

## JESUS AND HIS ADVERSARIES.

BY THE REV. W. R. L. SMITH, D.D., RICHMOND, VA.

The new Jewish Encyclopaedia, a work of real learning, rejects Josephus' account of the Sadducees and Pharisees for the alleged reason that he wrote to please his Roman readers. It likewise charges unreliability on the New Testament report of these parties on the ground of a polemical attitude. The charge is natural, inasmuch as modern Judaism is the direct descendant of the ancient Pharisaic sect. We stand, however, by the faithfulness of that narrative, having only to reply that, if it betrays a polemical aspect, it is due to the fact that the adversaries of our Lord made it so.

Jesus played out His life against a fierce antagonism, whose features are familiar enough, but whose causes are not so easily apprehended. It is not possible to understand His words and works without a fairly accurate knowledge of His opponents. The Pharisees, in His day, were the representative class of the Jewish people, the most intelligent and progressive, eminent in prestige and power. They were the mind and soul of the nation, and like gravitation, their dominance pressed everywhere. The net work of their system was over all, and the common people accepted from them the molds of doctrine and practice.

## ORIGINS.

What were the origins of these sects? Since the return from Babylon the Jewish community had lived under a government, half church and half state, the religious and civic functions being united in the same hands. Two centers of control gradually developed, one in the Temple and the other in the Synagogue. This latter institution acquired its religious character and use in the time of the exile. Around these two cen-

ters arose two politico-religious parties or sects, the Sadducees, entrenching themselves in the Temple, and the Pharisees, concentrating on the Synagogues. Under the rights of home-rule, granted by the foreign masters, these parties, striving for the supremacy, fell continually into the fiercest animosities and strifes. The Sadducees were the party of the priests, a close corporation, proudly aristocratic in spirit, allying themselves only with the rich and the strong, and increasingly indifferent to the tenets of the ancestral religion. Professing reverence alone for Moses' law, they despised as superstition the traditions of the opposite sect. Worldly and materialistic, they renounced the doctrine of a future life and imitated the luxurious habits of the cultivated heathen. Two hundred years before Christ they held all the public offices, but on His advent, the reins of leadership had largely slipped from their grasp. They lost their moral greatness because they lost the face of God and touch with the common people. At the dawn of the Christian era, the sect greatly shrunken, was still a power in Jerusalem, caring only for its own comfort and anxious to preserve things as they were. Oblivious of the Kingdom of God, they lay under the curse of all aristocracies in being unable to see that all best things in this world must grow.

To Jesus they paid no attention until His presence disturbed the holy city, and He gave little heed to them because of their growing moral and religious insignificance. It is not strange that there is no record of a Sadducee ever being admitted to the church.

#### THE PHARISEES.

There was real greatness in the sect of the Pharisees. It must be granted that, in spite of limitations and defects, they stood for the elemental truths that Jesus came to clarify and develop. Staunch and steadfast champions were they of the authority of the Scriptures in home, school, synagogue, courts of law and daily life. Custodians of Moses' law and leaders of the people, they had a fiery zeal for God, and a love for right-

eousness as they understood it. Let us do them justice. They were studious and scholarly men, by no means intentionally and deliberately bad, or consciously hypocritical. As among Christian people, there were among them many shades of moral worth. The great mass of the people attended their ministry and it is practically certain that Mary and Joseph, the parents of John the Baptist and the twelve disciples, were members of this sect.

#### THEIR POWER.

Now how came these men to their place of popular favor and power? In the first place, they were the representatives of the democratic spirit. Wholly abhorrent to them was Sadducean deference and servility to alien oppressors. They promoted with tireless energy the general education of the people and the evangelization of the Gentiles. Their synagogues, like Christian churches, were planted in every neighborhood, while the priesthood exhausted itself in the ritual ceremonies of the Temple.

In the second place, they emphasized the doctrine of personal consecration and separation. Strict constructionists and rigid in their ideals of piety, they recoiled from Samaritan and Gentile, and one hundred years before Christ, cut all bonds of fellowship with the Sadducees. They were the Puritans of their day, and thence derived their party name. There is power in clear-cut, definite beliefs, and austerity of routine practice.

If they carried the principle of exclusion to absurdity, we must at least credit them with honest motives and moral intensity.

In the third place, the sect held itself sponsor for the faith and practice of the fathers. In doctrine, they adhered to the unity and holiness of God, the sacredness and binding authority of the Scriptures, the Messianic hope, resurrection and immortality.

In the domain of religion, the Old Testament, with a

super-added mass of traditional rules, was their Bible; in the sphere of civic life, it was their law book; so that at the same time, the rabbis and scribes were preachers, lawyers and judges.

Such was the curious order under the Jewish church-state government. Here then, are some of the foundations of their strength. It lay in their spiritual monotheism, their standard of piety and in their respect for the common people.

It was far and away the purest and best religion then existing in the world. It furnished the only soil on which Christianity could possibly have arisen. Thus much in fairness, must be allowed to the men who resisted Sadducean infidelity and preserved the basal beliefs of the Kingdom of God. And yet, it was this sect of the Jews that confronted Jesus with the most relentless and dangerous opposition.

#### ARISTOCRACY OF LEARNING.

At the time of our Lord's coming, they were at the climax of their power. A fraternity of six or seven thousand members had been organized, composed of the scholars, rabbis and scribes. It was an aristocracy of learning, somewhat resembling the order of the Jesuits in Roman Catholicism. This brotherhood sat in Moses' seat, arbiters of all civic interests, instructors in religion and patterns of holiness. Out of their thinking came an ossified orthodox theology. The program of the Messiah, their most essential doctrine, was fully made out, and on his appearance, he must conform to it, to the letter. Their religious ideas reached finality and became a closed system. Stern and pitiless legalism charted all the duties of daily life, the letter exalted and the spirit dead. Virtual omniscience and infallibility, joined to intolerance, have always been the work and bane of essential Pharisaism. Self-complacent and serene in the rulership of Palestine, the synagogue party deemed themselves the favorite sons of God, and daring will be the man who ventures to disturb their fond dream or challenge their authority.

Their spiritual degeneration has steadily progressed,

through the lust of power, the pride of intellect and the ostentation of piety. Fatally and unconsciously, they too have lost the face of God, and are capable of destroying the prophet who will restore it. The values of the human soul and the sense of sin have almost disappeared, and the angel of pure religion mourns over a desert waste of formal orthodoxy and dead externalism.

#### A RUDE AWAKENING.

One day a strange disturbing note struck along the valley of dry bones. What tidings are these come from the Jordan valley and the hills of Galilee? An obscure Nazarene layman has flung the gage of battle at the rulers' feet. He too accepts the currently approved theological foundations. On the doctrines of God and Scripture, the Messianic hope, resurrection and immortality, He is mainly in accord with the synagogue party. But the burden of His message is, a new vision of God, the inwardness of religion, a universal new birth in righteousness, and the Kingdom of God in the soul of Jew and Gentile alike. Radical ideas like these are utterly foreign to Pharisaic modes of thought. The gigantic system of externalism and formalism lies right across the Nazarene's path. As in the days of Elijah and Martin Luther, a perilous destructive work is upon Him, if any measure of success is to wait on His ministry. To construct, He must destroy. Like Zerubbabel's workmen He must labor with the trowel in one hand and the sword in the other. Thoroughgoing differences in Scripture interpretation sprang an immediate and impossible gulf between Him and them. He never made assaults on individuals. That method is the unfailing vulgar resort of the Pharisee. His true characterization of the infamous Herod, "that fox", is no departure from His principle of honorable dealing. Friendly to all adherents of the system, it was the system itself that gave unendurable offense.

## DIVERGENCIES.

What were some of His chief divergencies of view? First, the monotheism which had become a national instinct, He enlarged into the doctrine of an impartial, universal, loving fatherhood, with its corollary of universal brotherhood. This was the completed development of the democratic tendencies of His adversaries.

Second, He made of sin a darker and deadlier evil than they had ever dreamed. Physicians of the soul were they, healing the malady by means of outward observances and conformities. His own remedy was deep as life, involving nothing less than the sacrifice of Himself.

Third, He claimed divine dignity and authority. He set Himself above all the law and prophets, and openly assumed the primacy of Israel. He did literally assert His supremacy over all past revealers, and all former revelation. At one stroke He brushed aside rabbi and scribe as echoes and quoters of old time tradition, and assumed the role of legislator and judge, commanding, prohibiting and promising on His own bare word. To the system this gave the shock of blasphemy. It was the crowning insult of autocratic impiety and insanity. But His wisdom, His active goodness and personal charm won the multitudes and added daily to the ranks of His disciples.

## THE RUPTURE.

Now there is nothing in this world so sensitive to danger as special privilege and prescriptive right. He made it impossible for the authorities to overlook His actions. They challenged His right to teach and minister to the people, thus inviting the exposure of their scriptural poverty and saintly shams.

Stirred to a frenzy of hate, they traduce Him, and would overwhelm Him with an avalanche of popular scorn. That failing, assassination will be invoked to end the episode. And yet it is avowed that a polemical attitude in the New Testament does injustice to the ruling class. Alas, how often in this world

has unholy personal ambition masked itself behind pretended zeal for religion!

The causes of this spiritual declension may not now be discussed, but we may learn that the religious leader is quite as liable as the political or military leader to be led by a desire for applause, notoriety and power. The church is just as open a field as the state for the exercise and manifestation of such unworthy motives. It is a notorious and distressing fact, that the working of ecclesiastical machinery requires no spiritual faculty in those who manage it. We need not assume that malignant lying was the expedient deliberately adopted by these men. There is no doubt that, to their distorted view, it seemed God's service to thwart and destroy Jesus. Here is the bill of indictment served against Him to the Jewish public. He is a Sabbath-breaker, a friend of sinners, a drunkard, a lunatic, a blasphemer, a traitor and an emissary of the devil.

A most humiliating human spectacle is this. It seems a demonstration of men's incapacity for true religion, when worth can look like depravity, and hypocrisy can masquerade as goodness. Orthodoxy, unsanctified by love, may betray the venom of the serpent and the ferocity of the tiger. The man or group of men, in any sphere of life, who achieves a closed system of thought, will soon lose touch with the vital issues of a growing age, and become a menace to truth and progress. Beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees, is a caution just as pertinent now as it was by the sea of Galilee. The Pharisee is ambushed in every human breast.

#### THE COUNTER CHARGES.

With no backing of worldly powers, the intrepid Captain of our salvation moves unterrified in the wild tumult of battle. How did He anger them so? Why do they gnash their teeth and plot; can it be that Goliath fears young David? Are they not ashamed to confess that He has sorely wounded the federated learning and piety of the Jewish nation? That is the compliment undesignedly paid Him. In undermining their system, He has disastrously impeached their reputation for learn-

ing and integrity. He has reduced their popularity and weakened their authority among the people. Personal damage has been inflicted truly, but there was no help for it. Truth is merciful to men, but it can never be compassionate to error. His arraignment of the system began with His ministry, severe at the outset, and increasingly terrible to the end.

The first blow was aimed at their standard of personal character: "Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of heaven." There and then He entered the stormy path that leads to Gethsemane and Calvary.

Next, He charges them with exegetical incompetency. "You do err, not understanding the Scriptures"; "you are blind leaders of the blind". This was another fatal irritant.

Then follows the accusation of inhumanity. "You oppress the poor." Greedy of money, you "rob widows", and teach children to neglect needy parents by alleging "Corban".

Most blighting of all, He denounces the satanic spirit of the order. "Ye are of your father—the devil", brewing calumny and scheming murder. Incurably perverse, even your missionary zeal but supplies new converts for hell.

With this awful severity spoke the gentlest Man that ever preached the love of God. Human language was put under strain to bear the weight of His malediction. Heaven above breaks down in wrath, and the red hot hissing iron of His indignation, set a brand on the forehead of Pharisaism, which shall be inerasable forever. Not in temper or fury of passion did He speak, but with tears in His voice and lamentation in His heart. The adversaries held sacred elemental truths, but on them had been upreared a superstructure of cumbersome tradition and ritualistic death. On deafened ears fell the offers of patient goodness and redeeming love.

#### THE END.

To such a moral conflict, there could be but one termination. Jesus saw it and told His incredulous disciples. On Olivet He wept and said, "your house is left unto you desolate". But



the Kingdom of God is among men, and like the stone cut out of the mountain, it will move onward in conquering might, filling the earth with its glory. In August, A.D., 70, nearly forty years later, Jerusalem fell before the battering rams of Rome in as wild a riot of ruin as history records. His Temple gone, his ritual obsolete, the useless Sadducee passes out of history. The Pharisee, broken and homeless, but magnificent in courageous hope, began his devious and painful journey through the centuries, surviving to this day. His tenacity of racial life and recuperative energy extorts Christian wonderment and admiration. Many of his ancient peculiarities have been dropped along the way but modern Judaism still holds by its great old doctrines and pathetically clings to some form of Messianic hope. Encouragement lies in the fact of its growing respect for Jesus and willingness to rank Him among the illustrious prophets of Israel. This tribute was recently paid Him by a Jewish author: "It is freely admitted that a great historic movement of the character and importance of Christianity cannot have arisen without a great personality to call it into existence and give it shape and distinction. Jesus of Nazareth had a mission from God, and He must have had the spiritual power and fitness to be chosen for it." Even this noble recognition is surpassed by the testimony of another Jewish scholar, who says: "Jesus is the most important Jew who ever lived, one who exercised a greater influence upon mankind and civilization than any other person, whether within the Jewish race or without it. A Jew, whose life and character have been regarded by almost all the best and wisest people, as the greatest religious exemplar for every age". -Some good day, let us hope that they shall see Him as He is and join with us in crowning Him Lord of all.