



CONTEXT FOR THE CHRIST EVENT:

Hasmonean II

FOR AGES the Hebrews believed that they were chosen to reconcile the “opposites” — antitheses — that have confronted and bewildered humanity. These opposites include the awesome chasms between paradise and hell, between good and evil, between the uncreated and the created, and between the God-given unconditional and conditional covenants. With their liberation from Ptolemaic and Seleucid rulers, the Chosen People dreamed of fulfilling their destiny of reconciliation. However, the decadence of the Hasmonean dynasty — along with its indifference to and rejection of Judaism’s traditional theocratic structure — shocked Jewish traditionalists. This soon led to the emergence of the Jewish sectarian cults.

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Sadducees

On the one hand, displaced from their hereditary high priesthood, the Zadokites and their supporters became the Sadducees (“Zedukim”). The Sadducees were conservatives who upheld the supremacy of the written Torah. They believed that the death of every individual was irrevocable. For them there was no resurrection of the body, no immortality of the soul, no angels or ministering spirits.

Pharisees

On the other hand, the displaced Levitical priests and their Hasidic scribes ultimately became a prominent lay group known as the Pharisees (*Perushim* =

Separatists). “So greatly did the religious values prevail over political in the Pharisaic framework that . . . they were willing to submit to foreign domination — so long as it did not interfere with their inner way of life — rather than support an impious government of their own. . . .

“By the time of the Hasmonean revolt, it had become evident that the Pharasaic theological doctrines were giving utterance to the hopes of the oppressed masses and affecting the entire life of the Jews. This hope was especially seen in doctrines that included . . . [the Zoroastrian beliefs] in the resurrection of the dead, the Day of Judgment, reward and retribution in the life after death, the coming of the Messiah, and the existence of angels, and also divine foreknowledge along with man’s free choice of, and therefore responsibility for, his deeds. . . .

“ . . . [Their] belief in man’s responsibility for his actions led to the Pharisaic doctrine of divine retribution. For the Pharisees, man would be rewarded or punished in the next life according to his conduct. . . .

“For the Pharisees, the Torah God gave to Moses consisted of the Written and the Oral Law, and both were truth . . . Their view of the law was that its commandments were to be interpreted in conformity with the standard and interpretation of the rabbis of each generation, and to be made to harmonize with advanced ideas. . . .

“The Pharisees believed that since God was everywhere, He could be worshiped both in and outside the Temple, and was not to be invoked by sacrifices alone. They thus fostered the synagogue as a place of worship, study, and prayer, and raised it to a central and important place in the life of the people which rivaled the Temple.”¹

“One of the [further] achievements of the Pharisees was to sacralize family life by transferring into the home rituals that observed temple holiness. This is a move that can come only from those who experience family life as no less sacred than temple life.”²

Essenes

The Essenes, known as “healers,” “lived in monastic communities from which, with few exceptions, women were excluded. They lived austere lives, supporting themselves by manual labor, generally agricultural, and holding everything in common ownership. They abhorred slavery. The religious outlook of the Essenes was closer to that of the Pharisees than of the Sadducees but they also had their own specific beliefs and observances. . . .

“ . . . [W]hile the Essenes believed in immortality of the soul, they rejected the doctrine of bodily resurrection. While the Pharisees took an active part in the daily Jewish life of the masses, . . . the Essenes formed a separate sect. Their reason seems evident: they deemed themselves the only true Israel and they regarded the religious observances of the cities and the Temple as corrupt. They refused, therefore, to participate in them and went to the wilderness of Judea, to seek God there.”³

It is believed that the Essenes constituted “an extremist offshoot of the Jewish apocalyptic movement, whose basic doctrine was the expectation of the end of days. According to the view of this movement, the course of history and its epochs had been preordained by God. . . . Hence it was inconceivable that the end of days would fail to come. With its advent, evil would cease, the wicked would be destroyed, and Israel freed from the yoke of the nations. Until it came about mankind was partially under ‘the dominion of Belial.’ But preceding the advent of ‘the final era’ God would raise (or had already raised) up for Himself a community of elect who were destined to be saved from the divine visitation, and who were ‘the eternal [or the righteous] planting’ and the nucleus of the society of the future.”⁴

Summary

On one hand, the Sadducees remained focused on the Temple, its services, and on the written Law. They believed that God was ultimately anthropomorphic (human) but that he had little or no ultimate involvement in human affairs. They believed that the present life was the only form of human existence. The only resolution of the antithesis between the divine and human was human extinction.

On the other hand, the Pharisees determined to resolve the “opposites” by focusing on the synagogue, on their private homes, on table fellowship, and on conformity to both the oral and written Law. The Pharisees tended to be theomorphic — believing in the immortality of the soul, in embodied resurrection, in a future judgment and a new Creation. By emphasizing the universal immanence (indwelling) of God, the Pharisees believed that they had resolved the antitheses between heaven and earth, Creator and creature, good and evil, life and death.

The Essenes constituted yet another sectarian movement. They withdrew from traditional communal life and formed monastic groups dedicated to belief in an apocalyptic combat that would hopefully resolve the dialectic differences by escaping from the earth, from the created, from the flesh, and from evil.

It is in this context that the imminent coming of God as the Human One should be understood. Only God himself could resolve the cosmic, age-long tensions and secure the at-one-ment of heaven and earth, of divinity and humanity, of Law and promise, of death and life.

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Endnotes

1. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. Menahem Mansoor, “Pharisees.”
2. Bernard J. Lee, *The Future Church of 140 BCE: A Hidden Revolution* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995), p. 49.
3. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. Menahem Mansoor, “Essenes.”
4. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. Jacob Licht, “Dead Sea Sect.”

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