

The world of Jesus- Life in 1st. century Palestine study 3

Religion: The Teachers of the Law,
the Pharisees and the Two Laws



THE TEACHERS OF THE LAW

Originally the understanding, interpretation and teaching of the religious Law was the preserve of the priest (cf Mal.2v7). However by the return of the exiles from Babylon in the 530sBC under Ezra (the scribe par excellence Ezra 7v6,12,25), the need to know and to understand the Law as a basis for national life became the concern of every Jew. Further impetus to this was given as some of the priests began to adopt Hellenistic attitudes and life-styles, turning their backs on the ways and the traditions of their forebears. So an independent lay movement began to grow up whose task was the study, the interpretation and the transmission of the Law. These men became known as the Scribes, or Teachers of the Law. They were held in the highest esteem, for although not many were of noble birth or from wealthy backgrounds, their unique knowledge of God's words and ways gave them immense influence, prestige and power. By the time of Jesus, most Scribes would have been Pharisees, although not all (Mk.2v16; Lk.5v30).

As people familiar with words and with the interpretation of words and as those who handled the Word of God, Scribes were often appointed as trustees, looking after the affairs of widows and orphans (Lk.20v47).

In the New Testament

By the time of Jesus, three terms had evolved to describe the Scribes and what they did.

<i>Grammateus</i>	"Scribes" (Lk.15v2) Jewish tradition describes Moses as being such a one (cf Mt.23v2)
<i>Nomikos</i>	"Lawyer" (Mt.22v35; Lk.7v30; 11v45, 52).
<i>Nomodidaskolos</i>	"Teacher of the Law" (Lk.5v17; Acts 5v34).

The Scribes continued to be held in very great respect, being called:-

"Sages" or "Wise Men"

"Lord" / "Rabbi", although the term eventually became a courtesy title and no more of *Monsieur* (cf Mt.8v2,6,8,21,25). }

"Teacher" (Mt.8v19) } hence Jesus' words in Mt.23v8-10

"Father" (Mt.23v8-10) }

Their disciples were to respect them more than their own parents and Scribes would expect to take precedence at social and religious occasions, even dressing like the aristocracy and the priests (Mk.12v38-39; Lk.11v43; 20v46).

Their Four-Fold Task

1. To study and to interpret the Scriptures (especially important as the knowledge of Biblical Hebrew was known to so few).
2. To study the Scriptures more generally.
3. To teach (Mt.7v28-29; Mk.1v22) and where a disciple would seek to model himself upon his rabbi, his mentor and role model (Mt 10v24-25).
4. To give judicial rulings. For obvious reasons they were not allowed to charge for this last task and so most Scribes would have a trade or profession to help support them (e.g. Paul Acts 18v1-4), although it would be normal and expected for them to receive payment as teachers and interpreters of God's Laws (cf Lk.10v1,5-7)

Their Method of Teaching

Repetition and so remembering. In rabbinic usage, "to repeat" is the same as "to teach." However this was not simply a monologue but often involved Question and Answer and by inviting the disciple to reflect and to make the Discovery for themselves. A model that Jesus used (e.g. Discovery – in His parables, or Question and Answer e.g. Mt.15v21-28; Mt.16v13ff; Mt.17v24-27; Mt.19v16-21; Mt.21v28f; Mt.22v41-46).

The disciple would then go out and repeated word for word the teaching of their master, returning to reflect with the rabbi on all that they had experienced (Lk.9v1-2,10; 10v1,17f). It was strictly understood that a disciple never altered one word of what he had been taught. The highest of praise was reserved for the model pupil who neither omitted nor added to what he had learned and the greatest condemnation for the inattentive disciple. Which is yet another reason why we have confidence in the Gospel records.

The Scribes clash with Jesus.

Eating with tax collectors and “sinners” (Mk.2v15-17).

At His claim to be able to forgive sins (Mt.9v3; Mk.2v6-7; Lk.5v21)

Not washing hands before eating (Mt.15v2; Mk.7v5).

At the words of the children at Triumphal Entry (Mt.21v15-16).

Jesus clashes with the Scribes

When He tells the crowds to listen to their teaching but not to behave as they do (Mt.23v2 – there was often a literal chair in the synagogue from which the preacher would speak, but also this is a reference to those who were seen as the spiritual descendants of the first great Scribe, Moses).

When they misuse *Corban* to disadvantage parents and by so doing bring dishonour upon God (Mt.15v1-9; Mk.7v9-13).

When they are spiritually blind and do not recognise Him (Mt.12v38-42; Lk.11v29-32).

When they attribute His activities to Satan (Mt.12v24-28; Mk.3v20-30; Lk.11v14-20).

When they seek the pre-eminent places and desire the praise of men (Mk.12v38-40; Lk.11v43; 20v46).

He promises a light yoke to those who are His disciples as opposed to the heavy weight of the “Yoke of the Law” which the Scribes impose upon theirs (Mt.11v28-30; Lk.11v45-46)

He pronounces seven “woes” over the Scribes and the Pharisees in Mt.23v13-36.

Later on the Scribes are found acting in opposition to Peter and to John and then to Stephen (Acts 4v5; 6v12).

THE PHARISEES

Originating from the *hasidim* the “*holy ones*” who fought so bravely under the Maccabees in the war for independence but who later turned against them, they formed one of three significant religious sects mentioned by Josephus.

The name “*Pharisee*” means “*separated ones*”, although it is unclear whether this was separation from Hellenic (Greek) culture, religion and ideas; from all ungodly Gentiles; or from less devout Jews. Probably it is easier to say that they saw themselves as set apart *from* “the world” and set apart *for* God. In that sense they saw themselves as the heart of the nation, both a shining example and a living rebuke to those who were not so punctilious in their observance of the Law.

Never more than 6,000 in number they were held in high regard but not perhaps in affection by the common people due to their zeal for and knowledge of the Law, where their interpretation of the Torah almost universally held sway. In this they were following in the tradition of Ezra and his colleagues who “...read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” (Neh.8v8). However Jn.7v48-49 gives an insight into how some at least of the Pharisees’ thought of those less well versed in the Law than they.

As experts in Jewish Law the Scribes and the Pharisees held an important place in the Sanhedrin, where their task of examining the orthodoxy of teachings and teachers often brought them into contact and conflict with Jesus. The occasions in the New Testament when we read of the Pharisees coming to question Jesus (or John the Baptist before Him), can thus perhaps be seen more in the light of official or semi official deputations from the Sanhedrin sent to examine this man from Galilee rather than simply odd visitors “dropping by”. However, unlike the Herodians or the Sadducees, they were a political force or party only in so much as every political question was actually a religious question. Hence to ask Jesus whether it was (literally) *lawful* to pay taxes to Caesar is a political question as far as the Herodians are concerned and a religious question as far as the Pharisees are concerned (Mk.12v13-17).

One at least of their number, Nicodemus, became a follower of Christ (Jn. 3v1f; 7v48f; 19v39f)

In doctrine they were more “liberal” than their great rivals the Sadducees, accepting as authoritative the whole of the Old Testament, plus the Oral Torah. In that sense they were in a strange position of continually adding to the Word of God by continuous debate, teaching and interpretation, yet at the same time holding firmly to the view that all that they taught was firmly grounded in God’s original revelation to His people and thus they would have fiercely resisted any suggestion that they were innovators of any kind.

In contrast to the Sadducees, whose main emphasis was on worship at the Temple, the Pharisees stressed the importance of rightly divining and obeying the Torah / the Law of God.

As examples of the high regard in which they held the study and exposition of the Law come these words from the Mishnah (a collection of rabbinic writings made in the 2nd century AD but containing older material).

"..but if a bastard is learned in the Law and a High Priest is ignorant of the Law, the bastard that is learned in the Law precedes [i.e. takes precedence over] the High Priest."

"He that takes upon himself the yoke of the Law, from him shall be taken away the yoke..of worldly care.."

"He that occupies himself in the study of the Law for its own sake merits many things, and, still more, he is deserving of the whole world. He is called friend, beloved [of God], lover of God, lover of mankind; and it clothes him with humility and reverence and fits him to become righteous, saintly, upright and faithful; and it keeps him far from sin and brings him near to virtue, and from him men enjoy counsel and sound knowledge, understanding and might.. And it gives him kingship and dominion and discernment in judgement; to him are revealed the secrets of the Law, and he is made like to a never-failing spring and like to a river that flows ever more mightily; and he becomes modest, longsuffering, and forgiving of insult; and it magnifies him and exalts him above all things."

There were two famous "schools" of Pharisaism, one following the strict interpretations of Shammai, the other following the more liberal teachings of rabbi Hillel.

Doctrine

The Pharisees, following such Scriptures as Dan.12v2 and in contrast to the Sadducees, believed in the immortality of the soul - a fact which Paul was later to turn to his advantage, and in the existence of spirits and of angels (Acts 23v1-10).

THE TWO LAWS

For Jews of Jesus' day there were *two* Laws that had to be known and followed. There was the written Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai and contained in the Torah, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. But there was also another Law, equally if not more binding than the first – the *Oral Law*. This Law (like the first) was believed to have been given to Moses on Mount Sinai and then passed on to Joshua and by Joshua downwards through the ages and through the voices of the Scribes.

In fact there were three levels of this Oral Law in descending order of authority.

1. The first was that which was believed to have come directly from Moses.
2. The second were the teachings of the Scribes from Ezra onwards.
3. The third were scattered pieces of "law" from individual Scribes over the centuries.

However, although these teachings were ranked in order, they were all just as binding as the written Torah and in fact *more* binding. To oppose any of the Oral Torah was considered worse than opposing the written, for the former was the authentic interpretation and completion of the latter. It is this Oral Law against which Jesus speaks so strongly, when He condemns the "traditions" to which the religious authorities cling so tenaciously (Mt.15v1-9; Mk.7v1-13; cf Gal.1v14).

IN CONCLUSION

Scribes and Pharisees (almost but not quite coterminous) formed part of the main opposition groups to Jesus.

- He was not the product of any respected rabbinic school in Jerusalem, but rather came from the alarming backwoods of Galilee (cf Jn.7v50-52)..
- He rejected their imaginative and inventive interpretations of Scripture, indeed rejected the whole notion of an Oral Law in any shape or form.
- He based His authority not on past rabbis and sages but simply "But I say to you.."
- He drew followers away from them and thus affected their power base.
- And sadly many were convinced that in resisting Jesus they were serving God...