JUDAISM:
FROM HERESY TO PHARISEE IN EARLY MEDIEVAL
CHRISTIAN LITERATURE
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During the Middle Ages, Christians largely accommodated themselves to
the small number of Jews who lived amongst them. Augustine (354–430)
explained that God had punished the Jews after their rejection of Jesus by
destroying the Temple and sending them into exile. Their survival was
divinely guaranteed, however, because the presence of the Jews, Augustine
believed, testified to the authenticity of Scripture and the fulfillment of the
prophecies upon which Christianity built its faith.1 The Jews themselves, of
course, argued that God had never truly rejected his chosen people. By
claiming the Jews as their witnesses, Christians inadvertently accepted the
Jews’ identity as the descendants of the biblical children of Israel.

This proved to be increasingly irksome to many Christians. Christians had
appropriated the text of the Hebrew Bible by reading into it allegories of
Christianity’s ultimate truth (which included seeing themselves as the true
Israel). As I hope to show in this article, Christians during late antiquity and
the early Middle Ages tried other ways to counter the Jewish claim of
enduring “chosenness.” They did this by trying to present contemporary
Judaism as unworthy of being the heir of the Judaism of the Bible. In other
words, contemporary Jews could not claim to be the true descendents of the
Israelites and the preservers of the biblical tradition. Some Christian intel-
lectuals, largely in the Greek tradition, sought to make contemporary Juda-
ism into a collection of heresies in contrast to the unity of biblical Judaism.
Others, mostly Latin writers following Jerome’s lead, sought to cast the
Judaism of their day as a monochromatic but corrupt Pharisaism equally
alien to the nature of biblical religion.

The evidence for portraying Judaism both as a fragmented array of here-
sies and a tradition undermined by Pharisaism can be found, of course, in
the New Testament. The authors of the Gospels presented Judaism as di-
vided into several main groups with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Samaritans,

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and occasionally the Nazarenes and Herodians playing important roles. Such a picture suggests a religious system with significant divisions but not yet overwhelmed by heresy. The narratives of the Gospels, however, do provide fertile ground for readers inclined to see the omnipresent sectarian nature of Judaism. Indeed, the priests, scribes, or elders seem often to represent discrete groups. Moreover, there was evidence of recurring sectarianism in the figures of Theudas and Judas the Galilean, who gathered sympathetic followers and provoked revolts against Roman taxation. Accounts of these last two figures—as well as the other sects to different degrees—are so vague and abbreviated that they could easily serve as the nucleus of elaborate historical fantasies.

At the same time, the accounts in the New Testament of first-century Jewish life emphasize the prominence of the Pharisees. Described by the Gospel authors as almost uniformly hostile to Jesus, the Pharisees are indicted for their hypocrisy and blindness, for being overly zealous protectors of the Mosaic laws, and for waiting to trap Jesus in ritual transgressions. Although not named as part of the group of chief priests and elders that brought Jesus to Pilate (Matt. 27:1), the Pharisees were clearly portrayed as seeking to eliminate Jesus. The Pharisees are accused of adding their own laws to God’s revelation; they became the chief corrupters of the Jewish religion.

Josephus’s (37/8–ca. 100) analysis of the three main sects in his own portrait of Judaism enhanced the sense of a fundamentally divided and poten-

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5 The Herodians appear as the allies of the Pharisees although it is not clear from the text if they constitute another distinct Jewish group: “And they sent unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, to catch him in his words” (Mark 12:13).
tially heretical religious culture. Josephus's portraits of the heresies (haereses) or "schools of thought" were carefully tailored to his Hellenized Roman audience. His accounts gave depth to the abbreviated references in the New Testament, making the sects seem more like three-dimensional religious groups that had increasingly little in common. Josephus highlighted the Pharisees' expertise and obsession with the Law. He noted the Sadducees' rejection of resurrection, and devoted much space to describing the ascetic practices of the Essenes. Josephus refers as well to the mysterious "fourth philosophy," which added another sectarian element to the Palestinian landscape. Ultimately, Josephus imprinted on the tradition a sense of the timelessness of the sects. This constructed timelessness of the sects no doubt encouraged Christians to see them as firmly entrenched in Jewish society.

With these texts as starting points, it is easy to see how a reader inclined to emphasize the sectarian nature of Judaism — or at least receptive to that idea — could create a picture of the religion where heretical or non-normative movements dominated. The preeminence of the Pharisees in the gospel accounts and in Josephus's discussion kept the Pharisees at the center of thinking about the nature of Judaism. In both cases, Christian churchmen were implicitly challenging the claim of contemporary Judaism — whether heretical or Pharisaical — to be the heirs of the original descendants of Abraham.

Justin Martyr (ca.100–163/5), for example, oscillated between indicting Judaism for its heresy and its Pharisaic corruption. In defining Judaism, he

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7 Jewish War, 1.7, p. 137: "The Pharisees handed down to the people certain regulations from the ancestral succession and not recorded in the laws of Moses, for which reason they are rejected by the Sadducean group, who hold that only those regulations should be considered valid which were written (in Scripture) and that those which had been handed down by the fathers need not be observed."

8 Jewish War, 1.7, pp. 137–38.

9 Jewish War, 1.7, p. 133: "The Essenes profess a severer discipline; they are Jews by birth and are peculiarly attached to each other. They eschew pleasure-seeking as a vice and regard temperance and mastery of the passions as virtue." His survey of their habits of dress, prayer, eating, ablutions, and communal governance runs for several pages in the Jewish War.

10 Cohen, Maccabees to the Mishna, 164–66.

11 Ibid., 163.
listed a series of sects, obliterating a unified Jewish identity. At the same time, his indictment that the Jews prefer their own traditions to divine truth seems to be a projection of the New Testament censure of Pharisaic innovations. Both traditions — that of heresy and the Pharisees — can also be seen in Hippolytus (d. 235), a prominent heresiologist who inserted a section on the Jewish sects in his Refutation of All Heresies, also known as the Philosophumena. In his brief excursus on the Jewish sects, Hippolytus essentially followed Josephus’s tripartite division of the Jews into Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Even though he limits the sectarian divisions to three, Hippolytus makes it clear that he thought the Jews had degraded into heresy when their original community fragmented. He writes:

Originally there prevailed but one usage among the Jews; for one teacher was given unto them by God, namely Moses, and one law by this same Moses. And there was one desert region and one Mount Sinai, for one God it was who legislated for these Jews. But, again, after they had crossed the river Jordan, and had inherited by lot the conquered country, they in various ways rent in sunder the law of God, each devising a different interpretation of the declarations made by God. And in this way they raised up for themselves teachers, (and) invented doctrines of an heretical nature, and they continued to advance into (sectarian) divisions.

Elsewhere, Hippolytus implied that the Pharisees were the object of his attack on the Jews because they rejected divine law and embraced the traditions of their fathers.

12 Justin, Dialogue with Trypho, in Saint Justin Martyr: The First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy; or The Rule of God, trans. T. B. Falls, Fathers of the Church, 6 (New York, 1949), 276: “After careful examination, [one] would not acknowledge as Jews, the Sadducees or the similar sects of the Genistae, Meristae, Galileans, Hellenians, and the Baptist Pharisees (please take no offense if I speak my mind), but would realize that they are Jews and children of Abraham in name only, paying lip service to God, while their hearts (as God himself declared) are far from Him.” Justin tried to subvert the relationship between Jews and Abraham. See Jeffrey Siker, Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy (Louisville, Ky., 1991), 189.


15 Hippolytus, Refutation of All Heresies, 9.13, p. 134: “For there is a division amongst them into three sorts; and the adherents of the first are the Pharisees, but of the second the Sadducees, while the rest are Essenes. These practice a more devotional life, being filled with mutual love, and being temperate.”

16 Hippolytus, Refutation of All Heresies, 9.13, p. 134.

Most of the Greek writers after this point seemed to focus on the heresy embedded in Judaism. Of all the early church writers, it was Epiphanius (ca. 320–ca. 403), born in Palestine and later the bishop of Salamis (Constantia), who explored in greatest detail the ongoing fragmented and competitive beliefs of Judaism. For Epiphanius, there was a natural degradation of the unity of the people who first received God’s favor:

(2) . . . tribes arose from the proliferation of the different languages, various nations emerged to correspond with each tribe and clan, every nation chose its own king, and the outbreak of wars, and conflicts between clashing nations, resulted. For each used force to get its own way, and, from the insatiable greed that we all have, to take its neighbor’s property.

There had been a true religion practiced by the Jews in biblical times, but it quickly degraded into sectarianism. It seemed that the crucial moment came when Jews tried to adapt the Torah to other nations:

(3) Since there had been a change in Israel’s one religion, and the scripture of the Law <had been brought> to other nations — I mean to Assyrians, the ancestors of the colonist Samaritans — the division of Israel’s opinion also resulted. (4) And now error began, and discord began to sow many false opinions from the one fear of God just as each individual thought best, and meant to acquire proficiency in the letter (of Scripture) and expound it to suit himself.

When Israel brought its one law to other nations, divisions in the Law appeared. These divisions then encouraged even further individual interpretations of the Law and its corruption into heresy. In this way, Epiphanius

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18 Baumgarten cites similar comments in the works of Irenaeus (d. ca. 202) and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215), which accused the Pharisees of manufacturing a false law in opposition to the law of God. See Baumgarten, “Josephus and Hipploytus on the Pharisees,” 9. There is no indication that these two churchmen tried to link the Pharisees with all Jews.


21 Ibid.

leaves contemporary Christians with a mechanism to displace the Jews. Clearly a religion filled with such corruption cannot claim true descent from the faith of God’s chosen people.

At least one exegete extended the indictment of Judaism’s heretical nature back into the biblical period. Philastrius (d. 397), bishop of Brescia, whose De haeresibus was based on Hippolytus and Epiphanius, though written in Italy, projected this corruption of Judaism further back into the Jewish past by tracing a myriad of sects and divisions in Israelite society of the Old Testament. In Philastrius’s reconstruction, sects were a permanent feature of Judaism and Jewish society. Philastrius’s work is an exploration of the myriad of potential and realized heresies of Israelite society. The corruption of Judaism was not, then, simply a phenomenon that occurred during the time of Jesus. Perhaps there was a moment of true biblical Judaism but the potential for such heretical fragmentation was already there in Jewish history, making the claim of its modern descendants to be the caretakers of religious truth seem fraudulent. (Did Philastrius’s dissection of the Israelites make them irrelevant to Christian history? Certainly, such an approach seems suggestive of a Marcionite rejection of the Old Testament.)

We can see something of a synthesis of these various understandings of the heretical origins of Judaism in Eusebius (ca. 260/70–ca. 339), who drew on many of the earlier authors. Eusebius concluded that each leader of the Jewish sects “introduced privately and separately his own peculiar opinion.” There was a natural tendency in religions to distort a common truth. He quotes Hegessippus, probably a convert from Judaism who was writing in the Judeo-Christian milieu of Jerusalem during the second century. According to Eusebius, Hegessippus identified seven sects: “Hegessippus also names the sects that once existed among the Jews: There were various groups in the Circumcision, among the Children of Israel, all hostile to the tribe of Judah and the Christ. They were these—Essenes, Galileans,

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23 Philastrius, Liber de haeresibus, PL 12:1126. He finds a reference in Ezekiel, for example, to Jews who worship in caves: “Troglodytac qui ita dicuntur, in Judaeis, qui in speluncis habitantibus abditis, idola colore non desinebant. . . .” Or, PL 12:1126-27: “Alia est haeresis in Judaeis, quae Reginam quam et Fortunam Coeli nuncupat, quam Coelestem vocant in Africa,” or PL 12:1131: “Haeresis est quoque in Judaeis, quae serpenti sacrificat, et usque ad Ezechiam regem Judaeorum, eamdem impietatem celebrat.” This last one takes as its point of origin the serpent that Moses set up in the camp (Num. 21:9).
24 Panarion, 1.19, p. 47.
26 Eusebius, History of the Church, 4.22, p. 182.
27 Ibid.
Hemerobaptists, Masbotheans, Samaritans, Sadducees, and Pharisees.28 Indeed, by arguing that these sects had been arrayed against the "tribe of Judah," Eusebius was able to assert that true Judaism had been neutralized by the efflorescence of sectarianism. The tribe of Judah had disappeared. All that remained were disparate groups and corrupt leaders who not only frustrated Christ's mission to the Jews, but also bequeathed future corruption to the Christians.29 The language of the imperial law codes confirmed this shift as Judaism was described as a *religio* before 416 and then after was referred to as a *superstitio*.30

Christian exegetes capitalized on this perceived corruption of Judaism by making the Jewish heresies the root cause of Christian sectarianism itself. In this way, any aspect of contemporary Christianity that was perceived to be impure could be attributed to the Jewish past. The connection between the pure religion of biblical Israel and a pure Christian present would be preserved. Again citing Hegesippus, who saw the Jewish sects as a breeding ground for specifically Christian heresies, Eusebius records the story of an early Christian, Tebuthis, who after failing to be made a bishop began to corrupt the Church. He sprang, according to Hegesippus, from one of the original seven Jewish sects.31 Philastrius, too, by setting up the biblical heresies in an uninterrupted sequence suggested that the heresies of the Old Testament flowed into or prepared the ground for Christian heresies. Epiphanius as well was terrified of the effects of the Jewish heresies. If he was right that heresy was a natural consequence of the growth of religions (see above), then it could be rampant among Christians as well. Judaism's fate was then a salutary warning to misguided Christians not to succumb to these Jewish heresies.32 The sectarian nature of Judaism became more pres-

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid: "From them came false Christs, false prophets, false apostles, who divided the unity of the Church by corrupt doctrines uttered against God and his Christ." The Jewish sects became convenient whipping boys for Christians anxious about internal Christian heresies. Justin, for example, lashed out at Christian heretics who corrupted a true Christianity in the same way that Jewish sectarians had fragmented Judaism: "Moreover, I also informed you that there are some who are Christians in name [like the Jews who are Jewish in name only] but in reality are godless and impious heretics whose doctrines are entirely blasphemous, atheistic, and foolish" (*Dialogue with Trypho* [ca. 80], 6, 276). Epiphanius's discussion of the four sects of the Samaritans and the seven sects of the Jews emphasizes the rebellious and illogical nature of the particular "heresy," an attitude easily shifted to contemporary Christian challenges (*Panarion*, 1.19, p. 47).
32 The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a third-century Greek treatise on pastoral theology now surviving in fourth-century Syriac and Latin translations, with fragments of the Greek
singing for Christians in late antiquity as they became increasingly preoccupied with the nature of Christian heresies. Christians of all kinds in the years before and after Constantine’s conversion were faced with a dizzying array of perceived Christian heresies and internal conflicts. Christian self-definition in these early centuries was fought out with the rhetoric of heresy and the condemnation of sectarianism. It was natural then for Christians hypersensitive to heresy to scrutinize Judaism for similar symptoms of corruption.

While Eusebius and other Greek writers had largely focused on the heretical nature of Judaism, Jerome’s (ca. 347–420) presentation seems decisive in turning the Latin tradition toward the Pharisees. His commentary is particularly marked by the absence of attention to the apparent variety of Jewish sects. His narrative strategy was not the result of ignorance. Jerome knew of the Essenes and Samaritans, and was deeply dependent on Josephus for at least some of his information about the sects. However, according to Jerome’s commentary, only the Pharisees and Sadducees really mattered: “There were two heresies among the Jews: one of the Pharisees and the other of the Sadducees.” Instead of a panoply of sects, Jerome created contained in the Apostolic Constitutions (375), describes how Satan tried to tempt the Jews to sin and thus created the corrupt sects. With the destruction of the Temple and the rejection of the Jews, Satan turned his attention to creating heresy and discord in Christianity. See R. Hugh Connolly, ed., Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments (Oxford, 1929), 23, 199.


35 Cf. Augustine, who seems uninterested in heresies of the Jews. The De Haeresibus of Saint Augustine, trans. and ed. L. Müller (Washington, D.C., 1956). At the same time, Augustine seemed perfectly content to dismiss the complexities of Jewish religious life. In the City of God, he presented the Jews as a unified people: “And then again, the Hebrew race at the present time is not divided, but dispersed indiscriminately throughout the world, though united by association in the same error” (City of God, 17.7, p. 732).

36 “Duae haereses erant in Judaeis: una Pharisaearum, altera Sadducaearum” (Jerome, Comm. in Matt., PL 26:163).
a Jewish history fixed between the two poles of Pharisaic legalism and Sadducean rejection of resurrection and the prophetic books of the Bible. The Pharisees and their association with the Law soon took prominence over their Sadducean shadows in Jerome's commentary. Their name signified their separation from the general population of the Jewish people by virtue of their created traditions. As Jerome wrote, "The Pharisees have been separated from the Jews, on account of superfluous observations; they also took their name from [dissidio, the word for] separation." In one letter Jerome complained that he "could not count the many Pharisaic traditions, which are now called 'deuteroseis' but [which] are like the tales of old women." He was equally harsh elsewhere claiming that the Jews follow their traditions just as tribes consult their idols. It was the scribes and Pharisees who deceived the people. Hillel, for example, was the true defiler of the Law by adding his own traditions. In fact, Jerome thinks that all the sects had undermined the Law handed down from Moses. Jerome's suspicion of the Pharisees focused on several ritual innovations or misinterpretations, most notably the wearing of phylacteries. The Pharisees seemed to be superstitious to the point where they could not understand the prophecies of Scripture that announced Christ's coming.

Why did Jerome reject — or not even consider — the route taken by so many others to make Judaism a collection of heresies? We may look first to

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37 Jerome rejected the idea that the Herodians were a real sect. He was particularly incensed by this belief and ridiculed it: "Certain of the Latins ludicrously assert that they [the Herodiani] are the ones who believed that Herod was the Christ, which is something we read nowhere." For Jerome, these sectarianists were not another cultic group but Herod's military retainers: "Herodians, id est, militibus Herodis." Jerome may have simply been reacting to the interplay between the historical context and narrative of the Gospel. It may have just made more sense for him to consider the Herodiani as the retainers of Herod and not devotees of a cult that proclaimed him to be the Christ. Again, the effect of Jerome's reading was to simplify further the sectarian divisions among the Jews (Jerome, Comm. in Matt., PL 23:164).


41 Jerome, Contra Luciferianos, PL 23:178: "Taceo de Judaiismi hereticis, qui ante adventum Christi, legem traditam dissiparunt. . . ."

42 Jerome, Comm. in Matt., PL 23:168.

43 Jerome, Comm. in Matt., PL 26:78: "Scribae autem et Pharisaei, qui videbantur legis esse doctores, ex prophetarum vaticinio non potuerunt intelligere Salvatoris adventum." There were other more favorable albeit muted opinions about the Pharisees. The Ps. Clementines, probably coming from a Jewish–Christian milieu, seemed neutral about the Pharisees, and reserved their animosity for the Sadducees. See Baumgarten, "Josephus and Hippolytus on the Pharisees," 13–14.
Jerome's general style of reading the Bible. Jerome may have fixed upon the literal quality of a verse in Isaiah. Reading Isaiah 8:14, Jerome saw only two sects or "houses" that would oppose Christ. If Jerome projected the prophecy onto contemporary Palestinian society of Christ's day, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were the most prominent sectarian who confronted Jesus. Trying to include the Herodians and the Essenes and assorted other groups into the pattern of Jewish life, contradicted the prophecy of Isaiah. As a result, the Pharisees and Sadducees took center stage in the way in which the Latin tradition understood Jewish sectarianism. This makes Jerome's analysis dependent upon a particular reading of a verse, which of course was also available to other late antique heresiologists. The question then becomes, why did this reading influence Jerome more than others (or what other factors shaped his attitude to Judaism and led him to explain those perceptions through the biblical verse)? Jerome may have found — or been struck by — the way that the verse in Isaiah allowed him to compress the history of Jewish heresies. By narrowing the range of Jewish religious identity, Jerome could imagine that there were fewer ways the Jews could have corrupted the text of the Old Testament. He could rely on his Jewish interlocutors to provide him with a more or less reliable linguistic tradition. In Jerome's eyes, the absence of heretical sects helped ensure the correct transmission of Scripture. These pressures may have made Jerome less sensitive to, or willing to ignore, the discourse of heresy that preoccupied others.

Perhaps even more importantly, Jerome laid the groundwork for the later elaboration of the identity of Jews and Pharisees. Once having focused his audience's attention on the Pharisees, Jerome equated the Jews as a people with the legally corrupt Pharisees. To Jerome a natural Jew descended from Abraham and was circumcised by his parents on the eighth day: "Natura Judaeus est qui de genere est Abraham, et a parentibus die octavo circumcisus est." And all of these natural Jews were still Pharisees because they practiced the ritual innovations of the Pharisees. For example, throughout the world, Jews could be seen with their Pharisaic phylacteries: "they use them today in India, Persia and Babylon."47

45 Jerome, Comm. in Matt., PL 23:163
46 Jerome, Comm. in ep. ad Gal., PL 26:342–43.
When Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636) wrote his *Etymologiarum sive originum libri* XX (ca. 620) some of the more esoteric of Epiphanius's and Philastrius's heresies apparently had disappeared from the exegetical tradition.\(^48\) Given the list that Isidore did preserve, it seems more likely that he was working with Latin versions, either written or oral, of Eusebius and Epiphanius (as he included the *Genistae* and *Meristae*, two groups which appeared in the lists of the two Greek Fathers).\(^49\) Isidore's descriptions of the more exotic Jewish sects beyond the standard three of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes are unsystematic.\(^50\) Perhaps under the influence of Jerome, the portraits of the *Masbothei*, *Genistaei*, *Meristae*, *Samaritanae*, and the *Hemerobaptistae* are abbreviated. The Samaritans, for example, keep the Law but reject the prophets. The Masbotheans assert that it was Christ who taught them to "sabbatizare" in all things. The Hemerobaptists daily wash their clothes and bodies. The *Meristae* take their name from the Greek word for part ("pars Latine dicitur") since they discriminate among the Scriptures, taking some prophets to be true and rejecting others.\(^51\)

However these different groups evolved, there was some kind of original Judaism that had become degraded. According to Isidore, "Jews mean those who confess. [For the reason that] many from them follow a confession,\(^51\)

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., 297: He notes that the Pharisees and Sadducees are opposed to each other, explaining that the word *pharisaei* in Latin means *divisi*, in the sense that the Pharisees are divided from the people "quasi per justitiam," which seems to mean by the level of their observances. *Suddueaei*, on the other hand, means the just ones or *iusti*, even though they do not deserve the name for they reject the resurrection of the body and preach that the soul will be buried with the body. Isidore also notes that they accept the five books of the Law, but they reject the prophecies about Christ in the prophets. The Essenes are dispatched with one line that asserts that they claim that it was Christ who taught them every ritual of abstinance. There is an expanded list of heresies attributed to Isidore in one text that was not very well known in the Middle Ages. It is a slightly altered list originally attributed to Augustine. There is a published edition *S. Isidori hispalensis episcopi De haeresibus liber* (Madrid, 1940). I consulted a 1523 edition, *Etyymologiae. Contenta in hoc libello Ysidorae De sectis et [nominibus?] haereticorum . . . ,* in the Beinecke Library. In addition to listing standard heresies like the Arians, Gnostics, and others, the text resembles Philastrius's efforts to link heresies to various Old Testament figures such as Melchesidek. The text concludes with a warning about the innumerable number of heresies that exist, often without any names.

whom/which evil had once possessed. Implicit in Isidore’s comment is the capability of the Jews to have once seen the truth. He suggests the same kind of capacity for truth in biblical Judaism when he adds the Hebraei to the list of heretics, by defining them as travelers whose very name reveals that they have left their original errors. In this sense, Isidore has inherited the two traditions about the Jews: heresy and Pharisaism. His synthesis still takes the larger shape of the discourse of heresy, but the generalizations he offers about the nature of Jewish heresy seem to be drawn from an orientation close to Jerome’s emphasis on the corruption of the Pharisees.

Bede (ca. 673–735) is the turning point for the medieval Latin tradition as he is the transmitter and magnifier of Jerome’s ideas about the Pharisaic nature of Judaism to later commentators. Although Bede relied heavily upon Josephus in many of his commentaries, he clearly followed Jerome’s pattern of ignoring the more detailed accounts of the sects and concentrated on the Pharisees and Sadducees. He eliminated the sectarian elements in the history of first-century Judaism. For example, the rebel Theudas, according to Bede, gained his influence over the people by magic: “And while he was a magician, he said that he was a prophet.” As for the Nazarenes, who are mentioned in Acts 24, Bede marginalized them as well. The members of the sect wished to be both Jews and Christians. However, their ambivalence undermined both identities, making them neither Jews nor Christians. As a result they lost their standing in both communities: “But they wished to be both Jews and Christians and they were neither Jews nor Christians.” The Samaritans, too, did not enter into the equation of Jewish sectarianism; they were divorced from the Jewish people. Finally, the Sadducees themselves are relegated to a secondary position because of their rejection of resurrection.

In the same way as Jerome wished to equate the Jews and the Pharisees, Bede blurred the distinctions between the Jews and the Pharisees by emphasizing that the Jewish people shared in some of the Pharisees’ meaningless traditions. Bede’s language is often imprecise, and oscillates between references to the Pharisees and references to Jews. For example, Bede was

53 Ibid.: “… transitores, quo nomine admonentur ut de pejoribus ad meliora transeant, et pristinos errores relinquant.”
55 “Sed dum volunt et Judaei esse et Christiani, nec Judaei sunt nec Christiani” (ibid., PL 92:990).
57 Ibid., PL 92:530.
able to recognize that some Jews had overcome their blindness and had acknowledged Christ’s divinity.58 Nevertheless, the Pharisees and all the Jews, (“Pharisaei enim et omnes Judaei”) would not eat unless they had washed their hands or bathed since they held to the traditions of their fathers.59 Some of the more unpleasant characteristics of the Jews and the Pharisees were interchangeable. The Pharisees exhibit the infidelity of the Jews [to God].60 The Pharisees thus seemed to embody the worst aspects of the Jewish character and vice versa.

If all the Jews were now Pharisees, then there truly had been a fundamental break with the religion of biblical Israel. Christians could claim the Jews of the biblical past as their true ancestors. The monochromatic nature of Judaism probably appealed to Bede for other reasons as well. He did not have to negotiate a world of multiple Christianities or potentially corrupting heresies. He may not have imagined heresy to be the foremost threat to Christianity. Bede was faced with the equally difficult but perhaps more focused task of unifying a quasi-Christianized society. To that end the image of a fragmented Judaism did not add anything to his rhetorical arsenal.61 Rather, by focusing on the legalistic and misguided interpretations of the Pharisees, Bede was perhaps signaling his concern about the growing institutional nature of English Christianity. Just as earlier writers did not want Christianity to become a collection of heresies, so too did later writers want to avoid the fate of the legalistic Pharisees.

It was likely out of the same need to preserve the idealized nature of biblical Israel that Carolingian exegetes generally adopted Jerome’s and Bede’s strategy of understanding the Pharisaical nature of Judaism. They pared down Jewish sectarianism to the competing groups of the Pharisees and Sadducees.62 The Sadducees were quickly dispatched because of their

58 Ibid., PL 92:781: “Non omnes ex Judaeis qui convenerant ad Mariam, crediderunt, sed tamen multi.”
60 “Pharisaei autem Judaeorum demonstrant infidelitatem” (Bede, In Matthaei Evangelium Expositio, PL 92:50).
ideological rejection of resurrection. The Essenes were ignored, and the Samaritans were marginalized as well. Without any of these other “heretical” sects, the focus could be placed on the illegitimate nature of Pharisaic practices. Hrabanus Maurus (ca. 780/4–856) argued that the Pharisees replaced divine law with their own traditions. As Hrabanus wrote, they literally put aside the decrees of divine will in favor of the traditions of men.63 For Hrabanus, the Pharisees threatened the proper interpretation of the Law, which was of paramount importance to Hrabanus’s own position at court and to Carolingian political culture.64

Carolingian exegetes did not ignore the possibility of the sectarian corruption of Judaism, but they usually returned to the primary role played by the Pharisees. For example, Christianus Druthmarus of Stavelot, active in the middle years of the ninth century, also envisioned the first-century society of Palestine as filled with false prophets, quasi Jews, and their followers.65 The Pharisees added fasts and other superstitions that were not found in any text, replacing divine law with the human traditions of the Pharisees.66 Paschasius Radbertus of Corbie (ca. 790–860) also thought that among the “populus Judaeorum,” there were many heretics who said they were the saviors: “For in her captivity, many heretics could be found among the Jewish people who said that they were messiahs.”67 This kind of commentary makes the whole of Palestinian society seem as if it were in turmoil; the Pharisees and their superstitions were just the most prominent manifestation of the corruption that was plaguing Jewish society. The particularly virulent heresy of the Pharisees manifested itself in their own traditions and rituals. They based their practices, like fasting, either on a rigorous interpretation of the Law or on their own superstitions.68

These rhetorical strategies were part of the larger effort to ensure that contemporary Jews were seen as the descendants of the Pharisees and not

66 Druthmar, Expositio in Matthaeeum Evangelistam, PL 106:1337.
67 “Nam in ipsa captivitate, in populo Judaeorum, multi extiterunt heresiarchae, qui se Christos esse dicerent” (Paschasius Radbertus, Expositio in Evangelium Matthei, PL 120:376).
68 Ibid., PL 120:774.
the children of Israel of the Scriptures. For Carolingian clerics, who imagined themselves and their rulers to be the New Israel, preserving an uncorrupted image of biblical Judaism was crucial to their self-image.69 To that end, Paschasius, like Jerome and Bede, blurred the boundaries between the Pharisees and the Jews as an entire people. When he discusses Jewish proselytizing, it is not the Pharisees who lead the way but the “Judaei.” They teach the converts to Judaize, making it seem as if at least some of the Pharisaic customs were considered to be representative of general Jewish practice.70 There is perhaps another echo of this in the way Radbertus refers to the conversion of some of the Jews to Christ. One part of the Jews believed, while the other part was attached to the Law — that is, to the regimen of the Pharisees.71 In other words, the Jews who still did not believe in Christ were marked out by their Pharisaic rituals.

Druthmar echoes this tradition in asserting that the boundaries between the Pharisees and the Jews in general were quite fluid: “There were two sects in Judea, that of the Pharisees and that of the Sadducees, but they were all Jews.”72 In Druthmar’s understanding, the superficial divisions among the Jewish population are bridged by other common cultural connections like circumcision, dietary restrictions such as the abhorrence of pork, as well as other behavioral regulations. All of these are traditionally perceived to be Pharisaic practices. Ultimately, Druthmar goes beyond asserting a vague common identity among Jews and emphasizes that the Pharisees lend their identity to Jews in general. In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, he makes it clear that the “Pharisees mean the Jewish people.”73 The divisions among the Jews have been replaced by a Pharisaic unity. By making all the Jews into Pharisees, Druthmar opens up space for seeing the Pharisees as cut off from the truth of the biblical religion. Druthmar’s influence may have been limited, but later exegetes take up similar themes.

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the commentary tradition had stabilized around the structure first articulated by Jerome and then reinforced

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70 Radbertus, In Matt., PL 120:774.

71 Ibid., PL 120:830.

72 “Duæ sectæ erant in Judæa, Pharisaæorum et Saducaeæorum, et tamen omnes erant Judæi” (Druthmar, In Matt., PL 106:1442). He compared the two sects to the divisions in the society of his own day. Just as Christians have monks and canons, and are all Franks; so too were the Pharisees and the Sadducees all Jews (“et sicut inter nos sunt monachi et canonici, et tamen de una gente Francorum sunt, similiter erant apud ipsos”).

and elaborated by Bede and the Carolingians. For Anselm of Laon (ca. 1050–1117) the Pharisaical law of the Jews obscured the truth of revelation. In his allegorical commentary, Anselm argued that the Law, which contained the roots of Pharisaical superstition, divided the faithful people from the people who lived after the coming of Christ:

And the Jewish people came onto the scene, and the law, which was to the people as a dividing wall, because it [divided] the first faithful people and the last who lived at the time of Christ’s coming, and placed itself in the middle [of these two peoples]. This is why the Jewish people is called Phares, that is division. But Christ destroyed that interfering people and the law, and joined together a dividing wall of the two faithful peoples, that is the structure [of the church].

Anselm focused Jerome’s rhetoric and made the name Pharisee equivalent to Jew with both expressing the divisive quality of the Law. The division was now between the Jews and Gentiles. Moreover, the dividing wall did not come between some elite Jews and the mass of the people, but between the Jews who lived before and after Christ. The Pharisees were not just a separate sect but they were really the Jews themselves who continued to reject Jesus.


77 By isolating the Pharisees from the Israelites, Christians could use the Pharisees as a rhetorical weapon against their own internal enemies. Jerome, for example, lashed out at
Just as early Christians were preoccupied with a discourse of heresy, the emphasis on the Pharisees— at least after the time of Bede— suggests a religious culture that was defining itself in terms of law. Christians desperately did not want to be Pharisees, and by identifying contemporary Jews as such indicated their own fears: a religious culture that was becoming dominated by legal rituals. Somehow, the children of Israel— the true progenitors of Christianity— had escaped the trap of legalism. Even when asserting the sense of the antiquity of the Pharisees and their common Israelite origins, one commentator at least was intent upon showing that these ancient Pharisees were untainted by legal delusions. Rupert of Deutz (1075/1080–1129), a prominent twelfth-century exegete, found the Pharisees among the Israelite priests. He imagined that the Pharisees were part of the Levites and reached back to Aaron and his sons: “There were good Pharisees, namely Aaron and his sons.” These boni Pharisees, significantly, had not yet drifted into corruption and imposed their own traditions and superstitions on the people.


See John Van Engen, “Ralph of Flaix: The Book of Leviticus Interpreted as Christian Community,” in Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe, ed. Michael A. Signer and John Van Engen (Notre Dame, 2001), 150–71. Signer points out that as part of the gloss’s interest in heightening anti-Jewish sentiment for homiletic reasons, Christians could read the Pharisees back into the Israelite past. See his elegant study of the gloss’s representation of Joseph’s brothers as the Pharisees: Signer, “The Glossa Ordinaria and the Transmission of Medieval Anti-Judaism,” 596–99. In this case, the goal of allegorically understanding the Joseph story (with Joseph as Christ) seems to have overwhelmed the need to see the patriarchs as free of any Pharisaical corruption.

“Fuerunt et boni Pharisaei, scilicet Aaron, et filii ejus . . . ” (Rupert of Deutz, De Trinitate et operibus ejus, PL 167:1556). Rupert also considers the scribes to have been a continuous lineage of Jews, if not a sect: “Fuerunt enim in illis scribae boni, videlicet quorum Moyses et Esdras optimi.”
What was the impact of this thinking on the Jews who lived among Christians during the Middle Ages? Unfortunately, there is no easy or clear answer. Equating the Jews so closely with the Pharisees may have allowed some Christians to imagine their Jewish neighbors as more closely connected to the days of Jesus’ rejection and death. An increasing concern or focus on the reality of Jesus’ life and suffering was something, we are taught, that was evolving in medieval culture by the twelfth century in any case. At the same time, the Pharisees could be seen as an internal part of the larger Christian religious tradition. They were not heretics per se, but overly legalistic rabbis. Even Christians could become Pharisaical. Did this give Christians a way to understand contemporary Jews that helped to modify potentially more visceral anti-Judaic feelings? What ultimately mattered to most Christian intellectuals was to assert the break between the children of Israel and Jews. This had more to do with Christian notions of their own religious identity than it did with any sense of confronting contemporary Judaism. And just as these attitudes had evolved from early notions of heresy and Pharisaism, after the thirteenth century new factors would arise to complicate further relations between Jews and Christians.

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