

Sects and Parties of Jews

from “The Life and Epistles of St. Paul” by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, Chapter 2.

The Sadducees and Pharisees are frequently mentioned in the New Testament, and we are there informed of the tenets of these two prevailing parties. The belief in a future state may be said to have been an open question among the Jews, when our Lord appeared and “brought life and immortality to light.” We find the **Sadducees** established in the highest office of the priesthood, and possessed of the greatest powers in the Sanhedrin; and yet they did not believe in any future state, nor in any spiritual existence independent of the body. The Sadducees said that there was “no resurrection, neither angel nor spirit.” (Acts 23:8; Matt. 22:23,24) They do not appear to have held doctrines which are commonly called licentious or immoral. On the contrary, they adhered strictly to the moral tenets of the Law, as opposed to its more formal technicalities. They did not overload the Sacred books with traditions, or encumber the duties of life with a multitude of minute observances. They were the disciples of reason without enthusiasm – they made few proselytes – their numbers were not great, and they were confined principally to the richer members of their nation.

The **Pharisees** were the enthusiasts of later Judaism. They “compassed sea and land to make one proselyte.” Their power and influence with the mass of the people was immense. The loss of the national independence of the Jews – the gradual extinction of their political life, directly by the Romans, and indirectly by the family of Herod, caused their feelings to really round the Law and their religion as the only center of unity which now remained to them.

Those, therefore, who gave their energies to the interpretation and exposition of the Law, not curtailing any of the doctrines which were virtually contained in it and which had been revealed with more or less clearness, but rather accumulating articles of faith, and multiplying the requirements of devotion – who themselves practiced a severe and

ostentatious religion, being liberal in almsgiving, fasting frequently, making long prayers, and carrying casuistic distinctions into the smallest details of conduct – who consecrated, moreover, their best zeal and exertions to the spread of the fame of Judaism, and to the increase of the nation’s power in the only way which was not practicable – could not fail to command the reverence of great numbers of the people.

It was no longer possible to fortify Jerusalem against the heathen; but the Law could be fortified like an impregnable city. The place of the brave is on the walls and in the front of the battle; and the hopes of the nation rested on those who defended the sacred outworks, and made successful inroads on the territories of the Gentiles.

Such were the Pharisees. And now, before proceeding to other features of Judaism and their relation to the church, we can hardly help glancing at St. Paul. He was “a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee,” (Acts 23:6), and he was educated by Gamaliel, (Acts 22:3), “a Pharisee”. (Acts 5:34) Both his father and his teacher belonged to this sect. And on three distinct occasions he tells us that he himself was a member of it.

Once when at his trial, before a mixed assembly of Pharisees and Sadducees, the words just quoted were spoken, and his connection with the Pharisees asserted with such effect that the feelings of this popular party were immediately enlisted on his side. “And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the multitude was divided ... And there arose a great cry; and the Scribes that were of the Pharisees’ part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man.” (Acts 23)

The second time was when, on a calmer occasion, he was pleading before Agrippa, and said to the king in the presence of Festus: “The Jews knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straightest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.” (Acts 26) And once more, when writing from Rome to the Philippians, he gives force to

his argument against the Judaizers, by telling them that if any other man thought he had whereof he might trust in the flesh, he himself had more: "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the Law, a Pharisee." (Phil. 3:4). And not only was he himself a Pharisee, but his father also. He was "a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee." This short sentence sums up nearly all we know of St. Paul's parents. If we think of his earliest life, we are to conceive of him as born in a Pharisaic family, and as brought up from his infancy in the "straightest sect of the Jews' religion."

His childhood was nurtured in the strictest belief. The stories of the Old Testament, the angelic appearances, the prophetic visions, to him were literally true. The needed no Sadducean explanation. The world of spirits was a reality to him. The resurrection of the dead was an article of his faith. And to exhort him to the practices of religion, he had before him the example of his father, praying and walking with broad phylacteries, scrupulous and exact in his legal observances. He had, moreover, as it seems, the memory and tradition of ancestral piety; for he tells us in one of his latest letters (2 Tim. 1:3) that he served God "from his forefathers."

All influences combined to make him "more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of his fathers," (Gal. 1:14) and "touching the righteousness which is in the Law, blameless." (Phil. 3:6) Everything tended to prepare him to be an eminent member of that theological party, to which so many of the Jews were looking for the preservation of their national life, and the extension of their national creed.

But in this mention of the Pharisees and Sadducees we are far from exhausting the subject of Jewish divisions, and far less from enumerating all those phases of opinion which must have had some connection with the growth of rising Christianity and all those elements which may have contributed to form the character of the apostle of the heathen. There was a sect in Judea which is not mentioned in the Scriptures but which must have acquired considerable influence in the time of the apostles, as may be inferred from the space devoted to it by Josephus and Philo. These were the **Essenes**, who retired from theological and political distractions of Jerusalem and the larger towns, and founded peaceful communities in the desert or in villages, where their life was spent in contemplation and in the practices of ascetic piety. It has been suggested that John the Baptist was one of them. There is no proof that this was the case, but we need

not doubt that they did represent religious cravings which Christianity satisfied.

Another party was that of the **Zealots**, who were as politically fanatical as the Essenes were religiously contemplative, and whose zeal was kindled with the burning desire to throw off the Roman yoke from the neck of Israel. Very different from them were the Herodians, twice mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 3:6; Matt 22:16; see Mark 12:13), who held that the hopes of Judaism rested on the Herods, and who almost looked to that family for the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah. And if we were simply enumerating the divisions and describing the sects of the Jews, it would be necessary to mention the **Therapeutae**, a widely spread community in Egypt, who lived even in great seclusion that the Essenes in Judea. The **Samaritans** also would require our attention. But we must turn from these sects and parties to a wider division, which arose from the dispersion of the Hebrew people, to which some space has been devoted in the preceding chapter.

Hellenists and Arameans

We have seen that early colonies of the Jews were settled in Babylonia and Mesopotamia. Their connection with their brethren in Judea was continually maintained; and they were bound to them by the link of a common language. The Jews of Palestine and Syria, with those who lived on the Tigris and Euphrates, interpreted the Scriptures through the Targums or Chaldean paraphrases, and spoke kindred dialects of the language of Aram; and hence they were called Aramean Jews.

We have also had occasion to notice that other dispersion of the nation through those countries where Greek was spoken. Their settlements began with Alexander's conquests and were continued under the successors of those who partitioned his empire. Alexandria was their capital. They use the Septuagint translation of the Bible, and they were commonly called **Hellenists**, or Jews of the Grecian speech.

The mere difference of language would account in some degree for the mutual dislike with which we know that these two sections of the Jewish race regarded one another. We were all aware how closely the use of a hereditary dialect is bound up with the warmest feelings of the heart. And in this case the Aramean language was the sacred tongue of Palestine. It is true that the tradition of the language of the Jews had been broken, as the continuity of their political life had been rudely interrupted. The

Hebrew of the time of Christ was not the oldest Hebrew of the Israelites; but it was a kindred dialect, and old enough to command a reverent affections. Though not the language of Moses and David, it was that of Ezra and Nehemiah. And it is not unnatural that the **Arameans** should have revolted from the speech of the Greek idolaters and the tyrant Antiochus, a speech which they associated moreover with innovating doctrines and dangerous speculations.

For the division went deeper than a mere superficial diversity of speech. It was not only a division, like the modern one of German and Spanish Jews, where those who hold substantially the same doctrines have accidentally been led to speak different languages. But there was diversity of religious views and opinions. This is not the place for examining that system of mystic interpretation called the Kabbala, and for determining how far its origin might be due to Alexandria or to Babylon. It is enough to say, generally, that in the Aramean theology, Oriental elements prevailed rather than Greek, and that the subject of Babylonian influences has more connection with the life of St. Peter than that of St. Paul.

The Hellenists, on the other hand, or Jews who spoke Greek, who lived in Greek countries, and were influenced by Greek civilization, are associated in the closest manner with the Apostle of the Gentiles. They are more than once mentioned in the Acts, where our English translation names them "Grecians" to distinguish them from the heather or proselyte "Greeks." Alexandria was the metropolis of their theology. Philo was their great representative. He was an old man when St. Paul was in his maturity; his writings were probably known to the apostles; and they have descended with the inspired Epistles to our own day. The work of the learned Hellenists may be briefly described as this – to accommodate Jewish doctrines to the mind of the Greeks, and to make the Greek language express the mind of the Jews. The Hebrew principles were "disengaged as much as possible from local and national conditions, and presented in a form adapted to the Hellenic world."

All this was hateful to the Arameans. The men of the East rose up against those of the West. The Greek learning was not more repugnant to the Roman Cato than it was to the strict Hebrews. They had a saying, "Cursed by he who teaches his son the learning of the Greeks." We could imagine them using the words of the prophet Joel (3:6), "The children of Judah and the children of Jerusalem have

ye sold unto the Grecians, that ye might remove them from their border," and we cannot be surprised that even in the deep peace and charity of the Church's earliest days, this inveterate division reappeared, and that "when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews." (Acts 6:1)

It would be an interesting subject of inquiry to ascertain in what proportions these two parties were distributed in the different countries where the Jews were dispersed, in what places they came into the strongest collision, and how far they were fused and united together. In the city of Alexandria, the emporium of Greek commerce from the time of its foundation, where, since the earliest Ptolemies, literature, philosophy, and criticism had never ceased to excite the utmost intellectual activity, where the Septuagint translation of the Scripture had been made, and where a Jewish temple and ceremonial worship had been established in rivalry to that in Jerusalem, there is no doubt that the Hellenistic element largely prevailed. But although (strictly speaking) the –Alexandrian Jews were nearly all Hellenites, it does not follow that they were all Hellenizers. In other words, although their speech and the Scriptures were Greek, the theological views of many among them undoubtedly remained Hebrew.

There must have been many who were attached to the traditions of Palestine, and who looked suspiciously on their more speculative brethren; and we have no difficulty in recognizing the picture presented in a pleasing German fiction, which describes the debates and struggles of the two tendencies in this city, to be very correct. In Palestine itself, we have every reason to believe that the native population was entirely Aramean, though there was no lack of Hellenistic synagogues (see Acts 6:9) in Jerusalem, which at the seasons of the festivals would be crowded with foreign pilgrims, and become the scene of animated discussions. Syria was connected by the link of language with Palestine and Babylonia; but Antioch, its metropolis, commercially and politically, resembled Alexandria; and it is probable that, when Barnabas and Saul were establishing the great Christian community in that city, the majority of the Jews were "Grecians" rather than "Hebrews." In Asia Minor we should at first sight be tempted to imagine that the Grecian tendency would predominate; but when we find that Antiochus brought Babylonian Jews into Lydia and Phrygia, we must not make too confident a conclusion in this direction. We have ground for imagining that many Israelitish families in the re-

mote districts (possibly that of Timothy at Lystra) may have cherished the forms of the traditional faith of the eastern Jews, and lived uninfluenced by Hellenistic novelties.

The residents in maritime and commercial towns would not be strangers to the western developments of religious doctrines; and when Apollos came from Alexandria to Ephesus (Acts 18:24), he would find himself in a theological atmosphere not very different from that of his native city. Tarsus in Cilicia will naturally be included under the same class of cities of the West, by those who remember Strabo's assertion that in literature and philosophy its fame exceeded that of Athens and Alexandria. At the same time, we cannot be sure that the very celebrity of its heathen schools might not induce the families of Jewish residents to retire all the more strictly into a religious Hebrew seclusion.

That such a seclusion of their family from Gentile influences was maintained by the parents of St. Paul is highly probable. We have no means of knowing how long they themselves, or their ancestors, had been Jews of the dispersion. A tradition is mentioned by Jerome that they came originally from Giscala, a town in Galilee, when it was stormed by the Romans. The story involves an anachronism and contradicts the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 22:3). Yet it need not be entirely disregarded, especially when we find St. Paul speaking of himself as "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" and when we remember that the word "Hebrew" is used for an Aramaic Jew, as opposed to a "Grecian" or "Hellenist." Nor is it unlikely in itself that before they settled in Tarsus, the family had belonged to the Eastern dispersion, or to the Jews of Palestine. But, however this may be, St. Paul himself must be called a Hellenist; because the language of his infancy was that idiom of the Grecian Jews in which all his letters were written. Though, in conformity with the strong feeling of the Jews of all times, he might learn his earliest sentences from the Scripture in Hebrew, yet he was familiar with the Septuagint translation at an early age.

It is observed that when he quotes from the Old Testament, his quotations are from that version/ and that, not only when he cites its very words,

but when (as if often the case) he quotes it from memory. Considering the accurate knowledge of the original Hebrew which he must have acquired under Gamaliel at Jerusalem, it has been inferred that this can only arise from his having been thoroughly imbued at an earlier period with the Hellenistic scriptures. The readiness, too, with which he expressed himself in Greek, even before such an audience as that upon the Areopagus at Athens, shows a command of the language which a Jew would not, in all probability, have attained, had not Greek been the familiar speech of his childhood.

But still the vernacular Hebrew of Palestine would not have been a foreign tongue to the infant Saul; on the contrary, he may have heard it spoken almost as often as the Greek. For no doubt his parents, proud of their Jewish origin, and living comparatively near to Palestine, would retain the power of conversing with their friends from there in the ancient speech.. Mercantile connections from the Syrian coast would be frequently arriving, whose discourse would be in Aramaic; and in all probability there were kinsfolk still settled in Judea, as we afterwards find the nephew of St. Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 23:16).

We may compare the situation of such a family (so far as concerns heir language) to that of the French Huguenots who settles in London after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. These French families, though they soon learned to use the English as the medium of the common intercourse and the language of their household, yet, for several generations, spoke French with equal familiarity and greater affection.

Moreover, it may be considered as certain that the family of St. Paul, though Hellenistic in speech, were no Hellenizers in theology; they were not at all inclined to adopt Greek habits or Greek opinions. The manner in which St. Paul speaks of himself, his father, and his ancestors, implies the most uncontaminated hereditary Judaism. "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I> Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I." (2 Cor. 11:22) "A Pharisee" and "the son of a Pharisee." "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews."