

Palestine In The Time Of Christ

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SAINT LUKE tells us that John the Baptist began his preaching in “the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and Philip, his brother, tetrarch of Ituraea and the country of Trachonitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilina: under the high priests Annas and Caiaphas...” (Luke 3:1-2). This medley of names, titles and duties warns us from the start that we have to deal with a complex state of affairs. The fact is that the political unity re-established in Palestine by Herod the Idumaeen at the cost of an atrocious war of three years duration (40-37 B.C.) had been again broken down. This half-Jew, crafty and cruel, who was to complete his reign with the massacre of the Innocents, did at least enforce order and obtained, even if he did not merit it, the name of “the Great”. He reigned from 37 to 4 B.C.

In his time the Temple was magnificently rebuilt (or remodeled), peace was maintained, the pride of the Sacerdotal families was humbled, and the marked Hellenism of the prince, together with his constant devotion to the more powerful of the Romans, was limited by a sure instinct for the critical point beyond which Jewish endurance would give place to despair and revolt. The dark intrigues of the palace and the unforgivable murders which blackened the last years of the reign did not prevent Augustus from ratifying the chief features of the Idumaeen’s will. This divided his land between three of his surviving sons — he had put to death his three elder sons. By this will, Archelaus received Judea; Herod Antipas (who beheaded John the Baptist and appears in the story of the Passion) was given Galilee and Peraea; while Ituraea and the north-eastern districts went to Philip.

By the year 30 only the last two retained their dominions. In Judea (properly so-called) Archelaus made himself so unpopular that his subjects forwarded to Rome a petition against him. Augustus received it in A.D. 6 and in consequence placed the province directly under a Roman magistrate, who was a mere procurator (we should call him a Lieutenant-Governor) of the Pro-Consul of Syria, and resided on the coast at Caesarea, whence communication with Rome was none too easy. His habitual absence from Jerusalem, to which he went every year with a strong escort at the time of the Feast of the Passover, together with the care taken by the Romans to leave to subject peoples a portion or a shadow of autonomy, meant that the high council of the nation, the Sanhedrin, which had been almost abolished during Herod’s reign, regained a certain amount of independence. Composed of seventy-one members, “princes of the priests” (chiefs of the principal families of sacerdotal caste), “scribes” (doctors expert in the interpretation of the Law), and “elders” (senators), the Sanhedrin was presided over at great functions by the high priest. In the time of Jesus, this tribunal was in actual fact the sole Jewish authority in matters political and religious...

We see in the Judea of those days, less perhaps than elsewhere, but in the same way, rich and poor, “the great ones of the flesh” and the small, persons of quality and the populace. As always happens, the first class are the better known to us: it is they who, in very great measure, make history, and it is always they who write it. And it is chiefly with them that we are concerned in this chapter. But if we were to forget the others we should run the danger of not understanding the Gospels, and it is the

Gospels which offer us the most vivid pictures of these. Leisured artisans, and fishermen who could be more easily detached from their boats than labourers could be uprooted from their soil, the apostles of Jesus almost all belonged to that little world of true Israelites, without guile and without artifice, formed on the model made familiar to us by the Wisdom literature and the Psalms.

The Master praised them in the person of Nathaniel (John 1:47) and, which is much more, he called them to him. Jewish scholars who strive to explain and to diminish the contrast between the Gospel and the Pharisaic ideal, locate the difference in the fact that, far from repulsing these men as incapable of sharing in the Kingdom of God, Jesus opened the door wide to them. He went lower than that, even to sinners and publicans, but chiefly he talked familiarly and in friendly fashion with the ignorant, the rude, and “this accursed multitude which knoweth not the Law” (John 7:49).

Above these masses of the people we find, ruling them or at least distinct from them, at this period in Judea, “the rich and prudent” whose importance was assured to them by their birth, fortune and knowledge of the Law. The Herodians are three times mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 3:6, 12:13; Matthew 22:16). Without constituting a particular sect, analogous to those which will be described below, these politicians, who were resigned to the Roman rule, and were devoted to, or rallied to, the power of the Idumaeen princes, were recruited from the families which the state of affairs existing under the Herods had not too much offended or injured. They saw in this government a more or less tolerable middle term half-way between total subjection to the Empire and an independence which they no longer believed to be possible. The words spoken at the meeting of the Sanhedrin about the miracles and increasing popularity of Jesus express very fairly the timid wisdom of the Herodians and the proximity of Rome which made them desire, and almost love, the scarcely national dynasty of the Herods.

At the other extremity of the political rainbow, a turbulent, fanatical group, the Zealots, were jealous observers of the Law, and, as such, were Pharisees and no more. What enabled Josephus to distinguish them from the main body of the Pharisees was the fact that, being before all else nationalists, the Zealots were the declared enemies of all foreign domination. Already formed in Gospel times, this turbulent minority increased as a consequence of the troubles which followed the ephemeral reign of Herod Agrippa I, who died in 44. It fomented and fanned the successive revolts which led to the capture and sack of Jerusalem in 70.

The Essenes, who are known only through occasional (though detailed and friendly) passages in Philo, Josephus and Pliny the Elder, have greatly aroused the curiosity of scholars and have driven not a few amateur historians to delirium. They formed cenobitical groups, freely recruited, and their chief centres were situated around the Dead Sea. (One such group – different from the others – kept a recently discovered library known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.) According to Josephus the Essenes numbered as many as four thousand. Their origin is unknown: but traces of them are found possibly towards the middle, and certainly towards the end of the first century B.C. After undergoing a postulancy of one year, they were initiated and given a knife, a belt and a white robe. They kept themselves, worked with their hands, as a general rule preserved celibacy, did not keep slaves and did not engage in commerce.

As all goods were held in common, meals were taken together, with a grave and religious solemnity. Their scrupulous, concerted, almost ritualistic care of personal cleanliness, and their abstention from blood sacrifices, might make us think that the Essenes were very different from other Israelites.

In reality, they were (although following their own particular course) true Jews, faithful to the fundamental beliefs of Judaism, strict observers of the Law, and especially of the Sabbatarian precepts, great readers of the Holy Books, who sent their offerings regularly to the Temple at Jerusalem. If Emil Schürer, the Protestant scholar, goes too far in calling them “decided Pharisees” (for their faith seems rather to have turned towards the immortality of the soul than to the resurrection of the body), if certain characteristics seem to betray foreign origin and discipline (possibly Greek or Pythagorean, more probably Iranian), the Essenes remain for all essentials within the religious body of Israel. In any case, nothing could differ more from primitive Christianity, which could at the most see in them an example, when for some time it put into practice at Jerusalem the common holding of property. In other respects, that is to say in almost all its characteristics (its rigid legalism, its scrupulous attention to corporal and saving purifications, its moral rigorism extending normally to prohibition of marriage, and its aloofness from all that was sinful, common or profane), the Essene Order was absolutely contrary to the spirit and the habits of Jesus. It could be more justly asked whether certain of the Master’s criticisms were not aimed at the refinements and exclusiveness of the Essenes...

Let us come to the great parties, which were opponents and rivals on many points, but which a common interest could partially draw together and unite against Jesus: the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The distant origin of these sects has been sought for in their conflicting tendencies, the one rigidly Jewish, the other more open to foreign influences, which divided the Jewish leaders throughout the period which followed the return from exile in the middle of the sixth century B.C.

At first the severe tendency, closed to all compromise, which was favoured by the leaders of the migration, Esdras and Nehemias (Ezra and Nehemiah), and by the fact that the greater number of the social leaders of the people had remained in Mesopotamia, undoubtedly reigned supreme. It is the period of the Soferim, i.e., the commentators on the book par excellence, the Sefer-ha-torah (Book of the Law). Promulgated again among this group of devout Jews, the Law became truly the form of this people, in the Aristotelian sense of the word, the intimate regulator of its life, its specific principle of order and of hierarchy. In it was sought every rule for public and private organisation, every solution for the extremely complex cases which were raised by the return to Judea of the caravans from Persia, coming as they were amongst a scattered population of pagan or semi-pagan occupiers. From this necessity there sprang the important occupation of the scribe, the commentator on the sole rule of God. Sprung generally from modest origins, often laymen, though not always (Esdras himself was of the sacerdotal caste), the scribes favoured with all their power whatever tended to separate Israel from the people amongst whom they lived, with the object of restoring an autonomous state. Mixed marriages, therefore, intercourse with pagans or the semi-Jews of Samaria, and anything approaching idolatry, were zealously denounced. On the other hand, some of the most important of the priests who had returned from exile, pastors and leaders of the people in this theocracy in which the two powers were confounded, remained in contact with the Persian authorities, and even went so far as to unite themselves in marriage with influential families not of pure Jewish race.

Such was the case for example, of the high priest Eliasib: he was united to the family of Tobias (or Tobiah) the Ammonite, and one of his grandsons, the son of Joiada (or Jehoiada) (and therefore the son and grandson of high priests) married a daughter of Sanaballat the Horonite. And Tobias and Sanaballat, sworn enemies of Nehemias, opposed with all their might the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem undertaken by the latter.

We can see in these two tendencies, the one aristocratic and liberal, represented by the high sacerdotal caste, and the other more humble and rigidly closed to all foreign influence, an anticipation of the future.

Yet the origin of the parties of the Sadducees and Pharisees does not go back so far; it must be sought in the obscure period which separates the end of the era of the scribes and the death of Simon the Just from the brutal attempt of Antiochus Epiphanes to Hellenize the country (roughly 270-175 B.C.).

Then was completely shattered the unity of the sacerdotal and learned oligarchy, the legendary "Great Synagogue" of later Jewish tradition, which maintained on the whole for two centuries, despite varying fortunes, a certain general understanding amongst those faithful to the Law. Whatever form that assembly may have had (and we must not be too quick to see in it the features of the future Sanhedrin), it united the double authority of the great priestly families and the doctors (priests or laymen) who gave the people from day to day the interpretation of the Law. The members of the first group, who were the more rigid the more liberty they took for themselves, and were satisfied with a literalism which cut short all casuistical discussion, stood theoretically, if not practically, for the written Law without gloss. The others strove to give to the sacred texts a flexibility which would enable them to be adapted to a change of circumstances; this they sought to do by the double means of a subtle exegesis of the letter of the law, and a traditional interpretation, a kind of oral law, which later took form in the Mishna. It was probably on that point that the separation took place.

From whichever side the initiative came, the somewhat ill-sounding name of the 'Separated' ('peruchim', Pharisees) was applied to those who abandoned the high authorities of the Temple. Thus it was indicated that they formed a body apart and were seceders. They themselves did not call themselves by this name, but preferred that of 'haberim' (colleagues, companions, fellow-workers). But the other name prevailed, and it is as Pharisees that all ancient tradition knew them. In contradistinction to them, and before political circumstances led them to reintroduce certain Pharisees into the supreme council of the nation, the representatives of the priestly caste were called or called themselves the sons of Sadoc (Zadoc) (Sadducees), in allusion no doubt to a prince of the priests of the time of David and Solomon, Sadoc, whose real or fictitious descendants were regarded as the sacerdotal family par excellence.

Each party was wedded to its own opinions, while the mass of the people, naturally closer to the Pharisees, oscillated between currents which sometimes came near to intermingling, only speedily to resume their separate and often antagonistic courses. The Sadducees were ambitious, and consequently opportunist, very tolerant in the matter of alliances, understandings, and compromises with pagans and half-Jews, hard towards the poorer people; they were unscrupulous in increasing their personal fortunes from the enormous contributions of money and other offerings which flowed into the Temple from all parts of the Holy Land and from the Dispersion, but they professed an unswerving conservatism in matters of the Law. They reduced the whole of Revelation, at least all that was of absolute authority, to the five books of Moses, rejecting or disputing, as illegitimate or imaginary, more recently developed beliefs on the resurrection of the body, the world of spirits, and the Messianic Kingdom. The Law alone, and in its strict letter, was of weight with them. It was less as priests (many of the priests were Pharisees) than as aristocrats and leaders of a dominant faction, as interpreters of Revelation and of the Law, that this minority, full of haughtiness towards the lowly, and bending only to the great, stood in opposition to the Pharisees. These men, well-born and

endowed with worldly goods, looked with jealousy on the progress of a caste formed outside themselves, and criticised their adversaries as innovators and rebels. They deplored the growing prestige brought to the Pharisees by their zeal, their knowledge, and their rigorism. They found these casuists an obstacle and an embarrassment.

But we should not imagine that the whole Sadducean party was of the type stigmatised by the Talmud in Section 57A of the Pesachim in the Mishna:

“House of Boethus? Woe is me!

Woe is me by reason of their bludgeons.

House of Annas? Woe is me!

Woe is me by reason of their viperish hissings.

House of Cantharos? Woe is me!

Woe is me by reason of their calumnies.

House of Ismael, sons of Phabi? Woe is me!

Woe is me by reason of their clenched hands.

They are high priests, their sons are treasurers, their sons-in-law are inspectors of the Temple, and their footmen belabour the people with clubs.”

We must not judge the whole party by the radically exclusive members, and the insolently secular attitude of the families which monopolised the office of high priest. Scholars are inclined to see in the Ecclesiasticus of Jesus the son of Sirach a book that is representative of the primitive Sadducees; from this we should have to conclude that the sect had a theology of its own, though very conservative in nature, and that it treated the prophets with honour, if it did not put them on a level with the five books of the Law...

As opposed to the Essenes, dreamers absorbed in moral and ritual matters, and the Sadducees, aristocrats by race and politicians by instinct, the “Companions” (haberim), the “Devout” (chasideim) who soon came to be called the Pharisees and have remained such for us — formed a party which was before all things religious and national, a kind of Holy League, the Jewish party pure and simple. Their whole aim was in the first place to purge the people of God who had returned to the Promised Land, from foreign infiltrations and influence, and then to preserve them from the aggressive, cunning and sometimes (as in the time of the Seleucids) violent propaganda of surrounding paganism. In this defence of the Jewish spirit and customs, the essential wall or, to use a metaphor dear to the rabbis, the protecting hedge of Yahweh’s vine, was the Law of Moses. Recruited from all classes of society, including the most humble, without distinction of priests and laity, and counting among their number the majority of the intellectuals, scribes and doctors, the Pharisees were thus before all, the men of the Law: its interpreters, its avengers, and at need its martyrs. St. Paul, when he wishes to express his passionate attachment to the Law, is content to say: “A Hebrew of the Hebrews. According to the law, a Pharisee” (Philippians 3:5). In saying that, he says all.

In their absolute trust in the Torah, some inclined to make it independent, to some extent, even of God. The collection called the Mishna of Tannaim ‘The Sentences of the Fathers’, which represents Pharisaism in its most authentic aspect, and gives us the best of it for the period reaching from the first century B.C. to the end of the second century A.D., practically identifies the scribe with the saint: knowledge of the Law sanctifies after the manner of a sacrament. Rabbi Meir (about 135) said: “Everyone who gives himself to the study of the Torah for its own sake is worthy of every good. What is more, the whole world and its fulness is not worth more than he.”

In these thoroughly religious pages God is scarcely named. The Law takes up all the space, because, for a Pharisee, it virtually signifies the whole of divine truth, so far as it is accessible to the human mind. And they had for it the respect that is due to God: the most innocent distraction during the study of the Torah is culpable, as being one which interrupts a prayer.

Rabbi Jacob (who died in 175) said in: Pirkei Avot 3:7 “If a man walks about while studying [the Torah] and interrupts his study to say “How beautiful is that tree”, or “How beautiful is that wild spot!” then Scripture holds such words to be a sin which makes his soul guilty.”

In this way the Pharisee drew from the Law the rules for the whole conduct of his life, private and public. This last fact, which endowed the scribe with the very power of the State, was bound to lead to conflicts with the political powers. And in fact neither the Hasmonaean princes from the time of John Hyrcanus, excluding the personal reign of the old Queen Alexandra (78-69 B.C.), nor the Idumaeans accepted this tutelage. But whether favoured or suspected, sometimes even persecuted, the ‘Separated’ never ceased to be feared by reason of their power with the people. This power, which Josephus states, with obvious exaggeration, to have been practically unlimited, was certainly great and often preponderant. It was based in great part on the manner in which the Pharisees had decentralised and in a certain sense laicised and democratised the religion of Israel. The Temple remained its centre; the hegemony of the great priestly families, and especially of the high priest, continued to be exercised; but even there, in the Temple, the Pharisees had their influence, and had caused daily prayers to be established, and instituted a sort of delegation of pious laity representing the people of Israel at the daily sacrifice. Outside the Temple, by means of the synagogue and worship in the home, they had severed the line which bound the whole religion of the people to the Temple. The rabbi and the father of the family tended more and more to supplant the Levite and the priest. Finally, in matters casuistical and the application of the Law to daily life by means of subtle exegeses and traditional interpretation, a sort of unwritten Law commenting upon the written one — in these matters the Pharisees were supreme, and for an Israelite desirous of devoutly fulfilling his duties, indispensable. Women especially (as Josephus noted) looked upon them as their oracle.

Less dependent than the chosen priesthood on political vicissitudes, less entangled than the Zealots in militant xenophobia, the bulk of the Pharisees represented, from the time of the Maccabees (Machabees) to the fall of Jerusalem, the kernel of Israel, the heart of Judaism. This they did by their ardour in observing, imposing and explaining the Law, by their minute knowledge, which though literal and rigid was yet real, by the hold which their puritanism gave them over the people, and by the religious feeling which made them favour the more purified and spiritual doctrines.

So, too, it was through the ‘Separated’ that the Jewish people survived the appalling catastrophes of the first and second centuries. The barriers established, or re-erected, around the race; the traditions jealously maintained within these closed groups; the supple resistance which gave way only in order to obtain; the political opportunism which bowed to every de facto government to snatch from each of them toleration and the maximum of possible concessions; the enormous mass of sayings, prescriptions, decisions, and recollections which crystallised into the two Talmuds: all these are the work of the Pharisees. And it is sufficient to read the Gospels to see the preponderant part played by them in the opposition encountered by Christ.

This very opposition makes impartiality more difficult for the Christian historian towards the principal enemies of Jesus. But he himself has plainly taught us that truth alone delivers. And while proving that they became by their blind obstinacy and the malice of their leaders the enemies of the

Kingdom of God, we willingly acknowledge that the Pharisees played a useful and sometimes a glorious part during the century and a half which preceded our era. Those who spied upon Jesus were the descendants, buried in the formalism of the Law, and sometimes poisoned by sterile pride, of the great men who had freed Israel from the yoke of the Gentiles at the price of their blood. All that was best in the literature which preceded the advent of Christ bore as a rule the imprint of the beliefs, the hopes, and the passions which were theirs. And even in the time of the Saviour, an impressive minority did not sin against the light.

In this matter the Acts of the Apostles are very helpful in completing the testimony borne by the Gospels. They show us in the youthful Church a great number of recruits from the party of the Pharisees; beginning with St. Paul. They were not the most unimportant.

In conclusion we must note that, while stigmatizing their merciless literalism, their complacent casuistry and their pride, Jesus aimed much more at the vices of conduct, the abuse of holy things, the canonization of human tradition, the ill-inspired zeal of the 'Separated', than at their doctrinal position. On the characteristic questions of the resurrection of the body, the existence and the action of spiritual forces, the Master was in agreement with them. Nor did he disdain to employ (though moderately) their exegetical methods. He acknowledged their relative authority in the domain of the interpretation of the Law: "The Scribes and Pharisees have sat on the chair of Moses. All things therefore whatsoever they say to you, observe and do: but according to their works do ye not" (Matthew: 23:2-3).
