

tionized the Church's attitude to leprosy. Kolbe's voluntary starvation prevented a Polish family from being torn apart by evil men. The element of creativity is not absent either from the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons. It was this kind of experience that led the Jews to believe in an afterlife, an afterlife that was not to be equated with the nebulous existence of Sheol, the abode of the dead, but a life in which the righteous would live with the Lord. The first Jewish martyrs voiced the clear conviction that death was not the end. Perhaps it was this conviction that led Tertullian, an early champion of Christian orthodoxy, to declare that "the blood of the martyr is the seed of the Church."

Blind Guides?

Then the disciples came to him and said, "Do you know that the Pharisees have taken great offence at what you have been saying?" His answer was: ". . . Leave them alone; they are blind guides of blind men, and if one blind man guides another they will both fall into the ditch."

Matthew 15:12-14

"Alas for you, lawyers and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay tithes of mint and dill and cumin; but you have overlooked the weightier demands of the Law, justice, mercy and good faith. It is these you should have practised, without neglecting the others. Blind guides! You strain off a midge, yet gulp down a camel! Alas for you, lawyers and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, which you have filled inside by robbery and self-indulgence! Blind Pharisee! Clean the inside of the cup first; then the outside will be clean also. Alas for you, lawyers and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like tombs covered with whitewash; they look well from outside, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all kinds of filth.

So it is with you: outside you look like honest men, but inside you are brim-full of hypocrisy and crime. . . . You snakes, you vipers' brood, how can you escape being condemned to hell?"

Matthew 23:23-33

THE GOSPELS FREQUENTLY portray Jesus engaging in controversy with his contemporaries. They highlight his disagreement with the religious authorities over such matters as keeping the Sabbath holy, eating with unwashed hands, the authority to forgive sins, and the legality of divorce. While it could be argued that the discussions on some of these issues indicate nothing more than a difference in emphasis or interpretation, the repeated denunciations of Matthew 23 display a merciless hostility on the part of Jesus towards one group of fellow Jews, namely the Pharisees. In calling into question the sincerity of the Jewish leadership, "hypocrites," "vipers," and "blind guides" seem to be favorite labels. Pharisaism is a bad system that produces bad people.

What is the Christian reader to make of such extreme vituperation? How is Jesus' uncharacteristically vicious attack on the Pharisees to be explained? The question may be addressed in one of two ways: (1) by taking the view that *any* teaching attributed to Jesus in the Gospels is authentic, in the sense that it was actually given by him, or (2) by assuming that the words were placed on Jesus' lips by the evangelists writing during the final decades of the first century AD.

Those who accept the first option insist on the "truth" of any statement attributed to Jesus, however uncharacteristic or unpalatable it may be. They claim that whatever he said has abiding value for his followers and is therefore normative for Christian belief. They assume without question that since the Jewish leaders of his day were vilified by Jesus, they must have

deserved such treatment. In the words of one conservative scholar, "If Jesus, who was the Incarnation of God, and therefore the personification of perfect knowledge and truth, thus depicts the Pharisees, thus they must have been and not otherwise; no more is to be said."¹ Proponents of the alternative view attribute statements that they consider unworthy of Jesus, though allegedly made by him, to the evangelists. As a result, they look for specific situational factors that may have prompted expressions of enmity and hatred. Such an approach recognizes that the anti-Jewish statements in the Gospels belong not to the time of Jesus but to the latter part of the first century AD, when there was constant and open confrontation between the Church and the Synagogue. The clash between these two groups is reflected in the accounts of the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees recorded by the evangelists. In other words, the existence of contingent factors helps to explain Jesus' strong condemnation of his contemporaries, and in consequence it could be argued that his statements carry less authority.

These two ways of regarding the words of Jesus have an immediate bearing on the description of the Pharisees given in the Gospels. Is what we read in Scripture factually true, or is every negative utterance the product of a hostile writer with an axe to grind? Was the rift between Jesus and the leaders of the Pharisaic movement as great as we are led to believe? Those steeped in the Christian tradition inevitably regard the Pharisee as the worst possible type of Jew and accept without demur what is still the standard dictionary definition: "a formal, sanctimonious, and hypocritical person." Furthermore, they deduce from the New Testament that Jesus had nothing whatever in

1. A. Lukyn Williams, *Talmudic Judaism and Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1933), p. 63.

common with this particular group of Jews. In textbook and commentary, from pulpit and podium, this negative view of Pharisaism has been propagated for centuries as authentic.

However, for several decades a small but determined group of biblical scholars have been aware of the need to assess the Pharisees with greater historical accuracy. Their research has led them to question the reliability of the account given by the evangelists and to turn to other sources in their desire to provide a more favorable and honest portrayal of the founding fathers of postbiblical Judaism. But it is doubtful whether this painstaking research has made any perceptible impact on the person in the pew, who listens to denunciations of the Pharisees on several Sundays during the Christian year, not to mention Holy Week. This essay is an attempt to bring the fruits of modern scholarship within reach of the nonspecialist by outlining the reassessment of Pharisaism currently underway in scholarly circles and by seeking to demonstrate the relevance of such reassessment for every Christian congregation.

A New Approach

One of the earliest examples of intellectual honesty among Christian biblical scholars with regard to Judaism in general, and Pharisaism in particular, is the work of the Harvard professor George Foot Moore. In a pioneering article entitled "Christian Writers on Judaism," which appeared in the *Harvard Theological Review* for 1921, Moore made a full survey of what Christians had written about Jews over the past nineteen hundred years. His findings led him to the conclusion that the vast majority of Christian theologians have taken an interest in Judaism for one reason only: to demonstrate its inferiority. He castigated his contemporaries, especially German scholars

whose works were quickly becoming authoritative, for giving a false picture of Judaism in order to justify its displacement by Christianity. He accused them of portraying the Judaism of the early Christian centuries as a barren, if not moribund, religion, with which Jesus of Nazareth was at variance. He criticized them for concentrating on the New Testament at the expense of other, less prejudiced, sources. To rely solely on the Gospels for an appraisal of the Pharisees was, in his opinion, tantamount to accepting only the evidence of the Talmud or the Koran for the life and work of Jesus.

Despite Moore's criticisms, the negative attitude towards Judaism among Christian scholars persisted. His contemporaries were reluctant to change their minds, and because many of them were highly respected teachers, their influence on their pupils may be detected long after the 1920s. One example must suffice. For the past thirty-five years *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* has been a constant source of reference for teachers, preachers, students, and study-group leaders. It is to be found in most parish libraries and is an excellent source for anyone wishing to increase their knowledge of biblical subjects. The author of the article on the Pharisees is Matthew Black, a former professor at the University of St Andrew's in Scotland and a respected New Testament scholar. Black emphasizes the connection between the Pharisees of Jesus' day and the rabbis — the religious leaders of the Jews after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. For him the link is an excessive legalism, which robbed Judaism of its vitality and left it lifeless. "Pharisaism," he writes, "is the immediate ancestor of rabbinical (or normative) Judaism, the arid and sterile religion of the Jews after the fall of Jerusalem." To demonstrate how offensive this false description of the Pharisees is to Jewish readers, it is enough to quote the reaction of Samuel Sandmel, who was at one time provost and professor at the Hebrew Union College

—Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati. He writes, "I am personally a descendant of the Rabbinic religion, the sterility of which was not so complete as to prevent my being born. Black's article is not only unreliable, it is disgraceful that it should have appeared in the same dictionary to which I and some dozen other Jews contributed."²

This one example could be multiplied. Unfortunately, it may be stated without equivocation that the majority of Christian scholars disregarded Moore's complaint. In their discussions of Pharisaism, they were ready to accept the testimony of the Gospels without questioning its validity. They did not entertain the possibility that the evangelists were biased and therefore deliberately attempting to discredit the Jewish leadership. Furthermore, they neglected non-Christian sources that, though belonging to the New Testament period, provide a very different picture of the nature of Pharisaism.

However, Moore was not entirely without support. Not only did Jewish scholars corroborate his findings, but also Christian students of Judaism began to take his views seriously. One of the first to do so was the Anglican clergyman James W. Parkes, who wrote voluminously almost up to his death in 1982 in defense of the Pharisees and their religion. The eminent biblical scholar W. D. Davies, formerly of Duke University, concluded a lecture on the Pharisees delivered in Wales in 1954 by saying that "a reassessment of Pharisaism and new appreciation of it among Christians should become a prime necessity."³ In the 1970s and 1980s notable contributions to the debate were made by Roman Catholic scholars in an attempt to put into practice the recommendations made in 1965 by the

2. Samuel Sandmel, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity: Certainties and Uncertainties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 101.

3. W. D. Davies, *Introduction to Pharisaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 28.

Second Vatican Council with reference to fostering better relations between the Church of Rome and peoples of other faiths. Among them the name of John Pawlikowski, a Chicago professor, comes to the fore. Several books by this prolific scholar contain chapters that assess the contribution of the Pharisees in an objective and unbiased manner.⁴

The first step in the process of reassessment is to consider the nature and significance of the sources from which we derive our knowledge of Pharisaism. There are three: the New Testament, the rabbinic traditions of the first two centuries AD, and the writings of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. Although these sources provide unequivocal testimony to the existence of the Pharisees as an influential group within Judaism, they are beset by one major difficulty: they fail to agree with one another. When discussing the nature of Pharisaism, they all reach different conclusions. To make matters worse, there is disagreement even within the same source. One way of dealing with the differences between the sources is by recognizing that each one has its own emphasis, for it is only when that emphasis is properly appreciated that a true and clear picture of Pharisaism will emerge. Before the historian can describe the movement, the biblical commentator must come to grips with the text and its context. One must ask: What does the writer of any particular source seek to achieve by mentioning the Pharisees? How does his portrayal of them support his point of view?

Let us turn briefly to the sources themselves, starting with the New Testament but confining ourselves to the Gospels. Although the evangelists portray the Pharisees in a bad light

4. John Pawlikowski, *Catechetics and Prejudice* (New York: Paulist, 1973); *Sinai and Calvary: Meeting of Two Peoples* (Beverly Hills: Benziger, 1976); *Jesus and the Theology of Israel* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1989).

most of the time, we should not lose sight of some positive references. Luke, for example, states that Pharisees invited Jesus into their homes to eat with them (7:36; 11:37; 14:1), and on one occasion they warned him that Herod was out to kill him (13:31). But these are exceptions. The charge of hypocrisy and spiritual blindness made in Matthew 15 and the seven "woes" ("alas" in modern translations) of Matthew 23, which introduce the most malicious blanket condemnations, are much more typical of the attitude expressed by the biblical authors.

As we have already pointed out, for those who take a literalist view of the Bible, the fact that these negative descriptions are ascribed to Jesus makes them factually correct. In their opinion there is no need to turn to other sources for information about the Pharisees; an inerrant and inspired Scripture suffices. But biblical critics adopt a different approach. Because they regard the New Testament as "the Word of God in the words of men," they do not believe that its contents are entirely without bias, and therefore free of prejudice when describing those who opposed Christianity. They also stress that the authors were primarily theologians, not historians, whose intention was to preach the risen Christ and defend the faith rather than recount first-century history. Furthermore, they recognize and take account of contingent situational factors in any assessment of the evidence. They trace the animosity not to Jesus but to the evangelists, because they believe that it stems from a time when Jew and Christian were at loggerheads. They cannot, therefore, accept that the New Testament portrait of the Pharisee is a correct one. An example of this viewpoint is found in the work of the British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, the dean of Lichfield Cathedral, who concludes that in this case the testimony of the Bible is unreliable. He writes: "It is very difficult to use

the New Testament as basic material in our reconstruction of the Pharisees."⁵

There are at least three contingent factors that may account for the emergence of hostile Christian literature composed during the final decades of the first century. The first is the expulsion of Christians from the synagogues (John 9:34; 16:2). The hostility of the evangelists could be a reaction to Jewish persecution, which in turn was fuelled by the attempts of Jesus' followers to break away from Judaism by claiming that they constituted a movement apart from the Synagogue. The second is that Pharisaism proved to be a threat to Christianity because it demonstrated that, despite the fall of the temple, the Jewish religion was very much alive and able to compete for the souls of pagans. In order to marginalize Judaism and persuade their readers that it was no longer a viable option, the evangelists made every effort to discredit the leaders. They portray them as the sworn enemies of Jesus and deserving of his criticisms. Finally, the authors of the New Testament were ever mindful of the power of the Roman Empire and took great pains not to kindle its wrath. For they knew that if the Christian Church was to succeed in its mission, the support of Rome was essential. One way of earning the favor of the empire was to show that the chief opponents of Jesus were Jews, not Romans; that it was his own people, not a foreign power, who crucified him.

Just as the Christian turns instinctively to the New Testament to learn about the Pharisees, the Jew turns to rabbinical literature. Here, as one would expect, the picture is very different. Although the rabbis of a later generation hardly ever refer to the political stance of the Pharisees against the Greeks and the Romans, they take great interest in their spirituality

5. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), p. 184.

because they regard them as the saviors of Judaism in times of crisis. They admire them for the very reason that earned them the condemnation of the evangelists, namely faithful adherence to the Law. But the most prominent characteristics of this highly respected group are godliness, learning, compassion, and brotherly love. For the Pharisee, the ultimate standard in personal relationships was the golden rule. Even so, rabbinical literature is not blind to the shortcomings of the Pharisees. The Talmud, the great compendium of Jewish practices and beliefs produced around AD 500, records the Pharisees' own verdict on themselves. They are just as ready as Jesus to criticize ostentation in matters of faith. Those who make a public show of their religion, but nurture deceit in their hearts, are condemned unsparingly. The bickering and the difference of opinion within the movement are also recorded. But the fact that some Pharisees were hypocritical and quarrelsome does not justify the wholesale charges brought against them in Matthew 23. If Jesus was a true teacher, surely he must be acquitted of such hasty generalizations.

Our final source is the work of Josephus, a commander of the Jewish forces in the nation's rebellion against the Romans in AD 66-73. Early in the war he was taken prisoner, and he spent the rest of his life in Rome, where he died at the turn of the century. His writings are important in our quest for the true picture of the Pharisees for three reasons. The first is that he wrote as a historian, not a theologian. Unlike the evangelists and the rabbis, he had no ulterior motive; he wished only to record facts. The second is that he was an eyewitness of the events that he records and is therefore likely to have given a correct account of them. Finally, his works were not, in all probability, rewritten or edited by others after him, as those of the evangelists and the rabbis were. In this source, the period and the account given of it correspond.

Josephus refers frequently to the Pharisees as the most prominent group among the Jews from the second century BC onwards. During periods of oppression and persecution they uphold the rights of the Jews. They emerge as champions of their people during crucial moments in their history: the time of the Maccabees, the reign of Herod, the first decade of the Christian era when Judea became a Roman province, and during the rebellion of AD 66. Josephus suggests that they were an influential body, which the rulers would do well to heed. But in addition to having political interests, they were also religious leaders. They were noted for their loyalty to God, their strict adherence to the Law of Moses, and their emphasis on social justice, compassion, and tolerance. However, Josephus did not like the Pharisees. For personal reasons he objected to their political power and failed to see why their interpretation of the Law should be paramount.

These, then, are the main sources of our knowledge of the Pharisees during the time of Jesus. The fact that each of them has its own agenda makes scholars reluctant to accept their evidence without demur. But however subjective the descriptions may be, taken together they provide a portrait of the Pharisees that is accepted as being historically accurate. It is possible to pinpoint four characteristics. The first is their piety; they were observant Jews determined to keep God's Law. All three sources agree on this. The second is their influence among the ordinary people. Josephus makes much of this point, but it is mentioned in the other sources as well. The third is their political power. Though this is not mentioned by the rabbis, and only hinted at in the Gospels, it features prominently in Josephus. Finally, their hypocrisy. The rabbis and Josephus note this, but the New Testament highlights it and applies it indiscriminately to all members of the group.

Achievements

The Pharisees first appeared during the second century BC, when Judas Maccabeus led his fellow Jews in a revolt against their Greek overlords. If the people of Judah were to resist the attractions of paganism, they needed strong religious leaders. A corrupt priesthood had embraced the Greek way of life, and almost overnight it lost all prestige. The Second Book of Maccabees relates in graphic detail how Jason, brother of Onias, "who had obtained the high priesthood by corrupt means," became totally immersed in Greek culture.

He abolished the lawful way of life and introduced practices which were against the law. He lost no time in establishing a sports-stadium at the foot of the citadel itself, and he made the most outstanding of the young men assume the Greek athlete's hat. So Hellenism reached a high point with the introduction of foreign customs through the boundless wickedness of the impious Jason. As a result, the priests no longer had any enthusiasm for their duties at the altar, but despised the temple and neglected the sacrifices; and in defiance of the law they eagerly contributed to the expenses of the wrestling-school whenever the opening gong called them. They placed no value on their hereditary dignities, but cared above everything for Hellenic honours. (2 Macc. 4:12-15)

Though the priests were nominally the nation's religious leaders, in the face of such corruption the Pharisees assumed the authority to make decisions in matters of faith and morals. These new lay leaders realized that in order to survive the threats posed by its opponents, traditional Judaism had to adapt to the situation in which it found itself. In their attempt to save their ancestral faith, they emphasized the moral and ritual

principles enshrined in the Law and strove to make them applicable to the daily life of every Jew.

In stressing public and private morality, the Pharisees were worthy successors of Moses and the great prophets of Israel. Ever since the covenant was made on Mount Sinai between God and his people, the ethical obligations of the Law had been of paramount importance to the religious leaders. But a glance at the history of Israel will demonstrate that the nation had consistently failed to keep the commandments. Although the ritual laws governing sacrifices and offerings were observed, the righteousness and justice demanded by God were entirely lacking; hence the fierce denunciations of Amos, Hosea, and Micah.

Listen, you leaders of Jacob, rulers of Israel,
should you not know what is right?
You hate good and love evil,
you flay men alive and tear the very flesh from their bones;
you devour the flesh of my people,
strip off their skin, splinter their bones;
you shred them like flesh into a pot,
like meat into a cauldron.
Then they will call to the Lord, and he will give them no
answer. (Mic. 3:1-4)

The Pharisees insisted that in order to avoid the catastrophe predicted by these eighth-century prophets, the Jews had to take the commandments seriously. If it was to survive, Judaism had to undergo a transformation based on adherence to every detail of the Law, moral and ritual. The Sinai covenant must be the basis of life for the individual and society.

But if the commandments were to be kept, they had to be applied to everyday life in a realistic way and their relevance to the ordinary Jew demonstrated. The inability of the prophets

to convince Israel of the need to repent convinced the Pharisees of the need for a new strategy. In their view, God's illustrious envoys had failed because the content of their preaching was too vague. A message expressed in such general terms as "Let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24) was far too imprecise. The same criticism could be made of the Law of Moses. How did people actually "love" their neighbors? What was meant by "honoring" one's parents? How was the Sabbath to be kept as a day of rest on which "any work" was forbidden on pain of death? How did one love God with all one's heart, soul, and strength?

But the lack of precision was not the only problem. It was obvious from such books as Exodus and Deuteronomy that very many Old Testament laws were irrelevant for a second century BC Jew. Much of the legislation recorded in the Five Books was far more suited to farmers than to townspeople and to priests rather than laity. During the early period of the nation's history, when Israel was basically an agricultural society, these laws could be observed with but little attempt at adaptation. But when, under the impact of Greek civilization, the Jew became a city dweller, the inadequacy of the Law of Moses became apparent. How were the Jewish communities in Alexandria, Athens, and Rome to preserve their distinctive lifestyle and practice their religion in an environment that was not only pagan but urban, if their only law code was intended for an agrarian society? The Law was certainly a help, but it did not by any means cover every eventuality. It is true that through the ministry of the priest it could assure the individual of forgiveness and atonement. But the promise of large flocks, fruitful fields, and full barns as a reward for good living, though relevant once, meant little to a shop-keeper in Antioch or a tailor in Corinth.

To make God's commandments applicable, the Pharisees developed the concept of a dual Law, or to use the Hebrew

term, a dual Torah: written and oral. The former corresponded to the first section of our modern Bible, which is traditionally ascribed to Moses and known as the Five Books. The latter "fully came into operation only just before the time of Christ, though it too, according to Jewish tradition, could be traced to Moses. Because of its ancient origin, the oral Law was therefore just as authoritative as the written Law. It is referred to in the various translations of the New Testament as "the tradition of the elders," "the teaching handed down by our ancestors," and "an old-established tradition" (Matt. 15:2; Mk 7:3). In some ways it is comparable to the concept of "tradition" in Roman Catholicism, namely the authoritative interpretation of Scripture that has evolved over the centuries.

Because the Pharisees believed that the written Law was far too imprecise to be of any practical use, they adapted ancient statutes and ordinances to meet the challenge of a new age; the moral principles of the covenant expressed in the written Law were applied realistically to the daily life of the urban Jew. This meant spelling out in detail the demands of the covenant and demonstrating that keeping them to the letter was not beyond the capabilities of any individual. The written Law did not refer in so many words to such specific duties as welcoming strangers, visiting the sick, giving alms anonymously, and working for the good of society. But for the Pharisees, these and a host of other religious duties were implicit within the Five Books and incumbent upon all Jews. The same interpretative method was applied to the principle of retaliation as expressed in the oft-quoted verses from Exodus 21: "Whenever hurt is done, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, bruise for bruise, wound for wound." Taken literally, this would mean that anyone who struck out another person's eye or tooth would lose one of his or her own. But the Pharisees were not content with

this interpretation, for the assailant might be a one-eyed person, in which case the punishment, namely blindness, would far exceed the crime. In their view, the written Law should not be taken literally in this case but interpreted in terms of compensation. The meaning of "eye for eye" was that the victim should receive the *value* of an eye, that is, realistic compensation for the harm done. Little wonder that Josephus claimed that the Pharisees tended to be lenient in administering punishment.

The development of the oral Law had far-reaching consequences for Judaism. We shall note three of them. In the first place, greater emphasis was placed on the individual. It is true that the Bible recognized the value of every person in the eyes of God. But the Pharisees went much further than the biblical authors, for they rejected the concept that the individual could be saved only through the mediation of a priest and the ritual of the temple. They dispensed with the need for a mediator by stressing that every Jew could communicate directly with God through keeping the oral Law. It was as a result of this emphasis on a personal relationship with the divine that the concept of the fatherhood of God developed in Judaism. It was through Pharisaism that the picture of God as a loving father, not only of the Jew but also of every other member of the human race, came into the New Testament. In essence, the Christian's "Our Father" is a Pharisaic prayer. It is also possible to link the Pharisees' belief in resurrection to their emphasis on the importance of the individual.

Secondly, the synagogue was given much greater prominence as a religious center alongside the temple. Although daily services were held in the synagogue, it was far more than a house of prayer. The various activities associated with it reflected the Pharisees' belief that worship was of no value unless it was linked to study and social action. Prayer was pointless if it was not informed by constant study of the Law. Piety was,

meaningless if charity was lacking. Hence, in addition to being a place of worship, the synagogue was a school, a library, a social center, and a court of law. It was the hub of every local Jewish community. Strangers were offered hospitality within its walls and the poor fed at its doors. In time the majority of Jews were able to dispense with the temple because they were persuaded that it was not through ritual but through study that salvation was obtained. Religious authority was henceforth in the hands of scholars, laymen proficient in the Law, not priests. The task of the teacher was to expound the written Law and apply it to the situation of each individual. The synagogue enabled every Jew to comprehend the commandments and accept the responsibility for keeping them.

Thirdly, the home and the family began to play a prominent part within the religious life of the nation. The hearth took the place of the temple, and ordinary meals replaced sacrifices. As the numerous references to purity in the New Testament illustrate, the Pharisees placed great emphasis on food. They produced numerous regulations about what to eat and how to prepare it. Some scholars see this "table-fellowship" as the hallmark of Pharisaism. It was not some ambitious political program that enabled Jews to live out their religious beliefs, but the sanctification of everyday life, symbolized by the fellowship of the dinner table. By transferring the practice of ritual purity from the sanctuary to the kitchen and the dining room, the Pharisees gave ordinary people the ability to live in accordance with the Law in their own houses without the services of a priestly mediator. This new approach to religion was prompted by the current situation in Judah. In the face of corruption in every facet of the nation's life — in its culture, its politics, and its religion — the Pharisees emphasized family life. If the attainment of national purity was beyond them, personal purity was not. It was in the homes and the syn-

agogues of Palestine that the rebellion against oppression eventually took root. Although the Jews failed in their bid to end the Roman occupation of their country, Judaism survived the catastrophe of AD 70 because of the faith of its adherents, a faith that was nurtured by pious families in their own homes — thanks to the oral Law of the Pharisees.

Jesus and the Pharisees

It is now recognized that Jesus of Nazareth remained faithful to Judaism throughout his life. Some modern scholars have associated him with one of the many groups or parties representative of the religion of his day. The Zealots, who were in constant conflict with Rome, the Essenes, the community that is believed to be responsible for producing the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Sadducees, who were in charge of the temple and its ritual, have all been named as the possible background of Jesus' ministry. While these suggestions have not been taken too seriously, the belief that Jesus had close links with the Pharisees has generated much interest and found considerable support, especially among Jewish scholars. One of the first to put forward this theory was Joseph Klausner, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Writing in 1925, he claimed that "even to the last, Jesus remained a true Pharisaic Jew."⁶ Forty years later Martin Buber, Paul Winter, and Asher Finkel came to the same conclusion.⁷ Among the increasing number of Christians

6. Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1925), p. 319.

7. M. Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 137; P. Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1962, 1974), p. 133; A. Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), *passim*.

drawn to this view is W. E. Phipps, who describes Jesus as a "prophetic Pharisee."⁸

Despite scholarly opinion, many Christians have difficulty in believing that Jesus had anything in common with the Pharisees. Does not the New Testament emphasize the irreconcilable differences between him and this group's interpretation of Judaism? However, now that a fuller and more balanced picture of Pharisaism has emerged, it is not inappropriate to consider the similarities between the teaching of Jesus and that of this influential movement. There is a striking correspondence between the Pharisees' characteristics noted above and Jesus' teachings. The Gospels refer frequently to the value of the individual. If even a sparrow does not fall to the ground without God knowing, how much more important is a human being. "As for you, even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So have no fear; you are worth more than any number of sparrows" (Matt. 10:30-31). Jesus' concept of the fatherhood of God may well go far beyond that of the Pharisees, nevertheless his teaching echoes one of their basic concepts; Jesus was not the first to emphasize the close relationship between God and human beings. Jesus' ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing, often carried out in synagogues, points to an affinity with early rabbis. As has been already pointed out, Jesus ate with Pharisees, and some claim that the Last Supper was a "fellowship meal" like those partaken of in Pharisaic circles. The early Christian teaching of resurrection can be traced to Jesus, and beyond him to the Pharisees. When Jesus was asked by a Pharisee which was the greatest commandment in the Law, he replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.' That is the greatest com-

8. W. E. Phipps, "Jesus, the Prophetic Pharisee," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 14 (1977): pp. 17-31.

mandment. It comes first. The second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Everything in the Law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:37-40). The Pharisee who asked the question would have been delighted with the answer. For Jesus, as for the Pharisees, the golden rule, "Treat others as you would like them to treat you" (Luke 6:31), is of paramount importance. A detailed and unbiased examination of such correspondences leads one respected New Testament scholar to conclude that he can "find no substantial conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees."⁹ From this standpoint it could be claimed that the Gospel of Christ transformed, but did not annul, Pharisaism.

Although due weight should be given to the similarities, the differences cannot be ignored. The Gospels demonstrate that there was a fundamental disagreement between the Pharisees and Jesus on many topics: the status of women, the forgiveness of sins, the authority of the Law, association with sinners, and the concept of the kingdom of God are some of them. There was a difference of opinion even on the significance of the individual, for Jesus insisted that this element of Pharisaic teaching should be revised and expanded, as his attitude to healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6) demonstrates. For the Pharisees the sanctity of the Sabbath was one of the cornerstones of Judaism. In a pagan environment, the observance of a day of rest was one of the distinctive marks of every Jewish community. It has been said that "the Sabbath has preserved the Jews more than the Jews have preserved the Sabbath." Healing a person with a withered arm on a day of rest was contrary to the oral Law. If the sick man had been in danger of dying, there would have been no objection to Jesus' action. But in this particular case, there was no emergency. The

9. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 291.

Pharisees found fault with Jesus because they considered it more important to preserve one of the distinctive marks of their faith than perform a healing that could wait until the following day. In an age when Judaism's very survival was threatened by pagan influences, its leaders laid more stress on those elements that affected the community as a whole than on a matter relating to an individual. Jesus disagreed.

If the conclusion that Jesus and the Pharisees had much more in common than the Gospels indicate, how does one understand chapters like Matthew 23? Two explanations are offered, both of which have appealed to biblical scholars. The first claims that Jesus is not issuing a blanket condemnation of the movement as a whole. His criticism is aimed at a small group of Pharisees, bigoted extremists and hypocrites who would have been condemned by others of their kind as well. Like the rabbis of the Talmud, Jesus could see the shortcomings of those members who brought the movement into disrepute, and he made his feelings known. The attraction of this explanation is that it allows that there is some truth in the denunciations made by Jesus in the Gospels, while accepting also the positive picture of the group painted by Josephus. Its weakness is the lack of hard evidence. The Pharisees of the Gospels are almost invariably regarded as the Jewish leaders of the day, not as a few individuals whose behavior is untypical of the group as a whole. Furthermore, it is difficult to believe that a clash between Jesus and a number of extremists could have led to the major disruption between Church and Synagogue that took place later.

The second explanation, already mentioned in passing, is that the negative portrayal of the Pharisees is related to contingent factors; it reflects the difficult relationship between Christians and Jews during the latter half of the first century. The fact that the Pharisees were implacably opposed to the emerging

Christian community many years after the lifetime of Jesus has relevance for any consideration of the way in which they are portrayed in Christian literature. The anti-Jewish features of the Gospels are more intelligible when set against the background of first-century controversy. Referring to the disputes between Jesus and his fellow Jews recorded in the Gospel of Mark, one scholar states bluntly that "all the Marcan controversy stories, without exception, reflect dialogues between the Apostolic Church and its social environment, and are devoid of roots in the circumstances of the life of Jesus."¹⁰ The evangelists condemned the Pharisees out of hand because it suited them to do so. Even those who do not go as far as this, because they believe that Jesus did disagree with the Pharisees at times, feel that the animosity recorded in the Gospels is greatly exaggerated.

In this context, it is instructive to note the difference between Matthew's portrayal and Mark's. In Matthew the Pharisees are the sworn enemies of Jesus, whereas in Mark, though they engage in a lively and sometimes bitter debate, they tolerate him, and at times admire him. Furthermore, Mark does not link the Pharisees with the Crucifixion. Which account is historically correct? If the theory that Mark wrote his Gospel first is accepted, then Matthew was writing at a time when the relationship between Jew and Christian was deteriorating rapidly. Many commentators therefore believe that Matthew, in company with Luke and John, expresses the hatred felt by the early Christians towards the Jewish leadership. For many this is the only acceptable explanation. Klaus Berger summarizes the point thus: "The Pharisees are, apparently, opponents of the early liberal community practice, projected back into the life of Jesus."¹¹

10. Winter, p. 125.

11. Quoted by Sanders, p. 292.

Conclusion

What relevance does this reappraisal of the Pharisees and of Jesus' relationship with them have for the contemporary Christian? How, in this instance, does a fresh approach to ancient texts affect the modern Church? The answer is related both to the current dialogue between Christians and Jews and to the intellectual honesty of preachers and teachers. After centuries of persecuting Jews in the name of Christ, churches of all denominations have sought to make amends for such shameful behavior. Since 1945 the major Churches have made a determined effort to right the wrongs of the past. In countless statements and declarations, they have recognized that since Christian teaching has contributed to the negative stereotype of the Jew, it is incumbent upon them to propagate among their adherents a different image of God's ancient people. While progress has been made in many areas, the Christian's image of the Pharisee has been slow to change. This has made dialogue between Christians and Jews more difficult. For although, strictly speaking, Pharisaism came to an end as a specific movement around AD 220, its ideals have continued to dominate Judaism throughout the subsequent centuries. The three main branches of contemporary Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) differ on many important matters, but they are all agreed on the debt they owe to the Pharisees. Every believing Jew is the spiritual heir of these founding fathers. If, therefore, the teachings of the Pharisees are condemned out of hand, Jews are not likely to enter into religious discussions with Christians, simply because the foundation of their faith is being undermined. Christians who believe that interfaith dialogue should have a prominent place in our pluralist society must learn to appreciate the contribution made by the Pharisees to Judaism and be ready to revise their ideas accordingly.

Biblical scholars continue to address the issues raised by a study of Pharisaism and seek to appreciate the movement's standpoint and its place within Judaism. Much progress has been made. But if current research is to influence Christian thinking on a significant scale, pastors and teachers must grapple with the difficulties at a local level and be prepared to reconsider the age-old description of the Pharisees as "blind guides."

A Portrait of Jesus

They came to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath he went to synagogue and began to teach. The people were astounded at his teaching, for, unlike the doctors of the law, he taught with a note of authority. Now there was a man in the synagogue possessed by an unclean spirit. He shrieked: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God." Jesus rebuked him: "Be silent," he said, "and come out of him." And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry left him. They were all dumbfounded and began to ask one another, "What is this? A new kind of teaching! He speaks with authority. When he gives orders, even the unclean spirits submit." The news spread rapidly, and he was soon spoken of all over the district of Galilee.

Mark 1:21-28

IN THE PAST THE GOSPEL OF MARK was regarded by Christian preachers and teachers as "the Cinderella Gospel." Like the little girl in the story, it was always the poor relation whenever