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Excerpt
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INTRODUCTION

The problems of identifying the Pharisees

There are two reasons why it is now virtually (perhaps totally) impossible to write an adequate history of the Pharisees: the first is that there is far too little evidence; and the second, that there is far too much. On the one hand, surprisingly little direct information about the Pharisees has survived: from this point of view alone, a detailed account of the Pharisees is not possible.¹ Yet on the other hand, a number of sources do in fact refer to a group or sect known, in English transliteration, as the Pharisees – and for many people, the most familiar of the references are those in the Gospels. But since the Pharisees appear, in both Christian and Jewish sources, as a part of a very complex history, it follows that the Pharisees cannot be studied in isolation, but only as a part of the history of the whole Jewish people in the period in question – principally, the period of the so-called second commonwealth (from the restoration after the Exile to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.), and of the following hundred years. Furthermore, it is clear that in some sense the Pharisees were related to rabbinic Judaism as its predecessors, and from *this* point of view, a knowledge of the formation of rabbinic Judaism is necessary for any serious understanding of the Pharisees; and it is here that the problem of too much evidence becomes formidable, since rabbinic sources are extensive, and are not always easy to understand. But even a brief acquaintance with the rabbinic sources makes it clear that the sense in which the Pharisees were the predecessors of the rabbis is by no means simple or direct. Nothing could be more misleading than to refer to the Pharisees without further qualification as the predecessors of the rabbis, for the fact remains that ‘Pharisees’ are attacked in rabbinic sources as vigorously as ‘Pharisees’ are attacked in the Gospels, and often for similar reasons. There is thus an initial problem in identifying the

¹ So, e.g., E. Rivkin, ‘Pharisaism and the Crisis of the Individual in the Greco-Roman World’, *J.Q.R.* LXI, 1970, 27–53: ‘The history of Pharisaism is largely non-recoverable because of the nature of the sources’ (p. 31, n. 4).

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references to 'Pharisees' in the different sources, and in determining whether, in fact, they refer to the same group or groups.

The initial problem can be stated quite simply. The Greek language sources (particularly Josephus and the N.T.) refer to a group known as *pharisaioi*, the Semitic language sources (particularly the rabbinic sources) refer to identifiable groups of people known as *perushim*. Both *pharisaioi* and *perushim* can legitimately, though loosely, be transliterated as 'Pharisees'. But the accounts given of the *pharisaioi* in Josephus and of the *perushim* in the rabbinic sources differ so much that the question has frequently been raised whether the terms *pharisaioi* and *perushim* refer to the same group, or whether *perushim* refers to a group, or party, at all.

Josephus gave surprisingly little information about the Pharisaioi, considering that he had, according to his own account, governed his life by the rule of the Pharisaioi, at least for some time (I.22). There are three general descriptions of the Pharisaioi (I.1, I.12 (12ff.), I.18 (162f.)), but no detailed account of their organisation or method, nor is their name explained; nor, for that matter, is there any account of when or how the Pharisaioi emerged: the reference in I.1 is imprecise, though the 'time' referred to is, in the context, c. 144 B.C.E., since Josephus inserted the reference after his account of Jonathan's negotiations with Rome and Sparta (I Macc. xii.1-23). Apart from the general descriptions, Josephus' portrayal of the Pharisaioi is incidental; and in the incidents described they emerge as a coherent group, able to remain in being even when excluded by the prevailing authorities from direct participation in government (as, for example, by John Hyrcanus (I.2), or by Alexander Jannaeus (I.3 and I.4)). At times, nevertheless, they were in favour, as under Salome Alexandra (I.4, and the further references), and they were in any case able to make their voice heard, either because of their ability (I.6 (172, 176); I.12 (15); I.19 (411); I.20 (159)) or because of their influence with the people (I.2 (288, 298); I.4 (401); I.12 (15)). It is clear from Josephus that a fundamental and differentiating characteristic was their adherence to the Law together with a procedure of traditional interpretation which established a relation between the Law as originally given and the customary application of it by the people. Josephus frequently emphasised the sacrosanct nature of the Law, to which nothing should be added or removed (I.21; cf. also I.13), and he regarded innovation as a major cause of the revolt against Rome (e.g., I.12 (9); I.19 (414)). The genius of

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the Pharisaioi lay in their ability to hold together customary tradition and the given Law; whereas it is clear that Josephus regarded the Sadducees as introducing a conflict between the literal Law as given and the customary interpretation which had arisen through succeeding generations.

There would be little point summarising, in this essay, what Josephus wrote about the Pharisaioi, since the material is included in the Translations. However, since the excerpts follow the order in which they appear in Josephus, it may be helpful to offer a more schematic guide for those who wish to read the material as a whole:

General descriptions of Jewish groups, including the Pharisaioi:

1.1; 1.12; 1.18; see also 1.2 (297f.)

Incidents, in chronological order:

- a. the break with John Hyrcanus: 1.2
- b. the break with Alexander Jannaeus: 1.3
- c. the restoration under Salome: 1.4; 1.14
- d. (a reference to the appointment of Hyrcanus: 1.5)
- e. the opposition of Samaias/Pollion to Herod when young: 1.6 (172ff.); cf. 1.15
- f. Samaias and Pollion favoured by Herod: 1.7
- g. Herod's oath of loyalty refused by the Pharisaioi: 1.9
- h. their influence with Pheroras' wife and the women of the court: 1.10; 1.16
- i. the cutting down of the golden eagle above the Temple gate: 1.11; 1.17
- j. Saddok the Pharisee assists the opposition to Quirinius: 1.12; cf. 1.18
- k. their counsel at the approach of the revolt against Rome: 1.19
- l. the counsel of Gorion b. Joseph and Simeon b. Gamaliel (cf. 1.24 (191)): 1.20
- m. Josephus consults the *protoi Pharisaioi* during the Revolt: 1.23

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n. Pharisaioi are among those who investigate Josephus during the Revolt: 1.24

Additional passages which illustrate other points:

1.13; 1.14: the high estimate of the Law in Josephus

1.22: his own association with the Pharisaioi

1.8: a passage to which reference is sometimes made as a possible explanation of the origin of the Boethusians

1.5: an illustration of the use of *synhedria* as a general term

The account of the Pharisaioi in Josephus will be seen, from this material, to be reasonably consistent. Allowances no doubt have to be made for Josephus' partiality, and for his purposes in writing Jewish histories at all, but the fact remains that there is nothing absurdly implausible in his account, brief and incidental as it is. But when one turns to the Semitic sources, in relation to Josephus, the problems of interpretation become very great. The basic problem can be stated, once more, quite simply: those whom Josephus referred to as Pharisaioi are to some extent linked with, or related to, those whom the later rabbis regarded as their own legitimate predecessors. But the rabbis scarcely ever referred to their predecessors as *perushim* (a possible, though interpretative, Semitic way of expressing the Greek *pharisaioi*); they referred to them by many names, but particularly, in their role as transmitters and interpreters of Torah, as Ḥakamim (the Wise, or the Sages). Almost without exception, they do not refer to their predecessors as *perushim*; on the contrary (as has already been observed), the rabbinic sources contain attacks directed *against perushim* – attacks which are almost as violent as the attacks on the Pharisaioi in the Gospels. What, if any, is the connection between the Pharisaioi of Josephus and the *perushim* of the rabbinic sources?

An obvious answer is to say that there is no connection at all. The root *prsh* can convey a meaning of 'separation', and there are certainly instances of this in the rabbinic sources (as illustrated on pp. 6f., 14). On this argument, the word *perushim* (or in the singular *parush*) is a way of referring to those who separate themselves in some way – either, for example, in extreme holiness, or in schism from the main community. The word *perushim* cannot, on this view be taken to mean 'Pharisees' as such. Since it is used to describe

'separatists', it *may* on occasion refer to those whom Josephus described as Pharisaioi, but there should be no expectation that this will be the case in every instance of the word *perushim*. Indeed, the word may not necessarily refer to an organised party or group at all, but simply to those who in some way separate themselves. The uses of *parush* and *perushim* must be tested on each occasion to determine their reference; they cannot, without further question, be assumed to supply information about the Pharisaioi.¹

There is much strength in this argument, not least because, as has been stated already, the later rabbis did not refer to their own predecessors as *perushim*; among many different names, principally Ḥakamim, the name *perushim* scarcely ever occurs. Furthermore, there is no real doubt that the Pharisaioi of Josephus are related to the Ḥakamim. In addition to the general descriptions of Josephus, which are reasonably consistent with what is known of the Ḥakamim, particular incidents correlate in Josephus and in the rabbinic sources. Here, of course, it must be borne in mind that specific historical reference, for its own sake, is extremely rare in most rabbinic works, and that details are often brief and imprecise. Even when incidents are referred to in rabbinic works which can also be

¹ See the further, and highly important, article by Rivkin, 'Defining the Pharisees: the Tannaitic Sources', *H.U.C.A.* XL, 1969, 205–49. In this article, an attempt is made to establish a methodology for defining the Pharisees in the Tannaitic sources. Rivkin suggested two controls: first, the passages which refer to Pharisees (*prushim*) collectively in juxtaposition and opposition to the Sadducees; these 'should be collated and the definition that they yield extracted' (p. 208). Second, the passages 'where the term *prushim* is conceded by scholars to mean something other than Pharisees' (p. 208); these also should be collated. The passages mentioning *prushim* which do not fall into the two control categories should then be examined without reference to the controls to see what information they reveal. This should then be compared with the control passages to see where identity or distinction obtains. The first control definition of the Pharisees can thus be extended, and the more usual way of defining the Pharisees from Josephus and the N.T. (often without much reference to the rabbinic sources) can itself be controlled and checked. The method proposed by Rivkin clearly cannot be absolute, because it cannot eliminate the need for ordinary historical judgement in those cases where identity or distinction is insufficiently precise, nor can it establish in *itself* that group uses of *prushim* refer to the same group. But its importance lies in its attempt to discriminate among different uses of *prushim*. The same general point of view, that discrimination is needed, is followed in this Introduction.

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found in Josephus, the main interest of the rabbinic recorder is likely to have been explanatory or exemplary; that is to say, his purpose is likely to have been to explain or exemplify a particular interpretation of Torah, or to illustrate when it originated, or how it came about. For this reason, stories occur in different places in rabbinic works with the names of participants changed or inverted, or with circumstantial details altered. But the critical point is that the substance, or purpose, of the narrative may well persist unchanged, even though the circumstantial details, or the names, are insecure. This does not mean that the substance of a narrative can automatically be assumed to go back to the original moment; it *does* mean that once a narrative emerged to exemplify a particular point, or points, it is likely to have persisted for as long as those points needed exemplifying in that particular way – which may, in fact, be down to the present day. Obviously, it is rash to generalise; but it is equally rash to assume that if a conflict of detail exists between Josephus and a rabbinic source, the rabbinic source is *wholly* to be discounted (or, for that matter, that Josephus is wholly to be discounted). Yet even with these necessary reservations in mind, it is sufficiently clear that the Pharisaioi in Josephus do, at least to some extent, overlap with the Ḥakamim.

In view of the relation between the Ḥakamim and the Pharisaioi, and of the fact that the later rabbis did not, in general, refer to their predecessors as *perushim*, there is an obvious strength in the argument that *perushim* are not to be confused or identified with the Pharisaioi. If the Pharisaioi are to be cross-identified, it should be with the Ḥakamim, and even then cautiously: there is no guarantee of the absolute accuracy of Josephus' use of Pharisaioi at every point. So on this argument, the term *perushim* does not refer to the Pharisaioi of Josephus, but to various individuals or groups who separated themselves in some manner. If the argument is examined, the first and most obvious point in its favour is the fact that there is not the slightest doubt that the root *prsh* carries, in many instances, a meaning of separation. A basic example occurs in 6.7; in 4.23 it refers to the separation of tithe; and in 5.4 to a separation of people. It is frequently used to describe separation from a community – not necessarily Israel: in 2.34 and 3.17 it refers to separation from the Samaritans; in 6.6 from the daughters of Israel. A particularly good example of this usage occurs in 4.10, since here both the verb and the noun (*perushim*) are used; and it is

quite clear that the word *perushim* is used by a rabbi of those who detached themselves from the Ḥakamim, not of the predecessors of the rabbis! The contrast between Ḥakamim and *perushim* is clear, even though R. Ashi was commenting at a later time.

A distinction between the Ḥakamim and the *perushim* is also suggested by the passage (2.38) in which Rn. Joḥanan b. Zakkai, one of the greatest figures in the Ḥakamic/rabbinic tradition, speaks of the *perushim* as though separate from himself. But here it has to be noted that he argues *for* the *perushim* against the Sadducees. There is thus a measure of distinction, but a measure of association as well. It is uncertain how accurate the passage is in detail, since Joḥanan b. Zakkai appears frequently as the protagonist against the Sadducees (and with great formal similarity in some instances). It thus appears to have been almost a 'literary genre' to cast Joḥanan in this role;¹ so although the disputes are *prima facie* likely to have occurred in substance, the detailed presentation appears to have become increasingly standardised. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Joḥanan's reference to the *perushim* as though distinct from himself is *not* a standard part of the usual presentation, and there is no real reason to doubt it.

Another similar example of distinction and yet of association between Ḥakamim and *perushim* can be found in 4.37. It will be pointed out below that the Sadducees, although in control of the Temple, had in many instances to follow the rulings or the interpretations of the Ḥakamim, exactly as Josephus stated (1.12 (17)), and as the rabbinic sources frequently exemplify (e.g. 2.11; 2.12; 2.32).² The version of the anecdote in the Tosefta (3.17 (3)) mentions only the Ḥakam; in the Babylonian Talmud, the *perushim* are mentioned as though distinct from the Ḥakamim, and yet clearly in close association with them.

Even more dramatic than these examples are the instances in which *perushim* are strongly attacked in the rabbinic sources – condemnations which were scarcely likely to have been made if the *perushim* were regarded as the predecessors of the rabbis – i.e. as the Pharisaioi of Josephus. For example, in the Mishnah (2.21) an unelaborated reference is made to *makkot perushim*, the wounds, or blows, of the *perushim*. The *gemara* in the Babylonian Talmud (4.22)

¹ For references to Joḥanan b. Zakkai, see the Index.

² But note, e.g., 2.8, 2.23, which exemplify that the priests did not always conform.

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gives its own interpretation of the meaning of the phrase by defining seven types of *perushim*. Some of the definitions are obscure but it is clear in general that they were intended to be condemnatory, since otherwise the comment at one point, 'But that is a virtue!' would make no sense. In 5.14, the phrase *makkot perushim* is defined by two stories as deception. The condemnation of *perushim* is equally clear in the discussion of the meaning of *minim* in the Shemoneh 'Esreh (the Eighteen Benedictions). The meanings of the word *minim* are by no means certain, but at least it can be said that the word refers to opponents of those whom the rabbis regarded as legitimately Jewish – hence the curse on them in the Shemoneh 'Esreh. According to the Palestinian Talmud (5.2), the wicked are associated with the *minim*; but in the parallel discussion in Tosefta (3.1), it is the *perushim* who are associated with the *minim*; there is thus an association between the *minim*, the *perushim* and the 'wicked'.

Thus far it would seem that the case for dissociating *perushim* from Pharisaioi is strong, since the rabbis, in the examples given, dissociated *themselves* from the *perushim*, sometimes in strongly condemnatory terms. But the issue is not quite so simple, for in fact, there are a few instances where a connection between Ḥakamim and *perushim* exists, just as, in some of the examples above, a measure of association could be discerned as well as of dissociation. The basic example is 4.25, the account in the Babylonian Talmud of what is also described in Josephus as a breach between Hyrcanus and the Pharisaioi (1.2). There are obvious conflicts between the two accounts, not least the name of the king – though the name Jannai may simply be a consequence of abbreviation through the letter *yodh*, at a later stage in transmission. But however imprecise the rabbinic memory of the episode may be, the fact remains that *perushim* and Ḥakamim are associated as a single group in the first incident (chronologically) in which, in Josephus, the name Pharisaioi is used. What must be observed is that it is the *opponent* of the Ḥakamim who uses the term *perushim* to describe them. This is exactly the case in a second fundamentally important example, the account in A.R.N. (6.1) of the origin of the Sadducees and Boethusians.

The context of this passage requires a slightly longer discussion. The holding of the high priesthood and the legitimacy of the high priest were constant and fundamental issues among Jews during the period from the Maccabean revolt to the destruction of the Temple –

as, indeed, they were among the issues which precipitated the Maccabean revolt itself, since the attempt to make the high priesthood a matter of barter inevitably antagonised those who stressed the purity of Zadokite descent. At one point, shortly before the Revolt, there were five claimants to the high priesthood, and the extreme Zadokites went so far in their opposition to what was happening to the high priesthood in the Temple at Jerusalem that they withdrew to Leontopolis and built their own Temple there – no doubt waiting for the restoration of their own pure line of descent in better days. Those who remained in Jerusalem did not necessarily agree with the arrangements in the Temple, but they were prepared to accept them. When the Hasmonaean family became successful rulers, it was virtually inevitable that they would take over the vitally important office of high priest, even though they were in the strictest sense unqualified: in the post-exilic period the high priest had become the leader of the Jewish community, and the Hasmonaean could scarcely be leaders of that community in any full sense without becoming high priests. But it was obviously necessary to find some way of allowing them to be high priests despite their ostensible lack of full qualification. I Macc. xiv records the settlement reached with reference to Simon, and it is clear that although Simon was recognised as high priest, it was with reservation. Emphasis is placed on the political aspects of his leadership, but apart from a general reference to his full charge of the Temple (vs. 42), little or no reference is made to specifically religious duties. Furthermore, the compromise nature of the arrangements is clearly recognised in the phrase ‘until a true prophet should appear’ (vs. 41): Simon and his successors were accepted as high priests but only until the unusual circumstances could be rectified by the consummation of the covenant promises of God, and by the restoration of his direct guidance to the community. It is thus clear that although Simon and his successors were recognised as high priests, it was only on the condition that certain specifically religious matters were reserved away from them, in view of their lack of qualification.

The high priesthood was thus a divisive issue in this period,¹ and

¹ It is thus important to note that the cause of division between Hyrcanus and the Pharisaioi/Hakamim was, according to both Josephus and the rabbinic tradition (1.2, 4.25), the technical disqualification of Hyrcanus in his claim to be high priest. Other, and quite different examples, of strong feelings about the high priesthood will be found in 1.20 and 4.9. Note also the (probably) anti-Hasmonaean passage in 9.1.

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indeed throughout the period it was divided among different families, of varying degrees of qualification. The rabbis recognised two main groups among the Temple priests (at least in the later part of the period), the Sadducees and the Boethusians,¹ though they knew that other families were involved as well. They also recognised that although some individual priests were members of the Ḥakamic movement,² and although the Temple priests (including the high priest) were in many instances compelled to implement Ḥakamic interpretations in the Temple (particularly where the interpretations defended traditional procedures),³ the fact remained that in general the Sadducees and the Boethusians opposed the Ḥakamim and resisted their influence. Various controversies between them have been recorded;⁴ they are of great importance in understanding the history of the period, and particularly in understanding the content of the N.T., since they pre-date the fall of Jerusalem: after that date, the Sadducees effectively began to disappear, and after the destruction of the Temple were no longer able to continue their position. Their literal adherence to the text of Scripture was revived by the Karaites, and some of the controversies were also revived, in rabbinic Judaism, in order to refute the Karaites; the Karaites were even referred to in controversy as Sadducees (as probably in *Megillath Ta'anith*), but all this was centuries later.⁵ Although the controversies are recorded by the victors (the Ḥakamim/rabbis), and although the details may therefore have become imprecise, the controversies in substance are important, because they are unlikely to have been wholly invented in the rabbinic period, and they can therefore throw much light on the Ḥakamim, and on other Jewish groups.

In view of the fluctuating conflicts in this period over the high priesthood, it is not surprising that the exact origins of the two main priestly groups, the Sadducees and the Boethusians, are obscure. A possible, but highly speculative, explanation of their origin focuses

¹ Although the two 'houses' were recognised, the distinction between them was not always kept clear, as can be seen in the fact that the names are sometimes used interchangeably in different accounts of the same incident. See, e.g., 3.4, 4.12, 5.8. Equally, it is vital to bear in mind that the term 'Boethusians' does not necessarily refer to one single, identifiable, group: it may have diverse reference.

² See, for example, *Aboth* ii.8, *Eduy.* viii.2, *Ḥag.* ii.7 (2.18), *Josephus Life* 197 (1.24). ³ See pp. 3, 12, 30f. ⁴ See the Additional Note, p. 53.

⁵ The term 'Sadducee' becomes in fact very diverse in rabbinic literature.