

A Gospel Portrait of the Pharisees

Donald E. Cook

[p.221]

I began writing these lines during the days of Hanukkah and Advent, 1985. As I wrote, I was aware of the emphasis upon light within both great holy seasons. It is my hope that this study in the Synoptic Gospels will be helpful in dispelling some of the darkness of misunderstanding between Jews and Christians.

The Gospels are stories about Jesus which proclaim him to be Son of God. They were written by early believers to record their memories about Jesus and to interpret the meaning of his life for their communities. These narratives now constitute a major segment of Christian Scripture. The blending of history and interpretation within the framework of the stories has given to the Gospels a certain charm and compelling literary presence or power which has caught the attention and imagination of readers for hundreds of years. For Christians, the accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry are a central point of reverent study and adoration, while for Jews these same narratives often are a source of dismay and pain, even anger.¹ The subject under consideration here, the portrayal of the Pharisees in the Gospels, is a major concern for many persons who are aware of the common early history of Christianity and Judaism and sensitive to their present and future relationships. The rationale for this concern builds upon two significant data: (1) the Pharisees are the principal opponents of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, and (2) modern Judaism traces its origins to the Pharisees who survived the fall of Jerusalem.²

MARK³

Mark refers to the Pharisees on relatively few occasions. Three times they are singled out for individual treatment (2:24; 8:11; 10:2); three times they are linked with the scribes (2:16; 7:1, 5), three times, with the Herodians or Herod (3:6; 8:15; 12:13); and once each they are related to the disciples of John (2:18) and to "all the Jews" (7:3). When observed against the background of the Markan outline, the Pharisees are mentioned ten times in the Galilean section of the gospel narrative in related sets of references (2:16, 18/2:24; 3:6/7:1, 3, 5/8:11, 15). Two of the sets include one reference to the Pharisees alone and another in which they are related to a second group or person (2:24; 3:6/8:11, 15). The two remaining sets have references only to the Pharisees linked to another group or person (2:16, 18/7:1, 3, 5). The reference to the Pharisees alone in 10:2 occurs on

[p.222]

¹ Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 22-119. Charlotte Klein, *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology*, trans. Edward Quinn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 67-126.

² Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 45.

³ I have attempted to present the gospel materials in a way that will allow each participant in the symposium or reader of this study to view and evaluate the synoptic portrait of the Pharisees. Each Gospel is considered as a literary unit and in relation to the group of three. Each participant or reader is encouraged to have a copy of the Gospels at hand. A parallel edition would be most helpful. The quotations in the study are from the *Revised Standard Version*.

the way to Jerusalem, and Mark's final mention of them (linked with Herod, 12:13) occurs after Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. It is significant that the Pharisees do not appear in the passion narrative.⁴ All the Markan Pharisaic accounts are paralleled in Matthew; Luke contains parallels to approximately half the Markan narratives.

The first two sets of Pharisaic encounters are part of what is generally recognized as a pre-Markan collection of conflict stories. All the other Pharisaic pericopes, except 8:14-21, are also understood to be conflict narratives.⁵ Some scholars see 12:13 related to a second pre-Markan collection.⁶

The issue involved in 2:15-17, the call of Levi, has to do with table fellowship.⁷ Note, however, that the comment attributed to the Pharisees is limited to a question addressed to the disciples. Although opposition to Jesus will be indicated later, no overt criticism of Jesus or the Pharisees is to be found here in Mark. The event provides a setting for a teaching of Jesus on the scope of the gospel, but may be called a "conflict story" only by reference to other materials. Feasting in 2:15-17 calls attention to fasting in the second Pharisaic reference (2:18-22). Again the Pharisees' participation is confined to a question, this time to Jesus himself, concerning fasting. Jesus' response to the question is not a criticism of the Pharisees, however, but a veiled passion prediction and two parabolic interpretations of the newness of the gospel.⁸

The second set of Pharisaic encounters in Mark has to do with Sabbath observance. In 2:24 the address is to Jesus in regard to the disciples' "doing what is not lawful." Again the participation of the Pharisees is incidental to a teaching of Jesus which reinterprets the meaning of Sabbath. There is actually no Pharisaic criticism of Jesus, and Jesus does not criticize the Pharisees. In 3:1-6 we come to the first overt hostility of the Pharisees toward Jesus, yet most readers would be shocked at the outcome of verse 6, if they were not already conditioned by a general negative impression of the Pharisees. Mark seems to interpret the narrative of the healing of the man with the withered hand as a demonstration of Jesus' authority over the Sabbath and thus a threat to Judaism as understood and practiced by the Pharisees. The conspiracy between the Pharisees and the Herodians to get rid of Jesus is another anticipation of the passion and suggests Pharisaic involvement in those later events, although their participation is not indicated elsewhere in Mark.⁹

⁴ Note, however, Michael Cook's suggestion that the mention of scribes in the passion narrative is really a reference to the Pharisees in *Mark's Treatment of Jewish Leaders* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), pp. 58-76.

⁵ Arland J. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), pp. 151-174; 203-205.

⁶ Cook, *Mark's Treatment of Jewish Leaders*, pp. 31-51.

⁷ Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity*, p. 46. Neusner suggests here and elsewhere that this was a matter of concern to the Pharisees prior to A.D. 70.

⁸ I take the Markan account to reflect the history of Jesus which, though interpreted by the Evangelist, had genuine claim to represent generally what happened. The circumstances of the church at the time of writing influenced all the Evangelists, as can be seen most clearly in Matthew and Luke, but I do not take the circumstances to have caused the creation of tradition which had no connection with Jesus. Note Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 32-41, and Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (London: Olliphants, 1976), pp. 824. Thus, while I appreciate E. P. Sanders' vast erudition, I do not agree with his evaluation of the history of Jesus found in the Gospels. Cf. his *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), especially pp. 270-293.

⁹ Cf. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, pp. 290-293.

The third set of narratives (7:1-8) contains three references to the Pharisees. Here we observe the first overt criticism of the sect by Jesus. Note the close identification of the Pharisees with the scribes and the Jews. The encounter begins with a question similar to those in 2:16 and 18: "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders...?" (7:5). Jesus' response is to reject traditional law by accusing the Pharisees and scribes of forsaking the commandment of God to embrace human interpretation. The epithet "hypocrites" occurs here for the first and only time in Mark.¹⁰

[p.223]

The fourth set of encounters indicates a continuing rift between Jesus and the Pharisees. The first narrative (8:11-13) informs us that the Pharisees came to argue with Jesus and ask a sign (this immediately after the feeding of the four thousand). Jesus' response is an emphatic "No." The second saying is a warning against the leaven (teachings?) of the Pharisees and Herod (8:15). The settings of both incidents are interesting for our study since they suggest that the disciples and the Pharisees shared a similar obtuseness.

The last two encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees continue the negative characteristic noted in 7:1-8 and 8:11-15. In 10:2 Mark places Jesus on the road to Jerusalem with the first item on the agenda being a conflict with the Pharisees who have appeared to test Jesus. The medium of the testing is a question of divorce. In the course of his answer, Jesus accuses his questioners of hardness of heart, indicating that the Mosaic legislation for divorce was not according to God's original purpose (10:6). Obviously this would not be a criticism of the Pharisees alone, but of the larger Jewish community. The question concerning tribute to Caesar (12:13-17) seems to reflect Herodian rather than Pharisaic concerns, but the introduction to the pericope indicates Pharisaic interest in the effort to entrap him. Mark earlier indicates involvement of the Pharisees with the Herodians (3:6).

MATTHEW

Matthew refers to the Pharisees twenty-nine times,¹¹ considerably more than Mark. Like Mark, he designates the group singularly and in relation to others (Sadducees, scribes, chief priests, Herodians). Matthew's narrative follows an outline similar to Mark's, and Matthew parallels each of the Markan Pharisaic pericopes. Moreover, there are four Matthean Pharisaic pericopes which substantially parallel a Markan text, but the Markan text does not refer directly to the Pharisees. In addition, there are Matthean references to the Pharisees which are paralleled only in Luke and others which are unique to Matthew. We shall examine each of these categories. Because of their significance, we shall look at the woes in chapter 23 separately.

In the pericopes shared by Matthew and Mark, the treatment of the Pharisees is similar in tone and development. The variations, however, are quite significant.

In the call of Levi (Mark 2:13-17; Matt. 9:9-13), the narratives are generally alike. Matthew, however, does not refer to the scribes of the Pharisees. Matthew's addition of an ethicizing note in regard to the temple cult (Matt. 9:13; Hos. 6:6; cf. Matt. 12:5-8) is the only substantial

¹⁰ Mark refers to the Pharisees' "hypocrisy" once (12:15).

¹¹ Matt. 23:14 is omitted by ψ , B, D, L, θ and many other witnesses.

difference.¹² The depiction of the Pharisees in the pericopes on fasting (Mark 2:18-22; Matt. 9:14-17) is basically the same. Neither Evangelist suggests overt conflict. The first question about Sabbath observance (Mark 2:23-28; Matt. 12:1-8) is reported almost verbatim by both Evangelists in the first part of the narrative. Matthew, like

[p.223]

Mark, records differences between Jesus and the Pharisees, but not conflict. Matthew, however, extends his narrative with a different ending (12:5-7) which enlarges his ethical concerns about the temple cult and interprets the Christ-event as "greater than the temple". (Note the repetition of Hos. 6:6; cf. 9:13.).

Conflict arises in the second Sabbath pericopes (Mark 3:1-6; Matt. 12:9-14). The intention of the Pharisees to accuse Jesus appears for the first time in Mark and Matthew, and the conspiracy to destroy him is reported by both Evangelists, although Matthew makes no reference to the Herodians (12:14). In the matter of oral tradition and Scripture (Mark 7:1-23; Matt. 15:1-20), the early developments in the pericopes are quite similar: The Pharisees and scribes criticize Jesus' disciples for not observing the traditional law; Jesus responds by calling them hypocrites and rejecting the claims of the traditional law. In the latter part of the pericope, Matthew expands his narrative to indicate that the Pharisees have been offended (15:12). For the first time, Jesus calls them "blind guides" (15:14). Blindness and hypocrisy become major motifs in Matthew's treatment of the Pharisees. The narrative of the Pharisees' seeking a sign is virtually identical in both Gospels (Mark 8:11-13; Matt. 16:1-4; cf. a Matthean doublet, 12:38-39), except that Mark refers to the Pharisees alone while Matthew joins them to the Sadducees.¹³ The tendency to expand the tradition found in Mark observed earlier (Matt. 15:12-14) may be seen also in the teaching on leaven (Mark 8:14-21; Matt. 16:5-12). Matthew adds a saying which interprets the leaven explicitly as the teaching of the Pharisees (16:11-12). Mark joins the Pharisees here to Herod, while Matthew joins them to the Sadducees. The treatment of the Pharisees in the pericopes on divorce is almost identical in Mark and Matthew (Mark 10:1-12; Matt. 19:1-12). The same is true on the question of paying tribute to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17; Matt. 22:15-22. Both relate the Pharisees to the Herodians.).

There are four Matthean pericopes which parallel Mark in their general substance, but in each text Matthew refers to the Pharisees; Mark does not. In 12:24, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul. Mark speaks of "scribes" (3:22).¹⁴ The parable of the wicked tenants (21:33-46) is focused by Matthew directly at the chief priests and the Pharisees (21:45). Mark says "they" tried to arrest him (12:12). Significantly, this change provides the setting for one of Jesus' most devastating judgments against Israel in general and the Pharisees in particular: "...the kingdom of God will be taken away from you" (21:43, unique to Matthew). In 22:34, a Pharisaic lawyer asks about the great commandment. In Mark, a scribe asks the question and is commended by Jesus (Mark 12:28-34). The commendation is absent in Matthew. Matthew 22:41-46 is the fourth of these narratives.

¹² This reference to the cult may suggest a circumstance after A.D. 70. Cf. F W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 228.

¹³ Matthew alone among the Gospels links the Pharisees and Sadducees (3:7; 16:1-12). Note, however, Acts 23:7.

¹⁴ Cf. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), p. 232.

According to Matthew, Jesus asks the Pharisees about David's son. In Mark, the question is not directed to an identified group, but makes reference to the scribes (Mark 12:35).

[p.225]

Except for several of the woes in chapter 23, there are only two Matthean Pharisaic pericopes which parallel Luke but not Mark. The first (3:7-10) portrays an event prior to the public ministry of Jesus in which John the Baptist castigates the Pharisees and Sadducees as a "brood of vipers." Luke (3:7-9) speaks only of the multitudes. The second pericope (12:38-42, a doublet of 16:14) depicts the scribes and the Pharisees asking for a sign, a request Jesus refuses using a "greater than" device similar to that noted in Matthew 12:5-7 above. Luke speaks only of the crowds (11:29-32).

The unique Matthean Pharisaic pericopes, except for those in the woes, are three in number: (1) In the Sermon on the Mount, the righteousness required by Jesus is contrasted with that of the Pharisees (5:17-20). (2) The accusation by the Pharisees that Jesus casts out demons by the prince of demons (9:34) is a doublet of 12:22-24 (cf. Mark 3:22). (3) Matthew alone informs us that the chief priests and the Pharisees asked Pilate for a guard at the tomb (27:62-66). Note that, as in Mark, the Pharisees are not mentioned in the events of the passion narrative itself, yet this unique text strongly suggests Pharisaic involvement in those events.

The woes against the "scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" constitute the most systematic and sustained attack against the sect in Matthew. They are situated within a complex of teachings in the temple and are Matthew's final contrast of the teachings of Jesus over against those of the Pharisees in particular and Judaism in general.¹⁵

The introduction to the woes, basically unique to Matthew (cf. however, Mark 12:37b-40; Luke 11:46; 20:45-46), depicts the Pharisees as teaching the Law of Moses correctly but not abiding by their own teaching. Pride and self serving are their characteristics (23:1-12; note a similar reference to scribes only in Mark 12:38).

There are seven woes, all but one of which explicitly refer to the Pharisees and scribes. There are no woes in Mark and only two in Luke which specifically name the Pharisees. The first two Matthean woes castigate Pharisaic teaching from the standpoint of its negative results (23:13-15; cf. the woe to the "lawyers," Luke 11:52). The third woe, indirectly attacking the Pharisees as "blind guides" (cf. 15:14), objects to the tradition on oaths (23:16-22, unique to Matthew). The fourth woe demands an ethicizing of the practice of tithing vegetable products, calling the Pharisees "blind guides" as in the third woe (23:23-24; cf. direct parallel in Luke 11:42). The fifth woe, continuing the theme of blindness, condemns the washing of cups and plates and again extends ethical demands (23:25-26; cf. direct parallel in Luke 11:39). The sixth woe judges the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes as "whitewashed tombs" (23:27-28; cf. Luke 11:44, where the woe is addressed "to you"). The seventh woe compares Jesus' opponents with those who murdered the prophets (23:29-31; cf. Luke 11:47-48, where the woe is addressed "to you").

[p.226]

¹⁵ The woes are part of the fifth major discourse in the Gospel, 23:1-25:46.

The conclusion of the discourse (23:32-39) continues the theme of the seventh woe and makes the same charge against the Pharisees and scribes with which the Gospel began: "You brood of vipers!" (Matt. 3:7, addressed to Pharisees and Sadducees; cf. Luke 3:7).

LUKE

The term Pharisee (or Pharisees) occurs twenty-seven times in fifteen pericopes in the Lukan narrative. As with Mark and Matthew, Luke identifies the sect singularly or in relation to other groups (teachers of the law, lawyers, scribes).¹⁶ Luke's understanding of and attitude toward the Pharisees may be detected by examining the ways in which he describes the sect within his narrative and by comparing the third Evangelist's portrayal of the Pharisees with that found in Mark and in Matthew.

The Lukan Pharisaic pericopes can be divided into groups similar to those we identified in Matthew, although Luke does not parallel all the Markan pericopes. He does not parallel all the Matthean Pharisaic pericopes, either. We shall examine the several groupings below. As in our consideration of Matthew, we shall study Luke's discourse against the Pharisees separately.

Luke begins his depiction of the Pharisees in a pericope paralleled in Mark and Matthew (Luke 5:17-26; Mark 2:1-12; Matt. 9:1-8), but only Luke identifies Jesus' opponents first as Pharisees and teachers of the law, then as scribes and Pharisees, who accuse him of blasphemy in forgiving the sins of a paralytic.¹⁷ The story is Christological and is clearly a conflict narrative which seems to set the tone for the early development of the gospel story.

The third Evangelist joins the triple synoptic treatment of the Pharisees where Mark begins: with the call of Levi (Luke 5:27-32; Mark 2:13-17; Matt. 9:9-13) and with the matter of fasting (Luke 5:33-39; Mark 2:18-22; Matt. 9:14-17). Matthew, like Luke, has earlier references to the sect. In all three Gospels the motif of encounter rather than overt conflict is present, although Luke adds that the Pharisees "murmured" or "grumbled" at Jesus' disciples (5:30). The tradition is permeated with a sense of defining the teachings of Jesus over against the Pharisees and Judaism. The third Markan Pharisaic pericope (Mark 2:23-28), which centers in the plucking of grain on the Sabbath, is also found in Luke and Matthew (Luke 6:1-5; Matt. 12:1-8). Luke's handling of the tradition is of the same texture as that noted above and is generally in line with the attitudes of Mark and Matthew, except that Luke refers to "some" of the Pharisees (6:2) rather than making a broad generalization as in Mark and Matthew (cf. Matt. 12:38). Luke's treatment of the healing of the man with a withered hand (Luke 6:6-11; Mark 3:1-6; Matt. 12:9-14) is substantially like that of Mark and Matthew. Here we observe in Luke, as in the other synoptics, overt hostility toward Jesus by the Pharisees. Mark's reference to the Herodians (Mark 3:6) is not included; rather Luke joins the scribes to the Pharisees as

[p.227]

¹⁶ J. A. Ziesler has an instructive footnote on the Pharisees and the groups to which the Evangelists link them in his article, "Luke and the Pharisees," *New Testament Studies*, 25 (1979), 150.

¹⁷ "...the story as a whole illustrates strikingly the principle that the materials preserved in the Gospels are those which were relevant to the continuing mission of the church." F W. Beare, *The Earliest Records of Jesus* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 77.

Jesus' opponents who are "filled with fury." Their proposed course of action is not specified as in Mark and Matthew.

Luke, however, is not consistent in this attitude toward the Pharisees. Early in his narrative, he focuses the preaching of the Baptist upon the multitudes rather than upon the Pharisees, as in Matthew (Luke 3:7-9; Matt. 3:7-10). In addition, Luke makes no mention of a Markan/Matthean Pharisaic pericope concerned with ritual purity which appears at about the midpoint of their narratives (Mark 7:1-23; Matt. 15:1-20).¹⁸

In the Lukan "special section" (9:51-18:14), there are several indications which hint at a Lukan intention to modify the synoptic negativism concerning the Pharisees. Observe, for example, that there are several pericopes which parallel Markan/Matthean Pharisaic narratives, but in each instance Luke does not refer explicitly to the sect. In 10:25-28 the person who questions Jesus is a lawyer, while in Mark he is "one of the scribes" (12:28) and in Matthew, significantly, a Pharisaic lawyer (22:34-35). In the Lukan Beelzebul controversy (Luke 11:14-23) Jesus' accusers are "some of them," the people; yet in Mark, they are the scribes (3:22-27) and in Matthew, the Pharisees (12:24; cf. 9:34). The Lukan pericope on the request for a sign makes no reference to the Pharisees (11:29-32), whereas Mark speaks of Pharisees (8:11) and Matthew identifies Jesus' adversaries as Pharisees and Sadducees (16:1; cf. 12:38). The same trend can be observed in the teaching on divorce (Luke 16:18; Mark 10:1-12; Matt. 19:1-12).

In the Jerusalem narrative before the passion, a moderating attitude is also evident. Luke three times refrains from naming the Pharisees explicitly, while one or both of the other synoptics do: (1) Only Matthew focuses the parable of the wicked tenants against the chief priests and Pharisees (Luke 20:9-19; Mark 12:1-12; Matt. 21:33-46). (2) The question of tribute to Caesar is raised by the Pharisees and Herodians in Mark and in Matthew (Mark 12:13-17; Matt. 22:15-22), but not in Luke (20:20-26). (3) Only Matthew mentions the Pharisees in the pericope on David's son (Luke 20:41-44; Mark 12:35-37a; Matt. 22:41-46).¹⁹

The Pharisaic pericopes unique to Luke are quite instructive and reveal the breadth of Lukan interest and concern.²⁰ One found in Luke's special section portrays the Pharisees in a friendly light: Some of them warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him (13:31-33). In addition there are three narratives in which the setting is a meal in a Pharisee's home. Although each setting is conflict-oriented, the table situation softens the effect. The first (7:36-50) is found in a narrative preceding the special section. Here the dialogue with Simon, a Pharisee, serves as a background for Jesus' teaching on forgiveness regarding a woman of the street. The second meal (11:37-12:1), located in the special section, is the setting for Luke's discourse on the Pharisees and will be considered below. The third meal (14:1-6), also in the special section, contrasts Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath with that of the Pharisees in light of human need.

[p.228]

¹⁸ This is part of what is usually called Luke's "Great Omission." Obviously, matters other than Pharisaic concerns were involved in Luke's editing process. Cf. Beare, *The Earliest Records of Jesus*, p. 128.

¹⁹ I am aware of the current debate concerning the relationship of the Synoptic Gospels to each other. I have followed the theory of Markan priority and have assumed that Luke had access to some form of a common source shared with Matthew.

²⁰ Because of the difficulty in knowing exactly how the shared tradition (Q) came to Matthew and Luke, the unique Lukan passages are most important as indicators of the Lukan attitude toward the Pharisees.

Over against the moderating attitude noted above, other unique Lukan Pharisaic pericopes, all but one in the special section, are quite critical of the sect. In 16:14-15 the group is accused of being "lovers of money," who scoffed at Jesus' teaching. This charge is not found elsewhere in the synoptics. The parable of the Pharisee and the publican (18:9-14) contrasts the self-righteous zeal of a Pharisee with the humility of a tax collector. Two other unique pericopes portray the Pharisees as questioners of Jesus or critics of his disciples in much the same manner as observed in Mark (Luke 17:20-21; 19:39-44).

This negative attitude may also be observed in two Pharisaic pericopes paralleled in Matthew. In a saying about John the Baptist fairly early in the Gospel (Luke 7:24-35; Matt. 11:7-19), Luke alone mentions the Pharisees and the lawyers and interprets their response to John as that of those who "rejected the purpose of God for themselves." Similarly, this attitude is continued in the Lukan setting for the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-10; Matt. 18:12-14).

The Lukan discourse against the Pharisees (11:37-12:1) generally parallels the Matthean teaching (Matt. 23:1-36) and concludes with a warning similar to one found at another point in the synoptic material (Mark 8:15; Matt. 16:6). It is not so elaborate or systematic as the Matthean text. The setting for the discourse is a meal at a Pharisee's home during which there is a disagreement over ritual purity: Jesus did not wash before the meal. In reaction to the Pharisee's astonishment at his behavior, Jesus begins to castigate the sect in general. The introductory narrative parallels Matthew's fifth woe (Luke 11:37-41; Matt. 23:25-26).

There are only two woes directed explicitly at the Pharisees in Luke compared with Matthew's sixfold "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." Indeed, the word *hypocrite* does not occur in the Lukan discourse, although hypocrisy appears in the conclusion (12:1). Yet five of the seven Matthean woes are paralleled in some way in Luke.

Luke's first woe, which focuses upon ethical concerns beyond the tithing of agricultural products, parallels Matthew's fourth (Luke 11:42; Matt. 23:23), and his second (11:43), which accuses the Pharisees of seeking places of prominence, parallels Matthew's introduction (Matt. 23:6-7). The third woe, pronounced upon the Pharisees indirectly ("You are like graves"), parallels Matthew's sixth (Luke 11:44; Matt. 23:27); and the fourth Lukan woe, which addresses the burdens of legal observances and parallels the Matthean introduction, is directed against lawyers explicitly, not Pharisees (Luke 11:46; Matt. 23:4). Luke's fifth woe, against those who honor dead prophets, is also indirect, but parallels Matthew's seventh woe (Luke 11:47-48; Matt. 23:29). The sixth and final Lukan woe, pronounced upon the lawyers who impede others in their seeking God, parallels Matthew's first woe (Luke 11:52; Matt. 23:13).

The discourse is concluded by an indication that the scribes and Pharisees were still trying to entrap Jesus (11:53) and a warning from Jesus concerning

[p.229]

"The leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1; cf. Mark 8:15; Matt. 16:6).

Finally, it should be noted that Luke does not mention the Pharisees in the passion narrative. This is true of Mark and Matthew as well.

SUMMARY

Probably the most important summary note that can be made is to call attention to the relative paucity of data concerning the Pharisees in Mark. Much of the Gospel proceeds without reference to them.

Mark indicates a number of Pharisaic concerns in their conflict, with Jesus: table fellowship (2:13-17), fasting (2:18), Sabbath observance (2:23-8; 3:1-6), ritual cleanness (7:1-2, 17-23), observance of oral tradition (7:1-5), interpretation of Scripture (7:8-15), divorce (10:2), paying taxes to Rome (12:13-17), and matters concerning the Messiah (2:28; 8:11-13).²¹

In the early sections of the Gospel, the issues are identified, but no overt conflict arises. The situation changes after 3:1 when successively Mark indicates that the Pharisees accuse (3:2), seek to destroy (3:6), argue with (8:11), test (10:2), and seek to entrap (12:13) Jesus. For his part, beginning in chapter 7 Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites (7:6; 12:15), accusing them of leaving the commandment of God for human tradition (7:8), warns the disciples against Pharisaic teaching (8:15), and says that they are hard-hearted (10:5); Mark does not mention the Pharisees at all in the passion narrative.

The struggle which Mark depicts is sharp, but it is within the family of Judaism. It is no more intense than some of the conflicts found in the prophets. Mark writes from a Christian perspective, but he is not anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish. He is anti-Judaic only in the sense that he is pro-Christian.

The Gospel seems to reflect traditions and circumstances in Judaism and the early church prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.²² The Evangelist is interpreting the story of Jesus Christ in which the Pharisees appear occasionally, but significantly. Mark portrays the Pharisees as a foil against which to contrast the work and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, whom he believes to be the Messiah.²³

A survey of Matthew's Pharisaic pericopes reveals a close relationship to the traditions found in Mark. Matthew, however, indicates broader grounds for conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees than does Mark²⁴ and is more intensely critical of the sect generally.

²¹ "The legal agenda at every point has a counterpart in the rabbinic traditions of the Pharisees. Moreover, the stress of the Gospels seems just about right: cleanness laws, agricultural taboos, Sabbath and festival observance, family laws. We further observed attention to Temple consecration and oaths. Only fasting seems to play no significant part in the rabbinic traditions about the Pharisees. The doctrinal issues are quite another matter." (Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity*, p. 55).

²² Cf. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, pp. 9-10.

²³ Note John Bowker's suggestion that Mark's Pharisees may be related to the *perushim* (extremists) who are to be differentiated from the *Hakamim* (Sages, the predecessors of the rabbis) in his *Jesus and the Pharisees* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), pp. 4-42. E. P. Sanders rejects Bowker's thesis (*Jesus and Judaism*, p. 50).

²⁴ Ethical concerns related to tithing vegetable products (23:23) and in regard to the temple cult (9:13; 12:6), a more pronounced concern for the law and its fulfillment (5:17-20; 22:34-40), and problems related to oaths (23:16).

In the pericopes parallel to Mark, Matthew tends to treat the Pharisees and their concerns in a manner similar to Mark. Even here, however, on two occasions, the Evangelist reveals an ethicizing concern in regard to the temple cult which goes beyond Mark (9:13; 12:5-8; cf. Hos. 6:6) and at another point adds an

[p.230]

epithet, "blind guides" (15:14), which becomes a theme in the woes. This tendency to expand certain Markan themes is evident also in 16:5-12.

The pericopes into which Matthew or his sources interject Pharisaic conflict (12:24; 21:33-46; 22:34; 22:41-46) are not very different in tone or substance from those which follow Mark more closely. Yet they intensify the reader's perception of conflict by their addition to the bulk of the controversy data. More significantly, however, one of these narratives provides the setting for one of the most cutting judgmental passages in the Gospel (21:43).

The two pericopes which parallel Luke alone (3:7-10; 12:38-42) follow the Matthean tendency toward intensification noted above. They are focused upon the Pharisees and their compatriots by Matthew, while Luke portrays each scene more generally without naming the Pharisees. Such developments reflect the mind of the Evangelist, or his sources.

Each of the unique Matthean Pharisaic narratives is quite revealing. A pericope in the Sermon on the Mount (5:17-20), which has legal concerns, suggests that the Pharisees are cut off from the kingdom of God (as in 21:43). In another passage (9:34), a Pharisaic accusation that Jesus is empowered by demonic forces, repeated later as a doublet (12:22-24), heightens the sense of conflict from a Christological point of view. A third passage (27:62) hints of Pharisaic involvement in the passion events, although Matthew, like Mark, makes no direct mention of this.

The discourse on the woes in chapter 23 is a literary construction based essentially on unique Matthean materials and traditions shared with Luke. It is a showcase of Matthean attitudes toward the Pharisees. The teachings are organized in a manner similar to the Sermon on the Mount, and the woes function collectively as a negative expression of much of the teaching on righteousness found in the sermon. In a sense, they are the opposites of the beatitudes, epitomizing the Pharisees' culpability and Matthew's hostility toward them. The woes are addressed to Jesus' opponents, but the context of the passage suggests that they are for the benefit of the disciples and thus, probably, are intended as teachings for Matthew's church.

Matthew tells the story of Jesus in much the same way that Mark does. His portrayal of the Pharisees has roots which go back into the history of Jesus, but his hostility in certain conflict passages, and especially his development of the woes discourse, suggest that the Evangelist has concerns which demand a specific definition of the Christian community as distinct from Judaism.²⁵ Most probably the circumstances of hurt, growing tension, and hostility between Judaism and Christianity, which began before the fall of Jerusalem and culminated in a

²⁵ These concerns become most transparent in the introduction to the woes where the command is given by Jesus: "...practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do..." (23:3). I take this to indicate that Matthew perceives a Judaic threat to his church, possibly from within as well as without.

complete break between the two groups after Jamnia, provide the best clue to the nature of the Evangelist's concerns within and without his fellowship.²⁶

[p.231]

A summary of the Lukan depiction of the Pharisees is a study in apparently contradictory emphases which are in tension with each other. The following examples highlight the data.

Luke introduces us to the Pharisees with a Christological conflict pericope also mentioned in Matthew but attributed to the Pharisees only by Luke (5:17-26). He quickly joins the other synoptics in four Pharisaic pericopes which indicate confrontation or conflict with Jesus in the areas of table fellowship, fasting, and Sabbath observance, with slight modifications (5:27-39; 6:1-11). This negative stance is heightened by the Lukan addition to a pericope shared with Matthew which announces that the Pharisees and lawyers have rejected God's purpose by not receiving John's baptism (7:30) and by Luke's setting for the parable of the lost sheep (15:2). The same tendency may be observed in several unique Pharisaic pericopes in Luke's special section, especially the description of the Pharisees as lovers of money (16:14-15) and the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (18:9-14). Even the stories of Jesus' eating with the Pharisees must be taken as conflict-oriented, although somewhat softened (7:36-50; 11:37-12:1; 14:1-6).

There is, however, another Lukan view of the Pharisees in the gospel materials that is more positive in outlook. Early in his narrative Luke turns the preaching of John away from the Pharisees and Sadducees (as in Matthew) and focuses it more generally toward the multitudes (3:7-9). Indeed, comparative study reveals that Luke makes no mention of a Markan/Matthean Pharisaic pericope concerned with ritual purity and quite caustic in tone (Mark 7:1-23; Matt. 15:1-20). Further, in the special section there are several pericopes which are edited to remove references to the Pharisees:²⁷ the lawyer's question (10:25-28), the Beelzebul controversy (11:14-3), seeking a sign (11:29-32), and a teaching on divorce (16:18). The same development also may be found in the Jerusalem narrative before the passion: the parable of the wicked tenants (20:9-19), the matter of tribute to Caesar (20:20-26), and the question of David's son (20:41-44).

There is one additional indication of Luke's "other" view. It is most striking because it presents a circumstance not reported in the other synoptics. In 13:31-33 some (as in 6:2) of the Pharisees come to Jesus and warn him that Herod is trying to kill him. This is a friendly act.

Luke's attitude toward the Pharisees is nearer to that of Mark than to Matthew's, yet it is his own. The tension between his positive and negative statements suggests that Luke came to accept the necessity of defining Christianity as distinct from Judaism, but rejected the traditional perception of the sect as the monolithic²⁸ opponents of Jesus. While Luke is undoubtedly hostile to the Pharisees *at points*, he is not bitter.

²⁶ Note the arguments of Graham N. Stanton in his article, "The Gospel of Matthew and Judaism," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 66 (1984), 264-284. Also, Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary*, p. 453.

²⁷ I judge the editing to have been done by Luke, but the Pharisaic references may have been absent in the source shared with Matthew. Thus Matthew may have added them. In any event, Luke does not use these pericopes to attack the Pharisees; Matthew does.

²⁸ I am indebted to J. A. Ziesler for this insight ("Luke and the Pharisees," p. 155).

Luke's circumstances of writing are different from those of Matthew in at least one major way: Luke does not see Judaism as a threat; Matthew does.

[p.232]

That this is Luke's sense of the matter seems to be confirmed by his references to the sect in Acts (5:34; 15:5; 23:6-8; 26:5), especially 15:5, in which we are told that some of the Pharisees have become believers, an idea incomprehensible to Matthew and possibly to Mark (but cf. Mark 12:32-34).

A FINAL WORD

We can now see that our assigned title is slightly off the mark so far as the synoptic Evangelists are concerned. Not surprisingly, we are presented with three portraits of the Pharisees instead of one.²⁹ All three portraits are developed upon traditional materials which were part of the church's memory of Jesus, but each portrait is unique in that the lights and shadows, the contrasts in color and design, and the focus through which the Pharisees are perceived vary according to the intent, ability, and circumstances of each Evangelist.

© 1987 *Review & Expositor* (<http://www.rande.org/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in April 2008 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

²⁹ In the Gospel of John the principal adversaries of Jesus are "the Jews," not the Pharisees; but John mentions the sect on numerous occasions and significantly. They are still opponents of Jesus, seen often in an authoritative role (1:24; 3:1; 7:32, 45-48; 11:46-57; 12:42; 18:3). The basis of the controversy between the Pharisees and Jesus, generally, is not found in the oral tradition or law, ethics, or the interpretation of Scripture, but in their rejection of Jesus as Messiah. Three examples of this mood are to be found in the efforts of the Pharisees to arrest Jesus (7:32, 45-48; 11:57), the fear that the Pharisees would put believers out of the synagogue (12:42; cf. 9:22), and the role of the Pharisees in the arrest of Jesus (18:3).