplars. They were his “gospel” missionaries to the world.

Jacob Neusner has summed up the higher vision of the Pharisees in these words: “The Priesthood of all Israel.” The Pharisees took literally the words of Exodus 19:5-6, “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” The Pharisees tried to realize this vision by living as if they were priests. . . . The Pharisees wanted the whole world to be God’s temple. They especially strived to make their humble family dinner table into the altar of God. Tithing and purity laws were merely the outward symbol of this great spiritual vision. As priests were to the Jewish people, so all Israel was to be to the peoples of the world.²⁹

Summary

Although the radical beliefs of the Pharisees have been largely hidden for two millennia, they are now being revealed. The Pharisees emerged in response to the Hasmonean termination of the hereditary priesthood. As the “Protestants” of

their day, they fervently believed that they constituted the “kingdom of priests” — the priesthood of all believers. As priests, they believed that they represented and embodied the kingdom, with the holy Law — enshrining the divine Shekinah or Holy Spirit — in their hearts. God’s kingdom must therefore be present. And because they enshrined that divine presence, mankind (male and female) must be destined to become theomorphic — raised to divine status.

Despite their deep sincerity, earnest commitment and valiant determination, the beliefs, practices and presuppositions of the Pharisees failed to build a bridge between man and God. Rather, history testifies that these convictions erected an impenetrable wall between man and God and between man and his fellow man. This soon brought the “fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4, NRSV) and God’s own anthropomorphic — human — manifestation as Jesus Christ.

Today we are witnessing the powerful resurgence of Pharisaism in the name of Christianity. And again its self-divinizing presuppositions are about to bring the final human manifestation of God as Jesus Christ. That revelation promises to be just as surprising as was God’s manifestation 2,000 years ago.

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Endnotes

1. See Moses A. Shulvass, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol. 1, *The Antiquity* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1982), p. 59.
2. When Solomon assumed the throne of Israel upon the death of his father, David, he banished the priest, Abiathar, of the house of Eli, to Anathoth. This act confirmed the position of Zadok as the principal priest of Jerusalem. Zadok’s successors formed the hereditary Zadokite priesthood, which survived until Onias was expelled by Antiochus IV in 175 BCE. See *Britannica Online* (early edition), s.v. “The Succession of Solomon to the Throne”; cf. *Britannica Online*, s.v. “Old Testament Literature: The Nevi’im (Prophets): Kings (Background and Solomon’s Reign): The Succession of Solomon to the Throne,” at www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-literature/Samuel-Israel-under-Samuel-and-Saul#ref597726.
3. Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, trans. S. Applebaum (New York: Atheneum, 1959), p. 10.
4. Stephen M. Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 49.
5. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, p. 10.
6. Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 49.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-56.
9. The Tobiads represented the family and descendants of Tobiah, a wealthy Jew who had been a business manager of a high Ptolemaic official. See *Britannica Online* (early edition), s.v. “Judaism: The History of Judaism: Hellenistic Judaism (4th Century BCE – 2nd Century CE)”; cf. *Britannica Online*, s.v. “Judaism: The History of Judaism: Hellenistic Judaism (4th Century BCE – 2nd Century CE),” at www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism#ref35185.
10. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, p. 155.
11. See “Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes,” in “Gates of Jewish Heritage.”
12. See “Qumran, Essene, Dead Sea Scrolls Discussion Forum.”

13. "In the Gnostic view, the unconscious self of man is consubstantial with the Godhead, but because of a tragic fall it is thrown into a world that is completely alien to its real being. . . . The world, produced from evil matter and possessed by evil demons, cannot be a creation of a good God." — *Britannica Online*, s.v. "Gnosticism" (early edition).
14. See Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 65.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 66.
16. See *ibid.*, p. 79.
17. "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Oral Tradition."
18. Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 68.
19. See *ibid.*, pp. 58, 79.
20. See "Gates of Jewish Heritage."
21. See Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 58-61.
22. See *Britannica Online* (early edition), s.v. "Moses, Assumption of."
23. See also "The Apocryphal Books: The Assumption of Moses . . .," at biblelight.net/assumpt.htm.
24. See also E. R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (Newhaven, 1935), and his remarks on the "mystery of Moses," quoted by W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 94, 95.
25. See *ibid.*, pp. 211-213.
26. See *Britannica Online*, s.v. "Empedocles," at www.britannica.com/biography/Empedocles.
27. "Now the Pharisees . . . also believe that souls have an immortal vigor to them. . . . (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18:1)," quoted by Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 134.
28. See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 72-75.
29. Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, p. 144.

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