

PHARISEES, JUDAISERS AND PAUL

Rev. Dr. R. Dean Anderson (last revised: 13 November 2016)

Judaism in the first century AD exhibited quite some diversity. Nevertheless, there was one group which was by far and away the most popular among the people, namely, the Pharisees. Despite the confrontations between Pharisees and both John the Baptist and Jesus, we are told that a number of them after Pentecost became Christian. Acts 15:5, speaking of the apostolic conference in Jerusalem, states:

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."¹

The interesting thing here is not so much that certain Pharisees became Christian, but that it would appear that, having become Christian, they still considered themselves to be Pharisees. So what characterised a Pharisee?

Defining Pharisees

For a start Pharisees were viewed as the orthodox Jews of their day, respecting the divine inspiration of what we know as the canonical Old Testament. They therefore (unlike the Sadducees) accepted belief in the existence of angels and of the resurrection (cf. Acts 23:6-9). In addition they were well-known for observing the traditions of their elders which interpreted and built upon the law of God. Several of these traditions are mentioned in the Gospels (e.g. Matt. 15:1-9). The traditions themselves, however, were strictly oral and nothing was committed to writing until the Mishnah, compiled at the beginning of the third century AD.

The Gospels highlight opposition between the Pharisees and John the Baptist. Matthew tells us that when John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him, he replied:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt. 3:7-10)

And Jesus, later reflecting upon the work of John the baptist says:

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." ²⁹ (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, ³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) (Luke 7:28-30)

In fact, it appears that the Jewish leaders even accused John of being demon-possessed (Matt. 11:18; Luke 7:33).

This criticism is, of course, not only levelled at the Pharisees and therefore does not specifically target any of their unique beliefs. Rather, it shows John's opposition to what he saw as the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders in general. Some three years later when Jesus asked the chief priests, scribes and elders whether John had been a prophet we are told that these Jewish leaders had not believed in John (Matt. 21:23-26 and parallels).

Clearly the Pharisees viewed themselves as children of Abraham. In this respect, the most famous Pharisee of the New Testament, the apostle Paul, clearly tells us what had been important to him before his conversion:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are from the ESV.

Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Phil. 3:4b-6)

Circumcision and genealogy are items that Paul mentions as important to him being a Jew. His characterisation of himself as a 'Pharisee' has especially to do with his relationship to God's law. For Paul, then, the essence of being a Pharisee has to do with the particular attention paid to God's law – the law as interpreted and built upon by means of the traditions of the elders. We may compare the statement of Jesus that "the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat" (Matt. 23:1).

It is at this point that we can return to the specific criticism that Jesus levelled at the Pharisees:

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” ³ He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” ⁶ he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

⁸ ““This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.””
(Matt. 15:1-9)

The Gospels are full of Jesus' criticism of traditions which tend to circumvent the commandments of God or only focus upon outward activities (cf. Matt. 5:20-47 and 23:1-36). The Pharisees themselves were also highly critical of Jesus, particularly from the beginning of the second year of his ministry when he began to provoke them by healing on the sabbath. Eventually, as Matthew tells us, the Pharisees accused Jesus of working miracles by the power of the devil (Matt. 12:22-30).

We may ask ourselves how this picture of the Pharisees compares to that provided by the priest, Josephus, who also belonged to the party of the Pharisees. He describes them in *Ant.* 18.12-15.

¹² For the Pharisees completely disparage their mode of life allowing nothing which would lead to more comfort, and they follow the lead of these good things which their doctrine having judged (worthy) has handed down, considering the keeping of these things, which (doctrine) desired to dictate, worth fighting for. Yet they yield honour to those who have gone before them in age not boldly agitating in contradiction of those who had brought in these teachings. ¹³ And while deeming all things worthy to be accomplished by destiny they do not remove the human will of the desire for the same, a will which seems to be a judgment belonging to God both by means of the council-chamber of the aforementioned destiny and by the person who has willed to join sides with either virtue or evil. ¹⁴ And they believe in the immortal strength of souls and also in both punishments and rewards under the earth for those whose conduct in life was either virtuous or evil, and that some (souls) will be laid to rest in eternal imprisonment and others given the tranquillity of being revived to new life. ¹⁵ And on account of these same things they are most persuasive to the peoples [i.e. the Jews of the various tribes] and whatever divine matters pertain to the performance of vows and holy rites are performed according to the interpretation of these (Pharisees). The cities have testified to the greatness of their virtue by means of the conduct of the greater life in both their mode of living and their words. (Transl. R.D.A.)²

Several aspects of Josephus' description are important to note. The Pharisees were characterised by their virtue and obedience to God's law as interpreted by their tradition. The common people saw this and respected it resulting in a general populace that tended to follow their teachings.³ Despite Josephus' torturous self-expression (rather more so in the original Greek), he shows that Pharisees respected God's providence

² For notes on the Greek text of this and the following quotation see my *Josephus and the NT: A Greek Reader*, to be found at:
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/ancient-greek/>

³ See Josephus, *Ant.* 13.288

while at the same time refusing to deny free-will. There is a strong emphasis on leading a life of virtue according to God's law in accordance with the teachings of tradition. Without explicitly saying so, it is this that determines whether one will be taken into heaven or sent to hell.⁴ It ought to be noted that for the Jews of the day, the common belief was that the law of Moses was given to the Jews and not to other peoples and was therefore not valid for other peoples.⁵ God's blessing was offered to the Jews only. To receive God's blessing one had to become a Jew.⁶

When Josephus later goes on to speak about John the baptist, he is surprisingly quite positive. But perhaps one ought not to be so surprised. Josephus was only born in ca. AD 37 and was not personally admonished by John. More importantly, Josephus' idea about what John taught is quite different to the Gospel accounts. By looking at Josephus' picture of John's theology, we can learn what seems to have made him acceptable to a Pharisee.

... for indeed Herod killed this fellow [i.e. John the baptist], a good man, who commanded those Jews who exercised virtue and treated matters with respect to each other in justice and those towards God in reverence to come together for baptism; for in this way the baptising appeared acceptable to him, not using it for the pardon of certain sins, but for the purity of the body; seeing that indeed the soul had already been cleansed by righteousness. (*Ant.* 18,117, transl. R.D.A.)

We see that Josephus correctly understood that John required good works (which John called 'the fruit of repentance') before admitting someone to baptism. However, he interpreted this to mean that baptism itself was not a symbol of forgiveness of sins, but – like the cleansing rituals of Mosaic law – a purification of the body. The whole idea of *God* forgiving sins and washing sinners clean is lost. The reason for this is that the good works John required are no longer seen to be a sign of repentance for sin, but good works that in some way show that pardon for sins is no longer necessary!

We should note that there is no direct evidence that Pharisees formulated a specific doctrine of salvation by works. Nevertheless, their attention to the outward obedience of the law was important and was at times stressed to such an extent that consciousness of sin and the need for forgiveness tends to recede into the background. Of course, the Pharisees themselves were well aware of the grace of God in establishing the covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants. But it is the combination of these considerations which leads the apostle Paul to say of Jews in his day (and he would typically be thinking of the Pharisees):

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³² Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. (Rom. 9:30-32a)

I have underlined two rather telling words here: "as if". Even Paul himself does not directly accuse the Jews of a distinct doctrine of salvation by works, but he is convinced that this is what their practice amounted to.

⁴ This essay is not intended to be a scholarly contribution to the debates around E. P. Sander's view of Palestinian Judaism in terms of covenantal nomism (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1977]), nor the resultant "new perspective" on Paul which seeks to take account of this view of Judaism and rescue Paul from the charge of attacking a straw man with his 'erroneous' description of Jews and Judaizers. It will be obvious to the informed reader that I cannot agree with the 'new perspective' and that I take the New Testament data as primary for a description of both Judaizers and Jews. That being said, while Sanders has certainly made many good points in defence of Jewish views of God's grace in granting the covenant relationship with his people, what we are concerned with here is more the kinds of things that Pharisees felt to be important matters in their theology and its practice. B. Chilton and J. Neusner (*Judaism in the New Testament: Practices and Beliefs* [London: Routledge, 1995]) rightly emphasise the need to distinguish various different 'Judaisms' – as they put it – that is, various groups within Israel at the time who profiled themselves quite distinctly by emphasising and de-emphasising different elements of their theology.

⁵ Gentiles were therefore forbidden to contribute to any of the obligatory offerings in the temple. If they wished to make a contribution to the God of the Jews, they had to give a contribution to the official "voluntary" temple collection, see S. Safrai, "The Temple" in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Assen/ Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1987) 2.880.

⁶ Certain limitations remained. The daughters of circumcised Gentiles were, for example, not permitted to marry priests.

The conversion of Pharisees

We saw at the beginning from Acts 15 that many Pharisees had converted to faith in Jesus Christ and yet at the same time continued to view themselves as *Pharisees*. What then did this conversion amount to? The Gospels and Acts show us that the basic tenet of faith was the conviction that Jesus truly is the promised Christ / Messiah and that he died on the cross and was raised bodily from the dead only later to ascend into heaven. Given that belief in resurrection was a key dogma of the Pharisees, they were much better predisposed to belief in the eye-witness accounts of Jesus' resurrection than groups such as the Sadducees.

Acts 15, however, shows us that these Pharisees were not prepared for the idea that Gentiles could become part of believing Israel without being circumcised. The history of Acts 10-11 already shows us how difficult this had been for the apostle Peter. Although Acts 15 records that the gathering of church leaders and apostles came to decide that Gentiles were not bound to the whole system of Mosaic law, many of Paul's letters demonstrate that not all believing Pharisees were satisfied. According to Acts 15:1 Pharisees even went so far as to state that one could not be saved unless circumcised according to the custom of Moses. This is a bold statement and goes further than what we might expect from our review of Pharisaic doctrine. However, we need to realise that these Christian Pharisees had felt provoked by the suggestion that Gentiles could be acceptable to God without circumcision and thus without the Mosaic legal system (Acts 15:5) upon which their whole tradition of elders was based. We do not need to postulate that such a theological pronouncement had always been part of their belief-system. It is human nature, that when a precious part of one's belief-system is challenged, a person tends to make just *that* aspect of their faith even more important than it may ever have been before. It is just this which seems to have happened with the Christian Judaisers who set about sending their own preachers to the various Gentile churches established by Paul in order to warn them that they needed to be circumcised and obey the whole law of Moses.

Paul's letter to the Galatians gives us the idea that these Pharisees continued to work with the notion that obedience to the legal system of Moses in some way prepared God to be merciful towards a person and therefore to grant forgiveness through Jesus.⁷ To put it in other terms, the confession of Jesus as the Messiah was an important, but not central part of their theology. In their opinion, Jesus did not change the basic legal system and its part to play in one's relationship to God.⁸ We should remember that this understanding only came slowly to the apostles as well, as Peter's wrestling with the question of circumcision and the dietary laws shows (Acts 10-11; Gal. 2).

Paul's answer to the Judaisers

Paul accepted the fact that God had chosen Israel. This election lay in the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. God promised that a great nation would spring forth from Abraham (Israel). When God stated in Gen. 12:3 "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" then he was saying that ultimately all the nations would be able to be counted among the offspring of Abraham and therefore participate in God's blessing.

Paul objected to the fact that the Jews had missed the significance of Genesis 15:1-6. In this passage the real formation of God's covenant with Abraham is to be found (Gen. 17 with the sign of circumcision is a later confirmation). In Genesis 15:6 we ought to read *how* Abraham (and all his offspring—including the nations of Gen. 12:3) may attain to God's blessing. *God reckons his righteousness to those with faith in his promise.* That which is "reckoned" is not earned. It is a gift given out of the undeserved love of God (= grace). See especially Romans 4 and Galatians 3:6-14.

The sign of circumcision which was given years later in Genesis 17 is only a confirmation of this. Justification through faith (Gen. 15) came first and does not depend upon bodily circumcision (Gen. 17). If one attempts to earn a personal righteousness by obeying God's law, only a curse is gained. God requires a complete obedience which is not possible for man (given his sinful nature). God holds the whole world (Jews

⁷ For a similar thought among the later (Tannaitic) rabbi's, see Mekhilta, *Pisha* 5 – 12.6 and also 16 where circumcision is said to be the reason ('merit') Israel was redeemed from Egypt (cited in Sanders, *Op.cit.*, 89, 90-91). It should be said that later rabbinic thought also contradicted the idea that the redemption of Israel was earned.

⁸ It is of course possible that their ideas were complex and nuanced. Paul himself seems not to have known who the Judaiser responsible for disturbing the Galatians was (Gal. 5:10) and therefore may not himself have had an exact idea of his theology. It is therefore no longer possible to reconstruct such possible complexity and nuance, if it existed at all. It serves no purpose to speculate.

and Gentiles) responsible for the breaking of His law.⁹ The law may have been given to Israel in written form by God's grace, but the whole world is accountable to it. The Gentiles have the principles (lit. "the work") of God's law written upon their hearts as evidenced by their conscience (Rom. 2:14-15). They ought to know truth about God and worship and thank him, but they only end up suppressing this truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18-21).¹⁰ The big problem is the fact that neither Jew nor Gentile is able to fully obey this law. God's election of Israel shows his grace to them because *justification through faith* is granted to this people, instead of the requirement of an impossible personal righteousness. Those who at the day of judgment are not justified by faith will receive an eternal punishment.

In the letter to the Galatians Paul argues against churches which desire to use the law of Moses—seen as regulations whereby one may earn righteousness before God—as a means to earn God's blessing. Paul argues that the coming of Christ has abrogated the law (Gal. 3:23ff, Rom. 7:1-6). He speaks in Galatians 4:9-10 of the law as something which contains "weak and worthless elemental things,"¹¹ and provides as examples the laws concerning the ecclesiastical year of the Old Testament. That the laws which had to do with the temple service were also included is clear from the fact that Paul summarises the difference between the Judaisers and the Gospel by pointing to the difference between the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:25-26). If the earthly Jerusalem was important to the Judaisers, then this can only point to the fact that they still considered the temple service (together with all the regulations concerning it) binding.

In Galatians 3:6-14 Paul desires to make clear to the Galatians that the Gospel rests upon the promise of the Lord given to the forefather Abraham. The promise is not to be obtained through the works of the law. The way of the works of the law ends in a curse (see above). Christ has borne this curse for all believers (Jews and Gentiles). The result is that the promise of God to Abraham accrues to the Gentiles *in Christ Jesus*.

The combination of Pharisaic ideas concerning justification and the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah is a denial of the meaning of Christ's death (Gal. 2:21). This "Gospel" is *anathema* to God (Gal. 1:6-9). It effectively precludes the possibility of receiving God's blessing. Although Paul speaks firmly of the law being abrogated in Christ, he reclaims the law for the Christian through the principle of love. Love is the fulfilment of the law (Rom. 13:8-10). As such, of course, love can only be made concrete in the life of the Christian by applying the moral requirements of God's law, which is the law of love. Obedience, of which the Christian only has a small beginning, is worked through the power of God's Holy Spirit dwelling within him.

The continuation of the Judaistic church

It is perhaps worthwhile to briefly note that the churches of the Judaisers continued to exist throughout the period of the early church, not only in Palestine and Syria but also in Asia Minor. Apart from various testimonies among the early church fathers we also have the evidence of Judaistic-Christian grave inscriptions (particularly from Asia Minor).

Already mid. second century we hear in general terms from Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 47) of the Judaising churches which upheld all the laws of Moses. Other sources describe the sect known as Ebionites. Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.26) tells us that they followed the laws of Moses, repudiated the apostle Paul as an apostate from Moses (cf. Or. *Cels.* 5.65), held the earthly Jerusalem in high esteem, and used only (a form of) the Gospel of Matthew. They seem to have also denied the virgin birth of Jesus who was taken to be a son of Joseph, although Origen (*Cels.* 5.61) states that some Ebionites did accept the virgin birth. Hippolytus (*Haer.* 7.22)

⁹ Paul does not think in categories of moral versus ceremonial law. The "law" is here, as always, the "law of God given through Moses".

¹⁰ The presupposition here is that in principle the whole Mosaic law (including ceremonies) was, before Christ, also the standard to which God held the Gentiles accountable. See for example Rom. 5:20 where the coming of the law increased transgression for *all*. The context is not restricted to Jews, cf. Rom. 3:29.

¹¹ Some commentators prefer the translation "spirits of the world" instead of "elemental things" in Gal. 4:3 and 9. This is more of an (incorrect) interpretation than a translation. The word which Paul uses signifies "elemental things." It can be used, for example, in grammar to denote the letters of the alphabet. The letters are the "elemental things" of grammar. In the natural science of antiquity the "elemental things" were the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. When Paul addresses the subject of religion, he considers the "elemental things of the world" to be rituals. Why then do some advocate the translation / interpretation "spirits of the world"? Certain philosophers from antiquity explain in their philosophy that the "spirits of the world" belong to the "elemental things." This interpretation is hardly probable in the context of Paul's letter.

tells us something of their theology of Jesus whom they considered to be a man just like us, except for the fact that he was the first to observe the law completely. That is why he was called “the Christ.” By his obedience to the law he was justified. Followers of Jesus are also justified by the law and thus also become “Christs.”¹² Tertullian (*Carn. Christ.* 14) adds that Jesus was considered to have an angel in him, just as the prophet Zechariah. Whether this theology also held for the Judaisers in Paul’s day is unknown. Later sources inform us of a gnosticising form of Ebionitism (cf. the Ps.-Clementine homilies and the Ebionite Gospel).

¹² Does this have any connection with what John says about Christians having an “anointing” (1 Jn. 2:27)?