The Religious Parties During the Second Temple Period

Bruce Satterfield
Department of Religious Education,
Brigham Young University - Idaho

The following are selected statements from various New Testament scholars concerning the religious parties that existed within Judaism during the intertestamental or the second temple period.

Introduction

“The Judaism of the intertestamental period is a very complex system indeed comprising many religious and political groups (these two ideas can hardly be separated), and a multitude of ordinary Jews who belonged to no identifiable party. Three important parties mentioned by Josephus are the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes, to which he adds a fourth, later to be known as the Zealots, which made its appearance around the year A.D. 6th” (Russell, The Jews From Alexander to Herod, pp. 155).

Sadducees

We know very little regarding the Sadducees. The reason being is as Samuel Sandmel has written, “The Sadducees are known to us essentially from their portrayal by their critics or opponents, including bitter ones. If any Sadducee ever wrote anything, not a line has come down to us” (Judaism and Christian Beginnings, p. 156). Consequently, our only knowledge of Sadducees come from their enemies. Not a good source! Nevertheless, the following scholars have gleaned the following concerning the Sadducees.

Frederick J. Murphy wrote: “Josephus, the New Testament, and rabbinic literature all speak of the Sadducees, but very little is really known about them. All three sources contrast the Sadducees and the Pharisees. In rabbinic literature, ritual purity and sabbath observance are debated by the two groups. The rabbis supply little information for reconstructing Sadducean organization or beliefs. The only two solidly established traits of the Sadducees are that they were members of the ruling class, and that they did not believe in resurrection” (Murphy, The Religious World of Jesus, pp. 239).

Stephen E. Robinson has given this view concerning the make up and political role and influence of the Sadducees: “The Sadducees were a small party of very wealthy and influential aristocrats. Most Sadducees were priests, and the high priestly families (those families from whom the high priests traditionally came) controlled the sect and its membership. The term Sadducee comes from the name of Zadok, who had been high priest at the time of King Solomon, and whose descendants had served in the office ever since, except for the time of the early Maccabean period. The name thus underscores the nature of the Sadducees as an exclusive circle of wealthy and influential high priestly families and their followers.

“The Sadducees controlled the Jerusalem Temple and derived their wealth, power, and influence from it. The temple generated tremendous revenues from the sacrifices and concession, and these riches were controlled by the Sadducees. The Sadducean high priest was also the head of the Sanhedrin (the governing council of the Jews), and therefore Sadducees were also very prominent in government. In any society, it is the aristocracy that resists changes in the status quo, since they benefit from things as they are. Thus, politically the Sadducees cooperated with the Romans in return for the continued exercise of their many privileges. But it also followed that the Sadducees exerted almost no moral influence on the common people, who resented them for their aristocratic attitudes and for their cooperation with Rome” (Robinson, The Gospels, pp. 24).

Concerning this same topic D.S. Russell wrote, “We can picture them, then, as a small and select group of influential and wealthy men who exercised considerable power in the civic and religious life of the nation. The powerful priesthood was represented within this social aristocracy by the High Priest and his retinue and by other leading priestly officials. Not all the priests, however, were Sadducees; some indeed were members of the rival party of the Pharisees. Nor, as we have seen, were all Sadducees priests, for in the party were wealthy traders and high-ranking government officials. They were in fact a company of people, priestly and lay, who enjoyed the same social standing and were determined to maintain the existing state of society both in Church and State. They did not begin, therefore, as a religious party, but because of their close association with the Temple and the priesthood, and because politics and religion could not readily be separated from each other, theirs gradually assumed a religious character over against the party of the Pharisees.”

Russell continued his discussion of the Sadducean politics and religion in these words: “In politics and in religion they were conservative in outlook, determined at all costs to maintain the status quo in both State and Church. As conservatives in politics they stood for the Israelite ideal of a theocratic state under the leadership of the High Priest. For this reason they were suspicious of the popular eschatological faith in the coming of a Messiah: as such
teaching was a menace to the existing social and political order and had to be handled with the greatest care. As conservative in religion they set themselves to preserve all that they believed to be best in the priestly tradition. In particular they championed the observance of the Temple ritual and the prerogative of the priests to interpret the Law, maintaining that their interpretations, together with priestly ordinances and usages arising out of them, were in themselves a sufficient guide for those who sought to obey the commands of God. From an early date their authority as interpreters of the Law met a serious challenge from the Pharisees, who developed their own oral tradition of lay interpretation (see below). The Sadducees rejected this tradition and stoutly defended the Torah as alone authoritative; it is unlikely, however, that they denied the sacredness of the Prophets and the Writings . . .” (Russell, The Jews From Alexander To Herod, pp. 158-159). The Prophets and the Writings are all of the Old Testament aside from the Torah or five books of Moses.

The Pharisees
Russell introduced his discussion on the Pharisees in these words: “Over against the Sadducees stood the Pharisees, who in matters of religion were as progressive as their rivals were conservative. Although priests were to be found in their ranks, theirs was essentially a laymen’s movement, whose members, unlike the aristocratic Sadducees, were drawn largely from the middle class. Although they were first and foremost a religious party they were not averse to political power, and in the course of the years acquired for themselves an influential position in the state” (Russell, The Jews From Alexander To Herod, pp. 159-160).

Robinson has written: “In the first century, the most prominent of the Jewish sects was the Pharisees. The precise origin of the term Pharisee is unclear, but it seems most likely that it is derived from the Hebrew word parash and should be interpreted to mean something like ‘separatist.’ Certainly the Pharisees prided themselves on being ‘set apart’ or ‘separated’ from the rest of the Jews by their strict observance of the minutest requirements of the law of Moses. According to Josephus, there were approximately six thousand Pharisees in the first century. They were the party that was most popular with the masses, and their interpretation of the scriptures was the one most readily accepted, even by those who were not themselves Pharisees. They were the popular party, the religion of the great mass of Jews--even through their actual membership was small.

‘Much of the Pharisees’ influence was due to their control of what is called the ‘oral law.’ The Pharisees claimed that Moses had received the law on Mount Sinai in two parts--one written and one oral. The written part of the law made up the five books of Moses, which were accepted by all Jews: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But according to the Pharisees, another part of the law had also been given to Moses orally and had been handed down and preserved by the Pharisees and their predecessors. This oral law, as interpreted and expanded by the Pharisees, was sometimes called ‘the tradition of the Fathers.’ Wherever the written scripture failed to give clear instructions, the Pharisees appealed to the oral law (which they alone controlled) for answers. . . .

“The Pharisees’ strength was in the local synagogues, which they controlled; and their religious leaders were called rabbis (meaning teachers or masters). In matters pertaining to national government or to the administration of the temple and its rituals, they recognized the authority of the Sadducean priesthood, for the Pharisees were generally scholars and preachers rather than priests” (Robinson, The Gospels, pp. 22-23).

Concerning the “oral law,” Russell wrote: “It was a body of ‘decisions’ or ‘judgements’ in oral form, explanatory of the written Law and developing alongside it. It is generally referred to as ‘the tradition of the elders’ or . . . ‘the oral tradition’. It is possible that part of this tradition is to be traced back into pre-exilic times and represents older traditions and collections of laws which may have been lost or destroyed but were preserved in oral form by succeeding generations. Much of it, however, is based rather on custom and usage that grew up in relation to some particular command or ordinance in Scripture. Take as an example the command about doing work on the Sabbath day. The command itself was clear enough; but what was meant by ‘work’? The written law left this undefined. Where Scripture could not help, however, custom could. Certain things were ‘done’ and other things were ‘not done’. Thus custom was able to provide a well-defined code of its own as binding as the written Law, which took its place as oral tradition alongside the word of Scripture. Sometimes laws of this kind could find no real justification in the written Torah; nevertheless they could be justified as forming ‘a fence round the Torah’(Pirke Abhoth 1,1) i.e. they gave a danger signal, as it were, which halted a man before he came within reach of breaking the law. For the most part, however, the oral tradition consisted of authoritative regulations arising out of an exegesis of biblical laws of a civil or religious kind. This teaching was called Halakhah Hebrew halach, to walk) because it showed how men should walk in obedience to the Law of God in every detail” (Russell, The Jews From Alexander To Herod, pp. 117-118).

I. Epstein noted that “The earliest method of teaching the oral law was by means of a running commentary, Midrash, on the biblical text. When the exposition yielded a legal teaching, the result was Midrash HALACHAH; if nonlegal, ethical, or devotional teaching, it was Midrash
Haggadah (‘narration’).” In the last half of the Second Temple period “a new method of teaching began to emerge as a rival to that of the Midrash—a method in which the oral law was taught without reference to the Holy Writ. This evidently represented a progressive method of teaching in that it enabled the teachers to put on the order of the day any such subjects as they desired without being tied to the sequence of biblical texts.” Without “the aid to memory which the Holy Writ could supply, the oral law could be imparted and retained chiefly by means of repetition. Hence the name Mishna (‘repetition’) was given to the new method of teaching. . . .

Epstein continues: “The adoption of the Mishna method did not, however, oust altogether the older Midrash form.” In fact, “Midrash and Mishna continued to exist side by side as media for teaching Halachah.” After the time of Christ at around 200 A.D., the oral law taught in the Mishna style was codified and written down by Rabbi Judah the Prince and became known as the Mishna. “Rabbi Judah’s Mishna soon gained wide recognition and became the authoritative canon of the oral law and the main basis of instruction and principal subject of study, investigation, and research for the schools, both in Palestine and in Babylon for several centuries. The Mishna of Rabbi Judah, however, contained only a minor fraction of the legal material current in the Palestine academies. There were many additional and rival collections that issued from contemporary authorities of Rabbi Judah . . . which preserved teachings which Rabbi Judah had for one reason or another thought fit to exclude and which often went counter to his teachings. These ‘external’ or ‘additional’ teachings . . . could not be ignored in the discussions of Rabbi Judah’s Mishna; nor could the oral traditions and teachings transmitted in Midrash form.” In two large gatherings held at different times by different sets of Jewish scholars, discussions were held concerning this matter. One group met in Babylon and the other in Palestine. “Their endeavor was to interpret the Mishna, explain its obscurities, discuss its contents, trace back its teachings to the Bible, and harmonize contradictions in oral traditions as emanating from different authorities or schools.” The product of these two groups has become known as the Gemara “which, together with the Mishna of Rabbi Judah, constitutes the Talmud” (Epstein, The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, pp. 511-512). Each group produced a differing Talmud. They have become known as the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud. Talmud forms the back bone of modern Judaism.

The Essenes

Concerning this religious party, Robinson wrote: “According to Josephus, the third major Jewish sect was the Essenes. It appears that there may have been more that one type of Essene, but those that are best known to us lived in a desert community on the shores of the Dead Sea. During the first Jewish revolt, when the Roman tenth legion scoured the Jordan River valley, the Essenes of this community, now called Qumran, buried their religious books in nearby caves. In 1947, the caves were discovered, and many of the books have come to light as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Through the scrolls, we know a great deal about the Essenes of Qumran, although how they differed from other Essenes is still unclear.

“Basically, Essenes believed that the Sadducean Jerusalem priesthood was illegitimate and that all who associated with Sadducean priests were apostate. The Essenes withdrew into their own wilderness community to wait for the end of the world and their own vindication. They believed that they were living in the last days, that the end of the world was near at hand, and that the Messiah would soon come to establish his kingdom and restore legitimate priests (Essenes, of course) to serve in a renewed temple. In the meantime, they withdrew as much as possible from what they perceived to be an apostate Jewish society.

“Essenes were more strict and rigorous than even the Pharisees, whom they called ‘seekers after smooth things,’ that is, those who look for the easy way. Yet in their beliefs they were very close to the Pharisees, and it appears that the Essenes and the Pharisees were two branches of a single movement that had its beginnings in Maccabean times. Like the Pharisees, the Essenes believed in the validity of some kind of oral law. They believed in the existence of angels and demons, in the continued existence of the spirit after death, and in the resurrection of the body. Like the Pharisees, the Essenes were anti-Roman, and in the first Jewish revolt, Essenes were active in the fighting” (Robinson, The Gospels, pp. 25-26).

The Zealots

With regards to the Zealots Robinson wrote: “Strictly speaking, the Zealots should probably be considered as a branch of Pharisaism, because their theology was basically that of Pharisees. However, the Zealots were rabid nationalists who actively resisted Roman rule of the Jews even to the point of armed insurrection. . . .

“Zealots believed that if Jews would only rise up and fight, God would send them victory as he had in the days of Judah the Maccabee. The Zealots, as an article of faith, would recognize no authority in Palestine but that of God and his appointed servants, and they rejected and kind of compromise or accommodation with Rome. . . Toward the end of the first century A.D., the Zealot movement grew stronger as the excesses of the Roman governors grew increasingly intolerable. The militant wing of the Zealot movement, called the Sicarii (Latin for ‘the Daggers’),
practiced political assassination and other acts of terrorism directed both at the Roman occupation government and at those Jews, primarily the chief priests and scribes, who collaborated with Rome. Finally, in A.D. 66, the Zealots were able to precipitate what they had long sought, a general revolt against Rome. The war lasted for seven years, and when it was over Jerusalem had been conquered, the temple had been destroyed, and thousands upon thousands of Jews had lost their lives. Thousands of the survivors were sold into slavery and dispersed throughout the Roman world. Zealots, Essenies, and Sadducees were all gone forever; only the Pharisees remained to rebuild Judaism in their own image and create rabbinic or ‘orthodox’ Judaism, the Talmudic or classical Judaism of a later time” (Robinson, The Gospels, pp. 26-27).

The ‘Am Ha-aretz

“The vast majority of the population in Jewish Palestine did not go to church, that is, they did not have an active affiliation with any of the Jewish sects. Most people accepted the views of the Pharisees on the interpretation of the law, but few actually became Pharisees. These nonaffiliated Jews were called the ‘am ha-aretz, the ‘people of the land,’ and they made up probably 90 percent of the crowds and multitudes to which John the Baptist and Jesus preached” (Robinson, The Gospels, p. 29).

The Scribes

Concerning the development of the occupational class known as scribes, Russell has given us this insight: “From an early stage in the development of the written Torah as sacred Scripture the need must have arisen for both definition and interpretation of its contents. For some considerable time after Ezra it was not always self-evident what exactly constituted the Law of God, nor was it clear how particular laws were to be applied in everyday life. To meet this need there emerged a body of men known as Sopherim or ‘scribes’, in succession to Ezra (described in Ezra 7:6 as ‘a ready scribe in the torah of Moses’), who gradually won for themselves an authoritative place within Judaism... Although they belonged to the priestly caste, being members of priestly or Levitic families (cf. 2 Chron. 34:13; Neh. 8:7-13), their interpretations of Scripture were not confined to cultic laws and regulations, but included ethical teaching... “Their influence continued throughout the Persian period, but shortly after the beginning of the Greek period it came to an end. The reason for this is no doubt to be found in the radically changed circumstances that now prevailed and for which their particular interpretations of Scripture were no longer adequate. The Greek culture brought with it a flood of new customs and new ideas with which the priestly scribes could not cope. At this point a development took place that was to have the greatest significance in years to come—there arose a class of scribes, chiefly lay, who applied themselves diligently to the task of interpreting and applying the Law in the light of the prevailing circumstances of their own day. This group of men, together with their adherents, exercised a great political and religious influence in subsequent years...” (Russell, The Jews From Alexander To Herod, pp. 115-116).

C. L. Feinberg tells us: “The function of the scribes was threefold.

1. They preserved the law. They were the professional students of the law and its defenders, especially in the Hellenistic period, when the priesthood had become corrupt. They transmitted unwritten legal decisions which had come into existence in their efforts to apply the Mosaic law to daily life. They claimed this oral law was more important than the written law (Mk. 7:5ff.). By their efforts religion was liable to be reduced to heartless formalism.

2. They gathered around them many pupils to instruct them in the law. The pupils were expected to retain the material taught and to transmit it without variation. They lectured in the Temple (Lk. 2:46; Jn. 18:20). Their teaching was supposed to be free of charge (so Rabbi Zadok, Hillel and others) but they were probably paid (Mt. 10:10; 1 Cor. 9:3-18, for Paul’s statement of his right), and even took advantage of their honored status (Mk. 12:40; Lk. 20:47).

3. They were referred to as ‘lawyers’ and ‘teachers of the law’, because they were entrusted with the administration of the law as judges in the Sanhedrin (cf. Mt. 22:35; Mk. 14:43, 53; Lk. 22:66; Acts 4:5; Jos., Ant. 18. 16f.). ‘Lawyer’ and ‘scribe’ are synonymous, and thus the two words are never joined in the N.T.” (Feinberg, The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, p. 1404).

After noting that scribes could come from any segment of Jewish society, or from any of the religious parties then extant, Joachim Jeremias notes that “It was knowledge alone which gave their power to the scribes. Anyone who wished to join the company of scribes by ordination had to pursue a regular course of study for several years.” It was only then could he “be received into the company of scribes as a member with full rights, and ‘ordained scholar’ (hakam). Henceforth he was authorized to make his own decisions on matters of religious legislation and of ritual (b. Sanh. 5a), to act as a judge in criminal proceedings (ibid. 3a), and to pass judgment in civil cases either as a member of the court or as an individual (ibid. 4b Bar.).” (Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, pp. 235-236).