

Jewish Religious System

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The Jewish Religious System: Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, the Sanhedrin, the Talmud

The religious life of the Jews in the time of Christ was controlled by the members of the Jewish priesthood, composed of the high priest and his family, the members of the supreme council, the Sanhedrin, and the local priest, or rabbi, who presided over the synagogue. Among the religious leaders there were many factions; and these factions had grave and fundamental differences in doctrine and practice.

This paper contains a description of each of the main elements of the Jewish religious hierarchy, namely: the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Sanhedrin. There is also a discussion of the doctrinal differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and there is a description of the Jewish Talmud, which comprised the written and oral scriptures and traditions of the Jews.

The Scribes In New Testament times the Scribes formed a small and exclusive class, holding absolute spiritual supremacy over the people. Everywhere you would see the Scribe as the mouthpiece and representative of the people; he pushes to the front, the crowd respectfully giving way and eagerly listening to his statements as those of a recognized authority. The great respect paid to Scribes is reflected in the title of honor “my master”, in Hebrew **rabbi**. From this respectful address the title Rabbi was formed, probably beginning as such in the time of Christ. In John 3, Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, addressed Christ as “rabbi”, a form of respect for a recognized teacher.

In New Testament Greek the words **nomikos**, “learned in the law; jurist” (Matt. 22:35; Luke

7:30; 10:25; 11:45,52; 14:3), and **nomodidaskalos**, “teacher of the law” (Luke 5:17; Acts 5:34) are used.

The period of the Sopherim, Scribes, began officially with the return of the Jews from captivity. Ezra was both a priest and a scribe; and the law read by Ezra (Neh. 8-10) was the Pentateuch essentially as we have it now. And from that time the Pentateuch was acknowledged by Jews as the binding rule of life. The office of scribe had its origin somewhat earlier than this official beginning, however.

The scribe of the Greek state (**grammateus**) was more than a mere writer; he was also the keeper and registrar of public documents (acc. to Thucydides, iv. 118; vii, 10; and also in Acts 19:35). Three men are mentioned as holding the office of scribe under Kings David and Solomon (2 Sam. 8:17; 20:25; 1 Kings 4:3). These were the king’s secretaries, writing his letters, drawing up orders and decrees, and managing royal finances. At a later period, the word “scribe” is connected with the numbering of the military forces of the country (Jer. 52:25; Isa. 33:18).

King Hezekiah brought together a group of men whose work it was to transcribe old records and to put in writing what had been handed down orally (Prov. 25:1). So the new significance of the title “Scribe” probably dates to this time, no longer referring only to an officer of the king’s court, but to a class of students and interpreters of the law, boasting in their wisdom (Jer. 8:8).

The Law had been handed to Moses by God at Mt. Sinai, and the writings of Moses, the Pentateuch, was the chief body of Scripture for the Jews after the exile. Later, however, the inspired writings of the prophets and historians were added to the au-

thoritative canon of scripture. At a still later period, a third collection of writings was begun which over many generations became for the Jews just as authoritative as the inspired writings. This body of work was the writings of the Scribes of decisions and interpretations of the Pentateuch, prophetic, and historical writings.

As the law became more complicated and comprehensive, more scientific study and professional interpretation was required. The many details and applications to everyday life involved patient study. In the time of Ezra, and for several generations thereafter, this study and teaching was the job of the priesthood. But the higher the law rose in the estimation of the people, the more its study and exposition become an independent activity. Thus the scholar class, the Scribes, was formed.

The priests had somewhat abdicated their God-given position as teachers of the congregation of Israel because, under Greek influence, the higher strata of priests, applied themselves to the study of heathen cultures, and more or less neglected the law. The Scribes appeared as the zealous and single-minded guardians of the law, and became the real teachers of the people, over whose lives they had control.

The history of the Scribes is divided into five periods, indicated by the names given to Scribes during successive times:

- The Sopherim (see above): lasting from the return from Babylon and ending with the death of Simon the Just, from about 458 to 300 B.C.
- The Tanaim (“repeaters”, or “teachers” of the law): in New Testament times.
- The Amoraim (Hebrew: “the expounders”) “wise men” and “doctors” of the law, who alone constituted the authorized recorders and expositors of the Halachah (220 A.D. to the completion of the Babylonian Talmud, About 500 A.D.) See below regarding the Halachah.
- The Saboraim (from Hebrew: “to think or to discern”): teachers of the law after the conclusion of the Talmud, 500 to 657 A.D., who determined the law from a careful examination of all the considerations urged by the Amoraim in their controversies on divine, legal, and ritual questions contained in the Talmud.
- The Gaonim, the last doctors of the law in the rabbinic succession, from 657 A.D. to 1034.

The Employment of the Scribes

In the time of Christ, the rabbis required from their students absolute respect, even greater than the honor due to parents. “If a man’s father and teacher have lost anything, the teacher’s loss should have the precedence, i.e., he must first be assisted in recovering it; the burden of a teacher is to be born in preference to that of a father, a teacher must be ransomed from captivity before one’s own father.” The rabbis in general everywhere claimed the first rank (Matt. 23:6,7; Mark 12:38; Luke 11:43; 20:46).

The main task of the Scribes was the theoretical development of the law. They developed the general precepts of the law; and where the written law made no direct provision, they created an application, either by establishing a precedent that was followed thereafter, or by inference from previous legal decisions. In this way, up to the time of Christ, Jewish law became an extensive and complicated science. Very great study was needed to gain even a general acquaintance with it.

The Scribes assumed that it was their special task to improve what was already binding by developing more and more subtle sophistication in reasoning. To develop a system of law binding on everyone, it was necessary to come as near to a consensus as possible. So the whole process of systematizing the law was carried on by oral discussion, the acknowledged authorities instructing the students and debating legal questions with each other, for centuries.

This made it necessary that the chief among the Scribes live in certain central places, and until 70 A.D. Jerusalem was the main headquarters of the Scribes, after that at Jamnia and Tiberias. Gradually, the theories of the Scribes became valid law; the rules developed by them were recognized in practice as soon as the various schools were in agreement. The Scribes were, in fact, legislators, especially after the destruction of the Temple, for then there was no civil court of justice under the Sanhedrin (see below).

The second task of the scribes was teaching the law. Every Israelite was supposed to have a thorough knowledge of the law. As a consequence, the famous chief rabbis gathered about them large numbers of students. Because parts of the oral law were never committed to writing, constant repetition was required to make it stick in the minds of the learners. Questions were directed to the students for the decision, while pupils also questioned the teachers. Because all knowledge of the law was

strictly traditional, the student had only two duties - to keep everything in memory, and to teach only what had been given to him.

There were special locations for this instruction, "houses of teaching" (synagogues), and the Temple itself among the colonnades or other spaces in the outer court (Matt. 21:23; 26:55; Mark 14:49; Luke 2:46; 20:37; John 18:20).

The third duty of Scribes was to pass sentence in the court of justice. Obviously, men so well versed in the law would be asked to be judges. We know that scribes were members of the Sanhedrin (see below). After the fall of the Jewish state in 70 A.D., scribes were both legislators and judges.

The Writings of the Scribes

In the development and writing of the law there evolved two main bodies of written work, the Halachah and the Haggadah.

Edersheim, in *Life and Times of Jesus*, Vol. I, p.98, states that the Halachah contained "either simply the laws laid down in Scripture, or else derived from or traced to it by some ingenious and artificial method of exegesis; or added to it, by way of amplification and for safety's sake; or, finally, legalized customs. They provided for every possible and impossible case, entered into every detail of private, family, and public life; and with iron logic, unbending rigor, and most minute analysis pursued and dominated man, turn whither he might, laying on him a yoke which was truly unbearable. The return which it offered was the pleasure and distinction of knowledge, the acquisition of righteousness, and the final attainment of rewards."

Scheurer, in *Jewish People*, Div. II, Vol I, pp. 339 ff, states that the Haggadah "is an amplification and remodeling of what was originally given, according to the views and necessities of later times. It is true that here also the given text forms the point of departure, and that a similar treatment to that employed in passages from the law takes place in the first instance. The history is worked up by combining the different statements in the text with each other, completing one by another, setting the chronology, etc. Or the religious and ethical parts are manipulated by formulating dogmatic propositions from isolated prophetic utterances, by bringing these into relation to each other, and thus obtaining a kind of dogmatic system."

The Pharisees The word "Pharisee" is from Greek by way of the Aramaic word for "separated".

The name Separatist is thought by some to be derived from that separation which took place in the time of Zerubbabel, and then again in the time of Ezra, when Israel separated from the heathen dwelling in the land and from their uncleanness (Ezra 6:21; 9:1; 10:11; Neh. 9:2; 10:29).

However, the name probably has a stricter meaning, coming to the Pharisees as a result of their extremely strict view of the idea of pollution, not only from the uncleanness of the heathen, but also from that pollution with which they thought the majority of Israelites were likewise affected. They might have been called "separatists" by some in praise, and by others in blame. It is unlikely that they took the name for themselves because they called themselves the haberim, those who "associate", this term referring to one who associates himself with the law in order to observe it strictly in opposition to the encroachments of the heathen world culture.

The priests and scribes (see above) formed the inner structure of Jewish religion after the captivity. These two groups became more and more separated until, in the Maccabean period, two parties, sharply at odds with each other, were developed from them, the Pharisees from the Scribes, and the Sadducees from the ranks of the priests (see below). The characteristic feature of the Pharisees arose from the legal tendency, while that of the Sadducees came from the social position.

During the Greek period, the chief priests and rulers of the people took an increasingly more negative attitude toward the law; so the Pharisees united themselves more tightly into a group that kept to a strict observance of the law. In the time of John Hyrcanus, they were in hostile opposition to the Maccabees, because the Maccabees chief objective was no longer the carrying out of the law but maintaining and extending political and economic power.

The stress which the Pharisees laid on the religion of the people won the majority of the nation to their side, and Queen Alexandra, to keep civil peace, gave the power into the Pharisees' hands. It was consistency with principle which gave them spiritual supremacy and kept people on their side. Although the Sadducees were at the head of the Sanhedrin, the whole conduct of internal affairs was in Pharisee hands; they completely ruled the public life of the nation, and this continued essentially throughout the time of Christ and the apostles.

From Scheurer, *Jewish People*, Div. II, Vol. II,

p. 28, “They had the bulk of the nation as their ally, and women especially were in their control. They had the greatest influence upon the congregations, so that all acts of public worship, prayers, and sacrifices were performed according to their injunctions. Their sway over the masses was so absolute that they could obtain a hearing even when they said anything against the king or the high priest; consequently, they were the most capable of counteracting the designs of the kings. Hence, too, the Sadducees, in their official acts, adhered to the demands of the Pharisees, because otherwise the multitude would not have tolerated them.”

Teachings of the Pharisees

Concerning immortality, the Pharisees taught “that every soul is imperishable, but that only those of the righteous pass into another body, while those of the wicked are punished with eternal torment” (Josephus, Wars of the Jews, II, 8, 14). “They hold the belief that an immortal strength belongs to souls and that there are beneath the earth punishments and rewards for those who in life devoted themselves to virtue or vileness, and that eternal imprisonment is appointed for the latter, but the possibility of returning to life for the former” (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, XVIII, 1,3).

The Pharisees also taught the existence of angels and spirits, while the Sadducees denied them (Acts 23:8), and this also represented the general standpoint of later Judaism.

Concerning divine providence and human freedom, the Pharisees “make everything depend on fate and on God, and teach that the doing of good is indeed chiefly the affair of man, but that fate also cooperates in every transaction” (Josephus, Wars, II, 8, 14).

“They assert that everything is accomplished by faith. They do not, however, deprive the human will of spontaneity, it having pleased God that there should be a mixture, and that to the will of fate should be added the human will with its virtue or baseness” (Josephus, Antiquities, XVIII, 1,3).

Concerning politics, the standpoint of the Pharisees was looking at civil affairs from a religious point of view. They could be content with any government as long as religion was not hindered; but they became, in a sense, a political party when they rose to oppose a government that interfered with the practice of the law.

Practices of the Pharisees

All Israelites avoided, as far as possible, all physical contact with the heathen, in order to avoid being defiled. The Pharisee, in addition, avoided physical contact with any non-Pharisees, even among other Jews. The fact that the Pharisees found fault with Jesus’ contact with publicans and sinners agreed exactly with this point of view (Mark 2:14–17; Matt. 9:9–13; Luke 5:27–32).

In the Talmud, seven kinds of Pharisees are described (from Delitzsch, *Jesus und Hillel*):

- The Shechemite Pharisee, so-called because he keeps the law for what he can profit from it, as Shechem submitted to circumcision to obtain Dinah (Gen. 34:19).
- The Tumbling Pharisee, who, to appear humble, hangs down his head and is in danger of falling down.
- The Bleeding Pharisee, who is often injured because he walks around with his eyes closed so as not to see a woman.
- The Mortar Pharisee, who wears a cap shaped like a mortar to cover his eyes so as not to see impurities or indecencies.
- The “What-Am-I-Yet-To-Do” Pharisee, who, because he doesn’t know much about the law, says “Tell me what my duty is now, and I will do it.”
- The Pharisee From Fear, who keeps the law because he is afraid of future judgment.
- The Pharisee From Love, who obeys the Lord because he loves him with all his heart.

A Comparison of Pharisaim and Christianity

It was Jesus Christ’s great effort to make clear the principles of the Laws of the Old Testament dispensation and to carry them to their legitimate conclusions, to “fulfill the law”, not to confirm the law as many have thought. The Pharisees taught such a slavish adherence to the letter of the law that its true character, which pointed to something higher than its letter, was completely overwhelmed; and its moral precepts, which were intended to elevate men, were instead made to contract and debase the ideas of morality.

While it was the aim of Jesus to call men to the law of God itself as the supreme guide of life, the Pharisees multiplied minute precepts and distinctions to such an extent that the whole life of Israel was hemmed in and burdened on every side by instructions so numerous and trifling that the

law was almost lost sight of (Matt. 12:1–13; 23:23; Mark 3:1-6; 7:2–4; Luke 13:10–17; 18:12).

It was Christ's leading aim to teach men that true piety lay not in outward forms, but in substance; not in small details, but in great rules of life. The whole system of Pharisaic piety led to the exact opposite. Under its influence "the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith" (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42) were undervalued and neglected. Religion in the heart was ignored (Luke 11:38–41). The most sacred obligations were evaded (Mark 7:11). Vain and trifling questions took the place of serious inquiry into the great principles of duty (Matt. 19:3). Even the most solemn truths were handled as mere matters of curious speculation or means to entrap an adversary (Matt. 22:35; Luke 17:20).

Christ taught compassion for the degraded and friendless; liberality to the poor; holiness of heart; universal love; a mind open to the truth. The Pharisees shunned lower classes and pushed from themselves such as the Savior would have gathered into his arms (Luke 7:39; 15:2; 18:11; John 7:47,48). They made a prey of the friendless (Matt. 23:13). With all their pretence, they were really avaricious, sensual, and dissolute (Matt. 23:25; John 8:7). They devoted their energies to making converts to themselves (Matt. 23:15).

The Sadducees The Hebrew word by which the Sadducees were called is **tsaddiqim**, "the righteous ones". If we only look at the points of differences between them and the Pharisees, we get a distorted picture of the Sadducees; but each party had its strong characteristics, that of the Pharisees being a rigid realism, while the Sadducees were aristocratic. According to Josephus, "they gain only the well-to-do; they have not the people on their side." The high priestly families, for example, were almost all Sadducees.

Beliefs of The Sadducees

The Sadducees accepted only the written law and prophets as binding. They rejected the entire traditional interpretations and the further developments of the Scribes. "The Sadducees say only what is written is to be thought of as legal...what has come down from tradition of the fathers need not be observed." (Josephus, Antiquities, XIII, 10,6).

In legal matters the Sadducees were very rigid in judging offenders, while the Pharisees were much milder. "They saw in the tradition of the elders

an excess of legal strictness which they refused to have imposed upon them, while the advanced religious views were, on the one hand, superfluous to their worldly-mindedness, and on the other, inadmissible by their higher culture and enlightenment" (Scheurer, Jewish People, Div. II, Vol. I, p. 41). A more thorough discussion of legal matters among the Sadducees can be found in Unger's Bible Dictionary, pp. 952,953.

In ritual, the only important differences of Sadducees from Pharisees was in respect to laws of cleanness. They derided the Pharisees for the oddities and inconsistencies which they had brought into their laws of purity. They did not reject the idea of Levitical uncleanness, however, and they demanded a higher degree of cleanness for the priest who made the red heifer offering than did the Pharisees.

Doctrines of the Sadducees

The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection of the body or in retribution or reward in a future life. They did not feel bound by any doctrine which did not proceed from Moses, and there was no assertion by Moses in the Pentateuch of any resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees would have given much more weight to Moses' writings than to any of the prophets or historians, even though they regarded those writings canonical.

The Sadducees denied that there were angels or spirits, independent spiritual beings besides God. Even the soul, they said, was only refined matter and would perish with the body.

It is not surprising that the Sadducees laid great stress on human free will. With a strong insistence on personal liberty there came a decrease of the religious motive. They insisted that man was at his own disposal, and they rejected the idea that a divine cooperation takes place in human actions. The Pharisees accentuated the divine to the verge of fatalism, and insisted on absolute preordination of every event in its smallest detail. The Sadducees opposed notions like these.

The Sanhedrin The rise of this great council of the Hebrews took place in the time of Greek supremacy, though there has been some attempt to trace its origins to the council of seventy elders named by Moses. The first mention of the Sanhedrin is in the time of Antiochus the Great (223-187 B.C.) It was evidently an aristocratic body, with the high priest acting as president. When the

Roman order was introduced by Pompey, the high priest still retained the position of governor of the nation, making it likely that the Sanhedrin was carrying on.

Herod the Great began his reign by ordering the whole of the Sanhedrin put to death, appointing his own council of elders in their place. Under the Roman procurators, the internal government of the country was in the hands of the Sanhedrin to a much greater extent. And in the time of Christ and the apostles, the Sanhedrin is frequently mentioned as being the supreme Jewish court of justice. The Sanhedrin was abolished after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The Organization of the Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin was composed of 71 priests who served for life and who were selected from the following:

- The acting high priest presided over the council; all former high priests were members.
- Male members of the high priestly families
- Scribes, legal assessors, bureaucrats
- Pharisees and Sadducees
- Elders - tribal and family heads

Criminal judges were members of the Sanhedrin, and twenty-three of them sat in judgment, with two clerks to record votes for acquittal and conviction. In capital cases, argument for acquittal was heard first, then those in favor of conviction. Anyone who had spoken in favor of the accused could not then speak against him; but one who had spoken against the accused could change his testimony in his favor. Sentence for acquittal could be pronounced immediately; but sentence for conviction was reserved for the next day.

In voting, each member stood, beginning with the youngest. A simple majority was sufficient for acquittal; but a majority of at least two votes was required for conviction. More members of the Sanhedrin would be brought in two at a time to vote whenever there was a majority of only one for conviction. When all 71 had voted, the person was acquitted if there was still a majority of only one.

Jesus appeared before the Sanhedrin on a charge of blasphemy (Matt. 26:65; John 19:7). Peter and

John were charged with being false prophets and deceivers of the people (Acts 4 and 5), Stephen with being a blasphemer (Acts 6:13 ff), and Paul with being guilty of transgressing the Mosaic law (Acts 23).

The Sanhedrin had the right of ordering arrests by its own officers; of finally disposing of such cases as did not involve capital punishment. A sentence of death had to be ratified by the Roman procurator.

The Talmud

Extracts from "The Essential Talmud," by Adin Steinsaltz.

The Bible is the chief cornerstone of the Jewish religion, and the Talmud is the central pillar. It is the most important book in Jewish culture and is the backbone of creativity and national life, shaping spiritual content and serving as a guide to conduct.

In a formal definition, the Talmud is "the summary of oral law that evolved after centuries of scholarly effort by sages who lived in Palestine and Babylonia until the beginning of the Middle Ages." The Talmud has two main components: the Mishnah, a book of law (**halakhah**), written in Hebrew; and the commentary on the Mishnah, known as the Gemara, a summary of the discussions and explanations of the Mishnah, written in Aramaic.

The Talmud is the repository of thousands of years of Jewish wisdom, and the oral law, "which is as ancient and significant as the written law (the Torah)," finds expression therein. It is a collection of law, legend, and philosophy, a blend of logic and shrewd pragmatism, of history and science, anecdotes and humor. Is it a collection of paradoxes; its framework is orderly and logical, every word and term is subjected to meticulous editing, completed centuries after the actual work of composition came to an end; yet it is still based on **free association**, a harnessing together of diverse ideas, reminiscent of the modern stream-of-consciousness novel.

Here is a comment from Rabbi Steinsaltz's book, Chapter 15, **The Sabbath**: "In the most general sense, the numerous Sabbath laws are an expanding network of minute details deriving from several basic concepts, which eventually create an almost Gothic structure made up of thousands upon thousands of tiny and meticulously fashioned details clustered around the original form.