

## Who were the Pharisees?

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF JUDAISM IN THE TIME  
OF CHRIST.

BY THE REV. G. H. BOX, M.A.,

*Formerly Hebrew Master at Merchant Taylors' School, London; Lecturer in  
Rabbinical Hebrew, King's College, London.*

THE two centuries that immediately preceded the rise of Christianity marked, perhaps, the most active and fruitful period of development in the history of Judaism. This is the period which saw the rise of the Apocalyptic movement, with its vast eschatological system that was essentially bound up with the doctrine of a future life, and the belief in a judgment after death, with rewards and punishments. It was also during this period that Messianic hopes and ideas were most active and alive in the popular consciousness, and found manifold and often conflicting expression. It was a period, too, marked to an extraordinary degree by divisions within the Jewish body. The parties within Judaism, as we meet them in the pages of the New Testament, emerged during this period—the Pharisees and Sadducees, to which we must now add the Essenes and Apocalyptists.

Who were the Pharisees? It is absolutely necessary that we should form some clear conception of the origin, essential character, and aims of this great party, if we are to gain any just and adequate idea of Judaism in the time of Christ.

The Pharisees were a religious party—not a sect—who appear to have been well organized, and who were drawn mainly from the ranks of the scribes. The Pharisees first appear in history under that name in the reign of the Maccabean Prince, John Hyrcanus (135-105 B.C.). Henceforth they take a prominent and influential part in the public life and affairs of the people, until the annihilation of the national life in the reign of Hadrian (A.D. 135).

Ever since the time of Ezra, the “scribes,” or teachers of

the Law, had been active in the Judæan community. They were a class of *litterati* devoted to the study and exposition of the Law. Ezra himself is described as "a ready scribe in the Law of Moses" (Ezra vii. 6).

It is not impossible that the mysterious "Great Synagogue" of later tradition may be a picturesque term for describing the line of these earlier *Soferim* ("scribes"), beginning with Ezra and coming down to the time of Simon the Just in the days of Alexander the Great. There were undoubtedly guilds of "scribes" in the Persian and Early Greek periods;<sup>1</sup> these seem to have been originally distinct from the guilds of the "wise," whose spirit is expressed in the Book of Proverbs; though later the two became one—sage and scribe are identified in Sirach (Ecclus. xxxviii. 24 *et seq.*; cf. vi. 33 *et seq.*, ix. 14 *et seq.*, xiv. 20 *et seq.*). We must not think of these earlier "scribes" in connection with the synagogue. That institution came later (probably after the Maccabean Revolt, 167 B.C.). But almost from the very first, as soon as the work of Ezra was completed, there were, no doubt, organized priestly or scribal schools where the Law was studied and taught; and these scribal schools, which were largely juristic in character, developed the oral tradition.

The schools and the activity of the scribes, of course, went on long after the rise of the Pharisaic party, and we find Pharisees and scribes mentioned side by side in the New Testament. They were intimately connected, but still distinct. It is clear, however, that most of the members of the Pharisaic party belonged to the class of scribes; though not all scribes were Pharisees, nor all Pharisees scribes. The relations between them have been well described by the writer of the article, "Scribes and Pharisees," in the "Encycl. Biblica" (col. 4322):<sup>2</sup>

"The object of the Pharisees," he says, "was clearly to live according to the Law which the orthodox scribes interpreted. It follows, therefore,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the "company of scribes" (συναγωγή γραμματέων) mentioned in 1 Macc. vii. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Professor J. D. Prince.

that, from the very inception of the Pharisaic party, its leaders must have been orthodox scribes. As the Sadducees also followed the written Law, there must also have been Sadducee scribes as well; and it is highly likely that there were also scribes who belonged to neither party. This explains the distinctive expressions 'scribes of the Pharisees' (Mark ii. 16; Acts xxxiii. 9); 'the Pharisees and their scribes' (Luke v. 30), from which it is evident that not all the scribes were Pharisees. It is probable also that some of the Pharisees—owing no doubt to lack of education—belonged only nominally to the scribal class, and practised blindly the precepts laid down for them by their scribal leaders. At the time of Jesus we almost always find scribes in judicial positions; thus, wherever high-priests and elders are mentioned, the scribes are generally included, without, however, any specification as to whether they belonged to the Pharisees or the Sadducees, or whether they were merely neutral scholars' (*cf.* Matt. xvi. 21; Mark xi. 27; Luke ix. 22)—'the elders [*i.e.*, members of the Great Sanhedrin] and the chief priests and the scribes' (Matt. xx. 18); 'the chief priests and scribes' (Luke xx. 1) . . . 'with the elders' (Matt. xxvi. 57; Acts vi. 12); 'the scribes and elders.'"

The Pharisees were thus closely associated with the orthodox teachers of the Law. But they were in no sense a purely academic association. They were for a long period the party of progress within Judaism; they fought strenuously and passionately—if not always wisely—for great causes, and won them. They championed the cause of pure monotheism against the Hellenizing movement; they built up religious individualism and a purely spiritual worship; they deepened the belief in a future life; they carried on a powerful mission propaganda; they championed the cause of the laity against an exclusive priesthood; they made the Scriptures the possession of the people, and in the weekly assemblages of the Synagogue they preached to them the truths and hopes of religion out of the sacred books (not only out of the Pentateuch, but also out of the Prophets and Hagiographa). In marked contrast with those of the Sadducees, their judgments in questions of law were, as is well known, of a mild and compassionate character. When it is realized how they spent their energies without stint in the work of instructing the people in the *Tôrā* (Law-Scripture), and in bringing religion to bear upon popular life, their enormous influence with the people generally—to which Josephus testifies—is hardly to be wondered at. Josephus

says (Ant., xviii. 1, 4) that the Pharisees led the people, compelling even the priestly aristocracy to yield to them. "Practically nothing," he says, "was done by them (the Sadducees); for whenever they attain office they follow—albeit unwillingly and of compulsion—what the Pharisees say, because otherwise they would not be endured by the people."

Pharisaism may, perhaps, best be described as a militant type of asceticism. In their personal standard of life the Pharisees retained the ideals of the earlier ascetic *ḥasidîm* (pious). They, in fact, were the successors of the *Assideans*, mentioned in 1 Macc. as strict observers of the Law (ii. 42), and abstainers from things unclean (i. 62 *et seq.*).

The very name *Pharisee* (Aram. *Perîshā*, pl. *Perishayyā*) suggests this connection with asceticism. It apparently means "one who separates himself"—viz., from things and persons impure. The abstract noun *perîshûth* occurs in the Mishna with the meaning of "abstinence," or "self-restraint." Though the name seems to have been given to them by outsiders, it was commonly used without any offensive sense. Josephus, for instance, calls himself in his Life a Pharisee. Their own name for themselves was *ḥabērîm*, "associates," or members of a brotherhood. This association, or *ḥābārā*, which probably was already organized in the New Testament period, was a league that pledged its members to the strict observance of Levitical purity, to the scrupulous payment of tithes and other dues to the priest, the Levite, and the poor, and to a conscientious regard for vows and for other people's property. It included priests and Levites who wished to carry out with scrupulous regard the dictates of the Law and the obligations especially of Levitical purity, and also laymen who wished to live like observant priests. It must be remembered that there were, during this period and later, large numbers of the descendants of Aaron who were careless and indifferent about such matters. "A true Pharisee observed the same degree of purity in his daily meals as did the priest in the Temple," says

Dr. Kohler, though Büchler would deny that this was true of the Pharisees in the time of Jesus.

In manifold ways the influence of the Pharisees made itself felt upon the religious life and institutions of the people. The observance of the Sabbath and holy days was invested with special sanctity in the home. As at the sacrifices in the Temple, wine was used in honour of the day. *Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy* was interpreted: *Remember it over the wine*, and was embodied in the ceremony of *Kiddûsh*, or *Sanctification*.<sup>1</sup> They made the observance of these days popular, and succeeded in imparting to them a character of domestic joy. Whereas to the conservative priesthood such occasions were regarded mainly as Temple festivals, the Pharisees strove to bring them into the common life of the people. Their influence on the Temple services were also of a democratic character. They introduced the recitation of daily prayers beside the sacrifices (*Tamid*, v. 1), and founded the institution of the *Ma'âmādot*—*i.e.*, the deputation of lay-Israelites which was present in the Temple at the daily sacrifice. It will be remembered that for the purposes of the daily sacrificial worship the priesthood with the Levites was divided into twenty-four courses of service, each course taking its turn for a week in the Temple service. For the same purpose the lay-Israelites generally were divided into twenty-four courses, "each of which had to take its turn in coming before God [in the Temple] every day for a whole week, by way of representing the whole body of the people, while the daily sacrifice was being offered to Jehovah."<sup>2</sup> But for obvious reasons it was manifestly impossible for the whole division of lay-Israelites to be present at one time in Jerusalem; and so a deputation actually represented the whole body; while those who had been left behind in the towns and country districts assembled in the local synagogues (at the time when the sacrifice was being offered in the Temple) and engaged

<sup>1</sup> For a description of this interesting ceremony (over a cup of wine and broken bread), *cf.* "The Religion and Worship of the Synagogue" (Pitman), by Dr. Oesterley and the present writer (pp. 346-351).

<sup>2</sup> Schürer, "Hist. Jewish People" (E. T.), iii. 275 *et seq.*

in prayer and the reading of Scripture (see *Taanith*, iv. 2). They also proclaimed the doctrine that the priests were but the deputies of the people.<sup>1</sup> "While the Sadducean priesthood," says Dr. Kohler, "regarded the Temple as its domain, and took it to be the privilege of the high-priest to offer the daily burnt-offering from his own treasury, the Pharisees demanded that it be furnished from the Temple treasury, which contained the contributions of the people (*Sifra*, 13, 17; 128, 18)." Further, they secured Temple sanction for certain popular customs which were not enjoined in the Law.

Such was the great festival of the water-drawing at the Feast of Tabernacles, when a libation of water was brought in procession from the Pool of Siloam to the Temple and solemnly poured on the altar. It was probably regarded originally as symbolical of rain. During the feast, which lasted seven days, the libation of water was made each day at the time of the morning sacrifice, and it is to this custom that Christ implicitly refers in John vii. 37: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink." This was one of the most popular of Temple ceremonies, and the Mishna, referring to it and its accompaniments, says: "*He who has not seen the joy of the water-drawing has never seen joy in his life.*" The Pharisaic institution of the *Tefillin*, or phylacteries, on the head and arm seems to have been devised as a counterpart of the high-priest's diadem and breastplate, and to have been regarded as a consecration of head and arm; and in the same way the *mezuzā*, or door-post symbol, was regarded as symbolizing the consecration of the home. Both observances were, of course, derived from the text of Scripture (Deut. vi. 8, 9, xi. 18, 19), and, doubtless, originally had talismanic associations. But these were forgotten.

The Pharisees also infused new and more specifically religious ideas into the observance of the old traditional festivals. One of the most significant of these was their doctrine regarding the Day of Atonement. They boldly transferred the atoning power

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mishna, "Yoma," I.

from the high-priest to the day itself, so that atonement might be effected apart from sacrifice and priest. The one indispensable condition was true repentance. Similarly, the New Year Festival became the annual Day of Judgment; and the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, became the Festival of Revelation, or Giving of the Law. They also improved the status of women, relaxing the rigour of the old laws of purification, and by the institution of the marriage document protecting the woman against arbitrary divorce. Their general aim, apparently, was to invest the woman in the home with as much dignity as possible. In consequence they enjoyed, as Josephus tells us, great popularity with the Jewish women (*Ant.*, xvii. 2, 4). Among their other great achievements they fixed the Canon of Scripture, and built up the Synagogue Service and Liturgy.

The enormous influence of the Pharisaic party on the religious life of the Jewish people in Palestine is thus clear, and it undoubtedly operated in the time of Jesus and the Apostles. In the Synagogue and outside the Temple it was supreme. Even within the Temple it made itself seriously felt. But, as Chwolson in his masterly essay "*Das letzte Passamahl Christi und der Tag seines Todes*"—which ought to be studied by all serious students of this period who read German—has made exceedingly probable, the Pharisees did not secure full control of the Temple ritual till the two decades that preceded the destruction in A.D. 70. Thus, in the time of Christ, the Temple service was conducted in accordance with the old priestly tradition mainly. Both the Sanhedrin and the Temple were still dominated by the priestly aristocracy. This comes out very clearly in the details of the trial of Jesus, as narrated in the Gospels. The procedure adopted violated the canons of the criminal law accepted by the Pharisees. It is clear enough from the Gospels, indeed, that the chief actors in the tragedy were the members of the high-priestly party.

The Pharisaic ideal was the exact opposite of what is understood by "progress" in the modern world. While in modern life the tendency is to secularize ever more and more

all departments of human activity, the Pharisees consistently strove to bring life more and more under the dominion of religious observance. But observance—and ceremonial—was valued mainly because of its educational worth. By carefully-formed habits, by the ceremonial of religious observance, religious ideas and sanctions could be impressed upon the people's mind and heart. But the outward was subordinated to the inward. Thus, in the prescriptions that occur in the Mishna and Tosefta regarding prayer, the necessity of conscious direction of the thoughts to the objects of the prayer (Heb. *Kawwānā*) is insisted upon. Nor is it clear that the Pharisees put all the requirements of religious observance on exactly the same level, and made no distinctions. The essential marks of their piety are well summed up in a Talmudic passage as follows: "*Three distinguishing characteristics mark the people of Israel—compassion, humility, and the practice of benevolence (acts of kindness)*" (T. B. *Yebamoth*, 79a).

So far I have attempted to describe Pharisaism on its best side, and I think that its positive and permanent achievements justify the description that has been given. But there were Pharisees and Pharisees. There was an extreme and fanatical section to be found, I think, among the School of Shammai, which was open to the charge of formalism and hypocrisy. Pharisees of this school were severe and exacting in their requirements, and bitterly narrow and exclusive. It was against this section, I think, that the polemic in the Gospels was primarily directed. Jesus denounced this hypocritical section of the Pharisees. The Talmud also denounces them. But, on the other side, were the mild and peace-loving disciples of Hillel.

A brief examination of one of the Gospel accounts of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees will serve to illustrate what has been said. That Jesus came into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees is attested very clearly in the oldest tradition of the Synoptic Gospels. Two specific instances of great importance are given—viz., the question of vows (a son, by pronouncing the word *korban*, being permitted to relieve



himself of the duty of helping a parent (Mark vii. 6-13), and the question of ritual purification—hand-washing before meals (Mark vii. 1-5). To the accuracy of both these accounts strong objection has been taken on the Jewish side, it being alleged that the Pharisees could never have tolerated such a breach of the moral law as neglect of duty to parents on the ground of tradition; and, further, that the laws of purification did not apply to the ordinary layman in daily life at all, but only on the rare occasions when he visited the Temple. They were “only obligatory upon priests during their time of service, or upon laymen during the rare and brief occasions when they visited the Temple.”<sup>1</sup>

It will not be possible for me, in the space at my command, to enter into a full discussion of the issues here raised. I can only indicate what seems to me to be the true view regarding one of them—viz., the question of ritual hand-washing before meals in the time of Jesus.

It is noticeable that the rebuke by Jesus of the Pharisees, as described in Mark vii., is directed against a hypocritical section (ver. 6, “you hypocrites”). These are represented more especially by “certain of the scribes which had come from Jerusalem”—*i.e.*, probably a deputation of the Shammaite party. It is notorious that the Shammaites (members of the party of Shammai, the opponent of Hillel) were rigorous to excess in their requirements, and were the champions of a narrow and exclusive form of legal piety. Their influence, up to the time of the catastrophe of A.D. 70, seems to have been in the ascendant; but later, the peace-loving and milder party of Hillel triumphed, and the oral law (embodied now in the oldest parts of the Talmud) was revised in accordance with Hillelite views. It is probable that in the time of Jesus the question of ritual hand-washing was a party one, and that Jesus Himself strongly opposed the Shammaite view. In fact, the impression

<sup>1</sup> Montefiore, *Hibbert Journal*, January, 1903. For a full and learned discussion of the laws of Levitical purification, see Büchler, “Der Galilaische ‘Am-ha-arez.’”

all departments of human activity, the Pharisees consistently strove to bring life more and more under the dominion of religious observance. But observance—and ceremonial—was valued mainly because of its educational worth. By carefully-formed habits, by the ceremonial of religious observance, religious ideas and sanctions could be impressed upon the people's mind and heart. But the outward was subordinated to the inward. Thus, in the prescriptions that occur in the Mishna and Tosefta regarding prayer, the necessity of conscious direction of the thoughts to the objects of the prayer (Heb. *Kawwānā*) is insisted upon. Nor is it clear that the Pharisees put all the requirements of religious observance on exactly the same level, and made no distinctions. The essential marks of their piety are well summed up in a Talmudic passage as follows: "*Three distinguishing characteristics mark the people of Israel—compassion, humility, and the practice of benevolence (acts of kindness)*" (T. B. *Yebamoth*, 79a).

So far I have attempted to describe Pharisaism on its best side, and I think that its positive and permanent achievements justify the description that has been given. But there were Pharisees and Pharisees. There was an extreme and fanatical section to be found, I think, among the School of Shammai, which was open to the charge of formalism and hypocrisy. Pharisees of this school were severe and exacting in their requirements, and bitterly narrow and exclusive. It was against this section, I think, that the polemic in the Gospels was primarily directed. Jesus denounced this hypocritical section of the Pharisees. The Talmud also denounces them. But, on the other side, were the mild and peace-loving disciples of Hillel.

A brief examination of one of the Gospel accounts of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees will serve to illustrate what has been said. That Jesus came into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees is attested very clearly in the oldest tradition of the Synoptic Gospels. Two specific instances of great importance are given—viz., the question of vows (a son, by pronouncing the word *korban*, being permitted to relieve

himself of the duty of helping a parent (Mark vii. 6-13), and the question of ritual purification—hand-washing before meals (Mark vii. 1-5). To the accuracy of both these accounts strong objection has been taken on the Jewish side, it being alleged that the Pharisees could never have tolerated such a breach of the moral law as neglect of duty to parents on the ground of tradition; and, further, that the laws of purification did not apply to the ordinary layman in daily life at all, but only on the rare occasions when he visited the Temple. They were “only obligatory upon priests during their time of service, or upon laymen during the rare and brief occasions when they visited the Temple.”<sup>1</sup>

It will not be possible for me, in the space at my command, to enter into a full discussion of the issues here raised. I can only indicate what seems to me to be the true view regarding one of them—viz., the question of ritual hand-washing before meals in the time of Jesus.

It is noticeable that the rebuke by Jesus of the Pharisees, as described in Mark vii., is directed against a hypocritical section (ver. 6, “you hypocrites”). These are represented more especially by “certain of the scribes which had come from Jerusalem”—*i.e.*, probably a deputation of the Shammaite party. It is notorious that the Shammaites (members of the party of Shammai, the opponent of Hillel) were rigorous to excess in their requirements, and were the champions of a narrow and exclusive form of legal piety. Their influence, up to the time of the catastrophe of A.D. 70, seems to have been in the ascendant; but later, the peace-loving and milder party of Hillel triumphed, and the oral law (embodied now in the oldest parts of the Talmud) was revised in accordance with Hillelite views. It is probable that in the time of Jesus the question of ritual hand-washing was a party one, and that Jesus Himself strongly opposed the Shammaite view. In fact, the impression

<sup>1</sup> Montefiore, *Hibbert Journal*, January, 1903. For a full and learned discussion of the laws of Levitical purification, see Büchler, “Der Galiläische ‘Am-ha-’arez.’”

is almost irresistible that the denunciations of the Pharisees occurring in the Gospels are directed primarily against a Shammaite section; and that the incident described in Mark vii. is an episode in the controversy between Jesus and the Shammaites. In confirmation of what has been said regarding the party-character of the point, it is interesting to note that, according to the Talmud (T. B. *Shabbath*, 14*b*), the duty of ritual hand-washing formed one of the "Eighteen Articles" which the Shammaites forced with such violence on the Sanhedrin in the stormy years that immediately preceded the conflict with Rome in A.D. 66-70.<sup>1</sup>

The great danger essentially inherent in a legalistic religion is undoubtedly that of formalism, externalism, unreality; and this defect unquestionably manifested itself in certain parties within Pharisaism. But the Pharisaic religion never failed to produce genuine examples of profound piety, while its positive achievements in the domain of religious institutions were astonishing.

Pharisaism was essentially legalistic in character. To the Pharisee the Law and its prescriptions were the supreme embodiment of the Divine Will and Divine Revelation. Jesus differed from the Pharisees in attaching less importance to the letter of the Law. The Pharisaic attitude, while not deficient in inward strength and religious conviction, was bound to be somewhat unsympathetic to those who remained outside the Law's pale. A Jewish scholar<sup>2</sup> has said: "Only in regard to intercourse with the unclean and 'unwashed' multitude, the '*am-ha-'arez* ('people of the land'), the publican and the sinner, did Jesus differ widely from the Pharisees." This difference, however, is really fundamental. Such a transcending of the

<sup>1</sup> That the neglect by Jesus' disciples of the practice of ritual hand-washing was not a departure from general lay usage may be inferred from the Gospel account itself. No protest was raised against it, apparently, till a deputation of scribes from Jerusalem arrived on the scene; and what they objected to was that a teacher—a Rabbi—should permit His disciples to neglect the rite.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. K. Kohler in the "Jewish Encyclopædia," ix. 665 (s.v. "Pharisee").

letter of the Law involved ultimately its supersession. But in Palestine, at any rate, the hostility of orthodox Pharisees seems first to have been aroused only when a section of the Christian sect became avowedly and explicitly antinomian in the person of Stephen.



## Authority in Religious Belief.

BY THE REV. C. LISLE CARR, M.A.,

*Rector of Woolton.*

OUR Lord promised His Church that the Spirit of Truth should guide His followers into all the Truth. But every one of His promised blessings is mediated through some agency. The food convenient to us comes through farmer and through merchant, health through the doctor's skill, peace through text or hymn ; and guidance in intellectual matters has its own agency which the Spirit of Truth uses to lead believers into all the Truth. This agency—in other words, the seat of authority in religious belief—is a subject which needs much discussion at the present day. It is entirely denied by some ; it is located by others in different places, and in varying form ; but for every Christian, while the ultimate authority is confessed to be the Holy Spirit, the means which He uses to express His guidance to mankind needs definition if there is to be confidence in personal faith. Without definite expression in words, there is no doubt that for the average Englishman of to-day no authority is admitted, except that of his own judgment. He claims a right, which he believes with confident certainty to be unassailable, to decide for himself what he shall believe. He may gather his creed from many religions and from many climes. He may collect from all the faiths about which he has ever heard a little here and there, and will generally express the conclusion that all religions have a great deal of good in them, but that none has any right to compel his allegiance. Or he may limit