

# **Ellis Rivkin on Judaism and the Rise of Christianity**

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For many HUC-JIR graduates, studying with Ellis Rivkin awakened them to the intellectual rewards and serious pleasures of Jewish history. Because of his remarkable ability to revitalize tired historiographical issues through a fresh reading of the sources, and because of his intense personal concern for students, Rivkin exemplifies a life devoted to the search for truth in an atmosphere of rational passion and mutual caring. Intent on rising above parochial loyalties by applying rigorous methodological strictures to old problems ripe for new solutions, Rivkin has devoted much of his career to constructing a theoretical historical ground for a liberal interpretation of Judaism and a nuanced conception of interfaith relations. His concern for Judaism in the broad context of world history and his articulation of the process of historical reconstruction come together with especial aptness in his conception of the Jewish roots of Christianity.

This essay will treat Rivkin's treatment of Christian origins as illustrative of four central features of his methodology. We will discuss, first, his use of primary sources in reconstructing the changes in Judaism of the last two centuries BCE and the first centuries CE. Second, we will call attention to Rivkin's version of structuralism, which pays close attention to the exercise of political power in history. Third, we will turn to his understanding of the relationship between religious authority and rhetoric. Fourth, we will examine his treatment of Pharisaic religiosity. These matters determine his reconstruction of the rise of the Jesus movement within first-century Jewry, its separation from the Jewish people, and the continued vitality of Judaism after the worldly triumph of Christianity at the end of the fourth century. We will conclude with some questions that Rivkin may want to address in future writings.<sup>1</sup>

## **I**

Rivkin insists that if one does not begin at the right place, one's project of historical reconstruction is contaminated with irrelevancies and misconceptions. Especially in ancient history, where there are so many gaps and such paucity of detail, all sources must be probed in a way that establishes a clear order as to which are foundational - foundational not only because they are closer in time and place to the historical question under consideration but also because the aims, realism, and information conveyed between the lines, so to speak, of the source make them so. In his work on the Pharisees, Rivkin seeks to construct an argument almost as inexorable as a geometrical proof: an argument that evaluates and places each source in its proper order so as to proceed step-by-step from the most secure conclusions to the most problematic.

Rivkin's initial approach is to perform a mental experiment, a bracketing as in the phenomenological method, of what would be known relative to the historical topic if we had this source only and no other. (We can also ask: absent this source, what would we not be able to know?) Working through each source for the Pharisees and the origins of Christianity, we seek to avoid prematurely collapsing one set of data into another. Just as

there are degrees of reliability for the sources, there are degrees of probability for the conclusions that can be extracted from them.

Establishing probabilities means not mixing highly reliable inferences and likely possibilities with speculations that have a meager basis in the evidence. Once we have established a preliminary position from an analysis of a source that has been awarded priority, we then turn to other sources, first, to determine whether our hypothesis is confirmed and, then, to devise other propositions to add to our growing picture of what probably happened.

Rivkin's work on the Pharisees and early Christianity stands out among the many writings on these topics by insisting that we must begin with Josephus and nowhere else. Only then can we fix the fundamental and crucial contours of the historical question we are seeking to answer. Whatever may have been Josephus's defects as a person and a chronicler (including the limitations of the documents on which Josephus himself relied), no other source - not the New Testament, the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Mishnah, the other tannaitic writings - comes near his historical value. Some historians have dismissed Josephus as a turncoat, a sycophant, and therefore an unreliable author. Quite likely Josephus was self-interested, arrogant, and cannot be trusted when describing what he thought or did during the years of the revolt. But without his writings we would be immeasurably poorer in our knowledge of Judea in the Herodian and early Roman periods and therefore in our ability to assemble a preliminary account of the dynamics of Jewish life in the first century CE.

There is no reason to doubt that Josephus had some degree of firsthand experience with Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. He was comfortable with the upper echelons of Roman society and aware of its procedures and values. Not devoid of religiosity and Jewish pride, Josephus had a more clear-eyed, worldly grasp of broad-ranging secular matters than the writers of the New Testament and a greater ability to report these matters than the tannaitic authors. Like Philo of Alexandria, he offered an eloquent defense of Judaism against its detractors. Josephus acted in crucial events as well as observed them, a not inconsequential qualification for a good historian in premodern times. Thus Rivkin insists that Josephus is in a class by himself, alone providing foundational information that is essential to all subsequent reconstruction.

From Josephus's all-too-fleeting accounts of the Pharisees' differences with the Sadducees, Rivkin draws his preliminary definition of the Pharisees, which enables him to avoid contaminating his reconstruction with irrelevancies derived from texts about perushim who may have been separatists but not of the Pharisaic kind. Likewise, he develops his presentation of Roman preoccupation with control of a subject population from Josephus's accounts of the behavior of Roman officials including Pontius Pilate; Rivkin thus avoids attenuating his realistic grasp of the Roman use of guile and force with the whitewashed account of Pontius Pilate in the gospels. Rivkin considers Josephus a far more reliable guide to the methods the Romans used to maintain hold over the seething Jewish natives and how the Romans would have dealt with someone whom they might have considered a potential trouble-maker, like Jesus of Nazareth. Only

secondarily does Rivkin turn to the New Testament, the next closest source chronologically to the events in question, to evaluate what they convey of the Jewish religious groupings and the Roman administration in Judea, and finally to rabbinical texts which have their origins in the Pharisaic traditions.

In his account of Pharisee-Sadducee disagreements, Josephus specifies a Pharisaic belief in the resurrection of the dead and their being "exact exponents of the laws," having "delivered to the people a great many traditional observances handed down from their ancestors and not written in the laws of Moses." The New Testament confirms the Pharisaic commitment to resurrection and refers to their sitting in the seat of Moses, that is, to claims of authority in Judaism. (We might find similarities between Jesus' polemics with other Jews and disputes between individuals or schools of Pharisees.) At the other extreme, Jesus' depiction in the gospel of John as an outsider to "the Jews" contradicts the frame we have constructed and is therefore not to be applied to a portrait of the historical Jesus. The Mishnah is our main source for the rabbinic mentality of the later second century CE, but what does it tell us of the early first century CE?

We would know practically nothing of Jewish messianism from the Mishnah alone. What reliable knowledge can we gain of institutional arrangements in Judea before 70 CE from the Mishnah, compiled at least 125 years later? One should not uncritically accept Mishnaic traditions on these matters. The tannaitic literature confirms that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, considered themselves preservers and interpreters of the traditions of the ancestors, and maintained the oral character of their teaching until it was written down at the end of the second century.

The Mishnah informs us of early figures (especially the *zugot* and the Pharisaic schools of Hillel and Shammai) and mentions certain halakhic and ritual disputes between Pharisees and their opponents. It holds that the Pharisees were in a position to disagree with the High Priest on procedures connected with the rituals of Yom Kippur.

We also have considerable data about late Second Temple apocalypticism. There may have been apocalyptic Pharisees, but belief in the imminent coming of God's Kingdom has not been shown to have been an essential attribute of Pharisaism. It was a belief of Jesus and his circle. Jesus and his disciples, as well as John the Baptist and his circle, may have had some traits in common with the Essenes (ritual immersion, a reputation for healing, sharing of property). Some of the Dead Sea Scrolls flesh out our knowledge of apocalyptic sects, but Rivkin's suspicions about the Scrolls bars data derived from them from incorporation into the foundational definition.

In sum, a solidly grounded reconstruction must be based on a discriminating judgment about the sources and a refusal to conflate them prematurely; Rivkin seeks above all to avoid mixing reliable and less reliable knowledge into a picture that goes beyond what the evidence allows.

## II

A second feature of Rivkin's historiography is an extraordinary sensitivity to methods of exerting power. Much of his insistence on not losing track of the most reliable knowledge stems from his concern for the overriding importance of power relationships in history. No full explanation of a historical particular is possible without a grasp of the political reality in which it was embedded, or, as he prefers to say, without a grasp of structural relations. Coercive power does not always have to be exercised nakedly but it lurks as a potential and is usually understood as such. Only if the historical evidence is examined with an eye to its presence, overt or covert, will we be able to understand human action.

There are many ways to exercise power. Rivkin, the structural historian, looks to see in whose hands power is concentrated, what means are available for those who can muster effective use of it, what rewards and punishments are at their disposal, how obedience is enforced when conflicts come to a head. In examining the history of Judaism this has been too easily overlooked out of concern for more spiritual matters and because Judaism has passed through so many different power structures that the historian is prone to jumble together.

A focus on sociopolitical structure is actually one of the universalistic dimensions of historical study. The omnipresence of issues of power is a key to transcending the alienness of other times and places, since the urge of some to dominate is found in every society. (We might add that Rivkin's awareness of this made possible his early acute analysis of the hidden structure of Communist totalitarianism.) Asking questions about power enables us to reconstruct persistent motives and regularized relationships between social groups and to bridge the gap between one cultural age and another quite distant from it.

The Jewish community itself has had many power structures as the internal structure of the community has been transformed from period to period: from leadership by patriarchal elders to charismatic prophets to anointed kings to professional Levites to Aaronide priests to Pharisaic sages (and the versions of the rabbinate that developed later). In Rivkin's presentation, the postexilic Aaronide priesthood had to cope with limits set for them by the Persian rulers but took advantage of opportunities made available to the hierarchy of the Jerusalem Temple to fill the vacuum left by the demise of the Davidic dynasty. Under Persian and Hellenistic rule, the priesthood enjoyed a privileged status that was underwritten by the gentile rulers who controlled the land of Israel. According to Rivkin, the rise of the Pharisees was made possible by the discrediting of priestly authority that accompanied efforts at radical Hellenization underwritten by Antiochus IV, the resulting Maccabean revolution, and the assumption of coercive power in Judea by Hasmonean priest-kings between 165 and 140 BCE (the Hasmonean dynasty claimed to be Aaronides as well as legitimate ethnarchs). The gradual transfer of power from Hasmoneans to Romans - especially the Roman use of the Herodian family as surrogates - created a wholly new situation that is necessary background for understanding Jesus' life and death.

Josephus's evidence is invaluable on the implementation of Roman rule in Judea after Pompey's intervention in 63 BCE. How did the Jews of Judea react to indirect Roman

control during the reign of Herod and to direct Roman rule afterwards? How did the Herodians and the Romans control the high priesthood? How did Herodians and Roman administrators handle protests and riots? What was the range of opinion on the Roman presence among Judeans of the early first century CE? There seem to have been those who made a distinction between obedience to the government and to God, holding that submission must be conceded, albeit reluctantly, to the rulers ("render unto Caesar what is Caesar's": tribute and taxes). Many Judeans were able realistically to accept this distinction, despite vehement insistence that obedience must be rendered to divine law in its proper domain ("render unto God what is God's": rejection of idolatry, faithful observance of the mitzvot). Others denied what Rivkin labels the division of realms between what is Caesar's and what is God's.

Rivkin argues that the Pharisees had already accepted a separation of jurisdictions between the state and themselves during the reign of Salome Alexandra (76-67 BCE). The zealous adherents of Josephus's "Fourth Philosophy" denounced this position and rejected the Roman right to conduct a census in order to collect taxes, giving rise to the Sicarii, the Zealots, and all the violent opponents of Roman rule in Judea. Apocalyptics saw the Romans as symbols of evil forces that were dominating the world just before the coming of the Kingdom of God. Judea was only one of the provinces the Romans had recently conquered, and Roman administrators knew full well their careers depended on vigilance against troublemakers. even Na=EFvet=E9 in matters of power was not a characteristic of the administrative elite of a Roman state that claimed the right to rule the world, especially in areas where its authority was only in the process of being imposed against the will of a considerable part of the local population.

What evidence have we that Pontius Pilate was exceptionally shrewd and cruel in this regard? Not the predominant New Testament presentations of Pilate (but see Luke 13:1). Pertinent are Josephus's accounts of how Pilate brutally reacted to the mildest protest and how he smoked out possible defiers of Rome with little regard for subtle distinctions in their ideologies. Are there examples of the Roman use of coercive violence even against what we might now consider otherworldly and pacifist figures? Again Josephus comes to our aid with his accounts of the massacres by Roman soldiers of a certain Theudas and an Egyptian prophet and their followers (*Antiquities*, XX, 97-99; *Jewish War*, II, 261-265). These precedents are relevant when we consider who was probably responsible for the decision to crucify Jesus.

Could Roman techniques of repressing potentially dangerous groups bring light to the question of whether the crucifixion was most likely the decision of Jews or Romans? Could the surviving institutions of the Second Commonwealth, about which we know relatively little, have functioned on such a matter with the independence attributed to them in the gospel account of Jesus' supposed trial? Rivkin uses Josephus to demonstrate that the Pharisees and Sadducees may have disagreed on fundamental beliefs but, in the first century CE, there is no evidence that the leadership of either group had the ability or the desire to inflict capital punishment on religious dissidents. Rivkin argues that the evidence indicates that they had agreed tacitly to "live and let live," not only with an eye

to each other but with respect to all the apocalyptic groups that appeared in Judea in this time of economic stress, social turmoil, religious ferment, and high spiritual excitement.

What about the High Priest, who is implicated in the gospel accounts? The high priesthood was under the direct control of the Roman authorities - indeed, the High Priest was an appointee of the Roman prefect who held under lock and key the sacred garments needed for officiating in the Holy of Holies. The High Priest would hardly have been a man who would courageously defy Roman interests. It should be noted that one of the first acts of the rebels in 65 CE was to replace the Roman-appointed High Priest with a humble kohen chosen by lot.

What body might have interviewed Jesus before turning him over to Pontius Pilate for execution? Rivkin refines Solomon Zeitlin's argument that the sanhedrin that examined Jesus has to be distinguished from the pre-70 sanhedrin (the Bet Din ha-Gadol) that made decisions of law. The body that questioned Jesus would have been a committee of mixed Pharisaic-Sadducean composition, a collection of political advisers. The Bet Din would have been a religio-legal assembly, composed exclusively of Pharisees and presided over by two eminent sages of the generation. It is difficult to believe that Sadducees, who denied the authority of the oral laws, could have adjudicated together in the same assembly with Pharisees, who insisted on the primacy of the oral laws. Hypothesizing that the gospel account has some basis in authentic memory, Rivkin insists that the specially selected Judeans convened by the High Priest to discuss the case of Jesus did not constitute a Bet Din but a council of Judeans on whom Pilate relied for advice. (One of Rivkin's most incisive formulations of a historical problem and solution - an explicit and elegant epitome of his methodology - can be found in his article "Beth Din, Boul=E9, Sanhedrin: A Tragedy of Errors," where he concludes from the use of the term sanhedrin in Josephus and the New Testament that this gathering of consultants must be sharply distinguished from the Bet Din of the Mishnah, which is almost always translated into Greek as boul=E9.) Given the political realities of the time, the participants may have agreed to serve in a sanhedrin that advised the Roman administration either because they benefited directly from Roman rule or because they were aware of the consequences of defying Roman might and wanted to protect their coreligionists and their land. In either case they were not the authoritative Bet Din of Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism.

Rivkin thus reframes the old question "who crucified Jesus" to eliminate the implication that one should mainly be concerned with assigning blame to some person or group. Only "what [structure] crucified Jesus" is capable of being addressed in a serious historical way. Armed with a reconstruction of the power relations suggested by the evidence in Josephus, one rereads the gospels for data that support the conclusion that Jesus was crucified, in the last analysis, because Roman supervisors and possibly a few Judean consultants were concerned with maintaining public order in the face of being told that someone hailed as "King of the Jews" had appeared in a Jerusalem crammed with pilgrims celebrating the Passover festival of redemption from slavery. It is also suggestive, if not conclusive, that the Mishnaic laws touching on blasphemy do not apply in Jesus' case; that the Mishnaic procedures for indictments involving capital punishment required at least a two-day trial (certainly not on the eve of a holiday) and the issuance of

stern warnings to witnesses; and that the documented forms of capital punishment according to Jewish law definitely did not include crucifixion. (Crucifixion was the most drastic means employed by Romans, and once by a Hasmonean king, to punish rebels and deter the populace from revolt.)

In sum, a circumstantial analysis of the death of Jesus illustrates Rivkin's principle that only if we have an understanding of the power structure of a society can we begin to understand a momentous event that takes place in it.

### III

A third emphasis in Rivkin's historiography is a sensitivity to conflicts over authority in Judaism under the general rubric of such major conflicts in any religion or ideology. Rivkin inoculates his students against taking rhetoric at face value (a lesson especially useful when reading religious documents in a seminary). Sincerity or insincerity is not the primary issue for historians aware of the convolutions of human motivation. Dispute among Jews over when a holiday was to be celebrated or how a purification ritual was to be carried out might actually have as its subtext a struggle between antagonistic movements to determine who has the right to determine correct Jewish behavior and ultimately who has say-so over the entire Jewish people.

Fortunately for historians, the Pentateuch and the prophetic books contain evidence of early patterns of legitimation in ancient Israel that were superseded in the Second Temple period. Passages in the written Torah grant extensive authority to the Aaronide priesthood as the culminating stage of the canonization of the Pentateuchal text. Impossible as it is to reconstruct in detail the evolution of early Israel's leadership, there are signs of tensions in the history books between shoftim, prophets, kings, and Levites. In the second chapter of *The Shaping of Jewish History*, Rivkin offers an ingenious solution to the creation of "Pentateuchalism" that takes as its pivot the desire to assert Aaronide supremacy over all other forms of leadership through its monopoly of the sacrificial means of expiating sin. Dominant Aaronide authority (presumably the organizing principle of the Sadducean party) is rejected by a Pharisaic movement that relegates the priests to a limited role as mere cultic functionaries. Through this reversal of power between Aaronide priests and the sages, ascribed status was replaced by achieved status in the supreme leadership of Judaism: a priestocracy based on patrilineal descent, monopoly of sacrifices, and Temple privilege was superseded by a nomocracy based on intellect, mastery of tradition, and skill in argumentation, judgment, and the rearing up of disciples.

Inasmuch as Jewish historians had a tendency to blur the revolutionary significance of this transference of authority and prefer to trace the rise of the scholar class to the time of Ezra if not earlier, Rivkin's analysis is striking. Again using Josephus as our preliminary source and paying special attention to Ben Sira's awed deference to the high priesthood (Ben Sira lived not long before the Maccabean revolt), Rivkin hypothesizes the rise to preeminence of the sages in the context of the spread of Hellenization and the series of profound spiritual and political crises in Judea during the second and first centuries BCE. Early Christianity, Rivkin shows, has to be understood not only in the context of the

power exerted by Rome in Judea but also as a result of a dramatic reshaping of Judaism spearheaded by the Pharisaic sages.

It was Pharisaism, not Jesus as some popularizers have insisted, that was the exemplar of reform in ancient Judaism. It is virtually an understatement that without the Pharisees there would have been no Christianity. One of the most fertile items for Rivkin's "Pharisaic revolution" is that the Pharisees legitimated the resurrection of the dead as a bona fide Jewish belief, while the Sadducees denied it. Whatever else they believed, Jesus' followers embraced this belief vehemently, taking the further step of affirming that Jesus was resurrected before their very eyes as an earnest of the resurrection about to occur to all worthy people. Rivkin concurs with many contemporary scholars that Paul cannot be understood apart from Pharisaism, as we shall see later.

The recognition of this indebtedness transforms the terms of Jewish-Christian dialogue. We referred earlier to Jesus' disputes with the Pharisees. Whatever may have been Jesus' concept of his mission (a problem which may never be fully solved), the Pharisees would have demurred from the claim made for Jesus in the synoptic gospels that, as Son of Man, he was Lord of the Sabbath and could do what he wanted while he was with his disciples, even if it were contrary to sacred practice.

How can the synoptic gospels' treatment of Jesus fit into the religious roles available to him in the Judaism of his day? In *What Crucified Jesus?* Rivkin proposes that Jesus combined (1) the personal power to heal and resurrect ascribed in Scripture to Elijah with (2) visions of universal peace and justice at the End of Days attributed to Isaiah, and that these biblical precedents were folded into the (3) argumentative and interpretative skills of a Pharisaic sage. This potent mixture, in a time of fermenting apocalyptic tensions, may have come to a head with Jesus' formal arrival in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Perhaps this entrance, conducted with his followers in expectation of the imminent establishment of the Kingdom of God, set the stage for a confrontation with authority that they had previously avoided. (It may even have been intended to provoke the authorities and bring about the establishment of the Kingdom.)

How would the Roman authorities and their Jewish lackeys have handled such a potentially explosive situation? Rivkin points to Josephus's account of the death of John the Baptist as instructive. John was not a member of a Fourth Philosophy group advocating violence against a pro-Roman such as Herod the Tetrarch (Herod Antipas [4 BCE-39 CE], who was a Roman appointee). John saw baptism not as preparation for an apocalyptic Final War but in relation to repentance of sins. Even so, Herod the Tetrarch had no hesitation in putting him to death as a danger to political stability. As with Theudas and the Egyptian prophet, such problems were disposed of without much regard to legal niceties.

Was Jesus a threat to the religious leadership? There is no indication, using Rivkin's methodology, that the religious leadership acted as an inquisitorial body to designate sectarian figures as spiritually dangerous and therefore to turn them over to the Romans for execution. In a situation when Judaism was in considerable flux, when many sectarian

apocalyptic and separatist groups existed side by side, when the End of Time was in the air, the Bet Din did not function to ferret out heresy or even to punish blasphemy. (It was not blasphemy to be called "Son of Man" or "King of the Jews" or even to claim to be a messiah.) Whatever may have been the insults that different Jewish groups hurled at each other (religious invective can be a sign of the intensity of belief in a heated environment), there are no accounts of violence of Sadducees versus Pharisees or Essenes, or vice versa. Unlike the medieval church inquisition, there was no clear-cut orthodoxy allied with secular power to ferret out religious heretics. Rivkin concludes that the various movements or "schools" of Judaism of the first century all in practice accepted the principle of "live-and-let-live."

"Live-and-let-live" meant that the conflict of authority within Judaism could be resolved by the action of a third party, by a divorce between the conflicting groups, or by the eventual disappearance of the other options. The Romans cut the ground out from under the Sadducees by destroying the Temple in 70 CE. The Essene orders seem to have vanished quickly or to have gone underground. The Zealot movement disappeared after the suppression of the revolts of the second century. The one issue that had real staying power was the supreme authority of the sages collectively as accepted by most Jews (and sustained politically by the Romans after the Roman-Jewish War), as distinct from the quite different religious status ascribed to the spokespeople of the Christ in the early Church. Whatever other factors came into play, the Torah of the sages versus the Christ of the Church eventuated in the parting of the ways between the two communities, each of which considered itself the true Israel of God with a most reliable channel of salvation. Not all disagreements result in irreversible splits (the disputes between the Pharisaic schools of Hillel and Shammai did not), but on many issues it was difficult to turn back once the quarrel came to be hinged on who had authority to loosen and to bind, as would later be the case with Karaites versus Rabbanites, the bishop of Rome versus the Eastern patriarchs, the Reformers versus the Papacy, and so forth. In the heat of ideological battle, form, so to speak, became as important as content - if not more so.

#### IV

A fourth aspect of Rivkin's historiography, along with his concern to prioritize sources, articulate power structures, and lay bare conflicts over authority, concerns the inner life of the religious person. Ideological systems such as Marxism, which emphasize power structures and social conflict, tend to dismiss the spiritual dimension as epiphenomenal, that is, as merely a superstructure to material motives. Rivkin seeks to maintain what he calls "internality" as an independent historical dimension. Thus for Rivkin, Pentateuchalism added something new to the older Yahwist concept of sin as disloyalty. As a result of the redaction and publication of the Pentateuch, the individual became far more responsible for observing the Pentateuchal commandments than in previous phases of Israelite religion because the individual now had a powerful stake in knowing and observing the divine laws that ensured long life, prosperity, and numerous offspring. What Rivkin calls "the Aaronide fixation on the sinning-expiation process" shifted the focus to a more introspective sphere, emphasizing the individual's active share in the welfare of the entire people.

Rivkin holds that the Pharisees built on Pentateuchalism but went far beyond it in internalizing the mitzvot as the means whereby the individual directly responds to God's call without the need for a mediator. The key to the heightened internalization of the "mitzvah system of salvation" was the principle of personal immortality.

Characteristic of his way of freshly reframing a historical phenomenon that is all too easily taken for granted, Rivkin calls our attention to the tremendous impact probably made by the Pharisaic doctrines of the Fatherhood of God, the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, and renewed life in the World to Come. Resurrection was the capping-stone of a lengthy process of extending God's control to more and more realms of being: now God ruled effectively over death as well as mundane history. This World became an antechamber to a transmundane existence opened to all souls who had obeyed God's commandments. Resurrection, Last Judgment, and eternal life transformed the individual's sense of himself or herself in relation to history, the universe, and the divine Parent. For Rivkin, forms of Pharisaism have remained vital for many centuries because Pharisaism flourished not only under good fortune and victory but successfully coped with all manner of breakdown, disaster, and agony as well.

As many scholars have shown, Pharisaism was far from being a religion of rote conformity. With the support of Pharisees, proselytism became widespread (the Pharisees may have devised the procedures for it); the synagogue network flourished (Rivkin holds that the Pharisees devised the bet kneset as a local center of worship, study, and charitable deeds); the synagogue became a focus of Jewish social and religious interaction; the biblical burden of ritual cleanliness was attenuated to facilitate living amid the hubbub of towns and cities; broad-based educational institutions were created; and midrashic ways of making Scripture relevant were elaborated. Not only refashioning Jewish society, Pharisaism also affected the "reality within," reorganizing the psychic structure of the Jew in novel ways.

Extreme demands can produce extreme anxiety. Rivkin conceives of Paul's conversion as the product of a tormented soul searching for amelioration of tensions which, at least for him, were magnified by fanatic observance of the mitzvot. It was not the teachings of Jesus that attracted Paul to the nascent Church when it was still a Jewish sect. Rather, he came to feel that Jesus' resurrection was God's sure victory over human sinfulness and the resolution of painful doubts as to his eventual salvation. Rivkin locates Paul in the history of Jewish ideas by arguing that Paul's dying and redeeming Christ was at bottom an extension of the "Pharisees' quest for the kingdom within." However much the appeal of Christianity to gentiles may have been furthered by the idea of an incarnate and resurrected savior-God who atoned for the sins of humanity, Christianity for Rivkin constitutes, basically, a variation of the Pharisaism that was a main turning point in the history of Judaism, perhaps in the history of civilization.

For Rivkin, Pharisaism represents an enormous leap in the unfolding of what he calls the "unity principle." This unity principle enabled Judaism to subsume under an ever-expanding monotheistic framework the dilemmas of life that biblical Israelites and later Jews confronted at different stages in their historical development. After the conquest of

Canaan, the Israelite tribes incorporated the religious needs of sedentary agriculture into a unity principle that was earlier symbolized by the deity of patriarchal seminomadic clans. The Davidic monarchy found ways to legitimate its rule by a unity principle that had made room for regularized government and a central shrine. The classical prophets incorporated the overriding demands of justice and righteousness into a unity principle that had mandated absolute loyalty only to Israel's God. The Aaronides sublated the previous phases into a comprehensive system for the atonement of sin. Precommitment to a singular and omnipotent God as the eternal answer forced the linking up of each new phase with its precursors. The Pharisees incorporated into Judaism what Rivkin calls the "internal city," a dynamic and portable code of religious law applicable, with suitable adjustments, anywhere a Jew settled. Later stages of Judaism, including medieval philosophy and mysticism and modern Jewish movements and ideologies, are further extensions of the unity principle to new domains of life and knowledge. The unity principle is what Rivkin calls a "problem-solver" of the highest order, representing the "sovereignty of unity over diversity" together with the cherishing of difference. Rivkin's unity principle serves as his connecting link between the various stages in the history of Judaism from its beginning until humanity will be unified in a global society that affirms the transcendent worth of each.

Here historiography has crossed into theology, explanation of the past into hope for the future.

## V

We would like to conclude by pointing to some theoretical problems connected with Rivkin's structuralism. There are actually two pairs of structural principles in Rivkin's writings. The first is the structure of power in society in contrast to the structure of internality in the person. The second is the structure of cultural symbols (although Rivkin does not use this term) in contrast to the structure of cosmic order.

We have explicated at some length Rivkin's principle that little in history can be understood without due regard to power structures, and that ideological disputes can frequently be unmasked as conflicting claims to dominant authority. Focusing on power enables him often to cut through the verbiage of the sources to the heart of the matter. Yet, as noted earlier, Rivkin disagrees with Marxists who reduce spirituality to the epiphenomenal. In his work on the Pharisees, he frequently alludes to creation in the domain of the "reality within" constituted by the individual consciousness of sin, will, forgiveness, and resolve.

For Rivkin, Pentateuchalism in a limited way and Pharisaism and Christianity in a more sweeping manner underwrote a self-awareness on the part of the individual vis-à-vis the divine that was a watershed in the history of all religions with roots in the Hebrew Bible. Concentrating on power structures, however, opens a historian to charges of reductionism: oversimplifying the complexities, contradictions, and multiple causalities of history. By postulating internality as a separate realm for historical analysis, Rivkin

implies that the contents of the human mind - ideas, values, meanings, spiritual goals - act as independent variables. Worldviews are not only rhetoric, they are causal forces.

This can be further unpacked. Need one insist that power and authority structures exist in the mind as well as in the physical means of coercion? Sociopolitical structures are as much a product of mentality as they are causal pressures that shape mentality. Rivkin suggests that certain Levitical families banded together to call themselves "sons of Aaron" to the exclusion of other Levites and then proceeded to create the Pentateuch to give them authority over the other Levites as well as over the remaining prophets and the people. But these Aaronide priests were immersed in the mentality of Pentateuchalism as well as creators of it. Have we not restored, then, a historiography in which power structures are only one but not the determinative element of what happens? So we ask Rivkin, how are the objectivity of power structures and the subjectivity of consciousness to be interconnected while preserving the integrity of each as historical factors?

The second pair of structural concepts revolve around Rivkin's unity principle. Is his unity principle a heuristic term for the matrix that holds Jewish culture together, akin to the cultural patterns that provide internal coherence to all civilizations (especially to cultural systems of complex societies where elites seek to impose coherence on the welter of opinions and meanings around them)? If so, the unity principle is not a "problem solver": it is a problem-solution. From this perspective, the unity principle is a supreme symbolic form - a myth, according to the twentieth-century sophisticated usage of the term. It is ontic, not ontological; descriptive, not prescriptive. To be sure, there is an alternative. The alternative is that the unity principle is a metaphysical reality, an active source of value as well as a means for the metamorphosis of value. Is the unity principle a cosmic thrust that may be represented by various cultures in different ways but is an absolute transcending them - even the Absolute according to philosophers and mystics around the world? The major thinker in Judaism to suggest that the Absolute was both a principle of cultural unity and a cosmic force was Nahman Krochmal. Is Rivkin a Krochmalian?

We intend by these concluding remarks to indicate that it is a merit of Rivkin's position that it raises classical questions about the nature of history and the relation of history to theology. That Ellis Rivkin enabled us to think about historical study in this way, that he has framed fruitful hypotheses in almost every area of Jewish past, that he led us to take history with utmost seriousness even though we may prefer alternative solutions to specific problems, that he showed us how to use history critically to frame Judaism in modern ways that preserved a direct contact with earlier forms - all this is, we hope, the greatest compliment that can be paid to a great teacher.

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## Notes

The following are some of Rivkin's writings on the subjects covered in this essay:

- *The Shaping of Jewish History: A Radical New Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).
- *A Hidden Revolution: The Pharisees' Search for the Kingdom Within* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978).
- *What Crucified Jesus?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).
- "The Parting of the Ways: Two Articles," *Jewish Heritage Reader* edited by Morris Adler (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1965), 159-172.
- "Solomon Zeitlin's Contributions to the Historiography of the Inter-Testamental Period," *Judaism* 14, no. 3 (summer 1965), 10-13.
- "The Internal City: Judaism and Urbanization," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5, no.2 (1966), 325-340.
- "Beth Din, Boul=E9, Sanhedrin: A Tragedy of Errors," *Hebrew Union College Annual* vol. 46 (1975), 181-199.
- "A New Look at Josephus," *The Solomon Goldman Lectures* vol.6, edited by Mayer I. Gruber (Chicago: Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1993), 3-15.