

SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT PHARISEES

- People often infer from Josephus that in the 1st cent. the Pharisees numbered on the order of 6,000.
- Along with priests, they were acknowledged experts on the law. [Sanders]
- They had no real political power in the 1st cent. but were generally admired for their piety. [Sanders] According to Josephus they were the leading sect of the day. [DJG]
- They were usually not priests. They were typically neither poor nor rich. [Sanders]
- “Characteristic of the Pharisaic position was their adherence to a body of traditional material handed down ‘from the fathers’, which defined correct behavior in a number of ways and which represented both an interpretation of and a supplement to Pentateuchal Law.” Their focus was largely on ritual purity (including food laws) and tithing. [DJG]
- A goal of the traditions of the elders was to “put a fence around the law”, so that if a pious Jew followed the traditions he or she wouldn’t be in danger of breaking the law itself.
- “Purity (in its very different manifestations such as food laws, hand washing, and so on) was not, in this period, an end in itself... It was the symbol, all the more important for a people who perceived themselves under threat, of national identity and national liberation.” [JVG]
- Some of their rulings on or additions to the law made life easier, while some made it harder. E.g. [Sanders]:
 - Pharisees expanded on the requirement in the law of bathing to remove certain impurities before entering the Temple, by washing hands before sabbath and festival meals, and eventually before all meals.
 - Jeremiah 17:19-27 forbids carrying burdens out of one’s house on the sabbath, which effectively prevented pot-luck gatherings among neighbors. “The Pharisees decided that, when several houses were next to each other along an alley or around a court, they could make them all into one ‘house’ by joining them with a series of doorposts and lintels. They could then carry pots and dishes from one part of the ‘house’ to another.”
- “Rabbinic literature attests to distinctions drawn between the ‘people of the land,’ the ‘reliable’ (i.e., people who could be trusted to observe certain requirements of purity and tithing), and full-fledged ‘associates’ who had pledged to conform with defined standards, including the attempt to maintain ritual purity while eating ordinary meals.” (E.g., an associate could not eat with outsiders.) [DJG]
- Some practices of the Pharisees which went beyond the law were seen as a vicarious action to help atone for the sins of Israel. E.g., a Pharisee might tithe beyond what was required on behalf of those who did or could not tithe the required amounts. [TAF]
- “Pharisees in the Gospels are generally (though not quite universally) depicted as opponents of Jesus, critical of his behavior, hostile in their questions, malicious in their deliberation. In turn, their piety is attacked as hypocritical, their spiritual leadership is declared as bankrupt, and they are charged with leading the nation to its doom.” [DJG]
- Pharisees in the NT are not always enemies: E.g., Paul; Gamaliel; the Pharisees of the Sanhedrin who did not accuse Paul in Acts 23:6-9; the Christian Pharisees in Jerusalem in Acts 15:1-5 (who advocated Gentile circumcision); those who warned him of Herod’s assassination plot (Lk 13:31). [Jerome, DJG]
- It has generally been thought that the rabbinic movement after 70 AD flowed from the Pharisees who came into their own after the fall of the Temple and Jerusalem. This should be taken with some caution: “...It is an oversimplification to speak of the ‘Pharisaic-rabbinic tradition,’ nor can rabbinic literature be used uncritically as evidence for Pharisaic traditions.” [DJG]
- Pharisees were not unknown to take an interest in others’ piety and behavior. Philo writes of them, “there are thousands who have their eyes upon [God] full of zeal for the laws, strictest guardians of their ancestral institutions, merciless to those who do anything to subvert them.” Cf. the Pharisees’ investigation of Jesus and John the Baptist in Jn 1:24; 4:1. [JVG] (*Contra* Sanders who thinks they weren’t busybodies.)
- Their name is commonly thought to come from Heb. *perushim*, meaning “separatist.”