

ORIGEN AND THE PHARISEES¹

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Abstract: The study of the Pharisees has particular importance in three fields of research: the continuity between Judaism and the emerging Christianity, the development of post 70 A.D. Judaism, the investigation on the roots of Christian anti-Judaism. A progressive elaboration of the Pharisaic typology can be detected in the Church Fathers of the first three centuries. A lexicographic statistical analysis as well as an analytical study of texts of interest were performed to characterize some different trajectories in the development of the Pharisaic typology. Origen emerged as the great ratifier of the Christian Pharisaic typology, with an impact lasting for centuries.

Keywords: Origen. Church Fathers. Pharisees. Judaism. Christianity. Pharisaic Typology. Lexicographic analysis. Justin. Pseudo-Clementines Homilies, pseudo-Clementines Recognitions.

Why should one investigate a specific – not Christian but Jewish – faction, at first glance of secondary importance among the many characters, groups, and traditions attested in Origen’s works? In the past few decades, scholarship has pointed to the existence of a Pharisaic question² – who the Pharisees were, their history, their influence in first-century Jewish society, their impact on emerging Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism – as well as to their increasing relevance not only in Christian history and theology.

In my PhD dissertation *I farisei in alcuni padri della chiesa e in altri scritti greci e latini e greci del II e III secolo* (Angelelli, 2022), I tackled the study of the Pharisees in the Church Fathers, an area almost never systematically examined before.

In this study I pointed out how:

Mentions of the Pharisees in the Church Fathers have mainly a typological and a theological dimension, not a historical one;

Origen played a very important role in the fixation and diffusion of the Pharisaic typology, which in part is influential up to the present day.

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² For an excellent introduction to the Pharisaic question, see Sievers & Levine (2021).

Two preliminary questions must be answered:

- 1) Why the Pharisees?
- 2) Why Origen?

1. Why the Pharisees?

Let us come to the first question: why the Pharisees? Or rather, what is the importance and interest of this Jewish group?

I have summarised three different fields of research in which the Pharisees are relevant.

A first area is theological, and concerns the continuity (or the discontinuities) between Judaism and emerging Christianity: what is the relationship between the Jesus movement and Jewish traditions? What is the relationship between the Old and New Testaments? In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus presents himself in continuity with the Law of Israel (Mt 5:17) and identifies the scribes and Pharisees, among others, as those appointed to transmit Moses' teaching (Mt 23:2-3).

A second dimension is historical: the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. caused a discontinuity in the history of Judaism. How did Judaism move from pre-70 A.D. to 'rabbinic' Judaism? Scholars in recent decades have challenged the paradigm of an essentially Pharisaic rabbinic Judaism (Stemberger, 2021). However, the role of the Pharisees in the definition of post 70 A.D. Jewish identity, in relation to the emerging Christian communities, is relevant and needs to be investigated.

A third dimension is related to interreligious dialogue (Levine, 2021; Grilli & Sievers, 2021): in Jewish circles, the Pharisees are perceived as the sages from which Judaism evolved to its present form. The synonymy of Pharisee with hypocrite impacts the sensitivities of many Jews and is ascribed by them to an anti-Semitism that has its roots in the Church Fathers (Chazan, 2016), that has had terrible effects in human history, and that has never been sufficiently corrected by Christian churches.

2. Why Origen?

Having briefly mentioned the relevance of the Pharisaic question, let us address the question: why Origen?

In my PhD work, I performed a lexicographic statistical analysis on the use of the noun *Pharisee* (in Latin and Greek) and the correlated adjective *Pharisaic* over the ages (Angelelli, 2022, pp. 24-53, Angelelli, 2021).

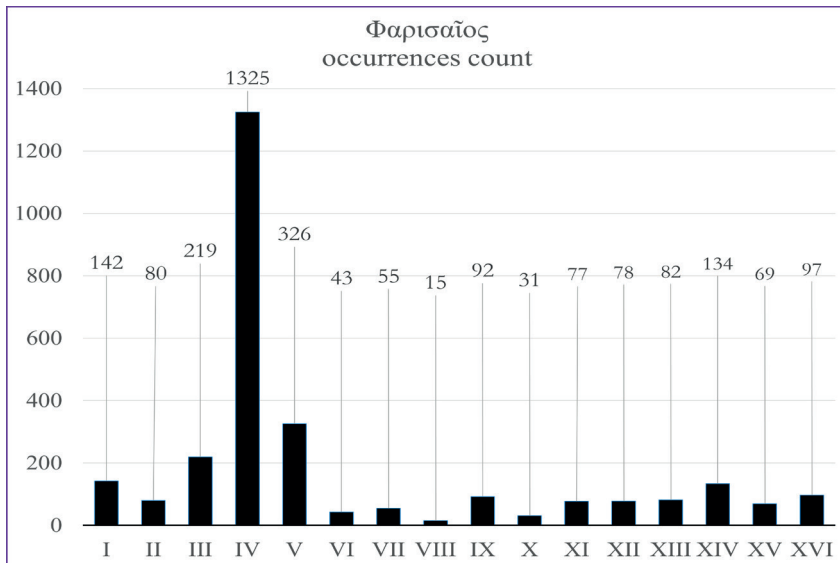


Figure 1. *Φαρισαῖος*, occurrences per century.

The study of the occurrences of *Φαρισαῖος* reveals some interesting data:

1. first, the Greek noun appears in the 1st century, whereas, for example, *ἰουδαῖος* and *ἐβραῖος* are already used in the LXX.
2. In the first three centuries the noun *Φαρισαῖος* appears mainly in Christian writings (Flavius Josephus is a happy exception).
3. *Φαρισαῖος* is not used after Flavius Josephus (+ c. 100) and reappears in Justin (+ c. 163/167).
4. The highest number of occurrences is in the 4th century.

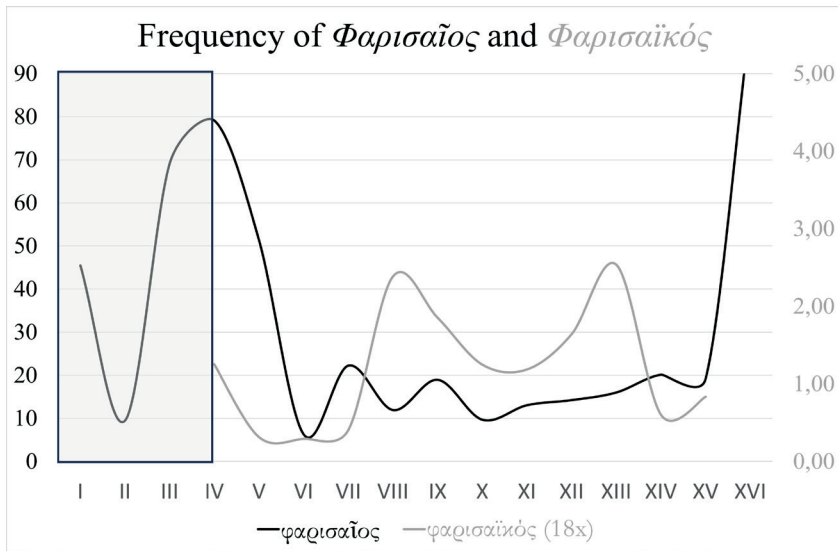


Figure 2. Frequency of *Φαρισαῖος* and *Φαρισαϊκός* (scale 18x)

In order to understand the actual use of a word, it is necessary to consider its frequency, or how many times that term appears in relation to the number of words transmitted for a given century. This allows to reduce the impact of the variance in the amount of literature in a given language transmitted in different eras. In Figure 2, I have reported the frequency of the noun *Φαρισαῖος* and the adjective *Φαρισαϊκός* expressed in words per million (wpm).

Φαρισαῖος is an underused lemma, its mean frequency for the entire Greek corpus is 28.8 wpm, a frequency enormously lower than a common word such as *λόγος* = 3249 wpm, but also a magnitude lower than *ιουδαῖος* = 308.44 wpm. That said, the frequency trend of the noun confirms the decline in use in the 2nd century and the recovery from the 3rd, as seen in Figure 1 (occurrences per century).

Φαρισαϊκός is definitely a rare word, with an average frequency in the entire Greek corpus of only 0.75 wpm. Nevertheless, it is an interesting marker: the existence of an adjective testifies to the linguistic crystallisation of the Pharisaic typology. Only when a concept or way of doing or being is broadly and unambiguously defined is it adjectivalised.

If we look at the frequencies of *Φαρισαῖος* and *Φαρισαϊκός* on the same graph (with different scales, Figure 2) we see how the noun has a maximum

in the 4th century, just when the adjective makes its appearance. These data indicate how the Pharisaic typology is fixed from the 4th century onwards. Consequently, what led to this fixation must have been developed and produced in the previous period: from the 1st century, when the noun appeared, until about the time of the emergence of adjectivization, in the 4th century.

If we look at the authors and writings of the first three centuries or so, we can see how the occurrences of the noun Pharisee (in Latin and Greek) are concentrated in only a few authors or writings (Figure 3 also shows the *Diatessaron*, albeit in Syriac, due to the high number of occurrences). Moreover, the Greek corpus is more significant than the Latin one.

Origen stands out in the graph because he is the author with the highest number of occurrences in the first three centuries, over 280; from the 1st to the 16th century, only Cyril of Alexandria (440) and John Chrysostom (413) have more occurrences than him.

From these data it is clear that Origen represents a reversal of the trend compared to the authors before him and anticipates the increased frequency of the usage of the noun in the 4th century.

The statistical lexicographical analysis in itself gives a lot of information and guides the choice of the most interesting writings and/or authors to study.

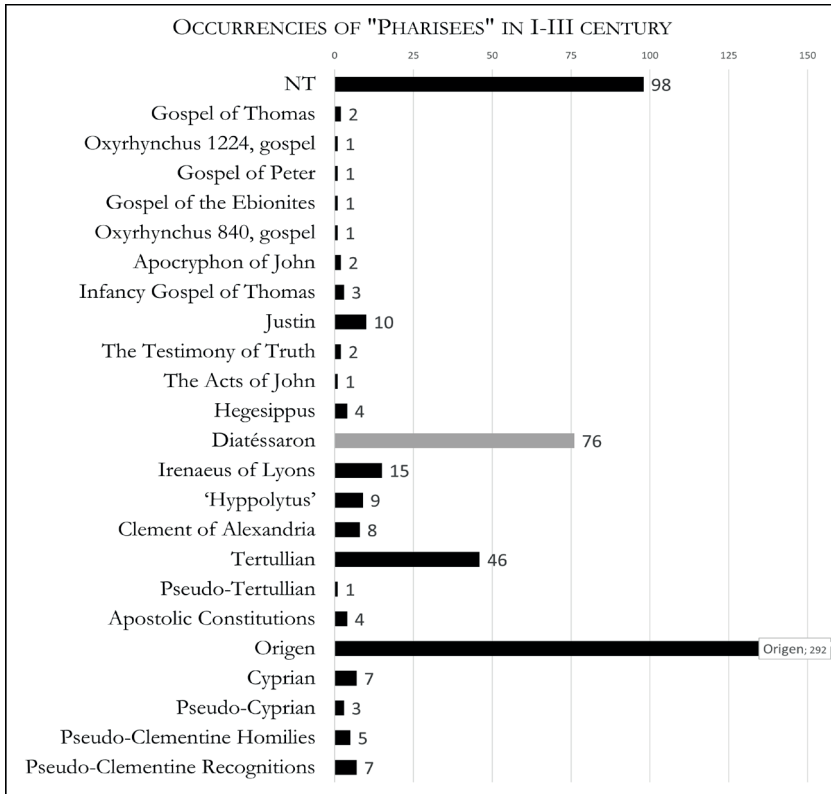


Figure 3. Occurrences of "Pharisees" in Christian sources I-III cent.

In my doctoral thesis, I analysed the use of the noun *Pharisee* in Justin, Aegesippus, 'Hippolytus', Clement of Alexandria, ORIGEN, Irenaeus of Lyons (transmitted in Latin), Tertullian, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, and in the pseudo-Clementine novels.

This analytical study has allowed me to highlight other interesting aspects (Angelelli, 2022, pp. 442-461):

1. There is no historical data on the Pharisees in the Christian writings of the first centuries.
2. The Pharisees do not appear in writings that make little or no use of the NT, such as the Apostolic Fathers, the early Greek Apologists (with the exception of Justin), the early Christian poetic works. Thus there is a kind of oblivion of the Pharisees after the NT writings and before Justin. The Pharisees reappear in Justin's *Dialogue with Tryphon*, often in connection with the *memories of the apostles*.

3. From Justin onwards, the Pharisees are ‘dragged’ into the texts in connection with the utilisation of the NT, and this use grows in relation to the theological-ecclesiological debate in the Christian communities during the quest for their own definition and identity.
4. There is an evolution of the Pharisaic typology through time, which can be tracked by analysing the portrayal, implicit or explicit, of the Pharisees in the different authors or writings. The analysis of the writings supports the development of the pattern already indicated by the lexicographical statistical analysis.
5. The Pharisaic type shows differentiations linked to the theological/ ecclesiological perspectives of the authors/writings that report them.

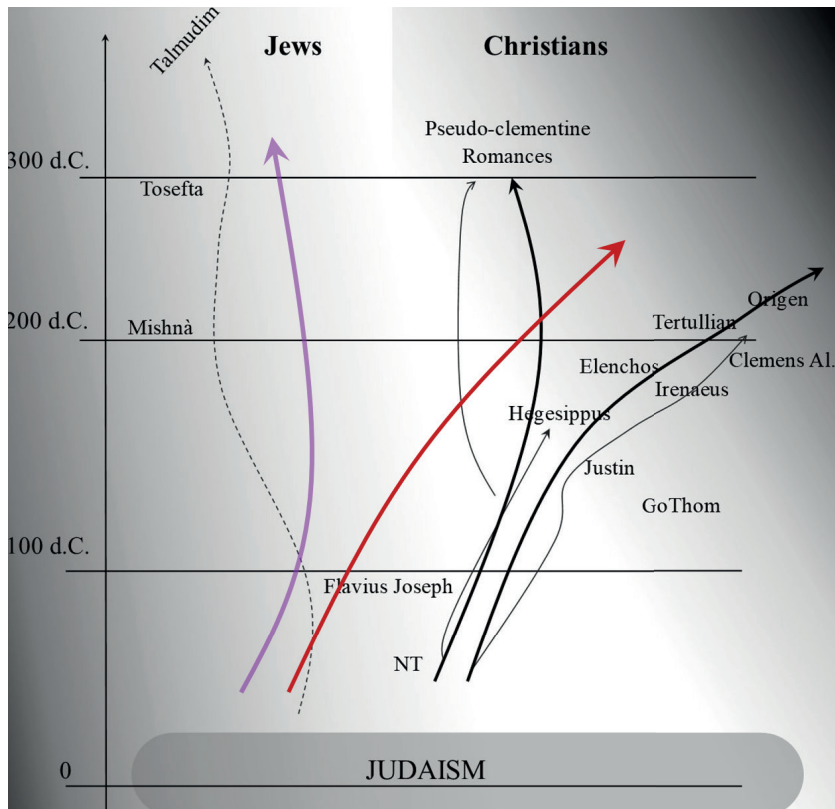


Figure 4. Trajectories of the Pharisaic typology's development.

If the development of the Pharisaic typology in the fathers is a kind of epiphenomenon of the theological debate in the first centuries, it is related to the theological and ecclesiological perspectives of the communities from which Christian authors and writings originated.

Therefore, it is not possible to speak of a single development of the Pharisaic typology, but of the existence of several trajectories of development of this typology.

In figure 4 I have shown two major lines of development of the Pharisaic type, two opposite extremes that contain other possible intermediate paths:

1. The trajectory of the great Church, from Justin to Origen, in which *the Pharisees are the type of the stubborn Jewish enemy of Christians*.
2. The trajectory of the pseudo-Clementine novels for which *not all Pharisees are “bad”, indeed they play an important role in the transmission of Mosaic teaching to the communities of believers*.

The outcomes of the different trajectories, although originating from the same substratum – admittedly varied in itself, that is, Jewish Scriptures and traditions, New Testament writings and traditions of primitive communities and so on – are clearly different.

A clarification: already the NT proposes a portrayal of the Pharisees (Marshall, 2014) that is not positive and has an antagonistic character in regard to Jesus of Nazareth; however this portrayal is not unequivocally negative due to the juxtaposition of positive traits or characters (e.g. Nicodemus). Later Christian authors pick up some traits of the NT Pharisees, selecting them according to their own theological vision. However, Origen is the author who really ratifies the Pharisaic type, as a synonym for the stubborn Jewish enemy of Christians.

3. From Justin to Origen

To highlight and summarise the development of the Pharisaic typology, I have selected some essential aspects in the portrayal of the Pharisees made by Justin (Angelelli, 2022, pp. 57-76) and Origen (Angelelli, 2022, p 279-366): everything that is in Justin can be found in Origen, but the changes are important.

Both authors give a role to the Pharisees in the transmission of Mosaic teaching.

For Justin, the Jewish teachers (*didascalos*) are responsible for the transmission (*Dial.* 38.2) of Jewish identity (the tradition). The Pharisees are a subset of such teachers. The teachers did not recognize Christ because they were unable to understand the Scriptures (OT) and the signs of the times.

In Origen, the Pharisees are the masters of the Jewish traditions (*CMt* XVII,28), but without Christ they exclude themselves from a full understanding of the law, and the Logos, the bridegroom, has abandoned the adulterous synagogue to marry the church constituted by the pagans (*CMt* XII,4, *CMt* XIV,17).

For the Alexandrian, what is characteristic of the Pharisees is a “literal” exegesis: they know the Scriptures, but, rejecting Christ, do not understand them, being culpably unable to go beyond a literal perspective and alienating themselves from the full meaning of the Scriptures (*Clo* XIII,55,378-380, *Clo* XIX,1-6, *CMtS* 27). They live the material cult proper to the Jews (*σωματική λατρεία*, *Clo* XXVIII,12,86 and 95), as opposed to the spiritual worship of Christians, *λογική λατρεία*, willed by God in Christ. Hence the impossibility of achieving the salvation disclosed by the Spirit in Christ.

Not only that. The Pharisees are also guilty of wilfully perverting the Mosaic law, teaching doctrines that are human commandments (*Clo* XXVIII 26,246) and nullifying God’s commandments (*CMt* XI,9, e.g. *korban*, *CMt* XI,13).

Jews who do not recognize Christ assume, for the Fathers, an antagonistic character. Here again, it is interesting to compare Justin and Origen.

For Justin, the antagonists of Christians are the stubborn Jewish teachers (and synagogue leaders) (*Dial.* 137.2). It should be noted that the (literary) role of the Pharisees as antagonists is slightly accentuated if compared to the role of the teachers (*Dial.* 105.6).

In their proselytism, in which scribes and Pharisees play a prominent role, the Jews spread slanders about Christians (*Dial.* 17,2).

The subject of the Pharisees is directly or indirectly connected with the subject of orthodoxy and heresy, depending on how one considers *Dial.* 80.4.

These points are picked up and developed by Origen.

The Pharisees not only oppose Jesus, but also his disciples, with an action that seems to be protracted in time (*CMtS* 9,16,23-25), to the point of reflecting the controversies between Christian (*CMtS* 10) and Jewish communities (*CMtS* XII,5-6).

The proselytism of the Pharisees (and scribes) is harmful because it diverts pagans from converting to Christianity and leads them to hate Christ (*CMtS* 16).

The Pharisees are more concerned with their own interests than about faith: to fight Christ and his disciples they ally themselves with those who deny the resurrection (Sadducees, *CMt* XII,1-2) or who collude with the occupying pagans (Herodians, *CMt* XVII,25-26).

The Origenian Pharisaic typology expresses the antagonism of Christian communities, who consider themselves the true and only Israel, towards Jewish communities, but also against Christian communities that are considered unorthodox (*CMtS* 27,48,9, Judaizers? *CIO* XXVIII,13,97).

4. The Pharisees in Origen and in pseudo-Clementine novels

To understand how there are trajectories of development that, starting from common roots (NT and early churches), have different outcomes, I have compared the points previously seen in Origen with some features of the Pharisees' representation in the so-called pseudo-Clementines (Angelelli, 2022, pp. 375-439).

In the pseudo-Clementines scribes and Pharisees are the holders of the Mosaic tradition uninterruptedly handed down from the fathers (written and oral Torah), and they are the teachers to be addressed in order to know the true parts (doctrine of false pericopes) of the law (*Hom.* 2:38).

The doctrine of Moses is crucial for achieving salvation, it is the key to the kingdom of heaven entrusted to the scribes and Pharisees (*Hom.* 3:18,3; *Rec.* 1:54,7; *Rec.* 2:30,1; *Rec.* 2:46,4, *Hom.* 3:18,3). The discussion is about the Pharisees' handling of this key, making it unavailable and compromising access to the kingdom. Although the Pharisees are guilty of such conduct, it should be noted that the negativity of this action is not developed to its extreme, for example by deriving from it the inherent malignity of the Pharisees (e.g. Origen).

Even when confronted with the explicit and strong criticism that Jesus makes in Matthew 23, the pseudo-Clementines propose a surprising reinterpretation of the woes: Jesus only reproaches some of the scribes and Pharisees (*Hom.* 11.29.1: *Rec.* 6.11.2-3), but not all of them.

One gets the impression that the pseudo-Clementine novels have a strong interest in addressing a narrative of the origins, and so of the essential characteristics of the Christian community, that they consider incorrect and

misleading. The portrait they make of the Pharisees corrects the one presented by the great Church, so that they are not definitively relegated among the enemies: Pharisees are allowed at least a possibility of recovery as well as a certain compatibility or possible coexistence with the Christians.

This leads to the idea that scribes and Pharisees were important for the communities behind the pseudo-Clementines: the body of believers is composed of both Jews and Gentile converts united by faith in the one God [of the Jews] (*Rec.* 2:46,3).

The theme of the Pharisees in Origen is thus part of a varied and complex development of the Pharisaic typology. Although the trajectory of the great church is one that has carried a negative representation of Pharisees, even to the point of proposing the synonymy between Pharisee and hypocrite in modern languages, this is not the only one. On the contrary, it must be placed in a broad framework, which should be further investigated to define or discover different outcomes, examining, for instance, Syriac and Hebrew literature.

5. Origen: the ratifier of the Pharisaic typology

Thus Origen is the great ratifier of the Pharisaic typology: in his systematic exegesis of the gospels and their actualization, he establishes a typological and definitive character of the Pharisees.

For Origen the Pharisees are a *nomen omen*: considering the etymology of the noun (Angelelli, 2022, pp. 356-358; Baumgarten, 1983, pp. 411-428), Origen chooses one of the possible meanings of the verb *prs* (*parash*), transliterates it as *fares* and renders it as separated: the Pharisees are the separated, those who separate themselves from others because they feel superior (*FrIo* XXXIV, *CIo* VI,222,120, *CMtS* 9,16,20-23, *CMtS* 27,46,14). In short, the figure of the arrogant haughtiness of the Pharisees would be expressed by their very name.

Although it is a single element and consequently of relative importance, Origen is the first to use the adverb *φαρισαϊκῶς* in *CIo* VI,22,121 (Angelelli, 2022, pp. 360-362). For the adverb the same applies as for the adjective *Φαρισαϊκός*: its existence attests to the linguistic crystallization of the Pharisaic typology.

Origenian exegesis and its constant actualization of the Scriptures promotes a synonymy between Pharisee and a way of being that is obtuse, stubbornly malevolent, haughty and focused on appearances (hypocrite). This synonymy persists to this day in many modern Western languages.

The extensive use of Origen's work by contemporaries and later Christian generations spread and established this Pharisaic typology, promoting it as a paradigm perpetuated for a very long time before it was criticised and challenged.

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