

LIFE LESSONS FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD: Pharisees and Sadducees



Josephus

“But then as to the two other orders at first mentioned, the Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws, and introduce the first sect. These ascribe all to fate [or providence], and to God, and yet allow, that to act what is right, or the contrary, is principally in the power of men, although fate does co-operate in every action.

Josephus

“But the Sadducees are those that compose the second order, and take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men's own choice, and that the one or the other belongs so to every one, that they may act as they please. They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades.

Josephus

“Moreover, the Pharisees are friendly to one another, and are for the exercise of concord, and regard for the public; but the behavior of the Sadducees one towards another is in some degree wild, and their conversation with those that are of their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them. And this is what I had to say concerning the philosophic sects among the Jews.”

PHARISEES

The word “Pharisee” probably comes from a Greek word meaning “to separate.” The Pharisees are separatists.

- This could refer to a political separation, when the Pharisees withdrew support from John Hyrcanus, Jewish king and high priest.
- It probably refers to their ideal of fulfilling passages such as Leviticus 11:44 or Exodus 19:6, which emphasize separation from sin and ceremonial purity.
- Scribes were the official scholars of the Torah.

PHARISEES

- Some Pharisees were scribes, but by the late second century BCE the Hebrew word for “scribe” had come to denote an interpreter or teacher of scripture rather than a copyist (cf. 1 Chronicles 2:55; 2 Chronicles 34:13; Jeremiah 8:8).
- “Scribes and pharisees” in the New Testament may mean “scribes, namely the Pharisees.”

PHARISEES

In the post-exilic community in Judea, some Jews began to meet together to urge one another to reject Greek culture and keep the Law of Moses more strictly. These were called the “Hasidim” (“pious ones”).

- Many of the Hasidim fought against the Seleucid soldiers in the Maccabean revolt, but the Hasidim were hesitant to support the Jewish ruling and priestly family, the Hasmoneans.
- Some of the Hasidim may have become Pharisees.

PHARISEES

After the Maccabean revolt, some leaders chose not to drop out of political life, but rather to lead the people.

- Pharisees codified their traditions in order to make the law speak to new situations. The Torah was a “living document.”
- Pharisees rejected the right of John Hyrcanus to be both king and priest. (He therefore gave his allegiance to the Sadducees.) Pharisees supplanted the priests as the interpreters of the law, but lost political power under Roman rule.

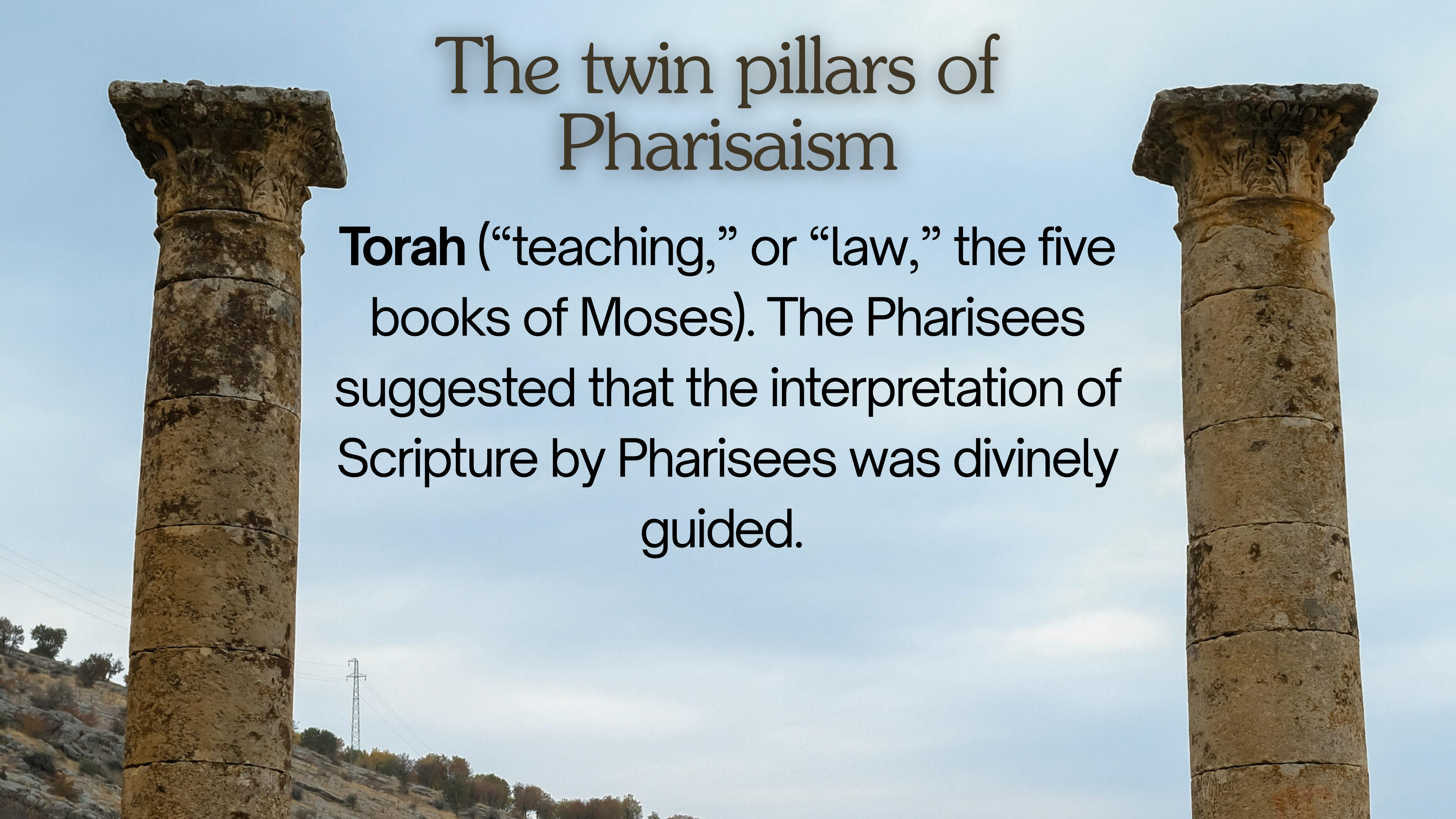
PHARISEES

The Pharisees banded together in schools or local fellowships. The schools of Shammai and Hillel were the two most dominant (cf. Matthew 19:1-9).

- Josephus wrote that there were 6,000 Pharisees in the first century, and credits them as being the most influential party among the common people.

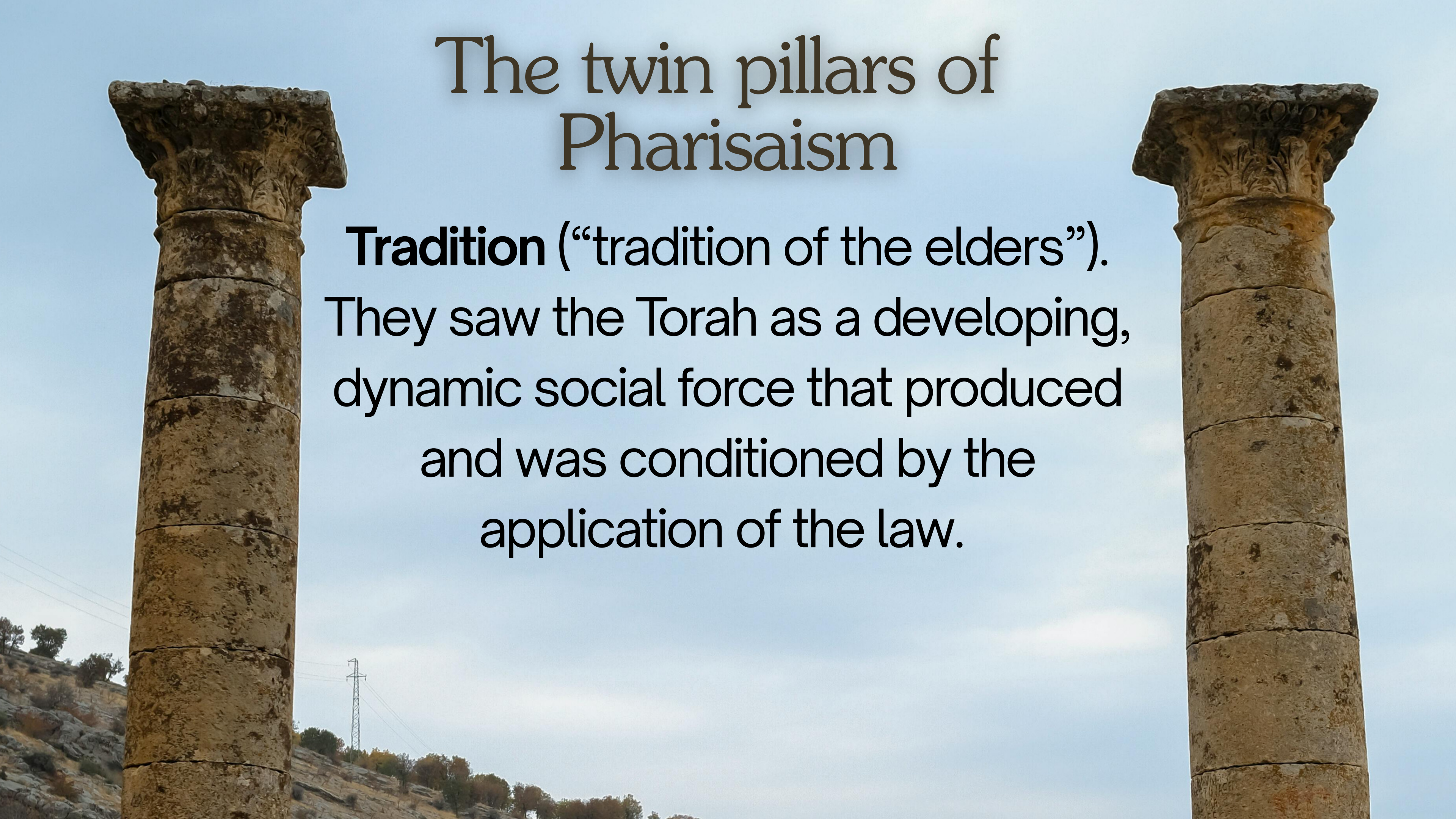
The twin pillars of Pharisaism

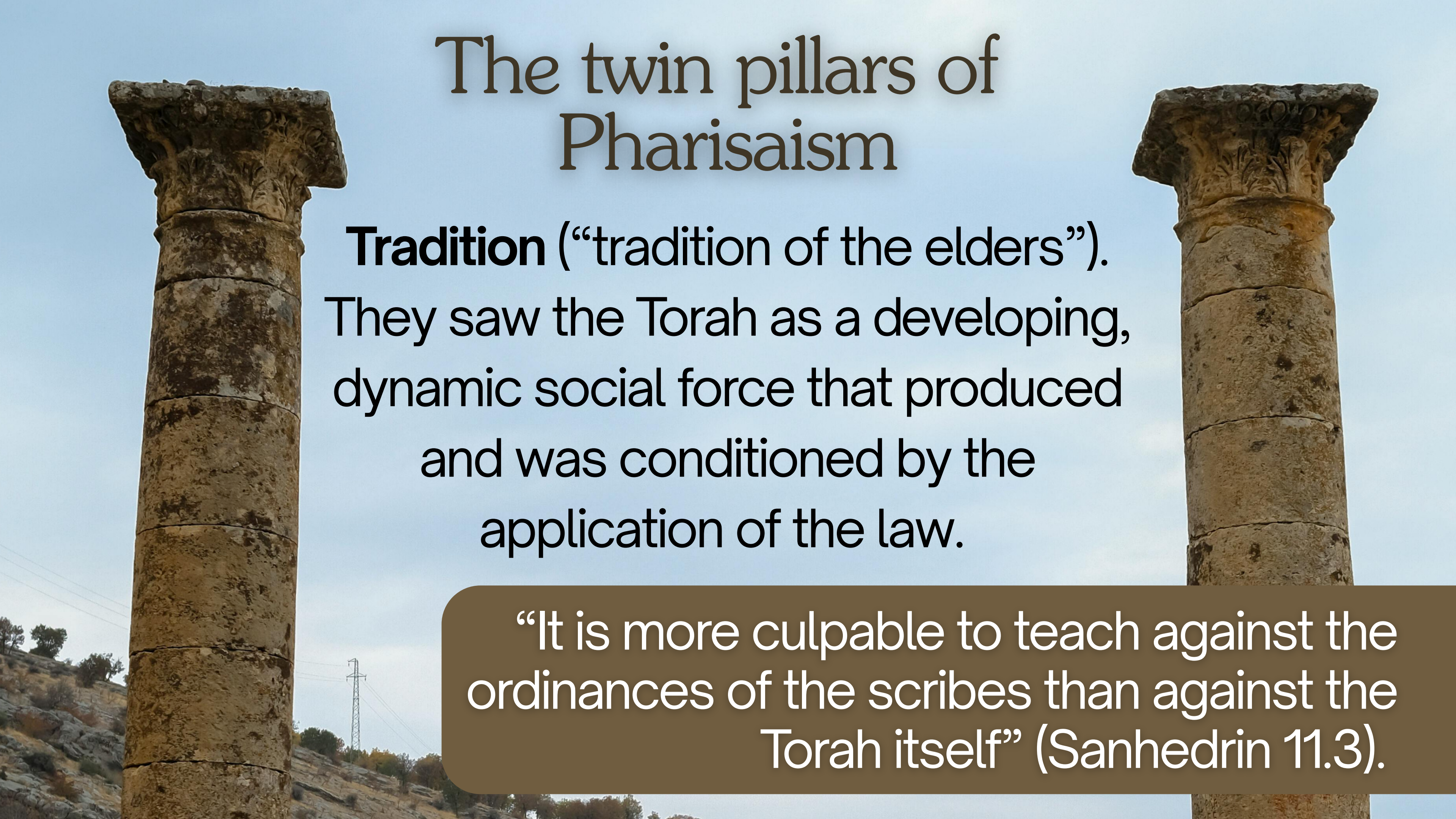
Torah (“teaching,” or “law,” the five books of Moses). The Pharisees suggested that the interpretation of Scripture by Pharisees was divinely guided.



The twin pillars of Pharisaism

Tradition (“tradition of the elders”).
They saw the Torah as a developing,
dynamic social force that produced
and was conditioned by the
application of the law.

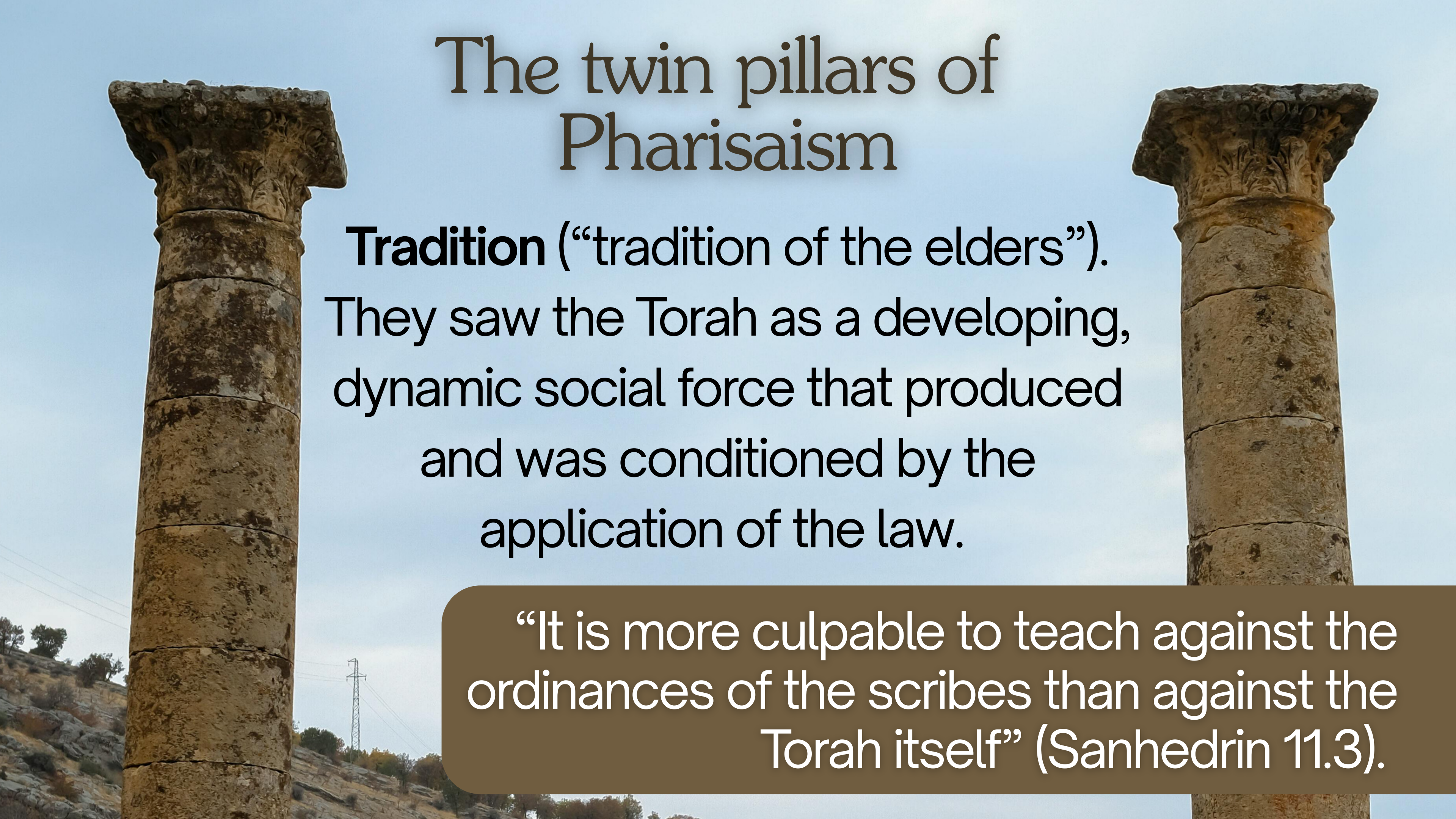




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“It is more culpable to teach against the
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Torah itself” (Sanhedrin 11.3).

The image features two large, weathered stone pillars, likely remnants of an ancient structure, standing symmetrically on either side of the central text. The pillars are made of stacked stone blocks and have ornate capitals. The background is a clear blue sky with a hint of a hillside and a power line visible on the left.

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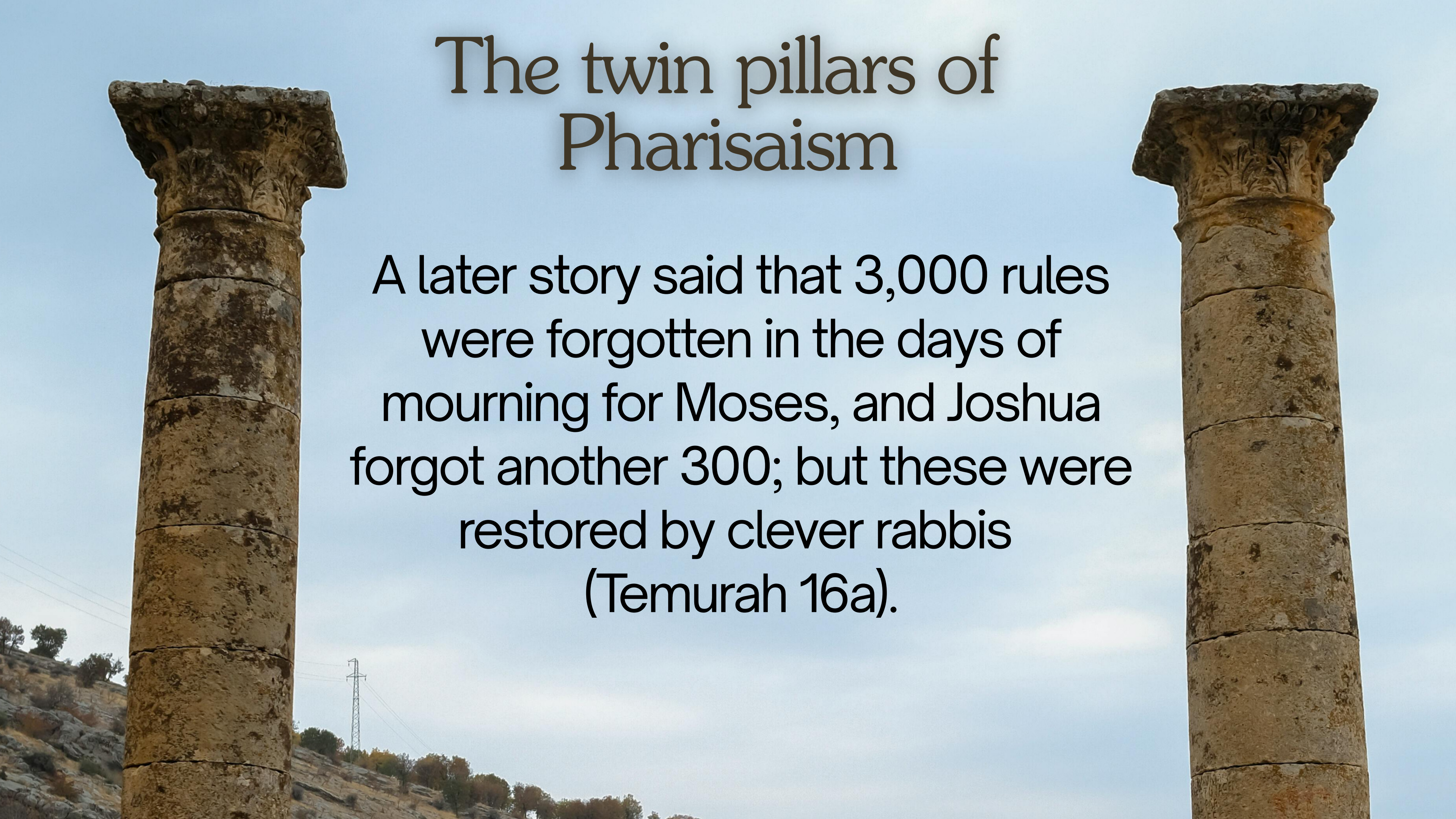
“If a man ... discloses meanings in the Law which are not according to the Halakah, even though a knowledge of the Law and good works are his, he has no share in the world to come” (Aboth 3.12).

The twin pillars of Pharisaism

Pharisees came to believe that the **oral tradition came down from Mount Sinai** with the Ten Commandments, and was transmitted to Joshua, then to elders, prophets, the men of the Great Synagogue, and (through many generations) to Shammai and Hillel (Aboth, 1.1).

The twin pillars of Pharisaism

A later story said that 3,000 rules were forgotten in the days of mourning for Moses, and Joshua forgot another 300; but these were restored by clever rabbis (Temurah 16a).



The twin pillars of Pharisaism

It is estimated that two-thirds of the rabbinic traditions concern ritual purity.

Much of the oral law developed in law courts, as a way of making a “fence around the law” (Aboth 1.1).

The twin pillars of Pharisaism

Pharisees were accepted as leaders largely because of their zeal for both **oral tradition** and **rituals** (e.g., baptizing proselytes, celebrating Hanukkah, hand washing) not ordained in the Torah.

The twin pillars of Pharisaism

Some of the traditions directly opposed the law. For example, Deuteronomy 15:1-3 prescribed the release of all debts in the seventh year, but Hillel legally declared that a loan might be collected whenever a lender desired, and that the law for seventh-year release did not apply in such cases.

PHARISEES

Jesus' common ground with Pharisees:

- Jesus and the Pharisees agreed on the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament. Insofar as the Pharisees taught what the Law of Moses taught, then Jesus wanted people to follow them (Matthew 23:1-3).
- Jesus was happy to eat with the Pharisees, but used this time as an opportunity to teach them (Luke 7:36ff.; 11:37; 13:31-33; 14:1).

PHARISEES

Jesus' common ground with Pharisees:

Jesus wanted to discuss the truth with honest-hearted Pharisees, who sometimes were candidates for conversion.

- Nicodemus (John 3:1-21; 7:51; 19:39)
- Gamaliel (Acts 5:34-40; cf. Luke 13:31)
- Saul (Acts 9; Philippians 3:5)
- Various Pharisaistic converts (Acts 15:5)

PHARISEES

Jesus' critique of Pharisees:

- Jesus' association with "sinners" illustrates a different conception of separation from the world (Mark 2:15-17; Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 5:27-32).
- Jesus' rejection of Pharisaistic conceptions of ritual purity and Sabbath-keeping challenged their enforcement of manmade tradition rather than on Scripture alone (Matthew 9:11; 23:2-3, 16, 23; Mark 3:1-5).

PHARISEES

Jesus' critique of Pharisees:

- Jesus contradicted their view of divorce (Matthew 19:1-9).
- Jesus challenged their pride (Luke 18:9-14), which showed itself in clothing (cf. Exodus 13:9, 16; Numbers 15:47-49), prominent positions, and public notices (Matthew 23:5-7).
- Jesus challenged their abandonment of parents in the name of temple duties (Mark 7:9-13).
- Jesus challenged their love for money rather than God (Luke 16:14).

PHARISEES

After 70 CE, when the temple was destroyed, the Pharisees took the lead in giving the Jewish people a new center of religious life apart from the temple.

- Rome recognized the Pharisaistic scholars as the governing body for the internal life of the Jewish people.
- The Judaism that survived the destruction of Jerusalem was a Pharisaic Judaism. The Talmud is a collection of Pharisaistic writings that was completed around 500 CE.

SADDUCEES

There are three possible etymologies of the word “Sadducee”:

- The name may be from the Hebrew word for “just.”
- The name may be derived from the name of the high priest Zadok (cf. 1 Kings 1:8, 32-39; 1 Chronicles 24:3, 31) or some other Zadok. (But, Sadducees supported the Hasmoneans, who were not Zadokite.)
- The name may be from the Greek word σύνδικος, for “member of the council.”

SADDUCEES

- **The Sadducee sect apparently originated during the intertestamental period.** The earliest period with which the Sadducees are associated is the time of Jonathan the brother of Judas Maccabeus (160-143 BCE).
- **The Sadducees were closely associated with the new Hasmonean high-priestly line begun by Jonathan's brother Simon (142-134 BCE).**

SADDUCEES

- **Simon's successor as high priest was John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE).** He originally was a follower of the Pharisees, but changed his loyalty to the Sadducees after the Pharisees challenged his priestly legitimacy.
- **Due to a close association between the Sadducees and the Hasmonean high priests, the Sadducees became the true ruling party.**

SADDUCEES



- **Salome Alexandra (76-67 BCE), widow of Alexander Jannaeus, transferred much influence back to the Pharisees, but when she died this was threatened. Seeking protection, the Sadducees supported Aristobulus II (Salome's son), whereas Pharisees supported Hyrcanus II.**
- **Herod put many Sadducees to death because they were urging Hyrcanus II to bring Herod to trial, and for supporting Antigonus, son of Aristobulus II.**

SADDUCEES

The Sanhedrin regained some governing control when Judea became a Roman province, after the reign of Archelaus (6 CE).

- Sadducees remained a majority in the Sanhedrin, and were the high priests (Acts 4:1; 5:17).
- Although the Sadducees had a following among the rich, the Pharisees (a minority in the Sanhedrin) were more popular with the common people.

SADDUCEES

The Sadducees were an aristocratic group concerned almost exclusively with running the temple. They got influence from their class, whereas the Pharisees got influence from their learning.

- Sadducees evidently were only in Jerusalem. When Jerusalem was destroyed the Sadducees disappeared from history.
- The Sadducees are now known primarily through the eyes of those they opposed—Pharisees and Christians.

SADDUCEES

Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees apparently recognized the authority of only the Torah (the first five Old Testament books). They denied the resurrection and the existence of angels and spirits (Acts 23:8), which they thought was not present in the Torah.

- Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees denied the authority of oral tradition.
- Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees had a strong view of human freedom and rejected predestination.

SADDUCEES

Sadducees' interaction with Christianity

- Some Sadducees came to be baptized by John the Baptist, but he recognized that they were disingenuous (Matthew 3:7-10).
- The Sadducees challenged Jesus to give a sign, although He had given many signs (Matthew 16:1-12).
- Jesus corrected their position on the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40).

SADDUCEES

Sadducees' interaction with Christianity

- Jesus twice cleansed the temple, the Sadducees' stronghold (John 2:13-22; Matthew 21:12-17). On the first occasion, he discussed the resurrection.
- Sadducees were involved in the temple arrest of Peter and John (Acts 4:1).
- Sadducees led the charge to arrest the apostles as the church was growing (Acts 5:17).
- Paul was on trial before the Sadducees on the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:1-8).

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