“A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS”: DID THE PHARISEES TRY TO LIVE LIKE PRIESTS?

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Part of the usual construction of the “watershed” issue is the assumption that there was competition between Pharisaic/rabbinic Judaism and Sadducean/priestly Judaism. One formulation of that competition assumes that adherents of the former aspired to appropriate priestly status. True, there is no doubt that several streams in Second Temple Judaism reflect a desire to appropriate the status of priests for non-priests. But did the Pharisees attempt to create a “kingdom of priests” in the sense of a community in which all would be considered priests or priestly? Many scholars answer this question in the affirmative and claim that the Pharisees attempted to allow all Israel (or, at least, all members of their group) to share in holiness, that is, to share as much as possible in the privileges and obligations of the priests. In the following, I will consider this question and attempt to cast light on one of the most important characteristics of the conflict between the Pharisees and the Sadducees/priests.

The view that the Pharisees tried to live like priests has been put most coherently and influentially by Jacob Neusner. He first studied rabbinic passages which include either the name of someone known to have been a Pharisee or the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Then he proceeded to an analysis of the mishnaic laws, in order to stratify the material chronologically. At the conclusion of his study he defined

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2 For a survey of the research on this question, see Schwartz, ibid., 67–70.

3 A. Geiger was among the first to link the Sadducees with the priests. See Schwartz, ibid., 67. But when I speak of Sadducees/priests, I mean to include the Dead Sea Scrolls community, since they too shared a priestly view. On this see D.R. Schwartz, “Law and Truth: On Qumran-Sadducean and Rabbinic Views of Law,” in The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research (ed. D. Dimant and U. Rappaport; Leiden, 1992), 229–40.
the Pharisees as being essentially a pure-food club, concerned above all with table fellowship and eating ordinary food in a state of purity. He attributed to the earliest layer of the Mishnah the same concern that he had previously attributed to the Pharisees, and proposed that Hillel, at the beginning of Herod’s reign, had converted the group from a political party into a table fellowship sect: “Eating one’s secular . . . unconsecrated food in a state of ritual purity as if one were a Temple priest in the cult was one of the two significations of party membership.”

This conclusion conforms very well to the critical reading of Josephus’ description of the Pharisees proposed by Morton Smith. Smith noted that the portrait of the Pharisees is different in each of Josephus’ major works, and argued that the Jewish War presents the more historically accurate portrait, reflecting the fact that the Pharisees “had no real hold either on the government or on the masses of the people.” Following Smith, Neusner argued that Josephus’ work contains no description of Pharisaic political activity under Herod; on this basis he developed the hypothesis that the Pharisees, after being politically active in Hasmonean times, retreated from politics during the reign of Herod. The hostility between the king and the Pharisees forced the latter to withdraw from the political scene and concentrate instead on the construction of a spiritual world based on the punctilious observance of all the commandments of the Torah. The Pharisees’ dominant ideal was the stringent observance of purity laws, in particular with regard to the eating of nonsacred food in a state of ritual purity. That the

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5 Ibid., 3:288.
7 Ibid., 81.
8 “The Pharisees determined to concentrate on what they believed was really important in politics . . . to achieve elevation of the life of all of the people, at home and in the streets, to what the Torah had commanded: You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy people. Such a community would live as if it were always in the Temple sanctuary of Jerusalem. Therefore the complicated and inconvenient purity laws were extended to the life of every Jew in his own home. The Temple altar in Jerusalem would be replicated at the tables of all Israel” (J. Neusner, From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism [Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973], 146). See also L.I. Levine, “On the Political Involvement of the Pharisees under Herod and the Procurators,” Cathedra 8 (1978): 23–27 (in Hebrew). It should be noted that according to Neusner, the biblical perception is that the purity laws are limited to the Temple precincts alone (Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah [Chicago, 1981], 211).