

# Jewish Pharisees,

Mobile, Saturday, June 19, 1982

## Historian's view give root to

The roots of Christianity are found in the teachings of the Pharisees, a branch of Judaism in the time of Jesus, rather than in the teachings of the Jewish Bible.

**THIS VIEW** was presented in a lecture to Mobile area clergy by Dr. Ellis Rivkin, professor of Jewish history at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

Rivkin spoke at this year's Ministerial Institute, a program that has been sponsored annually for 21 years by Spring Hill Avenue Temple in Mobile.

Rivkin said a hostility existed between Jesus' followers and the Pharisees, and words of Jesus in the New Testament book of Matthew indicate "the depth of harsh feeling" toward the Pharisees more than any other words in the New Testament.

**THE WORDS** from Matthew describe the Pharisees as "hypocrites," "white-washed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead men's bones," "serpents," "brood of vipers" and other labels.

Said Rivkin, "The Scribes-Pharisees certainly did not regard the claims of Jesus with any kind of gentleness ... and they indeed thrust the followers of Jesus from the synagogues."

What is most striking from the words in Matthew, Rivkin said, is an "affirmation put in Jesus' mouth that the Scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat."

Rivkin asked, "How is it that despite all of this hostility, Jesus can be reported as having said to his disciples, 'The Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, and therefore you are to practice and observe whatever they do?'"

**SITTING IN** Moses' seat means the Pharisees "have authority over the law."

Rivkin said the term "Pharisee" is "never once mentioned in any of the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) in God's law that was given on Sinai" to Moses.

Moreover, the word "Scribe" is not used in the five books of Moses.

"Clearly then, Moses did not seat Scribes and Pharisees in his seat of authority."

Moses seated in authority Joshua, a prophet, and the sons of Aaron of the priesthood, according to the lecturer. Aaron was Moses' brother.

**FURTHER** in the Bible, in historical and prophetic books, the word "Pharisee" is never mentioned, Rivkin said.

"Though Scribes are indeed mentioned from time to time, these Scribes do not sit in Moses' seat. These Scribes do not have any authority over the law. These Scribes are literally Scribes.

They're secretaries, chroniclers."

In the Hagiographa, or the wisdom literature of the Bible including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles I and II, "there are no Pharisees referred to."

**IN THE** wisdom literature of the Bible, Ezra is referred to as a Scribe, but that title "is not what gives Ezra authority. What gives Ezra authority is his genealogy, his priestly genealogy" back to Aaron.

"So the biblical record is without any kind of justification for Scribes and Pharisees' sitting in Moses' seat," according to Rivkin.

The lecturer talked about the book of Ecclesiasticus in the Apocrypha, or ancient books not included in the Bible. Ecclesiasticus was written by Joshua Ben-Sira, who lived about 280 or 180 B.C.E. ("Before the Common Era" is the Jewish term equivalent to the Christian usage of "Before Christ").

**"WHEN BEN-SIRA** was writing, there were no Pharisees sitting in Moses' seat. Those who held authority under the law in Ben-Sira's day were precisely that class of Aaronite priests which Moses had ordained in the wilderness."

Rivkin said Ben-Sira's writings do include Scribes, and they are not secretaries or chroniclers. "These are Scribes like Ben-Sira, who himself is a Scribe." These Scribes, however, "are not in charge of the law."

Thus, said Rivkin, "we still have not found any kind of immanence that Scribes-Pharisees sit in Moses' seat."

According to Rivkin, the first mention of the Pharisees is by Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who lived about the time of Jesus' crucifixion.

**IN JOSEPHUS'** work called "The Jewish Antiquities," Josephus writes a few sentences about the schools of thought among the Jews — Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes.

Josephus mentions the Pharisees as existing about the time of the revolt of the Hasmoneans, the family name of the Maccabean dynasty that ruled in Judea from 141 to 37 B.C.E. The Maccabeans revolted against Syrian rule and were victorious, a victory that is celebrated by today's Jews in the feast of Hanukkah.

Said Rivkin, "So we can say it is some time following on the Hasmonean revolt that Pharisees ... came into existence."

**THE SPEAKER** said Josephus' writings give an account of the

high priest John Hyrcanus, who died about 104 B.C.E.

Hyrcanus, who viewed himself as a Pharisee, split from that group, rejecting "the oral laws — the laws not written down in the laws of Moses — which are the laws the Pharisees taught but which the Sadducees rejected."

Thus from the account about Hyrcanus, "we are confronted with God's having given two revelations, one a written revelation on Sinai and the other an oral revelation." There was a twofold law.

The speaker said, "We are certain that there was a time when there were no Pharisees, and then there is a time that not only are there Pharisees but they are sitting on Moses' seat, although to sit on Moses' seat meant their unwritten laws were viewed as binding. The twofold law was binding."

**ACCORDING TO** Rivkin, "The masses of people who were followers of the Pharisees" were so enraged that Hyrcanus rejected the twofold law that they rebelled against the Hasmonean family, of which Hyrcanus was a member.

Peace was not restored until after the death of Hyrcanus and the unwritten laws were restored.

"So there we have the Pharisees sitting in Moses' seat, and there we have the evidence that the right to sit there, though not stemming from any biblical text whatever, was so accepted by the people at large that they are willing to rise up in revolt against the Hasmonean family."

The Sadducees, who accepted only the written law of Moses, "had no following among the masses of the people," according to the lecturer.

# Christianity not Jewish Bible,

**RIVKIN CALLED** the Pharisees and their twofold law "a quantum jump.... We have the birth of a form of Judaism which is non-biblically grounded."

Rivkin continued, "We have to ask ourselves why the quantum jump?"

The answer, he said, is in what the Scribes-Pharisees taught. They taught "good news. One could very well say it was a gospel."

The Pharisees taught what Rivkin called a triad: (1) God was not simply the father of all of the people but of "every single individual"; (2) God so cared for every individual that he revealed to Israel not one law but two, the oral and written laws; (3) the person who adhered to the twofold law "could look forward to eternal life and resurrection."

**THAT GOOD** news taught by the Scribes-Pharisees, according to Rivkin, "was so irresistible that the overwhelming majority of the Jews abandoned what had been the traditional Judaism of the single law and the traditional Judaism of the Aaronites."

Rivkin said that just as the five books of Moses contain nothing about Scribes-Pharisees, they contain nothing about "promise of eternal life of the soul and resurrection from the body."

**THE JEWS**, according to Rivkin, faced a crisis under the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, Syrian king from 175 to 164 B.C.E., who ordered the Jews to worship Zeus.

Either the Jews had to be willing to "undergo martyrdom or there would be no Judaism." Yet the teaching of the five books of Moses promise only "that God will reward and punish exclusively in this world.... Martyrdom had no reward. Martyrdom would be the end."

**THUS, SAID** Rivkin, "it was sort of like it was a revelation.... God rewards and punishes in the world to come. If one martyrs oneself, gives up one's life, then for certain he will have eternal life for his soul and resurrection for his body, and therefore this was indeed good news."

Rivkin said, "so the Scribes-Pharisees taught very novel doctrines which we can see in the form of the triad."

This teaching of the Scribes-Pharisees, Rivkin said, "is as new a creation in terms of Judaism as that new creation which Jesus was to open up for those who followed him."

The Scribes-Pharisees, Rivkin said, reshaped doctrines and concepts including the concept of the peoplehood of Israel. Because the Pharisaic teaching was eternal life for the individual, the "Scribes-Pharisees welcomed proselytes."

**THE TRUE** proselyte was committed to the triad, expecting eternal life and resurrection whereas, from the Pharisaic view, the Sadducees "could look forward to damnation."

Thus, said Rivkin, "the distinction between flesh and spirit precedes Paul and to a great extent accounts for Paul's drawing on it."

The Scribes-Pharisees created the institution of the synagogue, a decentralized institution of "co-believers come together as a community" in which prayer, not sacrifices, became mandatory. Prescribed prayers were an "affirmation of faith in the resurrection."

The synagogue "was what the emerging Christian community needed," Rivkin said.

**"THE SCRIBES-Pharisees** were the teachers of the resurrection, the very basis of Christian belief, the very heart of Christian doctrine, the very heart of Christian beginnings."

Therefore, according to Rivkin, "when Jesus was crucified, the possibility of his being resurrected was something that was built into the belief system."

Christians, Rivkin said, absorbed the Pharisaic teaching of the triad, changing only "the middle term, but not altering God as the source or the ultimate salvation, eternal life and resurrection for the individual. What Christians altered was the way ... through Christ and his loving redemptive promise and power."

**BECAUSE** "Pharisaic Judaism, not biblical Judaism, is the prerequisite for Christianity," Rivkin said the hostility between the followers of Jesus and the Pharisees is understandable.

"The followers of Jesus couldn't understand why the teachers of the resurrection would deny the resurrection of Jesus."



**Ellis Rivkin**