

NEW TESTAMENT AND CONTEMPORANEOUS JUDAISM

BOOK DESCRIPTION

THE SAGES, THEIR CONCEPTS AND BELIEFS

by

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"The Sages" is a traditional Jewish term for the representatives of the period of Rabbinic Judaism, which begins before the time of the Maccabees and ends with the Arabic conquest, a period of more than nine hundred years. The Rabbinic literature is contained especially in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, the Mishnah and the Tosephta, the Aramaic translations of the Old Testament books, and in the Midrashim which are mainly commentaries to the Old Testament Books. This large body of literature deals both with the Jewish oral law and with the Aggadah, Jewish legends and interpretations of biblical verses and narratives about the Jewish sages and their utterances. It is the Aggadah which reflects the concepts and the beliefs of the Jewish sages, and so the Aggadah is the object of Urbach's investigations. But as there are strong links between the Aggadah and the Halakhah, the Jewish oral law, Urbach also pays due attention to this branch of Rabbinic literature. Professor Urbach is himself a professor of Talmud at the Hebrew University and one of the greatest experts in this field. As he is also an excellent scholar, he deals with the immense material according to the methods of modern scholarship. This work is based upon previous researches of Urbach himself and of his predecessors and he uses not only Jewish Rabbinic sources, but also Greek sources, New Testament and Patristic literature.

Even today, many Christians have a distorted image of Judaism, especially of the Rabbinic Judaism which is the father of the traditional Judaism of today. This is caused by medieval Christian explanation of words in the New Testament about Jewish and especially Pharisaic *Weltanschauung* and practice. But, granted that some utterances in the New Testament show a natural lack of objectivity, the content even of such statements by no means corresponds with their explanations in the Patristic and Christian medieval literature. So when many modern Christian scholars studied the

* Jerusalem. Terry Foundation of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, at the Magnes Press, 1969, third impression, 1972 (704 pages). Original Hebrew title: חז"ל — פרקי אמנות ודעות.

Jewish Rabbinic literature itself, not only did they become able to understand the New Testament – and especially the words of Jesus – in a better way, but the picture of ancient Judaism became clearer, more precise, and more positive. It became evident also that religious and spiritual creativity in Judaism did not cease with the coming of Jesus, or in 70 A. D., the year of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Titus. Urbach's book shows very clearly the creative power of Rabbinic thought in the centuries following the rise of Christianity.

In the last century much was also done by the scholars in the field of Hellenistic and apocryphal Jewish literature, and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls opened entirely new outlooks. As most of these ancient Jewish witnesses are not Pharisaic, and the Dead Sea sect even actively opposed the Pharisees, it became a common slogan among scholars to say that ancient Judaism was in no sense monolithic. This statement is surely not wrong, but if this new approach means that Rabbinism has become less important and that Christian scholars are now less obliged to study rabbinic texts, which are more difficult to understand than other branches of ancient Jewish writings, then such a statement can be a danger to sound scholarship. The Pharisaic and Rabbinic trend in Judaism is not only the most significant movement in ancient Judaism, but it is also known, from both Josephus Flavius and the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the overwhelming part of Jewry adhered to the Pharisees. It should also be recognized that the strength of Pharisaism was in its will to absorb in its teaching the most relevant religious opinions and doctrines of that time. So even now, after the new discoveries and new researches, the Pharisaism and *Weltanschauung* of Jewish stages in the Talmudic period remains the most important field of studies for understanding ancient Judaism in the time of Jesus.

On the other hand, the Pharisaic movement did not accept all the ideas and forms of religiosity which were current in ancient Judaism, and it developed and adapted those ideas which it accepted in its own characteristic way. We do not precisely know when and how it happened, but it is certain that this specific Pharisaic approach was never abandoned by the Jewish sages during the long period (more than 900 years) of their existence. The changes which happened in the development of the ideology of the Jewish sages throughout their long history are faithfully registered and explained by Urbach in his book, but they are only modifications in the broad stream of ideas of the Jewish sages. Urbach is aware of the specific character of Rabbinic thought and so he consciously decided to dedicate a special monograph not to the whole of ancient Judaism with all its exponents, but to Rabbinic Judaism only. This wise restriction, caused by the character of the material is the chief methodological merit of the monograph, which will be published by Magnes Press in an English translation by Professor Israel Abrahams, lately Chief Rabbi of Cape Town, in 1973. The Christian reader

will thus have access for the first time to a scholarly treatise whose object is Rabbinic Judaism, though the author does not neglect to show connections between Rabbinism and other ancient Jewish trends and to describe differences between the teaching of the Sages and other branches of ancient Jewish literature, e. g. the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo and apocalyptic literature, in which he is also very well versed.

Even in such a monumental work as Urbach's book, it is not possible to treat all the interesting subjects of Rabbinic thought. Jews used to compare the Talmud to a sea, and it is not only the two Talmuds which have to be treated in such a book, but the material included in the Midrashim, Rabbinic exegetical works about the various books of the Holy Scripture, has also to be used if you want to understand Rabbinic Judaism. Sometimes an important saying or legend occurs in variants and you have to indicate them and decide which variant is more original, but even the differences between these variants show trends in Rabbinism. All the items discussed by Urbach are solidly based upon the whole Rabbinic material and sometimes even variants from manuscripts are used to clarify the original wording of a particular text. So Urbach's book is also helpful as a handbook of important passages from Rabbinic literature.

As already said, Urbach's research could not treat all the ideas occurring in Rabbinic literature: a selection was badly needed. The book is composed so that its single chapters are monographs about a special subject, but the chapters are by no means independent. Even if important information about a subject can be reached by reading the book selectively, it should be remembered that the author intended that the book should be read in the order in which it was written, because the individual chapters, while being units, form a chain in which the author's argument progresses, so that a following chapter depends on a former one.

After a short introduction about previous researches in Rabbinic Judaism, the author describes the Rabbinic concepts of monotheism, treats the idea of Divine Presence, the dialectical approach to the question of how God can be simultaneously near to and far from us, and explains the concepts of God's divine power, the Rabbinic understanding of wonders and the importance of Divine names. This leads him to speak about angelology and about the idea of creation. Speaking about man, he pays due attention to the anthropology of the Jewish Sages and to the doctrine about providence. After having spoken about the meaning of the written and oral Law in Judaism, Urbach discusses the Ten Commandments, their values and their meaning for Rabbinism; the question of whether Jewish ethics were seen by the Sages as an autonomous value is also elucidated. The author sees the central idea of the Kingdom of Heaven from the aspect of two Jewish approaches to God: the approach of fear and that of love towards God. The question of death, sin, reward and punishment was acute in ancient

Judaism and so the author compares various ideas about original sin, the meaning of suffering according to Rabbinic sources, God's justice and mercy as concepts and sometimes as personifications, the importance of repentance, the good and the wicked inclinations in the hearts of men, the idea of the division of mankind between the righteous and the wicked ones, as connected both with the cosmic importance of the righteous in Rabbinic Judaism and with the idea of reward and punishment. Then he proceeds to the concept of the election of Israel and to the Jewish approach to proselytes. The concept of election leads the author to the importance of the ancient Jewish self-criticism and inner apologetics. Later chapters deal with the position of Jewish Sages within Israel in the pre-Hasmonean period, and to appreciate the importance of Hillel (first century B. C.). He then describes the decisive task of the Sages after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 A. D.). One of the most interesting chapters about the activities of the Sages is the treatise about the ideological conflict between the ideal of learning and the ideal of works. This conflict has probably found its special form in the Pauline antithesis between faith and works. In another chapter the social position of Jewish Sages is described, and the book ends with a long chapter about the Rabbinic idea of salvation.

We have tried to present to the reader the richness of Urbach's book, which will be indispensable for all scholars who try to understand ancient and even modern Judaism and its essence. A great importance of the book for the study of Christianity is evident. Urbach knows very well not only the New Testament but also the Patristic literature, and he treats Christian items objectively and with scholarly accuracy. The sayings of Jesus are set, in this book, in their historical frame and we can understand them better when we read them here with their Rabbinic parallels; the results will in many cases be astonishing for New Testament scholarship, because many obscurities in these sayings are elucidated by Urbach's treatment of them. The book is also a great contribution to the understanding of Paul's doctrines: it is useful to learn new aspects of Paul's Rabbinic learning and to see where he disagreed with Rabbinic Judaism. Though many studies have already been written about the Jewish borrowings in Patristic literature, the vast learning of Urbach makes it possible not only to see the material points of contact between Rabbinic and Patristic literature, but also to understand the differences between Judaism and Christianity in the Patristic period. Readers will also learn how the clashes between Christianity and Judaism were caused not only by the special historical situation but also by the common roots of Rabbinism and ancient Christianity and by a similar way of thinking and reasoning. This affinity between Judaism, particularly Rabbinic Judaism, and Christian thought and outlook becomes very clear from Urbach's book, even in those parts where the author does not expressly mention the Christian counterpart.

This book about the Jewish Sages is therefore a unique work, because it aims at treating not Judaism in general but the most important movement in ancient Judaism, a movement which contributed to the rise of Christianity and its flourishing in the first Christian centuries. Rabbinism was also the only movement in Judaism which continued to exist after the destruction of the Second Temple and so it formed the basis for the later development of Jewish religion and society. Thus the book is also indispensable and helpful for the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

Review by Professor David Flusser