

## PHARISEES:

- The Pharisees were essentially a lay movement, with a particular connection to local synagogues within village and town communities (as distinct from the cities), particularly in the region of Judea. They were often middle-class educated tradesmen, merchants or landholders. As a religious sect they prided themselves on gathering for communal meals and strictly obeying the Law of Moses ('the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat' - Mt 23:2).
- Pharisees were interpreters of the Torah. They were skilled at interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures in order to make them relevant to everyday life. They taught that everything is pre-ordained, but that people have the free will to choose their path. In contrast to the Sadducees, Pharisees believed in angels and spirits, the resurrection from the dead, and a final judgement which would lead to eternal happiness or punishment (Mt 3:7).
- Pharisees accepted the concept of the oral law and sought to make the law fit changing cultural, political and social circumstances. An emphasis was placed on outward observances (in contrast to the inner spiritual awareness and commitment advocated by Jesus) and debate on the application of the law (Plucking grain on the Sabbath - Mt 12:1-8).
- Through their interpretation of the law and the traditions of the elders, the Pharisees devised numerous customs and practices designed to promote purity and a path to holiness (Ch 10.3 - A sinful woman forgiven).
- Pharisees were committed to the law as a guarantee of piety and a desire for ceremonial purity. In particular, they avoided contact with Gentiles and sinners, as this would render them impure and necessitate complex ritual cleansing (Ch 5.4 - Ritual Purity).
- Pharisees were known to fast twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays 'for the good of the nation of Israel' (Lk 18:9-14).
- To be accepted as a Pharisee required a public, visible commitment to following the rules of the Mosaic Law and the Oral Tradition. Whilst they did not necessarily consider their rules binding on all Jews, Pharisees were perceived as being harsh judges of the actions of anyone less righteous than themselves (cf Ch 10.2 - The woman caught in adultery - Jn 8:3).

## SCRIBES: (MK 14:1)

- A scribe was someone who could read and write and often held a government administrative position. This group comprised of those who were a well-educated class of copyists and/or teachers of the Law.
- Most scribes were associated with the Pharisees but some were linked to the Sadducees. Scribes who were trained in religious texts and traditions would have a close knowledge of the Jewish Scripture and law (Mt 13:52).
- In larger cities, scribes copied court decisions and commercial contracts and kept them on file in a public building. They would also compose official records, histories, diplomatic correspondence and literature. It was not uncommon for scribes to be sent as messengers for their political or religious masters.
- Local village scribes wrote everything from marriage contracts to loan records.
- Depending on the context some scribes were acknowledged as rabbis (teachers) or lawyers as well as keepers/writers of the sacred scrolls (Jesus denounces the Scribes - Mk 12:38).

life-style as had been the teaching of John the Baptist.

### The Pharisees

The Pharisees followed a direct line from the Hasidim. Their name means "those who separate themselves." There were some six thousand of them at the time of Jesus. They were concerned, above all else, for their religious faith and believed that the Exile had been the result of their ancestors' breaking God's law. They wanted to be legally pure, separate from any form of defilement. They believed that the difference between being "clean" and "unclean" depended upon that law. What was "clean" was obedience to the law; what was "unclean" was disobedience to the law.

This position regarding the law created problems, however, for although there are six hundred and thirteen commandments in the Torah (the books of Moses), they are not always specific. If the Sabbath day was to be kept "holy," then exactly what may be done and what may not? There were lengthy discussions on such subjects as whether or not it was lawful (or "unclean") to eat an egg laid on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees developed a set of regulations designed to save people from breaking the law itself, and they tried to apply the ancient law to new situations. It was necessary that stories be told illustrating the principles of the law (the *Haggadah*), and it was necessary for decisions about the law to be transmitted to others. The people responsible for this side of the work were the scribes, and there were sever-



The Jewish law was written on scrolls of papyrus or parchment.

al different schools of interpretation. The strict school of thought was led by Shammai, who came from a wealthy aristocratic family. The lenient school of thought was led by Hill'el, who came from the middle classes and understood the people. The differences of interpretation became live issues, so that Jesus was asked to give his opinion about the disputed divorce laws (Matthew 19:3–12).

The interpretations of the law were of little importance to the common people, who refused to join the Pharisees, the result being a great deal of bitterness between the two groups. The Pharisees believed in the historic doctrines of Judaism—in the unity, holiness, and providence of God; in the resurrection, the immortal soul bringing about a revival of the body;