

SOME CLARIFICATIONS ON THE PHARISEES

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1. We can say with certainty that the Pharisees as a whole were nationalistic. This means they opposed foreign rule or influence over the people of God, and cared for its religious and social welfare.

2. However, they did not attack governments unless their interests and program were in danger. Thus, they opposed the Jewish king Alexander Janneus (103-76), who persecuted (and probably crucified many of) them. His daughter Alexandra later favored the Pharisees. They are often depicted as vying for power, but seldom as revolutionary. Some Pharisees supported the First Jewish Revolt in 66 C.E., but most opposed it. Even as late as 132, however, a rabbi (descendants of the Pharisees), Aqiva, supported a messianic uprising. Generally, however, after 70 C.E. the Pharisees were strongly opposed to revolution and to apocalyptic, which fueled it. The Jewish canon would basically exclude apocalyptic works (Daniel is an exception, but it is pacifistic).

3. The Pharisees' interests were the nationalistic and religious renewal of the Jewish people. Emphasis was thus placed on separation, ritual purity and other hallmarks of Judaism that distinguished Jews from pagans. They believed in resurrection and in the coming of the messiah. It is not clear whether there were set beliefs about this before 70 C.E., but it seems that the Pharisees as a whole expected gradual as opposed to sudden, apocalyptic (abrupt divine intervention) change. They worked with governments if at all possible rather than antagonizing them. They opposed payment of taxes to the Romans, e.g., but paid them (unlike the Zealots) to avoid trouble. They could engage in civil disobedience if religious values were at stake.

4. Apocalyptic was probably too radical for the majority of Pharisees. Daniel was ok, but it was placed in the Writings, not the Prophets. But we should not be too eager to generalize on this point. We shall see that in some ways Jesus can be called an "apocalyptic," and that Paul the Pharisee also became one. Jesus and the Essenes, as well as the Pharisees, come from the hasidic movement, pious Jews who obeyed the Law (Torah). But among these groups there was great diversity: the Essenes were priestly and seem to be related to the Sadducees, but the Sadducees were worldly, non-hasidic and very unapocalyptic —the opposite of the Essenes! The Maccabees had some hasidim in their folds, but they went their different ways, the Maccabees starting a worldly dynasty opposed by pious Jews such as the Pharisees. Out of hasidism come those Jews who believed in resurrection (such as Jesus), the continuing intervention of God in history, and also the apocalyptists. The militant branch, already present in the Maccabean period, were the later Zealots.

5. In summary, we are on safe ground in saying two things: 1) Most Pharisees were not revolutionary or apocalyptic; they expected gradual change and did not antagonize governments needlessly or support insurrection easily; 2) Within the diversity that is first-century Judaism, there were probably left and right wing Pharisees who either supported or opposed revolution and the apocalyptic ideas of divine intervention which fueled it. Josephus was one conservative Pharisee (at least at one point) who hated revolution and the Zealots. Paul seems to have had a very conciliatory attitude to government at all times. Jesus was not a Pharisee. He expected the end of the world at least as we know it, and the end of earthly rulers. His teacher, if you will, John the Baptist, has links to the Essenes and was an apocalyptist who expected God to come in fiery judgment, and called on Israel to be ready for this. More to come . . .