

OPPOSITIONAL TRENDS WITHIN JUDAISM DURING THE TALMUDIC AND EARLY GAONIC PERIODS

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1. Historical circumstances

1.1 Towards the end of the Second Temple

Before 70 C.E., during the last centuries of the Second Temple, Judaism consisted of a variety of trends and groups. The later Jewish tradition, as well as modern orthodox Jewish historiography, describe this early Judaism more or less as a solid unit, constructing a predominating and continuous history of Rabbinic tradition - from Moses to the Rabbis. It is worthwhile to note that Christian theological historiography sometimes also shares this view - but with an apologetical or polemical purpose: to demonstrate that Judaism formed a compact background for emerging Christianity. In reality, the situation before 70 C.E. was by far more complicated, and the earliest Christians were only one - and at that time still a rather insignificant - group among others. We know about this complex situation from the New Testament, which mentions Pharisees, Sadducees, and the disciples of John the Baptist, and from the works of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who, writing towards the end of the first century E.C., mentioned two additional groups, the militant Zealots and Sikarii, and the allegedly peace loving Essenes.

Very closely related to the Essenes was the only group of which original texts are left, the Dead Sea Scrolls, detected since 1947 in caves near Chirbet Qumran. We can be sure, that other groups existed as well. Most of them spoke Aramaic idioms, and their elite also used Hebrew, and some also Greek. In certain border areas of Palestine and in the Hellenistic

cities, smaller Jewish communities lived in more or less problematic symbiosis with non Jews, and their members were already more or less well versed in the Greek *Koiné*.

1.2 Diaspora and emerging Rabbinic Judaism

Outside Palestine existed there an important Aramaic speaking diaspora Jewry in Mesopotamia, but we know practically nothing about its early history; in the western, Greek realm there existed a widespread diaspora throughout the Roman empire, with an especially important center in Alexandria in Egypt. Here the Greek language prevailed, and Greek translations of the Torah and the other parts of the Bible were in use, and a sophisticated Jewish-Greek literature emerged. After the war against Rome in Judaea/Galilee 66-70 E.C., which did not affect the Diaspora, Hellenistic Jewry had a chance to increase its influence on Palestinian Judaism. We find, indeed, some indications for rivalries between Rabbinic groups and Hellenistic Jews, perhaps called *chicônîm* by the Rabbis - outsiders, referring to their origin outside the Land of Israel. The Rabbis disapproved of the exemplars of the Holy Scriptures and of the literature of the Hellenists and tried to replace the old Greek translations of the Bible, the so-called Septuagint, by a new translation, ascribed to Aquila. But Hellenistic Judaism as a whole suffered severely from the consequences of the Jewish revolutions against Rome which took place during the years 115-117 E.C. in North Africa, Egypt, on Cyprus and in Roman Mesopotamia. After a second revolt in Palestine, the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-135

E.C., which appears to have been geographically restricted to Judaea, the Pharisaic-Rabbinic movement remained the single religious and political force in Judaism which was able to organize Jewish life anew, by accepting Roman rule. The representatives of this Pharisaic - Rabbinic movement, which organized itself only in *chabûrôt* and in schools, spread their ideas and life order as teachers and as judges, and finally gained complete power during the late 2nd century. This was thanks to the Roman authorities which officially acknowledged the Head of the Rabbinic School of Hillel as Ethnarch or Patriarch of the Jews throughout the Roman Empire, endowed him with a certain degree of fiscal and political autonomy, of course in the sense of a "personal autonomy", without territorial basis, with the "Sanhedrin" being the supreme court and academy. During this period between 138 and 220 C.E., a kind of normative Judaism indeed emerged, Rabbinic Judaism. Its basic authoritative traditions were gathered and redacted towards 220 E.C. in the "Mishnah", defined as "oral Torah" from Sinai, equally as authoritative as the "written Torah" in the Pentateuch, both Torah forming the authoritative revelation of God to Moses on Sinai. This double Torah was developed according to the needs of the respective times by the Rabbis, experts and guardians of this tradition, which in its actualized form was called *Halakhah*. And as the Rabbis transmitted only materials which they could use for their purposes, almost no testimonies about other early Jewish trends survived. This is also true of the Hellenistic Jewish communities in the west, which between the fifth and eighth centuries underwent a continuous Rabbinization and Hebraization. It is only due to Christian interests that some examples of non-Rabbinic literature survived, especially the works of Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus.

In Mesopotamia, too, the Rabbis were successful. After 220 E.C., the Mesopotamian schools followed the Rabbinic patterns with the Mishnah as their basis, and during the 4th-7th centuries the Mesopotamian schools became even more important than the Palestinian ones. Of the Rabbinic traditions, which finally formed the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud consequently became

after the Arab conquest the decisive authoritative source of Jewish Law throughout the whole Jewish Diaspora. It is this kind of Judaism which provides us with the criteria for defining a Jewish sect or heresy from the Talmudic era¹.

Throughout the Rabbinical literature we find polemical remarks concerning non- and anti-Rabbinical tendencies during the Talmudic period, but only few of them contain more than just a few details. Especially scarce are testimonies concerning Babylonia². The main means used by the Rabbis for the demarcation of such persons, tendencies or groups were:

a) Their system of laws concerning ritual purity and impurity.

b) The defamation of all exemplars of Biblical books of non Rabbinic origin, to ensure that Rabbinic authority could not be superseded by pretended direct Biblical authority. From this attitude emerged the Masoretic Text tradition, more as a by-product of questions of power and not primarily from endeavours to arrive at the oldest and best text form.

2. Social and historical preconditions for rival groups

2.1 *The traditional macro-structure of Israel in the Rabbinic society*

According to tradition, the whole of Israel was divided into three groups of descent in the following order of rank: 1. Priests as "sons of Aaron", 2. Levites, and 3. "Israel" in the sense of "laics".

This scheme had, of course, its origin in priestly traditions and was of great sociological and political importance as long as the sanctuary with all its social and economic implications existed. The destruction of the sanctuary implied, however, the dissolution of the whole social order bound to the complicated system of cultic taxes and sacrificial revenues in favor of the first two groups, the priests and the Levites. With the temple they lost the foundations of their social existence and their political power. As a group constituted by descent and as potential cultic personnel for a new or eschatological temple, the priests and Levites nevertheless remained in existence as separate

1 Cf. F. Dexinger, *Die Sektenproblematik im Judentum*, *Kairos* 21, 1979, 273-287.

2 J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. I, 1965, 251ss.; vol. II, 1966, pp. 19ss.; vol. III, Leiden 1968, pp. 195ss.; vol. IV, 1969, pp. 434ss.

groups, and certain privileges and prescriptions concerning priests are still valid in Jewish law of today.

Priests and Levites were at the time of the Second temple already divided among themselves.

Sociologically, differences existed between noble and ordinary families, the former by hereditary tradition in charge of the important offices and therefore also disposing of the bulk of the cultic revenues. We know that rivalries and strife among priests and Levites were rather common, and consequently some priests and Levites also joined oppositional groups. The Qumran community for instance, was a group led by oppositional priests. After 70 E.C., the remnants of such groups had to yield sooner or later to the emerging Rabbinic system, but some of them evidently resisted permanently.

Of course there were also priests and a large number of Levites among the Pharisaic circles and later on among the Rabbis. But the new order essentially remained a laic one, with authority based on knowledge of the Torah in the Rabbinic sense and not on descent and hereditary privileges - except regarding the head of the House of Hillel. The evolution went even as far as to transpose the privileges which concerned the sanctuary and its cultic personal to the Rabbinic schools and their members, whether priests or laics. But principally the traditional duties concerning the cultic revenues - tithes, *terumah*, *challot* etc. - were regarded as valid among the Rabbis as well, but they restricted in practice the privileges and the possibilities for profit from priestly revenues to priests of Rabbinical observance. Thus the sociological group, constituted by descent, split into pro-Rabbinical and non-Rabbinical factions, meaning according to criteria which belong to another category, that regarding the definition of schismatic or heretical tendencies, to be mentioned below. There were historical reasons for this treatment, because the leading priestly circles at the time of the Temple were members of the Sadducean party which the Rabbis regarded in retrospect and in view of its contemporary remnants as heretical deviations from their own form of Judaism said by them to be normative.

2.2 *Proselytes and apostates.*

The election by God refers according to tradition to Israel as a whole, as a collective entity destined to fulfill the will of God, the Torah. Therefore the individual is not free to leave this elected group, for by doing so he causes damage to the collective task, the fulfillment of which was regarded as something like the motor for the process of salvific history, bringing on the final stage of history as a whole. And the individual cannot be freed or expelled, he remains essentially a part of Israel - his personal behavior notwithstanding. Even in the case of apostasy with all its consequences the principal affiliation to Israel remains intact, and certain laws remain valid even in front of apostates. A special case is the apostate city³.

It should be realized - especially by New Testament scholars - that in Jewish antiquity formal criteria did not exist which could serve as proof of a kind of membership. To be a Jew was above all a matter of descent and attachment to an existing social group (family, clan) or to one of the religious groups within the whole Judaism as a whole. In territories or localities where the large majority of the population was Jewish, as in Palestine and Mesopotamia, the territorial public administration and the organization according to religious communities were not identical institutions. The distinction between the affiliation to Judaism as an ethnic group and as a specific inner Jewish religious group was here a matter of fact insofar as Jews could be followers of the Sadducean line, a Pharisaic *Chaburah* (community), an Essene or an early Christian community, without any consequences concerning their legal status as Jews in the sense of the privileges which were guaranteed by the Hellenistic and Roman authorities to Jewry in general: to live according to its own laws and practices. The deviations concerning laws and practices were here a matter of inner-Jewish strife. Even in extreme cases, when the common consensus became violated, for instance by a public Sabbath violation in a provocative manner, the question and problem was not that of membership but that of a possible revindication according to the norms of the Torah. An exclusion from Judaism was not an issue.

3 Dt 13,12ff.; cf. mSanh I,5; IX,1; X,4ss.; mSukka III,1-5.

The situation in the small Diaspora communities, usually identical with Synagogal communities was different. Here the membership was indeed a constituent factor, and it was not by mere chance that the communal organizations had as their model the organizational patterns of Hellenistic cult associations. These communities had to maintain rigid control over their members because of the necessity to define the limits of the community for which the Jewish privileges were valid. It was, consequently, in such Diaspora communities and in communal organizations of such Jews from outside, living in Jerusalem and Palestine, where the first serious quarrels with the early Christians arose, the latter pretending to represent "Israel" and at the same time representing a permanent threat to the Jewish communities as long as the Christians had the bad image of being enemies of the Roman empire. Discernible from such quarrels are juridical or disciplinary measures taken against members of the community who violated the social or moral order and were expelled from the community - but not from Judaism.

At the same time, criteria emerged which were applied to define the minimal requirements for proselytes joining Judaism:

A certain knowledge about Jewish laws and customs, a total submersion in water, the proselyte's baptism, as symbol of leaving behind the realm of uncleanness (idolatry), circumcision as sign of the covenant and acceptance of the Torah, and before 70 E.C. spending the money for the offering of a sacrifice at the temple as initial act of participation in the cultic community. It seems that the requirements for proselytes constituted in fact the nucleus for the evolution of certain criteria valid for the definition of a Jew⁴ - especially in the Diaspora.

As the counterpart to proselytism, apostasy was essentially defined as participation in a foreign cult, *'abodah zarah*, not as a matter of differing beliefs. Also in modern Jewish law in the State of Israel, the qualification as a member of the Jewish nation is explicitly bound to the condition that the person in question is not a member of a non-Jewish religious group. The definition remained, therefore, a negative one,

not implying positive criteria for membership regarding Judaism. Apostates, in Palestinian Hebrew *m'shummadim*, in Babylonian sources *mumarim*, are not to be confused with heretics, not even in cases of the occasional practice of non Jewish religious customs and rites. The exclusion from Judaism was thus above all an act of self-exclusion by public participation in non Jewish rituals⁵.

2.3 The 'Am ha-'arūç

During the first three centuries the Rabbis had to struggle to be acknowledged by the masses of people who followed various traditions without special attachment to one of the prevailing parties. These masses were the object of a kind of missionary activity by the Rabbis, which consisted particularly in the founding of schools for children according to Rabbinic standards. Nevertheless, this so-called 'Am ha-'arūç ((Folk of the land) remained for a long time a source of preoccupation for the Rabbis, especially in view of the practices concerning ritual purity impurity, but also because of local customs which the Rabbis regarded as superstitious⁶. The differences were manifold, because the 'Am ha-'arūç did not constitute a movement, and had no common leading ideas or common practices.

Rabbis in the communities frequently faced problematical situations, because synagogues were usually in the hands of rich Jews not always aligned to Rabbinic observance. In any case, these local authorities regarded the Rabbinic endeavours - with good reason - as a quest for power in the communities, not least in the realm of justice, where the local courts usually consisted of three influential members of the community while the Patriarchal regime tried to impose Rabbinic judges, at least with one Rabbinic scholar among the three. So the struggle between Rabbis and the 'Am ha-'arūç was indeed not only one for a certain way of life within Judaism but not least a struggle for power, and comparable tensions between Rabbinical authority and communal leadership have remained characteristic of the traditional struc-

4 L. H. Schiffman, *Who is a Jew?*, Hoboken 1985.

5 J. J. Petuchowski, *The Mumar - a Study in Rabbinic Psychology*, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 30, 1959, 179-190; S. Zeitlin, *Mumar and Meshumad*, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 54, 1963/4, 84-86.

6 A. Oppenheimer, *The 'am ha-aretz. A study in the social history of the Jewish people in the Hellenistic-Roman period*, Leiden 1977.

ture of the Jewish community to this day. The argument of heresy could well have been used during such quarrels for power, without ideological or dogmatic reasons, against all persons or groups not favorable to Rabbinical claims.

2.4 The Samaritans (*kûti/kûtîm*)

Throughout the Talmudic period and afterwards remained the Samaritans, who parted from Jerusalem centered Judaism during the 4th-2nd centuries B.C., remained an Israelite group which competed with Judaism. The relationship between both groups changed considerably with the times, the Rabbis regarding the Samaritans partly as heretical and partly as a judaizing group of gentiles.

3. Groups and persons stigmatized by the Rabbis as "heretics"

3.1 Mishnah Sanhedrin X and its actualizations.

Neither the criteria for proselytes nor the criteria for apostasy provided criteria for the definition of heresy, so heresy had to be defined in some other way. Rabbinical Judaism is often called an *orthopraxy* rather than an *orthodoxy*. This is only partially and superficially true, because it is of course necessary to share some basic beliefs to remain a Jew and to practice Judaism:

above all the belief in God, and that God elected Israel to fulfill his will, and that this will of God was revealed in the double Torah by Moses to Israel on Sinai.

Some basic beliefs of this kind have been collected in the Mishnah, tractate Sanhedrin X, and elaborated in the Talmudim and later on in the Talmudic exegesis in the course of the centuries according to the respective current problems. The basic text in the Mishnah deals with a general rule and its special cases. The general rule is in accordance with the collective responsibility of Israel as elected people regarding the Torah that the whole of Israel has a share in the "World to come", in the final state of salvation, with the citation of Is 60:21: *And all your people consists of righteous ones, they shall inherit the land for ever as the sprout of my plantation, as the work*

of my hands to be proud of it". Following this general rule is a list of special cases, of exemptions: "And those are who have no share in the World to come":

1. One who says that there is no resurrection of the dead (to be proved) from the Torah, and

2. that the Torah is not from heaven.

3. The *'appiqôrôs*.

Rabbi Aqiba said:

4. Also one who reads in outside scrolls/books,

5. and who whispers (incantations) over a wound citing Ex 16:26: *Each disease which I brought upon Egypt I will not bring upon you, for I am the Lord, your healer.*

Abba Sha'ul said:

6. Also one who pronounces the Name of God according to its letters.

In sequence the Mishnah enumerates certain individuals from Israel's past who have no share in the World to come:

The kings Jorobeam, Acab and Manasseh, and Bileam, Doeg, Achitofel and Gehazi. The generation of the flood; the generation of the tower of Babylon Gen 11; the men of Sodom and Gomorrah Gen 13; Datan and Abiram; Korah and his company⁷; the spies sent out by Jehoshua Num 14,37; the generation of the desert wanderings as a whole. In sum, all individuals or groups who favored foreign cults or who caused some damage to Israel as a whole.

More significant for the subject treated here are the first three cases which imply some deviating beliefs, also attested in bAZ 18a.

The first one concerns the resurrection of the dead, well known from the New Testament as the principal difference between Pharisees and Sadducees. However, the destiny of the individual after death was not the main issue but the question of whether God cares for the world and for each individual. It was not the belief in the existence of God that was questioned but his exercise of power in the world, which in ancient times generally was believed to be ruled by stars in the sense of an astrological determination of all events; this was also the case in Judaism, only Israelites were supposed to be exempted and to act according to free will (Obeying or disobeying the Torah) in so far as religious decisions were concerned. The Sadducees as a priestly led group were convinced

7 For a tentative identification with the Essenes see J. A. Draper, 'Korah' and the Second Temple, in: W. Horbury (ed.), *Templum Amicitiae. Essays on the Second Temple presented to Ernst Bammel*, Sheffield 1991, 150-174.

that God exercised his rule under normal circumstances through the cultic-ritual order according to the Torah, indirectly, while the Rabbis stressed God's omnipotence also in view of nature and man. Therefore the second benediction of the Eighteen Benedictions, a prayer which Rabbinic Jews used to pray three times a day, contains two subjects: God's power to give rain during the winter and dew during the summer seasons, and God's power to let die and to revive. The first heretical view in the Mishnah list thus concerns God's power, and in this sense it is discussed at length also in bSanh 90b-91a.

But in the wording of the Mishnah itself the question whether resurrection might be proved by a Torah passage or not appears to be the relevant point. Indeed, as the Pentateuch contains no hint at resurrection, this claim became a kind of dogma - against the wording of the Biblical text.

The second heresy presupposes doubts concerning the Torah as revelation; some people regarded Moses, for instance, as a kind of Hellenistic lawgiver.

The third heresy is labelled as 'appiqôrsût, in general explained as referring to a popularized kind of Epicurean philosophy⁸, presupposing a life of pleasure as the main aim of human existence. We don't know precisely whom the early Rabbis called 'appiqoros, but it may be along the lines just mentioned, because the Rabbis were partisans of a middle way ethic, avoiding extremes. They were against extreme asceticism, but compared with modern standards the Rabbinic life style was nevertheless a kind of ascetic life order, restricted only by the duties towards the community and the fulfillment of the Torah. Rabbinic scholars, in particular were supposed not to indulge in pleasures but in Torah study and practice only at least as far as possible, pleasure being regarded as suited for ordinary men and for women, not for serious scholars. In some passages the designation has evidently been interchanged in the course of textual transmission with Mîn(im) or Zaddûqî(m). The second part of the six heretical criteria refer to deviating practices. The fact that such formal deviations have been included in such a list illustrates the importance of

certain practices as demarcative criteria for ensuring Rabbinic authority and power.

The Tosefta, the Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud contain differing amplifications of the basic list. The Tosefta Sanh XIII adds "sinners of Israel" in general, *Minim*, *m^es-hûmmadîm* (apostates), *m^esôrôt* (traitors), and *p^erûshîm*, extreme ascetics who dissociate themselves from the public; also mentioned are people who lead others astray to sin, terrorize their fellow men, and blaspheme. In the pTalmud X,1-2, f. 27c-29c the additions include those who cast off the yoke (of the Torah), who break the covenant (removing the sign of circumcision), who transgress the Torah in public, and mention Torah in an unclean place. Included in bSanh 38b-39a is a *kôfer ba-²iqqar*, and a man who denies in principle. The last designation has been applied in a very broad sense but primarily refers to God's actions and attributes or to the assumption of two or more powers in heaven, to persons at least questioning God's power. The belief in angels in charge of natural powers, especially stars, was very common and could culminate in a belief in more than one Divine being⁹.

3.2 Other lists of heresies

a) Similarly, mAbot III,14 enumerates as mSanh X as one who profanes the holy things, one who disregards the festivals, and one who humiliates his neighbour in public.

b) Aggadat Bereshit 52,1 mentions four examples of doubting God's power by denying resurrection, by denying the effects of penitence, by doubting God's ability to rescue out of danger, and by denying the possibility that a barren woman can give birth to a child.

4. Named groups

There are many passages in the Rabbinic literature which deal with single deviations from the Rabbinic norms concerning beliefs and practices. These are not necessarily symptoms for heresies in the sociological sense, of movements or sects. *Appiqôrsût* for instance concerns

8 A. Marmorstein, *Les Épicuriens dans la littérature talmudique*, REJ 54,1907,181-193; H. A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy*, Leiden 1973; St. M. Wagner, *The Apikoros-Epicurean, a theist or scoffer*, in: *Gesher* 9,1985,109-117.

9 A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*, Leiden 1977.

only an individual, never a group. But in some polemical contexts groups are explicitly mentioned, and we have reason to assume that they were of a certain significance for the Jewish society.

4.1. The Zadduqim and Bethusim

The groups called by these names were evidently regarded as remnants of the Sadducean party from the period before 70 E.C. The legal differences between Pharisees and Sadducees specified by Rabbinic sources are very close to legal issues attested in texts from Qumran, indicating a common tradition which had its roots in the old Zadokite tradition that at an early stage split and was used among various groups¹⁰. It is obvious that in Talmudic times as well the group of the Zaduqim was primarily represented by priests¹¹. A certain amount of uncertainty arises because of textual problems, for in the Rabbinic text tradition frequent interchanges occurred between the designations *Mîn*, *Çadûqî* and *'Appîqôrôs'*. It seems that *Minim* and *Appiqorsim* shared the basic views of the Zaduqim without belonging to that group.

The rather enigmatic designation *Bêtûsim* or Boethusim has been usually understood as the name for a group within the Sadduceans, affiliated to a priestly family descended from the High Priest Boethos at the time of Herod¹².

4.2. The Minim, the scoffers and mockers

The most interesting group were in any case the *Minim*. The meaning of the name is not clear; originally it meant perhaps no more than *mîn* = "genus" / "kind" / "degenerated variation". But the oldest texts employ the abstract noun *mînût*, implying the sense of sexual misbehaviour. This rather early use for a polemical

purpose¹³ was modelled on the polemical combination of idolatry and fornication in Biblical texts. This defamatory scheme had parallels in contemporary Christian polemics against heretics, especially gnostics. In the late first and early second century C.E. *mînût* probably referred to persons and groups who fell under the verdict of certain Roman Laws against alleged dangerous phenomena but which nevertheless were estimated as extremely dangerous for the public morals as well as for the state. This verdict concerned - as is well known - the early Christians as well, but by no means they alone. In some early Rabbinic passages we find a situation presupposed according to which a certain Rabbi was arrested by the Roman authorities because of *mînût*. Therefore we may assume that on the term *mînût* was also used by the Rabbis, now as a defamation directed against all persons and groups who exhibited a demonstrative anti-Rabbinic attitude. In later texts the application of the singular *mîn* and the plural *mînîm* prevails.

It is a widespread but nevertheless erroneous opinion that "*Mîn(im)*" refers to Christians or Jewish Christians¹⁴. In almost all instances it is clear that their basic attitude to Rabbinic tradition and even Biblical contents¹⁵ was that of scoffers and mockers. They liked to prod Rabbis into discussions against their will, asking critical and especially exegetical questions in order to provoke the Rabbis and to ridicule them in public or sometimes only for their own personal amusement.

The sources also contain statements about a positive relationship of *Minim* to non-Jewish and especially Roman authorities. *Minim* collaborated and participated readily in the Roman administration of the country, consequently they are frequently mentioned together with traitors and denunciators. Despite all this, they regarded themselves as Jews, and they were Jews, certainly of a total different religious and political orientation, militantly opposed to the

10 L. H. Schiffman, *Sectarian Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Chico 1983; id., *The Temple Scroll and the Systems of Jewish Law of the Second Commonwealth*, in: G. J. Brooke (ed.), *Temple Scroll Studies*, Sheffield 1989, 239-255.

11 J. Le Moyne, *Les Sadducéens*, Paris 1972, 95ss. 155ss.

12 J. Le Moyne, *op. cit.* pp.101ss.332ss.; M. Herr, *Mî hû' hab-Bêtûssîm?*, in: VII WCJS, Jerusalem 1980/1, 1-20.

13 Cf. mSota IX,15; tHull II,24.

14 J. Maier, *Jüdische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Christentum in der Antike*, Darmstadt 1982 (see the register s.v.). For some aspects see A. Büchler, *Über die Minim von Sepphoris and Tiberias im zweiten und dritten Jahrhundert*, in: *Judaica. Festschrift zu Hermann Cohens 70. Geburtstag*, Berlin 1912, 271-295.

15 For first century mockers who criticized the Bibel cf. Philo, *De confusione linguarum*.

traditionalist and segregationist attitude of Rabbinical Judaism and mocking at the traditional concept of the election of Israel and at the exclusiveness of the traditional monotheistic claim.

It is significant that the 12th of the Eighteen Benedictions (in fact a malediction) contains two subjects: (1) a malediction of the "usurpators"/*zedîm* or the "wicked empire" (*malkût harish'ah*), the Roman world power, and (2) a malediction of the *minîm*, which according to one testimony (tBer III,25) replaced an older malediction of *perûshîm*, of those who separated themselves from the community. In the course of the centuries other persons and groups were added to these two basic enemies, especially traitors/*mesorot* and denunciators/*malshînim* - characteristically also persons with a clear cut relationship to the foreign authorities. The "Minim" -texts in the Rabbinic literature are testimonies to a secularized, liberal and in a certain sense also syncretistic trend within Judaism after 70 C.E., which during the first stage constituted a challenge for the emerging Rabbinic system in Palestine. The hatred which the Rabbis nourished against such persons was profound, they regarded them as worse than idolaters and ordained even Biblical scrolls written or owned by Minim to be burned. Their meat was to be regarded as the meat of idolaters, their bread as the bread of Samaritans, their scriptures as the books of sourcerers (to be burnt) and their children as Mamzerim, as offspring from illegitimate sexual relationships (bChull 13a-b). But the Minim never formed an organized group or sect¹⁶, and in this respect they were on apolitical and social level clearly inferior to the well organized Rabbinic movement. Notwithstanding their collaborative attitude, the Minim were not able to meet the Roman demand for a group able to organize and to represent Jewry in general. Thus it happened, that toward the end of the second century, after the acknowledgment of the Rabbinic system by the Romans, the Minim consequently lost their significance. Babylonian sources of the 4th-6th centuries knew practically nothing about them. Min(im) was then and later on

used as a general name for Jewish heretics, among them certainly also Jewish Christians¹⁷. In the Middle Ages in particular the Karaites were denounced as Minim.

Some Mishna texts (cf. mMegilla IV,8) ascribe certain deviating practices to *minût*, which points to already existing traditions connected in a polemical way with *minût*. The basic deviations in beliefs ascribed to Minim were essentially the same as in the case of Zaduqim and 'Appiqorsim; consequently, these names could be used interchangeably in the course of textual transmission. These beliefs contained doubts about the uniqueness of God or at least about the exclusive rule of God over the world and over human history. The consequence was a denial of collective providence for Israel (election) as well as of individual providence (resurrection). Some of these views were connected with interpretations of the Book of Qohelet, therefore the Biblical ("canonical") character of this book remained contested until the fourth century E.C. (Koh.R I). Finally, *minût* covers all basic deviations without regarding the concrete group. The Rabbis were not interested in describing the beliefs and practices of their enemies in detail; they condemned them all more or less alike according to the same criteria, only occasionally mentioning some details. A Text in jBer V,4 f. 9c defines a *Min*, therefore, as person who omits during the recitation of the Eighteen Benedictions the second, concerning resurrection, the twelfth, concerning malediction of the *zedîm* (Romans), and the fourteenth, concerning the reconstruction of Jerusalem.

A variety of theories have been proposed during the debates about the contribution of Judaism to the beginnings of gnosticism. It should be noted that Rabbinic Jews were usually rather reluctant to have contact with non-Jews. Minim, on the contrary, were certainly ready to discuss religious matters with Gentiles, and they were probably beside Samaritans the main source for the knowledge of Jewish traditions among gnostics, of traditions and interpretations which had been transmitted to them already in an more or less distorted form because of their anti-Rabbinic employment. In

16 So correctly J. Le Moyne, *op.cit.*, pp. 95ss.

17 Hieronymus, *Epistolae CXII* (sometimes numbered as 89) *ad Augustinum* MPL XXII,924/CSEL LV,381,23ss., reports on Ebionites resp. Nazorites that they were called *Minæi* by the Pharisees. This is corroborated by some early medieval Genizah fragments where the 12th benediction of the Palaestian texts of the "Eighteen Benedictions" contains *nôç'rim*. It seems to be a Hebraization of the Greek *Nazaraioi*, as in Mediaeval sources Jesus Christ was called *jeshû han-nôçrî*. Cf. J. Maier, *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung*, Darmstadt 1978.

just this distorted form they proved to be very suitable for gnostic anti-Biblical and anti-Jewish arguments¹⁸.

4.3. *Perushim*

The Rabbinic literature contains as already mentioned, polemics against everybody who dissociated himself from the public, from the community: He is called a *parûsh* or a *pôresh min haç-çibbûr*.

The relationship to the groups called in Greek *pharisaioi* in Josephus and the NT is not completely clear. In any case, the Pharisaic-Rabbinic circles did not use the word as a name for themselves. The Hebrew/Aramaic designation was in its negative sense evidently polemically applied in various groups to various groups, and in Greek became the polemical designation for the pre-Rabbinic groups, the "Pharisees" exclusively. Christian writers connected them of course with the Pharisees of the New Testament. But it is remarkable that some Church fathers obtained information which presupposed "Pharisees" as a contemporary Jewish tendency; Origen connected them with the literal interpretation of the Scriptures and an elitarian tendency, referring it to the Rabbis, and Hieronymus identified them *expressis verbis* with the Rabbis¹⁹. In the eyes of interested outsiders like Origen and Hieronymus Judaism was not primarily of the Rabbinic type, an impression which indicates that at the time a gap existed between folk religion and Rabbinic elitarian religion. This all hints at a continuous use of *parûsh* as a polemical designation among non-Rabbinic Jews in front of Pharisaic and later Rabbinic circles, while the Rabbis themselves used the same name for extreme ascetic Jews only.

5. Sects mentioned in Christian literature

Certain Church fathers listed pre-Christian and post-Christian Jewish sects, Samaritan sects and other groups at the fringes of Judaism to-

gether as Jewish heretical groups, using as sources in above all the New Testament and Josephus, and therefore the historical value of their testimony has to be viewed as dubious²⁰. Nevertheless, we have to admit that the Church fathers were usually referring to Diaspora Judaism, or relied on sources of non Rabbinic origin, a realm about which we know practically nothing²¹. In such contexts several baptist groups and Jewish Christian sects also appear, and of course gnostic movements, for the engagement of the Church fathers concerning such subjects was essentially an inner-Christian, apologetical/polemical, anti-heretical one.

6. The Emergence of an anti-Rabbinic opposition in late Talmudic and early Gaonic times

The Rabbinic establishment in Palestine and especially in Mesopotamia represented during the Amoraic period (the 3rd-6th centuries) a well organized system, exercising its power in an increasingly effective way. In Palestine this system was based until the early 5th century on the political authority of the Hillelite *Nasî* (Patriarch/Ethnarch); in Mesopotamia it was organized in economically virtually almost independent great schools and additionally upheld by the regime of the *Resh galuta'* (Exilarch), the Davidic representative of Babylonian Judaism at the court of the Sassanian empire and later at the court of the Caliphes. It was precisely this demonstration of power and worldly prosperity which provoked critical questions and consequently increasing opposition. The fact that Jerusalem and the temple still remained destroyed was for a certain part of the Jews a sufficient reason to restrain as far as possible from worldly pleasures, evaluating the present time as a period of chastisement and of exile, at the best as a possibility for repentance and return. Already in early Rabbinic times there existed groups who called themselves 'Abelê Çijjôn (Mourners about Zion), and some of them even went to Jerusa-

18 J. Maier, Jüdische Faktoren bei der Entstehung der Gnosis?, in: K.-W. Tröger, *Altes Testament - Frühjudentum - Gnosis*, Berlin 1980, 239-258.

19 See N. De Lange, *Origen and the Jews*, Cambridge 1976, pp. 35s.

20 M. Simon, Les sectes juives d'après les témoignages patristiques, in: *Studia Patristica* 1, 1957, 526-539; M. Black, *The Patristic Accounts of Jewish Sectarianism*, BJRL 41, 1959, 285-303. S. J. Isser, *The Dositheans*, Leiden 1975, pp. 11ss. 57ss.

21 About this aspect cf. L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr. His Life and Thought*, London 1967, pp. 52ss.

lem, lived there in an ascetic manner and prayed regularly at the Western wall. Such groups regarded the Rabbinic way of life and exercise of power as improper and as a symptom of religious and moral degeneration. Such critical tendencies were at first only of little importance, but in the course of time they provoked an increasing critical attitude within those broader layers of the society which had to pay for the expenses of the privileged Rabbinic establishment. Thus the latter ended up in a position similar to that of the priests towards the end of the Second Temple period.

Concrete deviations from existing practices were also frequently incited by messianic movements. The claim that the end of the days or the beginning of the time of salvation were near demanded sooner or later a demonstration of this decisive change. Of the many Jewish messianic movements a certain number, therefore, indeed developed heretical tendencies, and the deviations began precisely in practice, in order to demonstrate the new visibly in the proclaimed eschatological situation. Some of the messianic movements thus ended as sectarian movements²². Such messianic convictions also played a certain role during the emergence of the Karaite movement. At some stage the critical tendencies began to transform themselves into politically and socially organized oppositional movements. The decisive turn occurred when during a political controversy one party tried to mobilize and utilize exactly this oppositional potential. It was during the 8th century that a controversy about the succession in the office of the Exilarch split the house of David in Babylonia, and a certain Anan ben David felt he was passed over and cheated. He began to organize an effective opposition²³,

and various groups joined him and formed a vigorous movement. From it emerged Karaism, which in the course of the next two centuries developed into a concurring form of Judaism, which gained the acknowledgment of the Islamic authorities, and spreading throughout the Diaspora constituted for all of Rabbinic Judaism a real threat during almost three centuries²⁴. Thanks to a series of able personalities the Rabbinic line remained victorious, and Karaism survived only in small groups in Constantinople, Southern Russia and in the Baltics. Nowadays only two small communities in Israel and an unknown number of Karaites in eastern Europe are left.

From sources on the beginnings of Karaism we also learn about a continuous tradition from the Sadducees to the Karaites²⁵. Another source for Zadoqite traditions also played a certain role: some texts attest to the finding of scrolls in caves near the Jordan valley. Some scholars connected this with the Qumran caves and assumed that some Qumran scrolls had already been found during the early Middle Ages and that such finds generated a part of the Karaite movement²⁶. Certain sources even mention a special sect, the "Cave people" (*Maghariya*), but the evidence is rather scarce²⁷ and the chronological dates uncertain. Some scholars stress the fact that in the sources this sect is reported to be of pre-Christian origin and therefore they relate it to certain Gnostics²⁸.

The weapon of the Karaites, at first very effective but in the long run without persuasive power, was a principal challenge to the very foundations of Rabbinic authority. The Karaites claimed that only traditions to be found in or derived from the Bible - the *Miqra'* - are to be acknowledged as obliging authority²⁹, and

22 A. H. Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel*, Boston 1959².

23 L. Nemoy, Anan ben David, a Re-appraisal of the Historic Data, in: Ph. Birnbaum, *Karaite Studies*, New York 1971, 309-318; M. A. Cohen, 'Anan ben David and Karaite Origins, *JQR* 68, 1978/9, 129-145. 224-234.

24 B. Chiesa, Il giudaismo caraita, in: *AISG. Atti del V congresso internazionale, Roma 1987*, 151-173; J. Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, vol. II, Philadelphia 1935; Z. Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium; the formative years, 970-1000*, New York 1959 (1977²); L. Nemoy, Elijah ben Abraham and His Tract Against the Rabbanites, in: *HUCA* 51, 1980, 63-87 (pp. 79ss. a list of early Karaite teachers). For general information see L. Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology*, New Haven 1952 (1987²).

25 J. Le Moyne, *op.cit.* pp. 137ss.

26 N. Golb, The Qumran Covenanters and the Later Jewish Sects, in: *JR* 41, 1961, 38-50; N. Wieder, *The Judaean Scrolls and Karaism*, London 1962; A. Paul, *Ecrits de Qumran et sectes juives aux premiers siècles de l'Islam*, Paris 1969; B.-Z. Wacholder, *The Dawn of Qumran*, Cincinnati 1983, pp. 148ss.

27 H. Nibley, Qumran and "The Companions of the Cave", in: *RdQ* 5, 1964/5, 177-198.

28 J. Fossum, The Magharians: A Pre-Christian Jewish Sect and its Significance for the Study of Gnosticism and Christianity, in: *Henoah* 9, 1987, 303-345.

29 A. Paul, *Le Judaïsme ancien et la Bible*, Paris 1987, pp. 50ss.

with this basis they generated the decisive phase of Masoretic work on the Bible text³⁰. Thus they eliminated the whole oral Torah as part of the revelation from Sinai, destroying the basis of all Rabbinic school activity, authority and power.

But the Karaites, the end product of an emerging compound of rather divergent oppositional tendencies, developed in their anti-Rabbinic criticism contradictory attitudes. There were ascetic and messianic tendencies along the lines of the old 'Ab'elê Çijjôn, principally conservative, traditionalistic, and there were rationalistic trends, stressing the literal sense of Scripture and developing hermeneutical³¹, philological and juridical criteria and methods.

The latter trend introduced philosophical arguments³² in line with contemporary Islamic developments, thus provoking respective reactions on the Rabbinic side as well. Certain Karaites, such as Ja'qub al-Qirqisani (10th century), wrote descriptions of other religions and sects, in a rather modern, neutral manner, now an important source about Jewish sects in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages³³.

But in the long run the Karaites failed to offer a convincing compact alternative for an organized Jewish way of life, and they degenerated during the 13th-15th centuries from an alternative form of Judaism to a sectarian group.

30 B. Chiesa, *The Emergence of Hebrew Biblical Pointing*, Frankfurt/M. 1979; J. D. Barthélemy, *Études d'histoire du texte de l'Ancien Testament*, Fribourg/Göttingen 1978 (passim).

31 Cf. B. Chiesa, *Scrittura e linguaggio secondo Qirqisani*, *Annali di Ca'Foscari* 30,3,1981,1-8; id., *Dai "Principi dell'Esegesi Biblica" di Qirqisani*, *JQR* 73,1982/3,124-137.

32 J. Faur, *Intuitive Knowledge of God in Medieval Jewish Theology*, *JQR* 67,1976/7,90-110.

33 Edition: L. Nemoy, *Kitab al-anwar wa-l marakib. Code of Karaite Law*, I-V New York 1939/43; partial English translation: B. Chiesa - W. Lockwood, *Ya'qub al-Qirqisani on Jewish Sects and Christianity*. A translation of "Kitab al-anwar" Book 1, Frankfurt/M 1984; for a characterization see L. Nemoy, *Al Qirqisani's account of the Jewish Sects and Christianity*, *HUCA* 7,1930,317-397; B. Chiesa, *A Note on Early Caraitic Historiography*, in: *Essays in Jewish Historiography. History and Philosophy*. Beiheft 27, Middletown 1988, 56-66.