

4.1 Simon the Pharisee, the Woman and Jesus

The narrative of the woman who anoints Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee and the subsequent conversation about the forgiveness of sins (Lk 7.36-50) is presented in the Gospel of Luke in a different context than in the other Gospels. The parallels (Mt 26.6-13, Mk 14.3-9, John 12.1-8, note also that in Mt and Mk the woman anoints Jesus' head, in John and Lk she anoints his feet) are set within the passion narrative, whereas Luke tells it in a different context.

Preceding the narrative in the Gospel of Luke we find the scene where disciples of John the Baptizer are sent to ask Jesus who he is, which leads Jesus to repeat the allusions to Isaiah 61,1-2 prominent already in the opening sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth (cf 7.18-22). This scene ends in a blessing of those 'who take[s] no offence at me' (7.23). A little later Jesus explicitly refers to comparisons made by others (probably Pharisees and lawyers cf. 7.29) between himself and John the Baptist. Although these interested outsiders seem bewildered by the difference in behaviour of the two concerning eating and drinking and having table-fellowship with people of doubtful reputation, Jesus confirms their difference. The confirmation that he actually has come 'eating and drinking' could be understood theologically as Jesus' confirmation that with his coming the kingdom of God is in the process of arriving – the celebration at table then is a sign in anticipation of the kingdom and for those understanding the time and mission of Jesus absolutely appropriate. In terms of the literary structure of the narrative it thus should come as no surprise that we find Jesus accepting the invitation of Simon the Pharisee to have table-fellowship with him. We learn moreover that there was obviously no problem for Jesus to be invited to a Pharisee's house, nor for a Pharisee to invite Jesus to his table. We should keep in mind that the sharing of the table, that is the sharing of a meal, is an expression of quite a close relationship, in antiquity even more so than today! The fact that Jesus is seen as being invited by Pharisees, and is involved in controversial discussions with them demonstrates that there must have been an ongoing relationship between Jesus, his disciples and Pharisees. Even though they were involved in critical discussions they were in the sort of relationship which indicates that they were concerned and interested in the same or similar issues. This was certainly not the case with the *Sadducees*, and even less so with *Essenes* who are completely absent from the New Testament writings. Simon addresses Jesus as teacher (*didaskale*) which is a reference of respect over against the addressee, so there is no sign of hostility or tension in the opening of the narrative.

It is not obvious how and why the woman who provokes the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisee arrives at the house. Although the woman appearing on the scene is called a sinner, nothing specifically is said about her. There is no reference to what kind of sinner she was. Later tradition interprets the reference to 'sinner' as having a sexual connotation, even sees in her the prostitute of the city, and identifies Mary Magdalene with this woman. There is no indication in this narrative which would allow for such a link. These interpretations of the word 'sinner' are later inferences which have led to a big number of representations of the woman in works of art and literature. Jesus' explanation 'for she has shown great love' may have contributed to these interpretations.

The woman's act of anointing Jesus with oil irritates the Pharisee and lets him question whether Jesus is a prophet for it seems impossible that he would allow a sinner to anoint him. Jesus, far from condemning the Pharisee's irritation, responds by corrective teaching. The parable invites Simon to see events from a different perspective! There is no condemnation of Simon's question and actions but rather Jesus offers guidance to Simon so he may understand the depth of God's forgiveness. The affirmation in v.47 ' Her many sins have been forgiven because she has shown great love' has caused scholarly discussions because it seems to imply that 'great love' is a condition of forgiveness. But it is rather presented here as the evidence that she has been forgiven. There is no account of Simon's

reaction. The narrative is open, but certainly Simon is not a negatively stereotyped Pharisee, but an open and interested conversation partner of Jesus.

Useful Readings

Tannehill, Robert C., *Luke*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1996, pp. 134-138.

Hornsby Teresa, 'The Woman is a Sinner/The Sinner is a Woman' in Levine A.J. ed. *A Feminist Companion to Luke*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2002, pp.121-132.

4.2 The Pharisees and the Jesus/Christ – Movement

The question of the narrative image and historical relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees needs to be addressed here as traditionally the Pharisees have been seen as the

main opponents of Jesus. However, in the narrative of the encounter of Jesus with Simon a different image emerges. When taking a closer look at Jews and Israel in Luke-Acts it is necessary to distinguish between a) theological perceptions in the narrative, b) rhetorical strategies of the narrative, c) possible historical scenarios which are reflected in the narrative.

The Pharisees appear only in the Gospel in chapters 5, 6 and 7, and again in chapters 11-19. Significantly they are absent throughout the entire passion narrative, chapters 20-23. The Jewish authorities involved in the events leading to Jesus' crucifixion are the 'chief priests' and the 'scribes'. We will come back to this later in unit 5.

Whilst there can be hardly any doubt that historically there were some tensions between Jesus, his followers and some Jews at certain times and places, this no indication that the 'parting of the ways' was an issue at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry or at the beginning of the formation of the Christ-movement, be it for theological or other reasons. These tensions are also not an indication that faith in Christ and Judaism were incompatible, or that faith in Christ had superseded Judaism. The fact that the Pharisees are depicted as involved in conversation and debate with Jesus rather than pointing towards separation, are indications that they must have been concerned about similar issues, that is, they had shared interests. Dispute, debate and discussion even conflict are primarily not indications of separation – but of relation and closeness – otherwise there would be no debate! Thus when Luke has Jesus often interacting, debating, discussing and even saying harsh words over against Pharisees – and they are the most prominent partners in debate – this indicates that they were most likely very close to the Jesus-movement.

In conversations and debates they are often mentioned together with scribes or teachers of the Law but they are clearly a group distinct from these.

In the Gospel of Luke the Pharisees are present and raise questions in significant scenes and thus witness to very important aspects of Jesus' ministry. They are there when Jesus is healing and points out this is an indication for the forgiveness of sins (5.17-24), when Jesus is healing on a Sabbath (6.7-11), when Jesus is eating and drinking with outcasts or generally enjoys those activities (5.29-35). They invite him to their houses which gives Jesus the opportunity to teach (7. 36-50; 11.37-54; 14.1-14). Not only are they obviously interested in participating in the conversation with Jesus, and this mostly not for negative reasons, they also warn him explicitly of Herod's enmity (13. 31) and in some sense also in 19.39. On the other hand there are negative depictions of Pharisees in 6.7, 7.30, 11.42-54, 16.14, 18.9-14.

In Acts the Pharisees are more than once defenders of the apostles (Acts 5.33-39, 22.3; 23.1-10). Thus, when looking at the overall depiction of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts we find a far more positive portrayal than in subsequent reception history of the New Testament. The Pharisees invite Jesus, warn him and often Luke does not account for their reaction to Jesus' teaching as in 7.36-50.

The dominating image of the Pharisees is of people open and interested in the message and ministry of Jesus. They are not disciples but most likely in the narrative of Luke-Acts they represent Jews who did not (yet) join the Christ-movement. In some cases however, we find Pharisees who did become Christ-followers, the most prominent among them is Paul. And nowhere is there a hint that Paul regards this as a heritage he should leave behind or give up. Faith in Christ and the Faith of the Fathers are not incompatible and the latter is in no ways annulled or superseded by the former.

Nevertheless, there are also indications of tensions between Jesus and Pharisees. The most direct negative address is found in Lk 11.37- 44, woes to Pharisees which are followed by woes to lawyers 11.45-54. But since the depiction of the Pharisees is not negative in Luke-Acts elsewhere it has been suggested that this passage refers to a particular context, or a limited aspect in some Pharisees' teaching rather than being a general condemnation of

Pharisees (and lawyers) as such (Tannehill pp.197f.) The words may have wider implications but only concerning those whose faults are described, which could include people in Lucan communities. The danger against which Jesus argues is not Pharisees as such but hypocrisy. Thus the warning in 11.43 is warning against seeking honour and a position of high reputation, a warning addressed to the disciples in Lk 9.46-48 and again in Lk 22.24-27. A similar scenario is probably behind the accusation that the Pharisees are greedy, money lovers. This is a standard charge against false teachers, and the issue itself is, similar to the passage in chapters 9 and 22, a warning against striving for high status according to the 'standards of this world' (Lk 16.14-15). The charges against Pharisees in these particular passages are not consistent with historical information about this group in the first century. There is no evidence that Pharisees were financially and socially the most prominent and influential group. It is thus more likely that their negative depiction reflects some conflicts at the time of the composition of Luke-Acts.

The negative sayings in the Gospel of Luke, and in a more articulated way in the sermons of Acts, provide indications that the Lucan communities had to deal with the fact that some Jews did not see what they saw – they did not perceive Jesus as the Messiah and thus did not perceive their present time as the beginning/inbreaking of the time to come. The early Christ-followers tried to come to terms with this non-response of some Jews of their time, and Luke-Acts reflects an attempt to understand what was going on. The depiction of the Pharisees ranges from positive to negative which means that they are not the opponents per se but represent various and divergent responses to the message of Christ. The negative image attributed to them in subsequent history of interpretation is not in accordance with their image in Luke-Acts.

Useful Readings

Brawley Robert L., 'The Pharisees in Luke-Acts' in *Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology and Conciliation* Atlanta,GA: Scholars Press 1987, pp.84-106.

Tomson Peter, 'Luke-Acts: Positive Portrayals of the Pharisees' in *If This Be From Heaven...Jesus and the New Testament Authors in Their Relationship to Judaism*, Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press 2001,pp.223-228.

Mason, Steve, 'Chief Priests, Sadducees, Pharisees and Sanhedrin in Acts' in Bauckham R. ed. *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting Vol 4: The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*.Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1995, pp. 115-58(-177).

Tannehill, Robert C. *Luke*. Nashville,TN: Abingdon 1996 pp. 197-201

Ilan Tal, '[The Attraction of Aristocratic Women to Pharisaism during the Second Temple Period](#)', in *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 88, No. 1. (Jan., 1995), pp. 1-33. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org>

Saldarini, Anthony J., *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*. 2nd edition Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2001

Mason Steve, '[Pharisaic Dominance before 70 CE and the Gospels' Hypocrisy Charge \(Matt 23:2-3\)](#)' in *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4. (Oct., 1990), pp. 363-381. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org>

