



# the NEW SHOFAR

## The Pharisees: How even good people can get God wrong.

### Who were those Pharisees?

Titus Flavius Josephus, was a first-century Roman-Jewish scholar, historian and hagiographer, who was born in Jerusalem to a father of priestly descent and a mother who claimed royal ancestry. He wrote of the Pharisees:

*...they simplified their standard of living, making no concession to luxury. They follow the guidance of what their doctrine has selected and transmitted as good, attaching the chief importance to the observance of those commandments which it has seen fit to dictate to them. They show respect and deference to their elders, nor do they rashly presume to contradict their proposals. Though they postulate that everything is brought about by fate (divine providence), still they do not deprive the human will of the pursuit of what is in human power...they believe that souls have power to survive death and that there are rewards and punishments...eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage into the next life. Because of these views they are...extremely influential among the townsfolk (Antiquities.1.3.).*

Even allowing for the bias that Josephus shows throughout all of his writings, it is important to keep in mind that the Pharisees were passionate men of faith and religion. They loved God and valued the Torah and the covenant God made with Israel. They have much more in common with the Old Testament prophets than with the priests and the other religious functionaries.

### Their historical origins

The movement goes back to the time of Ezra when the nation was rebuilding the Temple and the City after the return from exile in Babylon (c.457 BC).

Under Ezra the teaching of the Torah was the responsibility of the priests and around them grew up the teachers who came to be known as the scribes or the lawyers.

### Law versus Temple

Ezra's focus on rebuilding the Temple had led to a revival in Israel as the people longed for a national renewal with the Temple at its centre. However, it was the Law and not the Temple that came to be the foundation of Israel after the exile. A new class of lay "lawyers" began to emerge, men who were not of the priestly caste, who owed no allegiance to the temple hierarchy and who were more than ready to reject priestly rule and laws.

Their time really came with the beginning of Greek rule in Palestine. Conditions in the land were chaotic and far from the ideal situation we read about in the Book of Ezra. The growth of the lay leadership weakened the power of the priestly hierarchy and when the Seleucid rulers nominated men for the role of high priest who were not even Jews, the priests themselves became discredited in the eyes of the ordinary people of the land. While during this period the pagan rulers were able to stop temple worship they were unable to destroy the place the Law had in the consciousness of the Jews. The cry that sustained them was *no foreign power or priestly collaborators could destroy the Law*, a cry built upon by the Pharisees.

### Synagogues of resistance

The Jewish resistance grew up around the village assemblies of the people which were called synagogues. It was from these synagogues that the group we know as the Pharisees first emerged and they were successful in challenging the right of the priests to be the official Torah interpreters.

## **Reform and renewal is never easy**

Nor surprisingly the priests did not give up their positions of power without a struggle, a battle that went on for over two centuries. This was a fight between the clerics and the laity and at its centre was the question of where true authority in Israel was to be found - in the Law or the Temple Cult? The priests were much more readily involved in the politics of running the nation and what really mattered for them when it came to power was where ones family ties and relationships were located. This led to much intrigue and compromise as Israel was not a free people and had to deal with whatever nation was governing them. This in turn meant that they were seen as compromised by the bulk of the people, as being more concerned about their own position of power, wealth and career moves than about living God's Law.

### **Pharisees as the separated ones**

It is generally agreed that the word "Pharisee" comes from the Hebrew for *the separated one*. They set out to separate themselves from uncleanness and more especially from the unclean people of the land. The word is also related to the Hebrew word for *holy* and Israel was called by God to *be holy as I am holy*. These lay lawyers then came to be called *the Pharisees* or the *separated ones* (interestingly the Christians in the New Testament came to be called *the saints* which is a term that comes from the same Hebrew source as *Pharisee*).

### **Pharisees and the Law**

These Pharisees were noted for their legalism and their rigorous interpretation of the Law. They became scrupulous in their adherence and taught a strict legalistic faith. Their enemies accused them of *building a fence around the law*. By this they meant placing the Law behind an enormous array of interpretations and teachings so that the people ended up obeying and following the teachings of the Pharisees rather than the Law itself. This was their attempt to protect the Law from being breached.

It was the Pharisees themselves who led the way in this life of observance and one of the results was that they physically separated themselves off from

all non-Pharisees. The danger of mixing with men who were not Pharisees was that they may be unknowingly mixing with people who could make them unclean. Thus they created an exclusive community of those who were "saved". In separating themselves off from all others they were able to claim a meticulous observance of the Law (particularly of the code of Leviticus that relates to ritual activities). It grew to be a bit like a caste system within Israel where they were members of an exclusive sect who avoided the rest of the population. In the case of inadvertent contamination by a casual contact, there were numerous rituals for removing the uncleanness.

Their guiding texts went far beyond the five books of Moses (the Torah - Genesis, Leviticus, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) and it was these numerous tradition of the ancestors that enabled them to move from black and white text fundamentalism to an openness to new ideas and possibilities in the living out of their covenant faith. In their own time they would have been seen as being a more liberal group of Jews, forward looking and seeking to take the Word of God and apply it (according to tradition) to the changing conditions of the time. They wanted to grow and progress Judaism as a religion in the world but at the same time wanted to ensure that it was their vision, their narrow view of God that remained its guiding principle.

In the language of today, it was more of a popular democratic movement that grew out of the people. It was liberal and progressive and it was this which enabled it to survive after the Jewish wars that saw the end of the City of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans. The Sadducees (and so the priests) represented the old ways, the *status quo* and were more interested in doing what was necessary to hold the nation and its religion together in its traditional form. These groups disappeared with the Temple it so revered and served.

### **The Pharisees and the Church**

Religions of all sorts suffer from zealots and the Church down through history has suffered at the hands of those who are more in the camp of the Sadducees, those who fear all change and who seek to hold the Holy Spirit to the script of their own visions for the future than from Pharisees.