

Essential Context for understanding the new Testament

In the next set of episodes, I want to deal with material which throws light on words, phrases, images and ideas used by the Evangelists which were understood by the immediate audience, but which modern people need to have explained. They were part of the environment which developed this language.

The scribes of the Pharisees: In Hebrew a scribe is SOPHER; scribes are SOPHERIM.

- I mentioned scribes in general before now in a more secular context, but the Gospels have a special group who are continuously depicted with the Pharisees, so they were **of the Pharisee party** and participated with them in opposing Jesus.
- Josephus says that at the time of Christ there were about 6,000 Pharisees – compared with the 4,000 Essenes. These were two powerful opposing groups who agreed on very little.
- We don't know how the Pharisees organised their group except that they lived in close-knit communities, namely members of a religious group who pursued the same ends.
- They exercised huge influence on the nation during and after the time of Christ. In fact, they were the ones who re-founded Judaism as Rabbinic Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem at the council of Jamina in the late first century AD. That is the Judaism of today.
- Each of the important established groups had their own scribes who dealt with all kinds of matters for them - both in religious and secular spheres. Before ~ 200BC authority lay with the priestly classes, so the scribes came from these priestly families.
- The scribe could act as both counsellor and judge: Sir 38:38 which probably meant that they came from the educated upper classes: **"The wisdom of the scribe depends on his opportunity for leisure; he who has little business may become wise."** Sir 38:24. Sirach was found among the DSS.
- Some of the Levites operated as scribes also, since they were the teachers and instructors of the Law before the Exile: Cf. For example, 2 Chr 35:3; 17:7-9. Judges in 2 Chr 19:8-11; scribes in 1 Chr 24:6.

- In post-exilic Israel, the Levites participated with Ezra in instructing the people: Nehemiah 8:7-13. This was just about the time when the Zadok priests began to move out into the desert to prepare the way of the Lord...
- After the exile ~ 200 BC a change occurred. The laity asserted themselves because of all the turmoil concerning the temple, so that, eventually, the 'scribes of the Pharisee party' were mostly lay people, not priests, as was the situation beforehand.

Examples: **Ezra** was a priest scribe, so he was learned in matters of the Law and the Commandments of the Lord: Ezra 7:11,12,21. These texts call Ezra "the priest scribe of the Law of the God of Heaven".

Sirach may have been a scribe also. He gives a description of a scribe and the dignity of his calling in Sir 39:1-11 where the heading in the JB is scholar. [\[read\]](#)

Qumran had both priestly and Levitical scribes in their community after 200BC, since the scribal role was essential for a nation or group to survive. All over the known world they kept annals, wrote history, poetry and liturgical texts for kings and religions.

The Rabbinic Tradition:

- Was based on the Halakah (Oral Law) - which gave rise to the Pharisee Movement which traced its origins back through Ezra. During the time of Christ, the two famous teachers were **Hillel and Shammai** representing opposite ends of the spectrum. These were the men with whom Jesus would have conversed with in the Temple when he was 12 years old.
- To show how complicated the scene was, from about 150 BC to 70AD there were 3 schools of scribes, that of the Sadducees, the Pharisees and that of Qumran.
- The student scribes were taught and trained to be teachers, judges and counsellors according to the doctrines of whichever group they were part of – much like the seminaries of various denominations of Christianity today with their differences in theology and doctrine ... all claiming to be right.
- Training for a scribe brought him into personal contact with his teacher. He listened to instruction and learned to master the material presented to him. By the time of the New Testament there were not only written scriptures, but there were numerous commentaries by the rabbis down the centuries – and of course, there was the Oral Law developed by the Pharisees.

- In the New Testament both Saul and Stephen were students of the famous Pharisee, Gamaliel. Since Judas Iscariot was also a student of the Temple he, too, was being trained by either the Sadducees or the Pharisees!
- Cf. for Paul: Acts 23:6: "Brothers, I am a Pharisee and the son of Pharisees..." Acts 26: 5 "I followed the strictest party in our religion and lived as a Pharisee..."
- There appears to be no evidence that scribes had to pay for their education – or that they were paid for their teaching! They depended on the generosity of those to whom they ministered.
- Mark 6:7-13 gives Jesus' instruction regarding the Apostles teaching the people. They were "to take nothing but a staff – no bread, no haversack, and no coppers for their purses". One of the reasons for this was the hospitality law; another was the presence of the Essene groups around the country ... and the knowledge that those who fed people spiritually were to be helped by their listeners materially.
- Paul's explanation to the Corinthians shows that the Gentiles were not conscious of this obligation to take care of their teachers: 1 Cor 9:1-23, esp. vs.11-12. 1 Thess 2:9.
- At the time of Christ, scribes – especially of the Pharisee party - were highly esteemed among the people. The reason was their patient instruction over the centuries to keep God's people abreast of God's Word and its relevance to their lives. The Essenes taught the people also from the written Word of God and the Testaments of the Patriarchs.
- Their success is seen in the Gospels where the Laity understood the law, Prophets and the Writings to the point where they could participate in doctrinal disputes between the scribes of the Pharisee party and Jesus: Mk 2:16; Lk 5:30; Acts 23:9 and the man born blind in John ch. 9.
- In Mt 7:29 the people were amazed that Jesus "taught with authority, but not like the scribes" who would quote other teachers to make their point. Since the scribes *were* the teachers, it was they who had the problem with Jesus' teaching, as is clear from the controversies in the Gospels.
- Those Pharisees who were *not* scribes were in power in the Temple. It was they who forced the Halakah onto the people – which Jesus opposed in Mt 15 etc.

The Halakah, the Oral Law, Tradition of the Elders:

INTRODUCTION:

- This was an area of major dispute at the time of Christ. The Oral Law was handed down verbally from father to son for many generations and grew with time into an impossible burden: Peter acknowledged this at the first council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:10.
- The major problem with the Oral Law was that it did not rest on **the written Law of Moses**, the Pentateuch! It developed separately through the Pharisee party in their gatherings and schools. The Oral Law was rejected by the Qumran community **who based their lives on the written Law (OT), the Prophets, Testaments of the Patriarchs.**

Let's look at **the Prophets** first:

- There was a school of prophets in Israel which had ancient beginnings – since Moses was a great prophet. A prophet is one who has a deep relationship with God, one who listens to His Voice and receives guidance for the people, after which they become teachers and guides for the Chosen People. The Testaments of the Patriarchs claim that the first major figures in the OT from Adam onwards were prophets – 37 in all.
- In the OT the school of the prophets came into prominence during the time of Elijah in the 9th century BC. There we see that men *also trained* to be prophets and were helped by the existing ones. See the 50 prophets who accompanied Elijah on his final journey in 2 Kgs 2:1-18.
- The school of the prophets continued down the centuries even though the OT writers didn't give them prominence in their books except for the writings of the major prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel etc.
- Examples are Samuel, Deborah, Ahijah the Shilonite, Shemaiah & Nathan. The DSS has the writings of Gad, the Seer.
- This school eventually found a home in the Qumran community where they flourished because they were now in a prayerful community who listened to God daily. From there it transitioned into the early Church where we meet them in acts – for example: Acts 1:27-28 for the prophet AGABUS.

- St. Paul speaks about them as a normal presence in the church: Cf 1 Cor 12: 1-31: Vs 27-28: "Now you are Christ's body; but each of you has a different part in it. In the Church God has given the first place to apostles, *the second to prophets*, the third to teachers..." 1 Cor 14;1-5 "... hope for the spiritual gifts especially prophecy..." Paul puts the prophets in the Church second only in importance to the Apostles!
- Throughout the history of the Church God has raised up people whom we call 'mystics' or 'saints' who left us major teachings to guide us. It began with the writings of the New Testament itself ... then the Early Church Fathers ... then those saints called 'doctors of the Church' and many others right up to our own day. These are the prophetic writings of the Church.
- The OT had books of history, prophetic writings, liturgical writings (Psalms), Wisdom writings etc – so has the Church, but we often don't recognise this. What is often called 'private revelation' is in fact prophetic revelation – just as in the time of the Mosaic Covenant.
- At the time of Christ, the Pharisees declared that prophecy was dead – because they refused to accept that it flourished in Qumran! Yet history has proved that the Qumran prophets were 100% accurate! The result was that no prophetic leadership came from the temple, and without the guidance of the prophets the Pharisee sect emphasised the Tradition of the Elders and took it to extremes. Since the Oral Law was rejected by the Essenes it became a matter of major dispute in the whole land.

History of the Halakah, Oral Law:

- This was a major issue for the Pharisees. The historian Josephus explains in Antiquities 13,10,6,297: "I wish to explain that the Pharisees had passed on certain laws handed down by former generations which were *not recorded* in the Laws of Moses, for which reason they are rejected by the Sadducean group (the priests) who hold that only those laws should be considered valid that were written down (in scripture), and that those which had been handed down by former generations from the tradition of the fathers *should not be observed*." In this both the Essenes and the Sadducees were in agreement.
- Josephus also tells us in Ant 13,10, 6, 293-296 that at the time of Hyrcanus (134-104 BC) the Pharisees had imposed their laws on the people at a time of great confusion. But once Hyrcanus took over the role of High priest as well as king he abolished these laws!
- Nevertheless, Alexandra, the only queen who ruled for a short time from 76-67BC, restored these laws. After that the Pharisees' power went unchallenged. (This was

the time when the Hasmonean kings assumed the priesthood and brought spiritual chaos to the people)