The Pharisees Through Separate Lenses

Matthew 12:14 reads “But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.” The nature of the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees in the 1st century CE has set the tone for the nature of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Throughout the New Testament (NT) the Pharisees are portrayed as meticulous, self-righteous, wealthy hypocrites. As a Christian, I always assumed that the Pharisees were just that. They were this horrible embodiment of an unspoken rivalry between Christianity and Judaism. However, the Pharisees were none of those things. The traditional Christian view of the Pharisees is not only complicated and contradictory, but also problematic and untrue. The Pharisees were a small sect striving to live a precise lifestyle while occupying the same streets and shops as Jews with disparate priorities. A more accurate representation of who the Pharisees were completely reframes them in relationship to Jesus, and, therefore, in relationship to Christianity as a whole. Moreover, it completely changes the interpretation of each book of the NT, each book from Josephus, and each piece of oral Torah given to bring both of these timeless religious communities closer to God.

I vividly remember one Tuesday sitting around a large table at Bible study talking about the Pharisees. I wasn’t really sure what they looked like or who they were, I only had the Bible in front of me and the words of the adults around me. I imagined a group of about 10 to 15 older men. They had bushy beards and long robes. They moved in a sort of triangle formation with eyes darting everywhere searching for impurity. It was like they were waiting for someone, anyone, to do something wrong so that they could be accused and punished according to a strict, made up Law that claimed to be Biblical.

I got all of this, like many Christians, from assumptions based on the text in front of me. I inadvertently brought myself into a long-standing tradition of distaste and distrust. The Pharisees are quickly deemed “hypocrites” and “a brood of vipers.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It seems as though they thought everyone around them was constantly impure.[[2]](#footnote-2) Some would go so far as to say that they had “a hatred of other peoples.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In a similar vein, they have been known for their exclusivity, as they were only men. There is a famous prayer by Rabbi Judah which precisely pulls together the Pharisaic distaste for other groups: “Blessed be Thou for not having made me a gentile, a woman, or an ignoramus."[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Pharisees are also set against Jesus in their hopes for fellow Jews. They abandoned “love [and] mercy” for their neighbors, considering themselves to be the only true form of Judaism. They believed themselves to have taken over the position as chosen community of God. They were “uncharitable and proud” to be set apart.[[5]](#footnote-5) On the other hand, Jesus is noted for his love of all mankind,[[6]](#footnote-6) his last breath spent on begging for forgiveness of the sin of the world.

The motives of the Pharisees are also regularly villainized in comparison to those of Jesus. The Pharisees “sought the glory of men,” as opposed to the glory of God. They became enthralled with processes of sanctification, which gave them a reputation of piety. Sadly, according to traditional opinion, maintenance of this reputation became the basis for their actions. More generally, focus on what the Pharisees actually believed is overtaken by the motives assigned to them and particularity with which they lived.

This traditional view of the Pharisees is problematic for many reasons. It blindly sets Christianity against Judaism, it uses sources without acknowledging their contexts, and it refuses to take into account the rhetoric of an ancient writer. There are three main sources to consider in analysis of who the Pharisees were and what they believed: Josephus, the New Testament, and rabbinic literature.[[7]](#footnote-7) Each source comes with its own set of problems.

The New Testament, and more specifically those who have interpreted it over time, intend to set the Pharisees as opposite to Jesus. From the Christian perspective, the “conflict stories” played out in accusations, short anecdotes, and parables “revealed his adversaries’ falseness.” Of course, from the Jewish perspective it is “misleadingly defam[ing]” the Pharisees.[[8]](#footnote-8) The problem lies in the completely and totally subjective nature of parables. They are meant to be allegorical; they are meant to be small examples to be applied across broad circumstances. When applying or interpreting parables it is easy to manipulate them.[[9]](#footnote-9) The parable becomes like putty in the hands of a child when given to interpreters with an agenda, stated or hidden. Further, the rhetorical strategy of the authors of the Gospels must be considered. The Latin *vituperatio* is used to name the strategy of description of an enemy using “stereotypical pejorative expressions.”9 The goal in using these negative stereotypes is not to further describe the Pharisees, but rather just to identify them as opponents. *Vituperatio* is common across the Gospels and the rest of the NT.9 It should, at the very least, be noted before considering the NT as a source of accurate information about the Pharisees.

The Jewish Midrash is not very thorough in describing the Pharisees by name, but these rabbis consider themselves to be descendants of the Pharisees.[[10]](#footnote-10) At face value, a source from descendants seems valid, but these rabbis are distant descendants. At the earliest they are removed from the life of Jesus by about 50 years. Most of the rabbinic literature was not written until 100 to 200 years after the Pharisees were an active social group. Therefore, to depend on the rabbinic literature to describe who the Pharisees were is to take information and throw it back in time.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Josephus was of a priestly family. The priests were an entire social class that capitalized on their foreknowledge and understanding of the Law, for they were the ones to interpret the Law for the people[[12]](#footnote-12) as well as advise those in power.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Pharisees were claiming the ability to speak to God to receive foreknowledge. They were also known as the interpreters of the Law. Their new presence as a social and political power was a threat to the priestly class’ status as those closest to God. Josephus’ family, his livelihood, and his entire class was under an inadvertent siege by the Pharisees.[[14]](#footnote-14) How could he speak highly, or maybe even accurately, of a group attacking his existence?

All of these misconceptions and complicated sources can be condensed into a few core beliefs, but we really don’t know much. We don’t have writing by the Pharisees themselves, nor extensive writing by an outside source similar to that of Josephus on the Essenes. Although, the name “Pharisees” is fairly telling in itself. This was a name given to the sect by other Jews in the time period. It comes from the Hebrew verb “parash” or “to separate.” This plays on two levels. On one hand, the Pharisees were a sect that intentionally separated themselves from their neighbors through many daily practices. On the other hand, they worked to separate the Law. They looked to make it more exact.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, this is not the name used within the group. The group we now call the Pharisees called themselves the “Habhurim” or the “brothers” or “companions.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Pharisees existed striving within “a style of life, not a profession.”[[17]](#footnote-17) They did not wake up in the morning and begin wandering around in a triangle formation searching for people to accuse or crucify. They did not wake up in the morning to study. They woke up in the morning as every other Jew did. They began farming or doing some sort of simple trade to keep their families alive. However, in every act of farming or tent making they acted a certain way. They ate certain things. It was not that they were Pharisees living Pharisaic lives, but rather Jews living a specific lifestyle aimed at a greater understanding of and interaction with the Law.

In the broadest sense, the only difference between the Pharisees and other Jews was their attention to “Oral Law.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Oral Law is the tradition and law surrounding the Torah, but not in the Torah. Some say that these traditions were also given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but not written down.[[19]](#footnote-19) Others say that they are the interpretations by “fathers” beginning “from Moses to the great Pharisees of Herod’s early rule.”[[20]](#footnote-20) In either case, the Oral Law was considered equal to the Written Law.[[21]](#footnote-21) These two types of Law come together to make up the core of the Pharisaic beliefs. The idea was to please God by, first, defining the Law specifically and, second, by strictly carrying out each letter or syllable. The technical term is “covenantal nomism,” literally law of the covenant.[[22]](#footnote-22) The Pharisees were not trying to make a life out of attacking other Jews, or even out of only studying the Law. They wanted to figure out how to best serve the God that gave them the Law for His covenant.

The Pharisees are also known for their belief in free will and resurrection, or life after death. The Pharisees had an impressive ability to combine a belief in God’s divine providence while also believing that people maintain free will. They combine the two so that God knows all that will happen, and He has instructed in a certain way, but people have the choice to follow God. There is evidence for this outlook across Judaism, but it’s not very solid. Sadducees firmly disagreed, we are unsure of common Judaism’s exact stance, and both the Essenes and the Pharisees “accept both: election by grace, obedience by free will.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The Pharisees held tightly to a belief in resurrection. They did not acknowledge *the* resurrection. Resurrection in the eyes of the Pharisees is a future event in which all of those who have died after a life of piety will be brought to life in a heavenly paradise on Earth. Of course, this puts them in the perfect position for both misunderstanding and opposing the Christian idea that Jesus was resurrected after three days. The Pharisees believed the event of resurrection will be set off by the Messianic Age, beginning only when the Law is observed perfectly. Therefore, the basic question is not if pious believers are brought back to life, but whether or not Jesus began the Messianic Age. The Pharisees would say absolutely not.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Much of the traditional Christian view of the Pharisees is simply a caricature built out of *vituperatio.* These were normal people; they took part in every day life. If someone like Paul, a well-known Pharisee, was persecuting Christians, he must have come into contact with them. He must have touched the growing Christian populations in town centers.[[25]](#footnote-25) They travelled “cross sea and land to make a single convert”[[26]](#footnote-26) so they must have intermingled with common, unclean Jews. Moreover, throughout the Gospels the Pharisees seemingly run into Jesus. They must be in the synagogues, streets, Temple, or shops to meet him in these places.[[27]](#footnote-27) How could they possibly be as hypocritical, spiteful, arrogant, and separatist as they are portrayed when they spend every day living alongside the common people?

Some claim that Jesus himself was a Pharisee. While the evidence for this is not very convincing, Jesus absolutely spent time alongside the Pharisees. He held similar beliefs in terms of who God is, what life looks like after death, and the need for consistent, daily, actions of faith. The main difference and cause for strife between Jesus and the Pharisees was Jesus’ claim to be a prophet. Jesus was not only content with calling himself a prophet, but also in completely changing the interpretation of the Law as given to Moses. The Pharisees worked to understand the Law as given. They looked to clarify. They made more precise. Jesus came to change the Law. Jesus made judgements about what of the Law was needed and what was not. The Pharisees put attention to the detail of the given Law above all else. Jesus put people above the Law. He wanted to bring individuals closer to God, not to keep a community inside of a covenant based on Laws with God.[[28]](#footnote-28)

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?”[[29]](#footnote-29) The Pharisees are upset here not because of the physical work that the disciples are doing, but because they are breaking the Law given by God. The basis of their relationship with God, the Law, is being called into question. Jesus is calling upon the stories of the Old Testament. He is using the people as an explanation. He is putting the needs of the people above the Law. It’s how Jesus interacts with God.

In reality, the Pharisees were not evil. They were not wealthy, nor were they overly meticulous. The Pharisees were working to remain close to God. Frequently, yes, they did speak against Jesus. However, it is not with malicious intent. Just as we wouldn’t expect Jesus to be sharp tongued in his response, we should not make the Pharisee’s tone so sharp. It was not that these people were competing or arguing, but rather engaging in dialogue. It was two different ways to God communicating what they think is best. It is no different than a meeting of different sects of Christianity today. There is not malicious intent, but rather a quarrel so that others will be saved or brought into the covenant with God.

In the Talmud, Jesus is called a “bastard” and a “sorcerer.”[[30]](#footnote-30) In the NT, the Pharisees are considered harsh and separatist. Understanding who the Pharisees actually were takes what looks like diametrically opposed groups and brings them into a conversation with one another. Understanding that the people considered the representatives of Judaism were not attacking the representative of Christianity calms the modern tension between these two belief systems. Without knowing who the Pharisees were, I put 10 to 15 old men in a triangle formation with uneasy glances and horrible posture into the New Testament. Now, I’ve put a group of farmers and merchants standing in town discussing the Law just as I stand and discuss religion with my peers in front of the library. This research has drastically changed my interpretation of many books of the New Testament, many statements from Josephus, and many pieces of oral Torah each documented with the purpose of bringing both of these timeless religious communities closer to God.

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1. Culbertson, “Changing Images” 539 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Reilly, “Our Lord” 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Reilly, 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Phipps, “Prophetic Pharisee” 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Reilly, 64-65 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Reilly, 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sanders, “Judaism: Practice and Belief” 413 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thurén, “Jesus the Victimizer?” 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thurén, 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sanders, “Judaism: Practice and Belief” 423 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sanders, “Judaism: Practice and Belief” 413 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nehemiah 8:1-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. McCready and Reinhartz, “Common Judaism” 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. McCready and Reinhartz, 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Culbertson, “Changing Christian Images” 540 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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21. Culbertson, “Changing Christian Images” 540 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Lecture 4/4/19 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sanders, “Judaism: Practice and Belief” 417-419 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Phipps, “Prophetic Pharisee” 549-550 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Sanders, “Judaism: Practice and Belief” 428 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Matthew 23:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Sanders, “Judaism: Practice and Belief” 429 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Phipps, “Prophetic Pharisee” 25-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Matthew 12:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Phipps, “Prophetic Pharisee” 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)