

**The Origin of the Pharisees:
An Examination of the Theory of the Pharisaic Revolution**

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INTRODUCTION

Western Christian culture has mostly come to equate the word *Pharisee* with hypocrisy. This should come as no surprise since contemporary persons are not likely to have had substantive exposure to the Pharisaic sect outside of New Testament literature. In the New Testament, the Pharisees are primarily portrayed in a one-sided negative manner. There is good justification for this, but it does raise some important questions. Is there more to Pharisaism than what meets the eye of the New Testament reader? If so, what sources should we access? Considering these sources, what can we know for sure about the Pharisees in terms of their origins? The question of Pharisaic origins is critical to laying a groundwork for further work in the study of the characteristics of their belief system, their influence upon the culture of the Palestinian Jews and the predominant *caricature of hypocrisy*. In essence, how they began is pertinent to the understanding of what they had become in the time of Christ. This probe into the popular theory of the Pharisaic Revolution will hopefully be accomplished by addressing the issue of primary sources and then critically examining the work of Ellis Rivkin and Steve N. Mason.

THE QUESTION OF SOURCES

An accurate historical investigation of Pharisaic Judaism is much more complex and evasive than a *novice* of New Testament literature might first believe. The three primary bodies of literature that mention the Pharisees *by name* and that are indispensable for such a study are the New Testament, the writings of Josephus and the Tannaitic literature.¹

Ellis Rivkin writes:

¹ Ellis Rivkin, *A Hidden Revolution: The Pharisees' Search for the Kingdom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978): 31.

Josephus, the New Testament, and the Tannaitic Literature are the only sources that can be legitimately drawn upon for the construction of an objective definition of the Pharisees. They are the only sources that can lay claim to contemporaneity or near contemporaneity. They are the only sources using the term *Pharisees* that derive from a time when the Pharisees flourished. *No other sources qualify.*²

Although they do not specifically mention the Pharisees, the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings are partly contemporary to the sect and are critical to the broader study of Pharisaism.³ In addition, the Old Testament should also be taken into account, since it served as the Scripture for the Pharisees. The combined scope of these bodies of literature is vast. The intrinsically independent foci of the writings contained therein serve to provide complementary research parameters for the study of the Pharisees. Because their foci are independent, the study of their contents ought to be conducted independently too. Only then, should a historian combine the individual results to form a common understanding of the Pharisees. Due to the page limitations of this project it is *obviously* impossible for one beginning student to exhaust the primary, much less the secondary resources, that are available. Nevertheless, we can at least gain an appreciation for the rich heritage that is embodied in the Pharisaic sect. This first section of the paper will contribute to this by acknowledging the relevance of the non-canonical literature cited above that *specifically* mentions the Pharisees by name.

Josephus is important to the study of the Pharisees because, in addition to having been their contemporary, he also possessed a relatively complete perspective into their way of life. Rivkin points out Josephus' unique qualifications with the following:

Josephus refracts the Pharisees from many angles of vision: (1) He was himself a follower of the Pharisees; hence, he knew them from within. (2) He

² Rivkin, 31.

³ Ibid.

