

REGIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FORMATION OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the historical formation of religious movements within Judaism. The author argues that these divisions were shaped not by internal factors, but primarily by external influences such as the Babylonian exile, Hellenistic pressure, and Roman domination. The activities of early Jewish groups—including the Samaritans, Hasidim, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots—are examined in their historical context. The emergence of Rabbinic Judaism is presented as a foundational stage in the development of modern Judaism. The study proposes a historical periodization approach as an effective method for classifying religious trends within Judaism.*

Keywords: *Judaism, religious movements, Pharisees, Rabbinism, historical development, Sephardic, Ashkenazi.*

In the long historical process of Judaism, a historically parallel classification of Jewish communities alongside the general history of Judaism serves as an effective method for understanding the development of various Jewish movements. Among scholars, the widely recognized categorization includes the “Early Period,” the “Medieval Period,” and the “Modern Period” of Jewish movements. The primary aim of referring to these categories is to facilitate a clearer understanding of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish communities.

The initial divisions within Judaism are attributed not to internal causes or dynamics, but rather to external influences. The first of these was the interaction with various cultures encountered as a result of the Babylonian exile. The second was the emergence of cultural exchanges following Alexander the Great’s military campaigns in the East, which led to the dominance of Hellenistic culture in the region²².

Apart from the distinct community of the Samaritans, the earliest sectarian divisions within Judaism date back to the 2nd century BCE. During this period, the emergence of sects was heavily influenced by external cultures. In the Hellenistic era, when the Seleucids forced Jews to worship Greek deities, a strong resistance movement arose among the Jewish population, leading to the formation of the Hasidim community. The Hasidim opposed such impositions and played a key role in initiating the Maccabean revolt. The term *Hasidim* derives from the Hebrew word *hesed*, meaning “love” or “kindness,” and is used to express

²² Mehmet B. Üç Dinin Tarihi. – İstanbul: Say Yayınları, 2016. –P. 125.

devotion to God. The Hasidim were known for their strict adherence to the Torah, although they rejected the traditions of the Talmud. This group is believed to have existed until around the 3rd century BCE²³.

The Jews living in Hellenistic regions were influenced by Greek ideas, yet they managed to preserve their own traditions and customs. Among those continuously exposed to Hellenistic thought, two major Jewish movements—the Pharisees and the Sadducees—emerged around 140 BCE. Both movements shared the common goal of preserving Jewish beliefs in the face of foreign cultural pressures. The Sadducees were one of the earliest Jewish sects, closely aligned with traditional Jewish concepts, and are considered to have laid the foundation for early orthodoxy. They accepted only the Written Torah as authoritative, and while they were committed to preserving ancestral traditions, their practices differed from what would later be known as Orthodox Judaism. The Pharisaic tradition, on the other hand, embraced both written and oral sources along with rabbinic interpretations. Their acceptance of doctrines such as the afterlife and resurrection closely aligns with the perspectives of modern Orthodox Judaism.

The Pharisees emerged after the Sadducees and were one of the earliest Jewish sects to represent an orthodox orientation. The Hebrew term for Pharisee is *Perushim*, which means “separated.” This name was given to the members of the sect due to their practice of refraining from certain types of food in order to maintain ritual purity. The Pharisees held significant influence among both the general population and political leaders. In addition to considering the Torah as the primary source of their faith, they also accepted oral traditions as authoritative. Supporters of this sect were known for adapting ancient religious principles to contemporary realities, integrating traditional values with the conditions of their time.²⁴

The third major sect to emerge among Palestinian Jews after the Pharisees and Sadducees was the Essenes. According to scholarly estimates, the Essenes appeared after the Maccabean revolts and resided near the Dead Sea. They referred to themselves as “holy” or “pure.” Believing in the immortality of the soul, the Essenes rejected the concept of bodily resurrection. Their main goals included the study of Jewish law, the eradication of pagan influences intertwined with Hellenistic culture, strict observance of Jewish legal codes, and the promotion of Jewish rituals. In addition to accepting the Torah, the Essenes also embraced certain oral laws. They drew attention for their social isolation, distinct lifestyle, religious ceremonies, and attitudes toward prophecy. Members of this sect lived apart from densely populated areas, leading secluded lives.²⁵

Among the early Jewish sects, the Zealots were relatively less prominent. They were founded under the leadership of Judas the Galilean and refused to pay taxes to the Roman Empire or recognize the emperor as their sovereign. Although the uprising initiated by the Zealots against the Romans is often considered political, its primary motivation was religious. According to their belief, God had chosen them as a sacred nation, and being ruled by other

²³ Küçük A. Günay Tümer, *Dinler Tarihi*. – Ankara: Berikan Yayınları, 2015. –P. 349.

²⁴ Mansoor M. Pharisees, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Judaica. – Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 2007. –P. 31.

²⁵ Newman H. *Proximity to Power and Jewish Sectarian Groups of the Ancient Period*. – Boston: Brill, 2006. –P. 82.

peoples was viewed as an insult to their divine status. They also rejected the priests appointed by the Romans.

The Rabbinic branch of Judaism was established by Jewish rabbis after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 BCE. It fully developed by the 5th century CE and represents a traditional approach to Jewish belief and practice. In order to ensure the survival of Judaism as a faith, this school of thought, shaped by rabbis—religious scholars—emphasized a lifestyle governed by religious law, and is characterized by three main features. First, belief in both the Written and Oral Torah, revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. Second, acceptance of the authority and leadership of rabbinic scholars. Third, the commitment to study the Torah and live in accordance with its guidance. Additionally, Rabbinic Judaism upholds the belief in the coming of the Messiah, who will gather the Jewish people in Zion. Over time, this tradition has absorbed influences from diverse cultural contexts.

In conclusion, throughout its historical development, Judaism fragmented into various religious denominations due to external pressures, political conflicts, and cultural influences. These divisions were not the result of internal reforms, but rather stemmed from factors such as the Babylonian exile, Hellenistic cultural domination, and Roman rule. In the early period, sects such as the Samaritans, Hasidim, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots emerged, while the destruction of Jerusalem led to the formation of Rabbinic Judaism. This movement established a lifestyle grounded in the Torah and oral traditions, serving as the foundation of modern Orthodox Judaism. The formation of each sect was influenced by specific religious interpretations, political ideologies, and degrees of social isolation. The study shows that classifying Jewish denominations according to historical periods is a key method for understanding Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities. This approach offers deeper insight into the complex yet logical progression of Jewish history. Ultimately, the diversity of religious directions within Judaism has remained a major factor in preserving cultural continuity and collective identity.

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