THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN
PHARISAIC AND CHRISTIAN JUDAISM:
SOME EARLY GOSPEL EVIDENCE

by

ROBERT A. WILD, S.J.

Milwaukee

Approximately nineteen pericopes in the Synoptic Gospels in one way or another depict Jesus in direct controversy with Pharisaic opponents.¹ This large number of recorded debates and conflicts would not evoke any special comment if the Pharisees in fact constituted a de jure or de facto "religious establishment" for Palestinian Judaism. While the Sitze im Leben for these narratives might variously be located either in the life of Jesus or in the situation of early Christian communities, the underlying state of affairs would remain constant: a struggle by acknowledged and established religious authority against a real or possible heretical movement. This view of Pharisaic religious dominance was widely assumed in the past and still makes its appearance with regularity in some of the standard introductions to New Testament literature.²


That in the years following the events of 70 A.D. the rabbinic descendants of the Pharisees did come to exercise such hegemony more and more completely is not in dispute. Therefore, it is not surprising that Christian accounts of Jesus' ministry which appeared in the latter part of the first century tended, if anything, to give the Pharisees an increasingly higher profile as the opponents of Jesus and his followers. The increasing conflicts between Christians and the spiritual descendants of the Pharisees as the latter sought to renew and unify Judaism after the destruction of the Temple led to a stress on Pharisaic opposition to Jesus in Christian traditions emanating from this period. Such an insistence served to connect the experience of the followers with those of the Master.

It is fair to ask, however, if the Pharisees were so dominant everywhere in Palestinian Judaism prior to the year 70 A.D. Séan Freyne has argued that Pharisaic presence in Jesus' home region, Galilee, was "sporadic" and "apparently unsuccessful" in forwarding its aims until well after the events of 70. Contrary to L. Finkelstein who believed that the patrician landowning class which effectively controlled Galilee was Pharisaic, indeed of the tradition of Shammai, Freyne argues that this class was Sadducean. He therefore thinks it probable that the Sadducees controlled religious matters as well. The people of Galilee were generally agrarian and conservative and largely disinterested in the halakhic reforms advocated by the Pharisees. If Freyne is correct, many reasons might still have led the tradition to assign a Galilean setting to narratives more modes: view of Pharisaic religious authority but still places them in the "religious establishment." His views are also challenged in this present article.

3 In the following pericopae the Pharisees are specifically designated as the opponents even though the Marcan parallels follow a different course: Matt. 9:32-34/12:22-24, 15:12, 21:45, 22:34-40, 22:41-46; Luke 5:17-26 and 7:36-50. Mark 3:6 and Matt. 12:14, both redactional additions to the account of "The Man with the Withered Hand" (Mark 3:1-5 parr.), specify that Jesus' opponents in this case were Pharisees (Matt.) or Pharisees and Herodians (Mark). Luke's version (6:6-11) integrates the Pharisees into the full account.

4 Although the Pharisees remain prominent figures in the Gospel of John, the experience of expulsion from the synagogue also led the Johannine community bitterly to designate their opponents as "the Jews."


7 Freyne, *Galilee*, 316-18 and 322.