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Jesus' Enemies?: Why Didn't the Pharisees Reject Their Friend Jesus?

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Chapter Seven

Jesus' Enemies?

Why Didn't the Pharisees Reject Their Friend Jesus?

IN THIS CHAPTER WE turn our attention to the Pharisees. In doing so, we hope to gain broad insight into how Jesus fit within the Jewish social hierarchy in first-century Galilee and Judea, at least according to the Gospels. Any conclusions we draw must be understood within a broad framework, not a nuanced, highly historical framework. We are not assuming that literally *every* Pharisee fit this description. Pharisees are central figures in the Christian demonization of Jews from late antiquity to the present. The Gospels portray Pharisees as self-righteous, hypocritical, spiritually hollow, overly ritualistic, and even demonic. Some of the Gospels portray Pharisees as the chief opponents of Jesus, the people largely responsible for his death. But is this portrayal fair? In this chapter, we explore the primary characteristics of Pharisees according to both Josephus and the authors of the Gospels to answer this question, as well as to understand better the nature of Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees, who were Israel's leaders at the time of Jesus. Based on evidence and inference, I posit that not only were Jesus and the Pharisees not vicious enemies, but that they had a cordial relationship.

Briefly, Who Are the Pharisees?

Josephus published *Antiquities of the Jews* in 93 CE, roughly twenty years after publishing his account of the Jewish-Roman War (*Jewish War*).¹ Josephus

1. For a brief discussion on the dating of Josephus's *Antiquities* and *Life*, see Rajak,

mentions the Pharisees in both of these works, but they are featured only briefly and often incidentally. From what we can gather, Pharisaism as a distinct movement developed about 150 years before the birth of Jesus (second century BCE) amidst the turmoil of Greek persecutions and the corruption of the Jewish priestly establishment. When Jews wrested the temple and the region from the Greeks and took control of their own state in 152 BCE, the Jews had in place two major branches of leadership: priests and kings. But where were the prophets? In times past, Israel was led by *prophets*, priests, and kings. As we learned in chapter 3, the standard conclusion among many Bible commentators is that prophets ceased with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. This is false. Many Jews in the Second Temple period identified several prophets of their time, including John the Baptist and Jesus. It is likely that when Jews began ruling their own state, Pharisees swept in to fill the leadership void that was formerly filled by the great prophets of old, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

Pharisees likely did not see themselves as equals with these former prophets, but it seems that they did attempt to reestablish that class of social reformers and moral gatekeepers who would hold the kings accountable and ensure that God's laws were observed properly. Pharisees may have sought to fill this role "until a true prophet [shall] arise," as stated in the first book of Maccabees.² Evidence for this is found throughout the ancient sources. For instance, note that the early rabbis, intellectual heirs of the Pharisees, traced their leadership lineage through the prophets back to Moses, as opposed to through the priestly lines back to Aaron, like other groups: "Moses received [the law] at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to elders, and elders to prophets. And the prophets handed it on to the [rabbis]," including Gamaliel, the famous Pharisaic leader and teacher of Paul, who was also a Pharisee.³

Several scholars have defined the Pharisees as a reformist group, as opposed to an *introversionist*, or separatist, sect—a group that separates itself from the world like the Dead Sea sect at Qumran.⁴ Like the former Israelite prophets, Pharisees were not revolutionaries but "moral reformers."⁵ They sought to *reform* the Jewish system. They did not seek to react "against the society [but] to shape the society and agitate *in* it and *for* it"⁶—to improve

Josephus, 237–38.

2. 1 Macc 14:41. See also 1 Macc 4:46.

3. Avot 1:1, 2–18. See translation in Neusner, *Mishnah*, 672.

4. See Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees*, 286; Deines, "Pharisees," 449.

5. Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, 82.

6. Deines, "Pharisees," 449.

the system already in place in earlier centuries, in this case, the temple-state system run by prophets, priests, and kings. Their aim was to preserve the law and national traditions as they came from Moses (not as distorted by Sadducean priests). Like the prophets of old, Pharisees were a repentance group. They preached obedience to God's laws. As reformers, the Pharisees mirrored the prophets of old who consistently counseled and challenged the kings. Harvard-trained political theorist Michael Walzer reminds us that, other than "Moses, whose position is unique in biblical history, the prophet as a political figure *first appears together with the king*."⁷ Note that it was not until the Jewish guerrilla fighters, led by a priestly family called "Hasmoneans," took the throne in 152 BCE that Josephus first mentioned Pharisees, as they were immediately thrust into political jousting with the new Hasmonean leaders. One of the first Hasmonean leaders, John Hyrcanus, sought out Pharisees for moral guidance. The populace rejected a subsequent king, Alexander Jannaeus, because the Pharisees disapproved of him. This is precisely why Alexander Jannaeus admonished his successor, Alexandra Salome, to make peace with the Pharisees and heed their counsel. After the Hasmonean dynasty, the Pharisees challenged King Herod on multiple occasions. For example, Josephus mentioned a Pharisee named Samaias, an "upright man" who challenged Herod and the Sanhedrin.⁸ All of this is reminiscent of the relationships between prophets and kings in times past: Samuel and King Saul, Nathan and King David, Elijah and King Ahab, Amos and King Amaziah, Isaiah and King Hezekiah, and Jeremiah and King Zedekiah. Israel's prophets developed a legacy of both "stand[ing] against the social power structures" and "serving Israel's kings as trusted counselors."⁹ It seems that Pharisees also sought to implement this kind of check and balance of power.

Not only did Pharisaic characteristics resemble those of ancient Israelite prophets, but Josephus described the Pharisees as those who made men think that God favored Pharisaism.¹⁰ Josephus added that the populace viewed Pharisees as prophet-type leaders, as they "were believed to have foreknowledge of things through God's appearances to them."¹¹ He also

7. Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, 75; emphasis added.

8. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.172–74, 15:3, trans. Marcus and Wikgren; Mason, *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees*, 261–62.

9. Leuchter, *Samuel and Tradition*, 43.

10. Josephus, *Ant.* 17.2.4.

11. Josephus, *Ant.* 17.2.4, trans. Marcus and Wikgren.

provided examples of their prophetic gifts when they prophesied of Herod's future deeds and tribulations.¹²

The Popularity of the Pharisees

One of the salient Pharisaic attributes that emerged in Josephus's writings is their popularity with the Jewish masses, not just in Galilee but also in Judea, the home of the temple establishment and ruling class. Josephus even seemed to claim on one occasion that he was a Pharisee, but a closer examination of his brief autobiographical statement,¹³ when coupled with his other statements about Pharisees, reveals that this was not so. Rather, he was a proud descendent of the priestly class. In his groundbreaking work on the Pharisees in Josephus's writings, Steve Mason, presently working at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, challenged the "consensus" that Josephus was a Pharisee. He posited that Josephus's original statement in Greek, "I began to follow the school of the Pharisees," should actually be read, "I began to engage in public life, following the school of the Pharisees."¹⁴ Josephus acknowledged that to be successful in public life he must behave according to the rulings of the Pharisees, because they had the support of the populace. This interpretation is the most plausible based on other statements he made about Pharisees, including the following:

[Sadducean] doctrine is received but by a few, *yet by those still of the greatest dignity*. But they are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates . . . they addict themselves to the notions of the Pharisees because the multitude would not otherwise bear them.¹⁵

As a member of the priestly clan and a non-Pharisee, Josephus acknowledged that Pharisees' opinions and legal rulings held sway with the masses; therefore, he, as well as the larger Sadducean body, were forced to capitulate to them. This does not mean that Josephus was a Pharisee himself. This passage also claims that Pharisees were popular with the masses. Using modern political language, if the Sadducees did not uphold the rulings of the popular Pharisees, then they would have been a lame-duck ruling body. Obviously we are using modern democratic terminology here, which

12. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.163–176; 15.1–4.

13. Josephus, *Life* 2.12.

14. Mason, "Was Josephus a Pharisee?," 40–41.

15. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.4; emphasis added. Translation in Mason, "Josephus's Pharisees," 30.

is bit misplaced because Jews lived within an ancient authoritarian model. Clearly the masses had no power, so why would the priestly ruling class care to follow Pharisees simply because Pharisees were popular with the masses? The answer is apparent in the following paragraph.

Another passage in Josephus that illustrates the popularity of the Pharisees details their contention with the high priest John Hyrcanus (135–104 BCE). The Pharisees, explained Josephus, are “so great [in] their influence with the masses that even when they speak against a king or high priest, they immediately gain credence.”¹⁶ Josephus lamented that Pharisees, with the support of the populace, criticized John Hyrcanus, who was his hero. Josephus believed that God had blessed Hyrcanus with the gift of prophesy. He also named his oldest son after Hyrcanus.¹⁷ Later, Josephus essentially blamed the Pharisees for the collapse of the Hasmonean dynasty.¹⁸ Pharisees had incited opposition among the populace toward the Hasmonean king, Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE). While on his deathbed, Jannaeus convinced his successor, Alexandra Salome (his wife), to give the Pharisees a larger role in the polity, which would undoubtedly result in higher approval ratings for her, so to speak, with the Jewish populace.¹⁹

These passages are significant because when Josephus, in the late first century CE, wrote about the Pharisees’ popularity in the late first century BCE during the reign of Herod, his comments were in the present tense. “He gives no narrative reason,” observes Mason, “to think that the Pharisees’ influence waned appreciably” from the Hasmonean and Herodian periods to his own time.²⁰ In other words, it is assumed throughout Josephus’s writings that the Pharisees were the dominant movement (though not necessarily the ruling class, meaning those who enforced laws and tried criminals) and had strong support from the populace for more than two hundred years prior to the publication of Josephus’s last work in the late first century CE.

The Gospels and Acts contain clues that seem to support Josephus’s claim that the Pharisees were popular with the masses, and that help to explain Pharisaic popularity. For example, in Luke, while Jesus teaches a crowd (11:1–36), a Pharisee invites Jesus to eat with him as an honored guest, which invitation Jesus accepts (11:37–44). The context of this episode presupposes Pharisaic popularity. That a Pharisee interrupts Jesus’ sermon, that he invites Jesus to join him and other Pharisees as a guest (Luke

16. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.10.5, trans. Marcus.

17. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.10.7; *Life* 1.5.

18. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.15.5–13.16.6

19. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.15.5

20. Mason, “Josephus’s Pharisees,” 30.

11:39–44), that Jesus accepts this request, and that the crowd does not seem troubled by the presence of Pharisees implies that Pharisees were influential and maintained a degree of respect from the people. If Pharisees had been as hypocritical and nefarious as some Gospel passages claim, then we would expect the crowds, or Jesus' closest followers, to have rebelled against the constant presence of Pharisees and even to have challenged them physically, just as they did on many occasions with the chief priests, Roman soldiers, and Pilate, as recounted by all four Gospels and Josephus.²¹ Nothing in Josephus and the Gospels even hint that the populace were ever annoyed or disturbed at the presence and leadership of Pharisees.

The Religious Devotion of the Pharisees

On multiple occasions Josephus referred to the religious nature of Pharisaism. For example, Josephus claimed that the high priest, John Hyrcanus, was disciple of the Pharisees. Hyrcanus told several prominent Pharisees, after inviting them to a feast, that he followed Pharisaism because “he wished to be righteous and in everything he did tried to please God,” to which Josephus added that “the Pharisees [also] profess.” Hyrcanus, recognizing that Pharisees were known to interpret the laws accurately, also admonished them to offer corrective advice if they were to ever observe him offending God by his actions.²² Elsewhere, Josephus explained that Pharisees had the “reputation of excelling the rest of their nation in the observances of religion” and that Queen Alexandra “being herself intensely religious, listened [to Pharisees] with too great deference.”²³ In this passage Josephus used the word *eusébeia* to describe the Pharisees. Throughout his writings it becomes apparent that *eusébeia* is Josephus's “one-word summary of the whole Jewish system of religion, instigated by God, articulated by Moses, administered by the priests, and shared by the whole nation.”²⁴ He also used the word *eusébeia* in relation to Abraham, King David, and King Solomon. Josephus stated that John the Baptist—who, like the Pharisees, was popular with the masses—exhorted the Jews to exercise piety (*eusébeia*) toward God. Josephus distinguished

21. Mark 14:47; Matt 26:51; Luke 22:49–50; John 18:10; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.17; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.372 (cf. Mishnah Sukka 4:9); 18.3.1–2; 18.55–60; 20.105; Josephus, *J.W.* 2.12.

22. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.10.5, trans. Marcus.

23. Josephus, *J.W.* 1.110, trans. Thackeray.

24. Mason, *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees*, 85–86.

in his writings between piety toward men (*dikaïos*) and piety toward God (*eusébeia*).²⁵

Several passages in the Gospels support Josephus's claim that Pharisees were highly devoted to God. The first episode occurs early in Jesus' ministry. In all three Synoptic Gospels Jesus invites a toll collector to eat with him. The toll collector and other individuals of ill-repute accompany Jesus to eat (Matt 9:9; Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). Pharisees query Jesus' disciples as to why he is eating with toll collectors and sinners. Jesus, overhearing the Pharisees, responds that those who are healthy need no physician and that he seeks out not the righteous but the sinners (Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32; Matt 9:13). According to the author of Luke, the "call" to the sinners is that of "repentance" or "reform" (*metánoia*). Here, the Pharisees' problem with Jesus is not that he entertained toll collectors and sinners *because* they were toll collectors and sinners, but that these individuals, according to Pharisaism, were impure as a *result* of being toll collectors and sinners. In other words, Pharisees were not necessarily concerned with oppressing or shunning vagabonds and miscreants because they were viewed as a hindrance and a threat to a healthy, functioning society—which is how many individuals today react to "druggies" and the homeless, whom they fear will crowd them and beg for money, or do worse—rather, Pharisees were concerned with impurity. Toll collectors, or tax farmers (*telônai*), engaged in bidding wars for the right to collect additional taxes at elevated rates for Rome,²⁶ probably through the transportation of material goods. It was this dishonest practice that likely caused Pharisees to consider toll collectors to be impure. Another reason for this impurity may be that collectors worked closely with non-Jews and were in direct contact with Roman coins, which contained idolatrous images.²⁷

Just as the Pharisees and Jesus debated about who was permitted to join in a meal, so did Peter and Paul. In his letter to Galatians, Paul "opposed" Peter because he, along with Barnabas, refused to eat with gentiles (Gal 2:11–13). Pharisees supported the segregation of people who were considered impure, particularly during religious activities like synagogue worship and mealtime symposia. Justification for this practice is based on Jewish law: "You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean" (Lev 10:10). In Christian Sunday school classes, the usual interpretation is that Pharisees rejected sinners, and that they challenged Jesus because he associated with sinners. This is usually followed with the injunction, "Do not be like the Pharisees. We must

25. Mason, *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees*, 85–86.

26. Donahue, "Tax Collector," 6:337–38

27. See Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 225–26.

help sinners, not shun them and judge them. Jesus taught us to help them.” Notice here, however, that Pharisees did not criticize Jesus for teaching or helping “sinners” in general; their concern was that he was *eating* with them, and therefore, becoming vulnerable to impurities during religious mealtime activities. Every accusation from Pharisees toward Jesus about entertaining sinners was in the context of mealtime activities.²⁸ They would rather have had Jesus wait until after mealtime to go outside and minister to impure sinners. In fact, “sinners” in this context does not merely refer to people who are violating God’s laws, as we often define sinners today. James Dunn (emeritus professor of New Testament at the University of Durham) has provided numerous examples all throughout early Jewish literature of almost every Jewish sect calling outsiders, *harmartoloi*, translated as “sinners.”²⁹ Thus, many Jewish groups not only labeled gentiles *sinners* but they also called any “Jews who practiced their Judaism differently” *sinners*.³⁰ Living in a society that was very tribalistic and concerned with boundary maintenance and impurities, Pharisees were not trying to be mean-spirited to the lowly sinner seeking help.

I once witnessed an intoxicated, homeless man in Orlando, Florida, enter a worship service and walk up and down the aisles talking to people during communion. When a leader in the congregation quietly ushered the disrupter outside, the man started singing (loudly) Brownsville Station’s “Smokin’ in the Boys Room.” If first-century Pharisees had been in attendance, they would have said something like, “This outsider must leave. We can help him in a few minutes, but right now during our sacred religious ritual is neither the time nor the place to minister to him.” Another experience illustrates this thinking further. Years ago when I was in Jerusalem, I ordered food in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City from a “nonkosher” food stand. I took my food around the corner and looked for a seat in a small dining complex. A man approached and asked me to eat elsewhere because the tables in that section were reserved for people eating food from a “kosher” stand. At the time, I was not attuned to the policies of that particular location, but I understood and moved to another area out of respect. These experiences illustrate the concerns of the Pharisees regarding purity, mealtime activities, and separation from certain types of individuals at particular times. We will discuss more about mealtime activities later.

Despite the fundamental disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees on eating with sinners, Jesus seemed to acknowledge that the Pharisees

28. See Matt 9:10–13, 11:19; Mark 2:15–17; Luke 5:30–32, 7:34, 15:1–2.

29. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 73–77.

30. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, 75.

were indeed righteous,³¹ meaning that they were right in the eyes of God with respect to their moral purity, that they were in conformity to God's law, and that they were "model citizens."³² It appears that Jesus was not concerned with the Pharisees needing to "repent" or "reform" (*metánoia*) in great measure. Rather, his concern was directed to those "sinners" who fell far shorter of meeting God's expectations for the House of Israel. According to all three Synoptic Gospels regarding this mealtime episode, Jesus appears to acknowledge Pharisaic religious devotion.

In a later episode in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is approached by "all the tax collectors and sinners" (15:1) and, again, Pharisees question why he eats with them. Jesus answers the Pharisees using three parables. The first parable concerns a person who has one hundred sheep (Luke 15:4–8; Matt 18:12–14). If one sheep in the flock wanders off, asks Jesus, how many would not leave the ninety and nine and search for the one lost? Jesus emphasizes the joy of the one whose sheep is safely returned: "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). The second parable appears only in the "L" material (i.e., information unique to the Gospel of Luke), and is similar to the first. A woman who loses one of her ten coins will search the home carefully until she finds it. When she does, she and her neighbors will rejoice. Likewise, as is declared in the conclusion to the first parable, "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:8–10). The assumption of these two parables is that the Pharisees (those who ask Jesus about sinners) are part of the "ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7)!

The third parable is also exclusive to the Gospel of Luke (15:11–32). Here, in the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus speaks of a father with two sons. The younger son pleads for his inheritance, and his father grants his request. The younger son soon after leaves home for a distant region, where he eventually squanders his inheritance and becomes destitute. He returns to his father not intending to assume the role of a son but of a hired laborer. Upon his arrival, the father rejoices and gives his son a robe, a ring, and a fattened calf to be slaughtered in celebration. When the older son hears the music and learns that the younger son has returned after squandering his livelihood, he becomes angry. He had remained obedient to the "commands" of his father, yet he had never received "even a young goat" to celebrate his obedience. The father reassures the older son, "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours;" however, "we had to celebrate and rejoice, because

31. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend*, 199.

32. Arndt and Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 195–96.

this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (Luke 15:31–32).

These three parables are important for understanding Jesus’ view of Pharisees. He attempts to build common ground with the Pharisees whereby they would understand his motivation and rationale for disregarding the purity laws they espouse. He also uses the parables to motivate Pharisees to follow his example and minister to sinners. These three parables imply that Pharisees were not “sinners” and that God approved of their piety. Jesus’ vision is that those who are already living the law will shift their focus from an exclusive observance of purity laws to administering to lost sheep who are outside the flock of the covenant people of Israel. In essence, the older brother of the prodigal son *represents the average Pharisee*, or at least those Pharisees who were associated with Jesus.³³ How do we know this? Because the Pharisees ask Jesus about why he ministers to “those sinners.” Jesus’ response implies that Pharisees and Jesus are on the same team—they represent the ninety-nine sheep and the older brother of the prodigal son. To the Pharisees, Jesus says, “You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31). The struggle for Jesus, however, is to help Pharisees realize their own potential and to join him in seeking out those who were failing to meet God’s expectations for covenant Israel.

As the story progresses in the Gospel of Luke, Pharisees approach Jesus and ask him when the kingdom of God would arrive. Jesus answers that the kingdom of God is *within (entos)* them (Luke 17:21). In other words the Pharisees, through their righteousness, devotion to God, and ability to persuade the masses, were in a position to join Jesus in bringing the kingdom of God to the people. After Jesus’ discussion on the kingdom of God (Luke 17:22–37), he delivers two parables that emphasize characteristics essential for being rewarded in the world to come: (1) the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, which emphasizes faith through continual supplication to God (Luke 18:1–8), and (2) the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which emphasizes humility (Luke 18:9–14). It is this second parable that concerns us here.

The focus of this parable, like many others in Luke, is righteousness. Jesus speaks this parable to individuals who do good deeds and consider themselves to be righteous but who regard sinners with contempt. Jesus undoubtedly included Pharisees in his intended audience for this parable because it was Pharisees who originally approached him. In the parable, a righteous Pharisee who prays, fasts twice a week, and gives a tenth of his income thanks God that he is not like the sinners: “thieves, rogues, adulterers,

33. Mason, “Chief Priests, Sadducees, Pharisees and Sanhedrin,” 141.

or even like this tax-collector” (Luke 18:11). The tax collector also prays but does not “even look to heaven, but [beats] his breast” while pleading with God to show him mercy because he is a sinner. The parable acknowledges that those whom Jesus addresses, the Pharisees, follow the law and are righteous, but it indicates that they must not become proud because of their devotion. Jesus does not accuse the Pharisees of being vile sinners but of lacking humility (18:9).

Another episode involving Pharisees implies that the crowd at the temple viewed Pharisees as religiously devoted and considered them friendly to Jesus. On this occasion while Jesus is teaching at the temple, obtrusive Jewish leaders question his authority to teach and perform miracles. According to the author of Matthew, the inquisitors were “chief priests and elders” (21:23). After hearing Jesus’ response, the “chief priests and Pharisees” seek to lay hands on Jesus but cannot because “they fear the multitude” (21:46). The “Pharisees” in the Matthean account subsequently send different Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to “entangle him in his talk” (22:15). They approach Jesus as imposters and say, “Master, we know that you are true and teach the way of God” (22:16). This Matthean account is characteristically confusing and hostile to Pharisees. First, the chief priests and elders approach Jesus to question him. Second, the chief priests and Pharisees (not elders) are offended at Jesus’ response and wish to seize him. Finally, Pharisees send different Pharisees with Herodians back to Jesus to pretend they are his friends and to cause him to say something illicit. In the parallel passage in Mark, however, it is the “chief priests, scribes, and elders” (11:27) who approach Jesus at the temple and subsequently send back Pharisees and Herodians to “catch him in his words” (12:13). First, it is unlikely that Pharisees and Herodians would acquiesce to Jerusalem aristocrats and perform their dirty work. Second, the fact that authorities are apprehensive to approach Jesus after the incident at the temple, and, therefore, send Pharisees and Herodians to him as friends, implies that Jesus and the crowd trusted Pharisees and Herodians, at least enough to mingle with them.

The Gospel of Luke elucidates this episode. The author of Luke agrees with the author of Mark that chief priests, scribes, and elders questioned Jesus at the temple, were offended at his response, attempted to lay hands on him (but did not because they feared the people), and then sent back imposters to trap Jesus in his words. However, while the authors of Mark and Matthew have Pharisees and Herodians approaching Jesus in a friendly manner, the author of Luke explains that the authorities sent “spies pretending” to be righteous men (20:20). These spies were most likely men from priestly circles *pretending* to be “righteous” Pharisees and Herodians. The interpretation of this episode in the Gospel of Luke fits precisely with what

Josephus wrote about Pharisees—that the populace supported them and that they had a contentious relationship with Sadducees and the Jerusalem temple establishment. That temple bureaucrats would send their minions to Jesus *pretending* to be Pharisees, and that these imposters would address Jesus respectfully as “master,” suggests that Jesus and the crowds trusted Pharisees and that the populace viewed them as righteous men.

Theological Positions of the Pharisees

We will not spend much time on the theological positions of the Pharisees, but we do want to highlight a few points. Josephus claimed that the Pharisees’ theological positions endeared them to the populace. Pharisees accepted the tenet of human agency and also recognized the hand of God in human affairs.³⁴ They believed that divine providence (*heimarméne* or *prónoia*) and free will were complementary. Regarding the afterlife, the Pharisees taught that the human soul is incorruptible—that it will be resurrected and that all souls will be judged and receive eternal reward or punishment based on their actions during their mortal lives: “eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage to a new life.”³⁵ In contrast, the Sadducees disagreed with these positions. As Josephus writes:

Sadducees, the second order, do away with Fate altogether and place God beyond both the committing and the contemplating of evil: they claim that both the honorable and the despicable reside in the choice of human beings, and that it is according to the judgment of each person to embrace either of these. The survival of the soul, the punishments and rewards in Hades—they do away with them.³⁶

Josephus asserted that because of these doctrines, the Pharisees were “extremely influential among the townsfolk.”³⁷ Josephus specifically stated on another occasion that the populace not only agreed with the Pharisees on important theological issues but also observed “all prayers and sacred rites of divine worship” according to the direction of the Pharisees. The “inhabitants of the cities” recognized the “excellence of the Pharisees” because they “practiced the highest ideals both in their way of living and in their

34. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8.14; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.12–17.

35. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.3. (See also *J.W.*, 2.8.14). See translation in Loeb Classical Library.

36. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8.14, trans. Mason.

37. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.3, trans. Feldman.

discourse.”³⁸ The Gospels and Acts support these claims of the theological positions of both Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:6–8).

The Lenient, Good-Natured Pharisees

Although Josephus seemed annoyed by Pharisees and lamented that Pharisees had the support of the masses, he described them as being cordial and merciful. He explained that Pharisees “are mutually affectionate, and cultivate concord in relation to the community.” The Sadducees, on the other hand, “have a rather harsh disposition even toward one another: encounters with their peers are as uncouth as those with outsiders.”³⁹ Elsewhere, Josephus explained that Pharisees respected the elderly and that they never “contradict[ed] their proposals.”⁴⁰ Josephus also admitted that Pharisees generally avoided a lavish lifestyle: “The Pharisees simplify their standard of living, making no concession to luxury.”⁴¹ In addition to their affable nature and prudent lifestyle, “the Pharisees are naturally lenient in the matter of punishments.”⁴² Josephus related an incident when a man named Eleazar was brought before the Jewish ruling body. The Sadducees pursued the punishment of death for Eleazar, whereas the Pharisees favored a more lenient punishment; they argued for whipping because death seemed to be excessive.⁴³ This incident is congruous with at least two others in Josephus. The first explains briefly that Sadducees were “indeed more heartless than any of the other Jews . . . when they sit in judgement.”⁴⁴ The second passage details the occasion when Pharisees criticized Herod for executing thieves without granting them a trial, as prescribed by Jewish law. When the Sanhedrin summoned Herod to court, all of the members present feared Herod and refused to speak against him. The only exception was an “honored” man, whom we later discover was a Pharisee.⁴⁵

One relevant issue regarding the social position of the Pharisees is that of the Pharisaic presence in Jerusalem among the ruling class. Josephus highlighted a few occasions when Pharisees were involved in judicial

38. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.3, trans. Feldman.

39. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8.14. See Josephus, “Judean War 2” translation by Mason.

40. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.3, trans. Feldman.

41. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.3, trans. Feldman.

42. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.10.6, trans. Thackeray.

43. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.10.5–6.

44. Josephus, *Ant.* 20.9.1, trans. Feldman.

45. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.9.3–4, 15.3, trans. Marcus and Wikgren.

affairs alongside the priestly establishment and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. If this was true, how then can we argue that Pharisees were not considered members of the ruling class? One answer is that Pharisees, while involved in some of the more high profile or complex criminal cases, were not major figures in the normal affairs of the ruling class in Jerusalem. Evidence from the sources reveals that not only did Pharisees play a limited role in the normal judicial affairs in Jerusalem, they were also at loggerheads with the chief priests and Sadducees regarding the law. Josephus, the Gospel of John, and the Gospel of Matthew all demonstrate that the Pharisees were involved with the chief priests;⁴⁶ however, it is likely that this involvement was limited to the “notables among the Pharisees”⁴⁷ who, because of their legal expertise and support from the masses, were able to persuade the chief priests on various issues. Josephus especially seemed to have highlighted the limited role of the Pharisees on the political scene and showed them being consulted and included in judicial affairs *only* to ensure political stability. Pharisaic involvement, as Mason has posited, was rare:

Josephus remarks (*War* 2.411) that “the elite came together in the same place with the chief priests and those who were *eminent among the Pharisees*,” to discuss [a] brewing crisis . . . Elsewhere, Josephus almost formulaically pairs the elite with the chief priests as Jerusalem’s leaders (*War* 2.243, 301, 316, 336, 422, 428, 648) *without mentioning the Pharisees* . . . So the notice at *War* 2.411, that the standard pair of priestly elite groups met with the leading Pharisees at that crucial point, seeming to stress that they also convened in the *same place*, hints that such a coalition was unusual in more normal times . . . Like *War* 2.411, *Life* 21 makes only passing mention of the “principle men of the Pharisees” alongside the chief priests, in the coalition trying to manage the clamor for war . . . Although Josephus has preferred to speak of hereditary aristocratic-priestly leadership, he has grudgingly acknowledged that the immensely popular lay movement of the Pharisees must always be reckoned with by those in power.⁴⁸

The notion of the Pharisees as political outsiders is also supported in several places in the Gospels and Acts. For instance, although the authors of Matthew and John mention “chief priests and Pharisees” together on occasion,

46. Von Wahlde, “Relationships,” 506–22.

47. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.409–417. See translation in Josephus, “Judean War 2.”

48. Mason, “Josephus’s Pharisees,” 11–12, 33; emphasis added.

the authors of Mark and Luke do not.⁴⁹ In fact, the author of Luke seems to go out of his way to change the accounts in his Gospel that are also present in the Gospel of Matthew. In Acts, some of Jesus' closest followers are arrested by the high priest "and all those who were with him, that is, the sect of the Sadducees" (5:17). When they are brought before the council, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a legal expert and one who had a "reputation among all people," convinces the court to release Jesus' disciples (Acts 5:34–40). Just as in Josephus, the Sadducees and chief priests seek more severe punishments whereas the Pharisees are more lenient. Similarly, when Paul stands before the Jerusalem court, the Sadducees want to charge him for claiming a vision of the resurrected Jesus, and they attempt to physically harm him. On the other hand, the Pharisees in the council "stand up and contend, 'We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?'" (Acts 23:9). It seems that if the Pharisees were as ruthless as many Christians have assumed, then the Pharisees would have argued for Paul to be scourged and killed. After all, Paul, a Pharisee, was an outspoken follower of Jesus.

Moreover, all four Gospels agree that Pharisees were not included in Jesus' infamous trial. Had they been present at the trial, it is likely that they would have challenged the guilty verdict of the chief priests and Sadducees, and Jesus may have been released. Earlier in Jesus' ministry, it is a Pharisee, Nicodemus, who challenges the Jerusalem authorities when they attempt to arrest Jesus. He asks, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (John 7:51). As strict observers of the law, Pharisees undoubtedly took seriously the injunction in Exodus to "keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right" (Exod 23:7–8). This is precisely what the populace accused the chief priests and Sadducees of doing.

Jesus' Relationship with Pharisees

What can this material tell us about the nature of Jesus' relationship with Pharisees? It seems likely that Jesus was cordial and friendly with the Pharisees, at least according to the information in Josephus and the New Testament. Some scholars have even argued that Jesus was a Pharisee himself.⁵⁰

49. See Matt 21:45, 27:62; John 7:45, 11:47, 11:57, 18:3.

50. See Heschel, *Abraham Geiger*; Maccoby, *Jesus the Pharisee*; Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee*.

A review of Jesus' main roles and characteristics in the previous chapters and in this chapter reveals that he has much in common with them. Like the Pharisees, he was popular with the masses; like the Pharisees, he was known for being religiously devoted and concerned about following Jewish law; like the Pharisees, he was viewed by many as a prophet; like the Pharisees, he believed in divine providence, resurrection, angels, visions, and reward and punishment in the afterlife; like the Pharisees, he was known as a wise teacher of Jewish law; he supported the various purity rituals and washings; he was friendly to the public; he rejected a life of luxury; he was lenient in punishment; and he despised the chief priests and the Sadducean establishment. This set of characteristics defines Pharisaism!

Not only did Jesus and the Pharisees share characteristics and theological beliefs, but it was Pharisees, according to the author of Luke, who warn Jesus that Herod Antipas is trying to kill him (Luke 13:31). It is because of this warning that Jesus leaves the Galilee. Between the time Jesus departs the Galilee and when he arrives in Jerusalem he has several discussions with Pharisees. Most of these are positive encounters wherein Jesus, as explained previously, praises the Pharisees for their devotion to God and even equates them with the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, whose father (representing God) says, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (Luke 15:31). Jesus also tells a group of Pharisees that the kingdom of God is within them (Luke 17:21). Later, during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, he and his disciples pass through Jericho. Upon their arrival, a beggar sees Jesus and shouts, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Some of Jesus' followers rebuke him and demand that he be quiet (Luke 18:35–39). We suspect it was Pharisees in the group who order the man to be silent, because Pharisees act likewise when Jesus subsequently approaches Jerusalem; when Jesus' close followers start shouting about his messiahship, it is Pharisees who call out, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop" (Luke 19:39). They may have feared that such declarations would lead to Jesus' arrest and possibly to his death (which is precisely what happened). Both Jericho and Jerusalem were aristocratic and priestly hubs;⁵¹ thus, loud exclamations of a new king, or a "Son of David," would have been met with swift and fierce action by the authorities. Pharisees knew this and tried to protect Jesus in these Judean centers of government.

51. Jericho not only contained the former palaces of Herod but also a hippodrome and an amphitheater, according to both Josephus and archaeological excavations (see Netzer, *Architecture of Herod*, 42–80). Jericho was a major city within walking distance of Jerusalem. Many members of the priestly class would have lived in Jericho. The parable of the good Samaritan illustrates that priests and Levites would have frequently traveled the route between Jericho and Jerusalem (see Luke 15:11–32).

It is also Pharisees who Jesus identifies as leaders of Israel whom the people should follow (Matt 23:3). It is a Pharisee, Nicodemus, who approaches Jesus respectfully and seeks counsel (John 3:1–21). It is Pharisees who, as followers of Jesus twenty years after his death (Acts 15:5), participate in the Jerusalem Council with the leaders of the Jesus movement. One of these Pharisee followers of Jesus is Paul. Recall that on multiple occasions Paul touts his Pharisaic training to establish commonalities and credibility with the Jewish crowds (Acts 22:3, 26:4–6). How bad could the Pharisees have been if Paul was using his Pharisaic background as a badge of honor? Finally, it is Pharisees who eat with Jesus on multiple occasions.⁵² This last point is key for understanding Jesus' relationship with Pharisees. Although Pharisees debate with Jesus and question his practice of eating with people of questionable purity, the fact that Jesus eats with them on several occasions, including as their guest of honor, illustrates that their relationship was more cordial than most modern readers assume.

In the Greco-Roman world, banquets involving hosts, guests, and servants were ceremonies.⁵³ Jews adopted the structure and ceremonial aspects of the Greco-Roman banquet. In preparation for a banquet, the host would typically extend invitations to several guests, some of whom would be most "honored." Hosts did not invite or dine with those outside their community; the banquet served as a boundary marker. This is precisely why Pharisees are frustrated that Jesus welcomes outsiders (i.e., impure sinners) to the banquet. It was widely understood that the banquet was a place designated for community fellowship and for fostering community identity; it was a place of deep friendship, not of rival interaction.⁵⁴ The banquet was also a sacred space for many Jews. Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner demonstrated that of the 341 passages in rabbinic literature on Pharisaism, 229 (67 percent) pertain to table-fellowship.⁵⁵ For Pharisees, the banquet was not to be taken lightly. It was a form of worship. The banquet was perhaps an extension of the temple and the synagogue, where purity, prayer, and discussion on Jewish law were the focus. Thus, in this specific time and place, the Pharisees would not welcome to their private dinners outsiders who did not share their values. By

52. Luke 5:27–39, 7:36–50, 11:37–41, 14:1–24 (1–6); Mark 2:13–22, 7:1–23; Matt 9:9–17, 15:1–20.

53. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals*; Smith, "Table Fellowship," 613–38; Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 15–51; Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke," 361–87; Smith, "Historical Jesus at Table," 466–89.

54. Classical authors like Plato and Plutarch wrote on the friendship dynamic at the banquet. See Plato, *Laws* 2.671C–672A; Plutarch, *Table Talk* 612 D, 614E–15A, 616C, 616 E, 660B. See also Smith, "Table Fellowship," 633–38.

55. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety*, 86.

inviting Jesus to dine with them, the Pharisees welcome Jesus as their friend. When Jesus then invites sinners and is seen eating with them, Pharisees ask why Jesus is a *friend* to these sinners (Luke 7:34; Matt 11:19). Jesus himself acknowledges that banquet ceremonies typically involve “friends,” “brothers,” “relatives,” and “rich neighbors.” Jesus urges the Pharisees, however, to widen their banquet hospitality to “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:12–13).

Upon arrival at a banquet, household attendants would wash the guests’ feet, and occasionally the host would greet the guests with a kiss and anoint them with scented oil. These hospitable acts in the Greco-Roman banquet are attested to in both Greek and Jewish sources.⁵⁶ The Gospels specifically mention each of these elements: washing guests’ feet before the meal, greeting guests with a kiss, and anointing them with scented oil (Luke 7:36–46; Mark 14:3–4; John 13:1–10). Multiple Greek authors, Philo of Alexandria, Qumran texts, and the Gospels all mention that guests would be positioned in order of their status at the table. The host’s most honored guests would be positioned next to the host, and the remaining guests would follow in descending order.⁵⁷ The participants would recline during the banquet, meaning they did not sit up at the table, but rather leaned lengthwise on couches on their left elbows.⁵⁸ Modern readers are somewhat confused by the odd practice during the Last Supper of one of Jesus’ disciples leaning “on Jesus’ bosom” during the meal (John 13:23, 25 KJV). The Greek word *anakeĩmai* means to “recline.” Jesus’ disciple would have leaned on his left elbow on the right side of Jesus, thus positioning his left shoulder and head near Jesus’

56. Plato, *Symposium* 175A (fourth century BCE); Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* or “The Dinner” 14.641d (early third century CE); Mishnah Chagigah 2:5 (late second century CE); Tosefta Berakhot 4:8 (late second century CE).

57. Plato, *Symposium* 177D–E; Plutarch, *Table Talk* 616F–617E; Philo, *Contemplative Life (De Vita Contemplativa)*, 67–68; 1QSa 2:11–12 (Qumran Rule of the Congregation); Luke 14:7–11; see also Smith, “Table Fellowship.”

58. Plato, *Symposium* 175A; Tob 2:1, 7:9; 1 Esd 4:10; 3 Macc 5:16; John 21:10. An early rabbinic source, dating to the mid – to late second century CE, details the order of the banquet, including washings, reclining, and prayers: “What is the order of the meal? As the guests enter, they are seated on benches or chairs while all the guests assemble. Once all have assembled and the attendants have given them water for their hands, each guest washes one hand. When they have mixed for them the cup of wine, each guest recites the benediction over wine for himself. When the attendants have brought before them appetizers, each one recites the benediction over appetizers for himself. When the guests have arisen from the benches or seats and reclined to the second stage of the meal, the attendants again give them water for their hands . . . When the attendants again mix for the guests the cup, even though each has recited a benediction over the first cup, he recites a benediction over the second also” (Tosefta Berakhot 4.8. Quote is based on translation from Neusner, *Tosefta*, 1:23).

chest, or “bosom.” The banquet was an intimate, personal experience among like-minded friends, not a place of hostility and conspiracy.

After the meal, participants would engage in philosophical discussions.⁵⁹ It was in this “symposium” setting that Jesus and the Pharisees debated legal matters, just as they did in the synagogue and temple complex. The precedent for debating Jewish law during a banquet was established long before Jesus’ generation. The Jewish text *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, or *Sirach* (second century BCE), counseled participants regarding debate during the banquet:

Let your conversation be with men of understanding, and let all your discussion be about the law of the Most High. Let righteous men be your dinner companions, and let your glorying be in the fear of the Lord . . . Do not reprove your neighbor at a banquet of wine, and do not despise him in his merrymaking; speak no word of reproach to him, and do not afflict him by making demands of him.⁶⁰

Note the emphasis in this passage on eating with righteous men, debating Jewish law, and refraining from hostile arguments during the banquet. This is the setting in which we can interpret Jesus’ banquet interactions with Pharisees (see, for example, Luke 14:1–24).

Explaining Pharisaic Hostility toward Jesus in the Gospels

Given the somewhat rosy portrait of Pharisees above, how do we make sense of the New Testament passages that seem to suggest a hostile relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees, as well as their highly negative portrayal of Pharisees in general? The word *Pharisee* appears 97 times in 38 different episodes or settings in the Gospels and Acts. Those who have received a healthy dose of anti-Pharisaism in Sunday school might naturally impose a negative context onto the Pharisee episodes, even if no such interpretation is warranted in all of them. If we look critically at each setting in which Pharisees appear, we see that some are clearly positive; Nicodemus immediately comes to mind, as well as mealtime episodes where Jesus is invited to dine with Pharisees as an honored guest.

59. Plato, *Symposium* 176E; Plutarch, *Table Talk* 612D–E; Philo, *Contemplative Life* (*De Vita Contemplativa*), 57, 64.

60. Sirach 9:15–16, 32:31 (Revised Standard Version).

We lack the space to dissect in depth all of these passages here; however, if we eliminate from this discussion the positive encounters between Jesus and Pharisees that we have already discussed, we are left with seventeen of thirty-eight (44 percent) episodes in which the authors of the Gospels seem to portray Pharisees negatively. About half of these seventeen episodes can be categorized as invective, or name-calling episodes, which we will discuss in chapter 9; but first, we tackle the remaining episodes that Christians typically identify as the best illustrations of negative Pharisaic characteristics. Keep in mind that many of the episodes regarding the Pharisees are unclear and contradictory. For example, it is *often* the case that where the Gospel of Matthew uses “Pharisees” in a particular story, the Gospel of Luke does not. Very few of the thirty-eight episodes are unified across the Gospels on what happened in the story. This ambiguity about Pharisees and Jews in the New Testament proved to be an enemy to Jews living in medieval Christian Europe as we saw in chapter 6.

“Testing” Jesus?

In four of the seventeen negative Pharisees episodes, Pharisees approach Jesus to “test him.” Many readers today assume these to be hostile encounters—that the “tests” were designed to push Jesus into blaspheming God or rejecting Jewish law. The problem with this interpretation is that Pharisees were not in the business of trying to get fellow Jews arrested for their stances on Jewish law. Jews everywhere debated the law, and numerous examples in the literature show that rarely did any two sages initially agree on a particular precept. They did not chase each other around like petty children trying get their interlocutor in trouble (or, in this case, arrested).

For example, in one episode, Pharisees approach Jesus and “to test him they ask, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?’” (Matt 19:3–12; Mark 10:2–12). Jesus responds and the story continues with no conflict. This type of debate was customary in Jewish circles. In another episode, Pharisees respectfully approach Jesus “to test him” by asking “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answers their question, and then he queries them in a similar manner on a different topic, showing that he was willing to engage in debate with them (Matt 22:34–45). In the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke, no Pharisee is mentioned. Further, Jesus tells the “scribe” in Mark, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (12:34). The “lawyer” in Luke, who may have been a Pharisee, is also respectful to Jesus (10:25–37). In the third episode, Pharisees approach Jesus for a sign “to test him” (Mark 8:11–12). The author of Matthew includes

“Pharisees and Sadducees,” as is often the case in this Gospel (16:1–4; emphasis added). As explained previously, Pharisees and Sadducees were ideological rivals. Based on evidence in Josephus, they worked against each other more than with each other. We certainly would not expect aristocratic snobs from Judea (i.e., Sadducees) to traipse around the Galilee with Pharisees questioning Jewish teachers. It simply defies our understanding of how members of these two sects related to each other. Further, the author of Luke injects ambiguity into this episode when he replaces “Pharisees” with “others” (Luke 11:16).

Jesus’ scholastic relationship with the Pharisees would have inevitably led to legal debates between them. The “tests” of the Pharisees were meant to gauge the validity or integrity of Jesus’ faith in God. The Greek word for “test,” *peirazo*, also means “trial” and is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *nasah*. In Genesis 22:1, God “tempts” or “tests” (*nasah* or *peirazo*) Abraham to ascertain his devotion and loyalty.⁶¹ In these episodes, Pharisees are not testing Jesus with the intent to have him arrested but to judge whether he really is devoted to God and knowledgeable in Jewish law. As mentioned, this type of exchange was customary in early Judaism—the rabbis debated everything. Again, we can see how sloppy interpretations of the New Testament have distorted both the text and the reputation of first-century Jewish leaders. The idea that Jesus and his Jewish peers were constantly bickering is simply not supported robustly in the texts.

Two episodes, however, do refer to Pharisees “testing” Jesus in order to get him arrested. One is in John, in which they test him “so that they might have some charge to bring against him” (John 8:6). The Gospel of John is highly problematic and unreliable when dealing with both “the Jews” generally and the Pharisees specifically. Further, John 8:1–11 does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament but was a later Christian addition. We will discuss these two issues shortly. The second episode appears in all three Synoptic Gospels, and to this we now turn our attention.

The Sabbath Synagogue Healing

The synagogue healing episode in Mark 3, Matthew 12, and Luke 6 makes the Pharisees look melodramatic and morally bankrupt. The accounts agree on five major details: (1) Jesus enters a synagogue on the Sabbath, (2) a man with a crippled hand is present, (3) Jesus addresses the Pharisees’ concern,

61. For those who do not know Hebrew or Greek, a helpful resource for conducting basic word studies is Renn, *Expository Dictionary*; this particular discussion of Greek and Hebrew words for “testing” is on page 965.

(4) Jesus heals the man's crippled hand without touching him, and (5) the Pharisees exit the synagogue after the healing and counsel together regarding Jesus.

The problems with this episode are many. First, according to the author of Matthew, when Jesus enters the synagogue and notices a crippled man, the Pharisees immediately interrogate him on whether it is "lawful to heal on the Sabbath," the purpose of which is to "accuse" Jesus (12:10). After Jesus answers their question and subsequently heals the man, the Pharisees exit the synagogue and begin plotting his death. According to the authors of Mark and Luke, Jesus is the one who incites the debate, not the Pharisees. The author of Mark adds that Jesus looks upon them with "anger" and is grieved at their "hardness of heart" just prior to healing the man (3:5), and that the Pharisees immediately exited the synagogue and "conspired against him, how to destroy him" (3:6). Some scholars have argued that readers must not understand the word "destroy" in this instance as referring to physical death. The late Phillip Sigal (professor at University of Pittsburgh), for example, argued that the Pharisees did not seek to end Jesus' life but rather "to renounce him," "to place him under a ban," or "to excommunicate him."⁶² However, the Greek word *apollumi* in its various forms is rendered as "to destroy," "to kill," "to ruin," or "to lose."⁶³ In each of the approximately ninety cases where the verb *apollumi* (or some form of it) is used in the New Testament, not one indicates excommunication, defeat, or the renouncement of an individual. Moreover, the Hebrew equivalent of *apollumi*—*abad*—does not refer to excommunication or the defeat of an opponent in an academic debate but rather to the utter destruction of a person, idol, or nation. In fact, several uses of the word *abad* in the Hebrew Bible and *apollumi* in the Greek Old Testament (i.e., "Septuagint") refer to "execution" upon the violation of a certain law.⁶⁴

Are Jesus' teachings and healing in the synagogue controversial, so much so that Pharisees would have sought to kill him? According to all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus heals the man by speech alone. No physical contact occurs. Jesus and the Pharisees were undoubtedly aware that any individual—according to Jewish law—who performed "work" on the Sabbath would be punished by death (see Exod 31:14–15, 35:1–3; Num 15:31–33). However, no Jewish group during the Second Temple and rabbinic periods, or any period for that matter, interpreted the law in such a way that would

62. Sigal, *Halakah of Jesus*, 141–42.

63. Renn, *Expository Dictionary*, 725.

64. Renn, *Expository Dictionary*, 275. See, for example, Lev 23:30; Deut 7:10, 20, 24; 12:2, 3; Josh 7:7; and 2 Kgs 10:19, 19:18.

justify killing a man for talking on the Sabbath. In other words, they did not consider talking to be “work.” The only Sabbath prohibition against speaking is found in the Damascus Document at Qumran, which indicates that “no man shall speak any vain or idle word on the Sabbath day,” such as “work or labor to be done on the morrow.”⁶⁵ If a member of the Qumran community violated the Sabbath by working, he was not sentenced to death (as required by the law in Exodus) but imprisoned.⁶⁶ This source states that “no man who strays so as to profane the Sabbath and the feasts shall be put to death; it shall fall to men to keep him in custody.” The Temple Scroll at Qumran posits that an individual is sentenced to death only for committing crimes against his own people, not for violating the Sabbath.⁶⁷ If Josephus is correct that Pharisees were lenient in punishment compared to the other main Jewish groups and that the populace preferred the laws and punishments of the Pharisees because of their leniency,⁶⁸ then it is unlikely they would have lobbied for Jesus’ death for such a minor infraction.

Even if, for the sake of argument, Jesus had placed his hands on the man to heal him, the Pharisees would not have called for the draconian penalty of death. No evidence exists in the Hebrew Scriptures that healing by touch on the Sabbath is “work.” Similarly, no passages in the Mishnah (see Introduction) prohibit healing or assisting a sick person on the Sabbath.⁶⁹ It is possible, however, that some believed healing by touch on the Sabbath was a violation. Consider, for example, a Lukan passage, independent from the other Gospels, that depicts Jesus healing in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10–17). After Jesus heals a woman by laying his hands on her, the leader of the synagogue says to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day” (Luke 13:14). Jesus answers the critic by comparing a sick person to an animal: “Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman . . . be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” (Luke 13:15–16). Jesus’ critics are ashamed after hearing his response, and the crowd rejoices over Jesus’ teachings (Luke 13:17). Jesus’ critics do not storm out of the synagogue and begin plotting his death. It is nearly impossible to conclude that Pharisees, or any Jews, would kill someone because

65. Damascus Document 10.16–19, see translation in Vermes, *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, 139.

66. Damascus Document 12.4–6, in Vermes, *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, 141.

67. See Yadin, *Temple Scroll*, 204–8, esp. 206.

68. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.10.6.

69. For a list of the 39 Sabbath prohibitions, see Midrash Shabbat 7:2; see also Midrash Besah 5:2.

of a legal dispute. In a few places in the book of Acts where Jesus' followers were killed (Acts 6 and 12), the issue seems to be more serious than a legal dispute. It may be that Jesus' closest followers were viewed with suspicion among the ruling class because they supported a messianic candidate who directly challenged the Jerusalem aristocracy. This certainly seems to be the case with Stephen who was heard saying that "Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us" (Acts 6:14).

Further, the text in Luke casts additional doubt on the traditional interpretation of this synagogue-healing episode. The translations in most English versions of the Bible inaccurately convey the meaning in Luke 6:11. For example, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) renders the passage, "But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might to do Jesus." The Greek word *anoia*, translated here as "fury," also translated as "rage" in the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and "madness" in the King James Version (KJV), does not mean to be "angry" or "furious," but rather to be "perplexed," "confused," or "bewildered." Mark Powell (Trinity Lutheran Seminary) explained that "[*anoia*] implies uncertainty."⁷⁰ Steve Mason (University of Groningen) translated this word as "incomprehension,"⁷¹ and David Flusser (the late scholar at Hebrew University of Jerusalem) pointed out that *anoia* "is never elsewhere translated 'anger, fury, wrath.'"⁷² Thus, the story in Luke is much different; when Jesus heals the man, the Pharisees were "confused" or "bewildered" because of Jesus' actions in relation to his queries. Therefore, they "discussed with one another" what they should do in the case of Jesus, meaning they counseled together about how they should understand Jesus' legal stance on this matter.

Another problem with this episode is that the author of Matthew has Jesus entering "their synagogue" (12:9). In fact, six of the nine passages that mention a synagogue in Matthew use the definite article "their," suggesting that Jesus is an outsider who preaches to *them* in *their* synagogues. Perhaps the best example is in Matthew 13, where Jesus enters "his hometown" and preaches in "their synagogue" (v. 54). Moreover, seven of the nine passages are characteristically negative toward the Pharisees, or Jews in general—quite typical in the Gospel of Matthew. A review of these nine passages⁷³ shows that the author of Matthew either designates the Pharisees as leaders

70. Powell, "Religious Leaders in Luke," 99.

71. Mason, "Chief Priests, Sadducees, Pharisees and Sanhedrin," 135.

72. Flusser and Notley, *Jesus*, 64.

73. Matt 4:23, 6:2, 6:5, 9:35, 10:17–18, 12:9–14, 13:53–58, 23:1–7, 23:34.

of the synagogues or identifies the Jesus-believers as outsiders to the Jewish community—hardly an accurate representation of early first-century, synagogue-attending, Jesus-believing Jews.⁷⁴ The portrayal of Jesus being an outsider to the Jewish community is a position that cannot be historically accurate given all the data. Jewish studies scholar Nina Collins (University of Leeds) further details the problem with this early Jesus–Pharisee encounter:

The discussion . . . on the previous scene of Jesus and his men in the Galilean fields [plucking corn to eat] has shown that this story is almost certainly midrashic [meaning nonhistorical additions to a text in order to elucidate its meaning], so that the event itself is non-historical and probably never took place and means that the midrashic Pharisees in the Galilean fields cannot turn into historical Pharisees in the following event. In any case, even if the historical Jesus met historical Pharisees in the Galilean fields, the possibility that the same Pharisees were also present at the cure of the man with a withered hand is difficult to accept. It would mean, for example, that after their meeting with Jesus in the Galilean fields, the Pharisees correctly anticipated that Jesus was going to a local synagogue, and then rushed on ahead and waited patiently in the synagogue until Jesus arrived, expecting him to cure a man with a withered hand who happened to be there. Even more unlikely is the assumption that Jesus would leave his starving disciples in the Galilean fields in order to visit a nearby synagogue, rather than to procure help for his men.⁷⁵

Simply put, the story seems to represent late first-century polemics against Jews by Jewish Christians who wanted to portray their own group as morally superior to Pharisaic Jews.

The Johannine Passages

The remaining negative, non-name-calling passages about the Pharisees in the New Testament are unique to the Gospel of John (which is why we call them “Johannine”). The historical reliability of this Gospel is hotly debated because it differs so starkly from the Synoptic Gospels. The Synoptic Gospels are structured similarly and contain many of the same stories and traditions, whereas the Gospel of John contains numerous episodes not included

74. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 356; Cohen, “Were Pharisees and Rabbis the Leaders”; Horsley, “Synagogues,” 61–64; and Horsley, *Galilee*, 233–35.

75. Collins, *Jesus, the Sabbath and the Jewish Debate*, 149–50.

in the other Gospels. Jesus' ministry occurs primarily in Judea in the Gospel of John, whereas his ministry occurs primarily in Galilee in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus' ministry covers at least two years and probably more in John, whereas his ministry covers one year in the Synoptics. Jesus cleanses the temple at the beginning of his ministry in John but he cleanses the temple at the end of his ministry in the Synoptics. Parables and exorcisms are prominent in the Synoptics, whereas the Gospel of John contains neither. These are just a few examples of the numerous differences between the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels.

The portrayal of the Pharisees in the Gospel of John is confusing in light of the writings of Josephus and the Synoptics. The Pharisees seem to be conflated, or even confused with, Judean leaders (i.e., Sadducees or chief priests) in John. The author of Matthew tends to do this as well, but the authors of Mark and Luke do not. For example, "Pharisees and Sadducees" appear together only in Matthew,⁷⁶ and "chief priests and Pharisees" appear together only in Matthew and John.⁷⁷ This is expected since the Gospels of Matthew and John are the most anti-Pharisee. In the first of these Johannine passages under consideration, "chief priests and Pharisees" send temple police to arrest Jesus (John 7:32). After hearing Jesus teach, they return to the chief priests and Pharisees without arresting Jesus because "never has anyone spoken like this" (7:46). The Pharisees respond, "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed" (7:47–49).

This passage is problematic for several reasons. First, we have already determined, based on Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic literature, and the Synoptic Gospels, that the Pharisees did not have high representation in the Jerusalem aristocracy. Some prominent Pharisees were part of the Sanhedrin, but they tended to be the most lenient and liberal in their rulings of punishment. They were backed by the populace, and together, the Pharisees and the people were able to check any overreach of the Jerusalem authorities. In no other ancient text do Pharisees conspire *with* chief priests and have jurisdiction over the temple police. Second, this episode claims that the temple police believed Jesus' words and were reprimanded by the Pharisees for doing so. The implication is that if it were not for the Pharisees, the temple police might have become followers of Jesus! Third, the Pharisees claim that never did any "authorities or Pharisees" believe in Jesus (John 7:48); however, the Synoptic Gospels and Acts provide significant

76. Matt 3:7, 16:1, 16:6, 16:11–12.

77. Matt 21:45, 27:62; John 7:32, 7:45, 11:47, 11:57, 18:3.

evidence, especially in Luke and Acts, that many Pharisees did follow Jesus, whereas some within the temple establishment assist in Jesus' arrest and death. In fact, the narrator in the Gospel of John later claims that many authorities did believe in Jesus (John 12:42). Here in this passage, however, the roles are reversed. It is the Pharisees who seek to arrest Jesus and who stifle Jesus' influence with the temple establishment. This episode (John 7:32–53) diverges so drastically from what we learned above that it seems to be an inaccurate representation of first-century Pharisees—it contradicts too much other material to accept it as is. We will discuss in chapter 9 why the author of John slandered the Pharisees in his Gospel.

The next verses in the Gospel of John (8:1–11) continue to portray the Pharisees in a peculiar and confusing way. This episode, one of the most well-known and emotionally charged depictions in all of the Gospels, details how Pharisees bring a woman to Jesus and attempt to stone her for adultery. Jesus confounds them with his famous line, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). As with the last episode, this one is highly problematic. First, this episode does not appear in any of the oldest manuscripts. Its Greek style and vocabulary are noticeably different from the rest of the Gospel of John, suggesting a later addition by a different author. This story first appears in a fifth-century manuscript.⁷⁸ Most English translations alert the reader of this fact through bracketing and a note. Despite this, many Christian commentators today claim that although the episode is a later addition, the details of the story fit a first-century setting. This, however, is false. The story counters critical conclusions based on a combination of the writings of Josephus and the Synoptic Gospels for the same reasons presented in dealing with the previous episode (John 7:32–53). If Pharisees really did send temple police after popular teachers and if they ganged up on sinners in the public square with the threat of stoning, then their support from the masses would have been nonexistent. Again, the evidence seems overwhelming that the Pharisees garnered support of the populace in the first-centuries BCE and CE for several reasons, including their leniency in punishment.

The narrative continues in the Gospel of John in the next verses (8:12–59). In this section, the author of John appears sloppy in his redaction. The Pharisees ask Jesus a question (8:13), and Jesus gives a long answer (8:14–21). The story then switches from using the term “Pharisees” to “the Jews” in the middle of the episode (8:22), suggesting that the author was inconsistent regarding the identity of Jesus' accusers. For the author of John,

78. Codex Bazaе (D). For an in-depth treatment of this episode, see Peterson, “ΟΥΔΕ ΕΓΩ ΣΕ [ΚΑΤΑ]ΚΡΙΝΩ,” 191–221; Omanson, *Textual Guide*, 183–84.

it did not matter whether Jesus' antagonists were the Pharisees or "the Jews" as long as he was successful in making his broader theological point. What is more intriguing is that Jesus then turns his attention from his antagonists to Jews who "believed in him" (8:31). Within a few verses, Jesus apparently forgets who he is addressing because he accuses these very Jews who believe in him for seeking opportunities to kill him (8:37). He also tells them, "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires" (8:44). By the end of the episode, these same Jews who believe in Jesus "picked up stones to throw at him" (8:59).

The author's lack of precision regarding Jesus' interlocutors and his irrational portrayal of Jesus speaking to Jews may illustrate that the Johannine community was responding to contemporary squabbles and conflicts with other Jews in the late first century and then reading them back into the Jesus story. Another possibility is that a later scribe added material to this chapter, making it confusing. We suspect this not only because of its erratic nature, but also because similar insertions are found elsewhere in the Gospel of John. For example, in John 11 the author reminds the reader that Mary anoints Jesus (v. 2), but the reader does not encounter the actual episode until the next chapter. Such a literary phenomenon makes little sense. The original author is not expected to step outside his own story and prematurely introduce the reader to a key event that shows up later in the story. It makes better sense that a later scribe tampered with the text. Another example of potential text tampering is in John 14. Here, Jesus closes his discourse and says, "Rise, let us be on our way" (John 14:31), only to have his discourse resume for another two chapters. Again, it seems that a later scribe might have inserted this material. Regardless of whether John chapter 8 was written by a single author or altered by later scribes, the story makes little sense and must be read with caution regarding its portrayal of Jews.

In John 11 the narrator explains that, again, "the chief priests and the Pharisees" call a "meeting of the council" and decide to arrest Jesus (11:47–57). The crime? He raised Lazarus from the dead. The authorities worry that this miracle might attract many more Jews to Jesus. In the next chapter (John 12), Pharisees lament that the "world has gone after" Jesus (12:19). Even many "of the authorities believed in him," but they did not confess such belief "for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue" at the hands of the Pharisees (12:42). The final episode in this group of Johannine passages about Pharisees explains that "a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees" arrested Jesus "across the Kidron valley" (18:1–3). Again, these episodes are confusing regarding the Pharisees for the reasons previously specified. They have Pharisees convincing—or threatening—Jerusalem authorities not to follow Jesus! Such

a claim is in direct opposition to what we understand about the Pharisees from Josephus and the other Gospels.

Further, the Pharisees did not have authority to expel priests from the synagogue. Although the author of Matthew seems to indicate that the Pharisees did control the synagogues (12:9), evidence suggests that this was not the case. Philo, for example, recorded that priests and elders read and explicated the Torah readings in the synagogue, not the Pharisees. He explained that when the Jews sit in the synagogue on the Sabbath, “some priest who is present, or some one of the elders, reads the sacred laws to them, and interprets each of them separately.”⁷⁹ An inscription from a first-century Jerusalem synagogue, discovered in 1913, states that three generations of priests oversaw the affairs of the synagogue: “Theodotus, son of Vettenus, priest and ruler of the synagogue, son of a ruler of the synagogue, grandson of a ruler of the synagogue, built the synagogue for reading of the law and the teaching of the commandments, and also the guest chamber and the upper rooms and the ritual pools of water for accommodating those needing them from abroad.”⁸⁰ That the three most important sources for information about the Pharisees—the New Testament, Josephus, and the Mishnah—are virtually silent on the issue of Pharisaic control of the synagogue is strong evidence. Of the approximately eighty references to the synagogue in the New Testament and the writings of Josephus,⁸¹ a large majority do not even mention the presence of Pharisees, and only three references seem to imply that they controlled the synagogue—two from Matthew (12:9–14, 23:34) and one from John (12:42–43). Moreover, one prominent scholar of early Judaism, Jacob Neusner, has shown that rabbinic passages about the Pharisees “supply no rules about synagogue life, all the more so about reading the Torah and preaching in synagogues.”⁸² If the Pharisees were leaders of the synagogue, then one would expect to find evidence of this in the sources.

All of these details about the Pharisees in the Gospel of John tend to contradict both Josephus and the Synoptic Gospels. Josephus demonstrates that Pharisees did not control these multiple institutions. They did not work in tandem with, or even supervise, Sadducees and chief priests. The Pharisees were not leaders of the synagogue, the Sanhedrin, or the temple police. To conclude otherwise obliterates any credibility of Josephus, the author of Mark, and the author of Luke. If the Pharisees really were the

79. Philo, *Hypothetica* 7:13, in *Works of Philo*, 744.

80. Runesson et al., *Ancient Synagogue*, 52–54.

81. Runesson et al., *Ancient Synagogue*, 52–54. There are approximately sixty references to the synagogue in the New Testament and approximately twenty references to the synagogue in Josephus.

82. Neusner, *Rabbinic Traditions*, 289–90.

supreme leaders in Jerusalem in every facet as the author of John seems to suggest, then it is odd that the Pharisees disappear from the story in the Passion narratives in all three Synoptic Gospels. From what we know about the Pharisees in Josephus, the Synoptic Gospels, and Acts, if Pharisees were allowed to participate in Jesus' arrest and trial, he probably would not have been killed.

Takeaways

In today's passive-aggressive western culture, readers assume that the Jesus–Pharisee interactions were hostile and negative. This could not be further from the truth. The Gospels contain several episodes where Pharisees debated Jesus. Their debates and criticisms of each other must be understood within a dialectical, that is, “academic” context. In addition to the mealtime debates, the author of Luke explains that on one occasion, Pharisees were sitting near Jesus talking with him; in the midst of this discussion a paralytic was brought to Jesus and he was healed. When Jesus forgave the man's sins, a debate ensued between Jesus and the Pharisees about the propriety of Jesus' actions. After Jesus argued his position, all who were present, including Pharisees “glorified God and were filled with awe” (Luke 5:17–26). Early Jewish literature is saturated with similar debates among the rabbis. Many of them espoused opposing views but nowhere do they attempt to murder each other. Jesus' criticisms of the Pharisees were not on the same level as his criticisms of the corrupt priestly establishment, whom the Pharisees also criticized.

The close association between the Pharisees and the early Jesus movement is at the root of later hostility in the late first-century Gospels of Matthew and John. In today's dictionaries, “Pharisee” has become a standard description of a hypocritical person with nefarious motives. Such defamation, however, is offensive to Jews, because many Jews today consider themselves to be Pharisaic, or “rabbinic” Jews. Rabbinic Judaism developed in the age of Jesus. The rabbis, after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, were the spiritual and ideological heirs of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were leaders of Israel during Greek and Roman rule and helped prepare an entire nation to survive the destruction of their temple. When the temple—the very core of Judaism—was destroyed in 70 CE, Judaism largely survived because of the Pharisees and later rabbis. Based on the literature of the rabbis, as well as Josephus, we must acknowledge that Israel's Pharisaic leaders in the age of Jesus were highly moral and ethical people.

During the early rabbinic era, Christians defined themselves in relation to Judaism, and as a result, they demonized Jews unfairly and blamed them for the death of Jesus. In the view of most Christians, Jews not only killed a revered teacher, but they killed God himself—under the leadership of the Pharisees. This interpretation is weak and irresponsible.