

THE INTER-TESTAMENT PERIOD
 III. SCRIBES, PHARISEES, AND SADDUCEES
 BETWEEN MALACHI AND MATTHEW

THE SCRIBES

WHO AND what were the "scribes," who appear so frequently in the Gospel narratives? We read of scribes in Old Testament times, but they must be distinguished from the order of scribes which developed during the inter-Testament period and had acquired such important status in our Lord's time.

The scribes in the Gospel narratives were a class of professional experts in the interpretation and application of the Law and the other Old Testament Scriptures. In Hebrew they were called the *sopherim*, from the Hebrew verb *saphar*, which means to write, to set in order, to count. In the Greek of the New Testament their usual title is plural, *grammateis*, translated as "scribes." In a few places they are called "lawyers" (*nomikoi*), as in Luke 7:30.

Origin as a Class

From the time of the Babylonian exile there developed a new line of scribes who were not just penmen, recorders, transcribers, secretaries, but a new body of men who became the guardians, the teachers, the doctors of the Law and of the Scriptures, to the whole nation. Their power as a class increased the more as time went on. They were not just scribes in the older sense, but they were "the scribes," as a specially distinguished, authoritative group in Israel.

The scribes transition to an authoritative group was due to five factors:

- (1) the mid-exile conversion of the Jewish people from idolatry to a passionate new faith in their own religion and Scriptures;

(2) the need which the exiled Jews had for special teachers due to their separation from their own land and capital and temple.

(3) the change-over from Hebrew, as a spoken language, to Aramaic which necessitated a teacher in the study and exposition of the sacred Hebrew Scriptures.

(4) the rise and spread of the synagogue during and after the Babylonian exile.

(5) the cessation of prophecy, with Malachi, and the new interest which this fostered in the Scriptures.

It is not difficult to see how, when once this new order of scribes came in, they rapidly gained great power. The very nature of the new Judaism made this almost inevitable, for as it has been observed, "The aim and tendency of Judaism was to make every Jew personally responsible for the keeping of the whole Law"; and therefore "a definite rule" had somehow to be extracted from the Law to cover practically every activity of daily life. Their effort to make the Law a detailed set of rules created a complex problem. In some way or another the Law had to be made to speak to that which it did not specifically apply; and when one requirement seemed to contradict another, some hidden harmony or other suitable explanation was shown.

The new order of scribes most probably originated with the Ezra, though Ezra is not be associated with the elaborate deteriorations which developed later. There gradually developed a class of teachers who studied the Hebrew Scriptures and sought to set the standard for all practice down to even the smallest detail. Initially they rendered a valuable service as long as a prophet of God was alive to keep them in line with the word of God.

Subsequent Misdirection

Because of the many perilous influences of foreign powers during this period, Israel needed to

preserve the Law with the utmost care. It had to be studied, and its precepts applied to the ever-changing circumstances of the national condition and life. The determination of the application of the law, however, was not made by the enlightenment of the Spirit of God, but by men.

During this time there developed two primary principles concerning the Law. First, the scribes greatly increased oral traditions. And secondly, they introduced a system of interpretation and exposition of Scripture which utterly destroyed its meaning. Over time this ever-multiplying body of handed-down oral tradition became regarded as being even above the written Law.

The study of the Scriptures themselves degenerated into a preoccupation with mere minutiae, a concentration on supposedly hidden meanings even in syllables and letters. They were so engrossed with the mere "letter" of the Word, that their idolatry of the letter destroyed any reverence for the written word. And true spiritual instruction became all but extinct.

It is not surprising that the people were taken back by the contrast between the straight forward teaching of Jesus and that of the scribes (**Matt. 7:28, 29**). Nor is it surprising that our Lord condemned the regard which the Jews held the "tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:7, 8). Nor is it surprising that the scribes, eager to retain their hold on the Jewish people, opposed our Lord and His teaching at every opportunity.

Some Necessary Distinctions

The scribes must be carefully distinguished from the priests. It may seem rather strange that the priests were not responsible for teaching and applying the Scriptures, but they did not do so even from the first. You see, the function of the priest related entirely to the official ceremonies and duties of the temple worship. Now a man might be a priest and a scribe but most were not both. Yet if they were both these two activities were always recognized as clearly distinct. Several times in the Gospels we find the scribes and the priests coupled together, which indicated

their consciousness of close connection in the one religious system. However, their functions were separate.

The scribes must also be distinguished from the *Pharisees*. The Pharisees were an ecclesiastical group such as a denomination is today and were held together by their aims and views. However, the scribes were a body of experts of the Law in a scholastic sense. A man might conceivably be all three, that is, a priest, a Pharisee and a scribe. The responsibilities of a priest related to his daily occupation. The duties of a **Pharisee** related to religious conviction. And **the scribe's** duties related to a special vocation.

There was such corruption among the scribes that our Lord severely denounced them in **Matt. 23:13-28**. Yet not all the scribes were of that sort such as Nicodemus, Gamaliel and Hillel who were men of integrity.

What caused these groups to form?

First, there was separatism which was based on the Law.

For the very beginning when the Remnant returned to Judea after the Exile, their aim was to reconstruct the a Jewish nation which was separated from all others to Jehovah by the strict observance of His law. Separation to Jehovah was the controlling idea behind the establishment of the new Jewish nation.

The second reason for these groups to form was the increasing influence of the High Priest.

During the comparatively uneventful period of Persian overlordship (536-333 B.C.) the importance and prestige of the high priest steadily grew. For him he had no king but God. Both the sacred and the civil authority became more and more merged in the one figure, until, instead of installing a separate civil governor, the Persian government left the Jewish high priest solely

responsible for the whole civil administration and the tribute levy to Persia.

The high-priesthood gradually became the coveted office by those who thought far more of its political advantages than of its spiritual responsibilities. In reaction to this, there arose a movement which strongly advocated strict adherence to the God-given national Law and the original ideals of Judaism.

The third reason for the forming of these two groups was the rise of opposition between them.

From a very early period there were two ruling classes in Judea, each aspiring to dominate the other according to each's own views. The priests on the ground of their official position, and the scribes on the ground of the authority of the Law. There was no healing the rift between the priests and the scribes. It went on and on, until it eventually crystallized itself into "Sadducees"(priests) versus "Pharisees" (scribes).

Historical Features: (1) First Mention by Name of the Pharisees

So, then, keeping in mind these two opposing attitudes and groups, let us go to the Maccabean period (165-135 B.C.).

During the heroic struggles of the Maccabees, John Hyrcanus became high priest commencing what is known as the Asmonean dynasty. This John Hyrcanus recaptured most of the territory which had been Israel's long before. It is in the days of John Hyrcanus that the Pharisees first appear on the scene as an historical movement.

The Pharisees represent that section of the Jewish people with whom loyalty to the Law, the religion of Jehovah, and separation to the ideals of Judaism, were everything. However, we assume by this time a considerable mass of oral law had accumulated, with its multiplied external

religious observances.

We should also be aware of this interesting fact. The Pharisees were the spiritual successors of the Chasidim, i.e. the "Pious Ones." This was a group who, thirty or forty years earlier, had banded themselves together in a secret league to preserve the Jewish faith against the efforts of Antiochus Epiphanes (a ruthless ruler in Syria) who was trying to eradicate the Jews. So strictly and literally did those Chasidim live "according to the Law" that many allowed themselves to be murdered rather than lift a hand in self-defense on the Sabbath day. When Judas Maccabeus commenced his liberation struggle large numbers of the Chasidim rallied round him and found their way into the Pharisees.

So, from these things, we see historical emergence of the Pharisees.

By the way, the **name Pharisees means "Separatists"**. They were most probably first so called this by their enemies because of their false pride and petty exclusiveness. They would gladly have avoided politics, but because religious issues were continually at stake, they became fiery defenders of their views. **Separation** was the dominating feature and the most prized virtue of the Pharisee's concept of religion. And to the letter of the Law the Pharisees gave fanatical adherence.

Historical Features: (2) Inevitable Tendencies of the Pharisees

By the nature of the two groups, the Pharisees had much in common with the scribes who were specialists in the Written Law, and in the ever-enlarging Oral Law. Most of those who were scribes by vocation would be Pharisees in conviction. The ultimate goal of the scribes and Pharisees was separation from the world and holiness to God by the strict fulfilling of both the written and oral law.

On the other hand, an unfortunate predisposition of the Pharisees was spiritual snobbery toward

the common people, who had not the slightest chance, and knew it, of fulfilling the complex requirements of the law which developed orally.

A further trap into which the Pharisees fell was **hypocrisy**. First they solemnly labored to perform all the oral law; then, failing in this, they resorted to mere outward compliance. Failing in this, they professed an outward compliance while secretly sinning. The acceptance of their own sin finally hardened them into the worst kind of hypocrites.

The mass of the Jewish people gave up trying to keep the oral law and resigned themselves to being helpless sinners. Yet, somehow, they still admired the Pharisees as representing something desirable even though the Pharisees despised them. This was the situation as it developed in the time when our Lord was on earth.

Historical Features: (3) Other Notable Aspects concerning the Pharisees

Yet there were those who were sincere and aspired to attain the impossible requirement of the oral law. Moreover, it was the Pharisees who kept the Messianic hope alive during this period of time in Israel, and preached the hope of bodily resurrection for the faithful when the Messiah should bring in His kingdom.

In his Antiquities of the Jews (Book XVII) Josephus says that there were approximately 6000 Pharisees in Herod's time. Even though they were never a large body numerically, their influence was certainly profound upon the Jewish people. They had, in fact, such a hold on the Jewish mind that no governing power could afford to disregard them.

Several times during the inter-Testament period we find that the Pharisees were the determining factor in the struggle for ruling power. We need only read the four Gospels to see what sway they had in our Lord's days on earth-and what influence they had in bringing about His crucifixion.

THE SADDUCEES

Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees were embryonic movements in the early alienation between scribes and priests. However, neither could develop in post-exile Jewry while prophets were on the scene. But in the inter-Testament period, when prophecy was gone, the opposition of these two groups increased until eventually, just after the Maccabean revolt, they emerged by name as the "Pharisees" and the "Sadducees."

It appears that the name "Sadducees" comes from "Zadokites". And the "Zadokites" are thought to have come from "the sons of Zadok," who held the high-priesthood from Zadok in David's reign (2 Sam. 8:17, etc.) to Maccabean times. In support of this we see that as late as the midpoint of the exile period Ezekiel names "the sons of Zadok" as representing the whole priesthood (Ezek 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11). What could be more probable, then, when the high-priesthood passed to the Asmonean house after the Maccabee victory, that the Jewish priestly group, desiring to retain the prestige and advantage of their respected position should stress in a new way that they were still really the Zadokites?

With Ezra combining the two within himself, it would have been surprising that a rift should have developed early on (Ezra 7:6,12). The rift between the two seemed to have developed from early tendencies. As we have said, to the scribes the idea of a government who was subject to God and the Messianic hope were everything. However, the priests seem to have been absorbed with the official and earthly aspects of the high-priesthood. As a result these two groups united in themselves both the spiritual and political headship of the nation.

Later, when the empire of Alexander spread the Greek language and culture throughout the civilized world, and a struggle began among the Jews between Judaism and Hellenism. It was the priestly line who gave way to compromises, while the influence of the scribes was the heart of the resistance. The influence of the scribes finally dominated in Israel.

Long after Alexander and his empire had gone, the Greek "culture" continued to spread among the nations. And the cities of Judea were willing victims. Danger to their religion was unavoidable as the Jews came into contact with the colorful refinements, liberty of thought, and voluptuous pleasures of those communities influenced by Greek culture. It was always the aristocratic group which was associated with the priests. And it was also always this group who leaned toward relaxing the practice of Judaism in order to embrace the Greek culture. And it was this group which later became known as **the Sadducees**.

A professor Skinner said, "The Sadducees seem to have been at first neither a religious sect nor a political party, but a social clique. They were a much smaller in number than the Pharisees. They belonged for the most part to the wealthy and influential priestly families who formed the aristocracy of the Jewish nation. The leaders of the party were the elders with seats in the council, the military officers, the statesmen, and officials who took part in the management of public affairs. However, with the mass of the people they never had much influence; and like true aristocrats, this did not concern them. Their one ambition was to make themselves indispensable to the reigning prince so that they might conduct the government of the country according to their own views. The Sadducees held, like some more modern politicians, that the law of God had no application to politics. If Israel was to be made great and prosperous it must be by well-filled treasuries, strong armies and skillful diplomacy. To expect a Divine deliverance merely by making the people holy was to the Sadducees sheer nonsense."

Yet we should note that the Sadducees were as concerned for Judaism as were the Pharisees. It was their idea of it which was radically different from the Pharisees. They totally rejected the Oral Law accumulated by the scribes, and professed to stand by the Written Law alone. However, they did so from a sceptical rather than a spiritual frame of mind. **Matthew 22:23** and **Acts 23:8** shows the scepticism of their attitude even to the Written Law, for they denied bodily resurrection, and did not believe either in angels or spirits. As a body they seemed to have been just as keenly aware and discerning about the worldly aspects of religion and politics as the

Pharisees were indifferent to them. The Sadducees were just as indifferent to the Messianic hope as the Pharisees were taken up with it. The two groups provoked each other into finely divided groups of mutual opposition. Wherever the characteristics of one group appeared the other reacted hostilely. The very fanaticism of the Pharisees provoked the scepticism of the Sadducees. The other-worldliness of the Pharisees irritated the worldly-mindedness of the Sadducees. And so the feud continued. The Pharisees tried to influence the nation from the people upwards. The Sadducees tried to influence the nation from the ruling power downwards. In the Gospels and Acts we see how influentially the Sadducees figured in the Sanhedrin. During our Lord's public ministry the high priests were Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, both Sadducees. **Acts 5:17** speaks of "the high priest and all they that were with him, which is the sect of the Sadducees." We can well understand how intolerable to the Sadducees were the teachings, character and Messianic claims of our Lord Jesus. Their hatred for Him is measured by their readiness to join even with the hated Pharisees in order to kill Him. It was they, in fact, who were directly responsible for His crucifixion (**compare Luke 3:2; John 11:49; 18:13, 14, 24; 19:15; Mark 15:11**).

Yet, even so, we must be careful not to imply that all the priests were necessarily "Sadducean." It was a devout priest and his sons who led the Maccabean revolt. It was to a righteous priest that the angel Gabriel announced the coming gift of a son who should be the Lord's forerunner. A generation later, after the ascended Christ had poured out the Holy Spirit on His waiting disciples, we find that, despite the bitter hostility of the chief priests, "a great company of the priests became obedient to the faith" (**Acts 6:7** says, "And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.")

And so in overview, we see the character and origin of the Pharisees and Sadducees.