



Never Been to Spain

The Journals & Journeys of Paul

*"Mirror, Mirror On the Wall...
Who's the Pharisee of All?"*

Acts 22:3 "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.

Acts 23:6 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"

Acts 26:4 My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know.

Acts 26:5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Galatians 1:14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Philippians 3:5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;

Call someone a Pharisee and it's received as an insult. Maybe it should be; but that wasn't always the case.

There were three significant religious movements, or sects, among the Jews: the Essenes, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees.

The Essenes flourished from the second century BC into the first century AD. They lived in various cities but congregated in communal life dedicated to asceticism, voluntary poverty, daily immersion, and abstinence from worldly pleasures, including (for some groups) celibacy. Josephus records that Essenes existed in large numbers, and thousands lived throughout Roman Judæa.

The Essenes have gained fame in modern times as a result of the discovery of an extensive group of religious documents known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are commonly believed to be Essenes' library at their community of Qumran.

Our modern equivalent of the Essenes would be monks living in a monastery. You probably would not have been an Essene.

You probably would not have been a Sadducee either. They tended to be wealthy and held powerful positions, including that of chief priests and high priest, and they held the majority of the seventy seats of the ruling council called the Sanhedrin.

The Sadducees were responsible for the Temple and its services. Most of them lived in or near Jerusalem.

They worked hard to keep the peace by agreeing with the decisions of Rome and they seemed to be more concerned with politics than religion.

Regarding their beliefs, they denied any resurrection from the dead. They thought it was not explicitly taught in the Jewish Scriptures. Obviously they did not believe in any afterlife, either in Heaven or Hell. They were annihilationists who said the soul perished at death. Along with that they denied the existence of angels and demons - in a spirit world.

You wouldn't have been an Essene or a Sadducee. You might have been a Pharisee!

The Pharisees were faithful Jews who opposed the efforts of the surrounding culture to influence classical Jewish life, called Hellenization. Their very name means *separation*.

They were mostly middle-class businessmen and were well-liked and well-respected by the common people. They lived throughout the empire and could be found anywhere there was a Jewish population. Most of those rabbis who taught in the weekly services of the synagogue were Pharisees.

They may have had their origins as far back as the Babylonian captivity. Ezra spoke of those who “separated themselves” from “the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God” (Ezra 6:21; 10:1–4). Nehemiah spoke of those of “the seed of Israel” who “separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers” (Nehemiah 9:2). These men “entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law” (Nehemiah 10:28–31).

One of our favorite verses in the Old Testament is Malachi 3:16 which reads,

Malachi 3:16 Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, And the Lord listened and heard them; So a book of remembrance was written before Him For those who fear the Lord And who meditate on His name.

It's referring to Jews who were Pharisees.

Unique to the Pharisees was that in their study of the law of Moses they built up a body of interpretation and application which acquired equal authority for them with Scripture. These are the teachings Jesus called "the traditions of men." Their original intent was to preserve the law amidst changing cultures and institutions - to preserve Judaism.

According to the first century historian Josephus, the Pharisees were also what we would call a political interest group; they had their goals for society and sought to achieve them. They were always there to gain access to power and thereby influence society to a new commitment to a strict Jewish way of life.

They sound, and I mean this sincerely, like the Tea Party of today - at least as to their desire to reform society according to the Word of God.

Jesus frequently rebuked the Pharisees, true. But He was often among them, even dining with them. I don't know of any occasion on which He had such close contact with either Sadducees or Essenes. There were many sincere Pharisees - Nicodemus for one and Joseph of Arimathea for another.

The Pharisees' strict observances on matters of purity needs to be understood as an expression of their belief that God would in the future vindicate His true people from the present corrupted regime, and that His people – the true Israel – would be identified by their faithful observance of His Law.

I'm not thereby defending them; I'm just pointing out that they were the spiritual Jews whom the people looked up to because they were committed to restoring what had been lost through subjection to foreign rulers.

When Paul talks about being a Pharisee, he didn't mean it in a derogatory sense. People would understand that he was jealous about God, zealous to serve Him.

One biographer of Paul's I'm reading put it like this.

From his mother's knee he had learnt of a God at once righteous and loving, of a divine Law given for mankind's total welfare, of a people designed to be God's agents in the world, of a future age when God's will would be universally done.

Paul probably lived in Tarsus until he was eleven or twelve years of age since most Jewish parents put their sons in training at the age of twelve.

The educational philosophy of the Jews was as follows: "At five years of age, let children begin the Scripture; at ten, the Mishna; at thirteen, let them be subjects of the Law." (Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 42).

The Talmud is a summary of Jewish oral law (traditions) that evolved after centuries of scholarly effort by sages who lived in Palestine and Babylonia until the beginning of the Middle Ages.

The Talmud has two main components: the Mishnah, a book of law, and the rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah, known as the Gemara.

At the age of ten the Mishna was added to the curriculum. The Mishna was in oral form in Paul's day, and the teacher would recite the lesson to the pupil and then the pupil was to recite the lesson back to the teacher verbatim. At the age of fifteen Gemara was added. The Gemara contained the discussion of the rabbis down through the centuries.

We read that Paul was taught "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3). It's hard to know exactly when Paul was sent to Jerusalem but piecing things together it looks like he may have been around sixteen years old.

Gamaliel was quite a force among the Jews. He was one of only seven Rabbis in history to be called "Rabban," the highest title possible.

Some have suggested that Paul would have been the logical successor to Gamaliel. A.T. Robertson writes,

What did Gamaliel think of his brilliant pupil? One would like to have a word from him. But the position of leadership to which he will soon attain shows that the master's approval rested on Saul. Perhaps the old teacher looked proudly on the young man from Tarsus as a possible successor. When Saul left Jerusalem he was to all intents and purposes the one young Jew in all the world who had most in prospect before him. He had been educated as a rabbi and the career of a rabbi lay before him. But that was not all. Many a young rabbi lived in comparative obscurity. This young rabbi had great friends at Jerusalem who could help him to the highest places if he proved worthy.

Interestingly, is reported in the Book of Acts to have taken a neutral position with regard to the Christians. He told the Sanheddrin to let them alone because if they were of God they'd prosper but if not they would fail. Paul certainly disagreed!

Doesn't it strike you as odd that the man who would be the apostle to the Gentiles would be this life-long, classically trained Pharisee among Pharisees? It would seem as though Paul would have greater success among people just like him.

After his conversion Paul himself assumed he would work among his own people. Jesus had other plans for him.

Acts 22:17 Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance

Acts 22:18 and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.'

Acts 22:19 So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You.

Acts 22:20 And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'

Acts 22:21 Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.' "

What's that all about? Sending the Pharisee of all Pharisees to the Gentiles? Seems silly. It's certainly not what we would do today.

Looking at the history of the early church we see the wisdom of God. All the first converts to Christianity were Jewish. Almost from the beginning there was a sense that a person must be a Jew in order to become a Christian. At least there was a great confusion about it that led to serious doctrinal errors being promoted. Taking the Gospel to the Gentiles at all was suspect. When Gentiles seemed to be getting saved without also being circumcised and keeping the law of Moses there was great opposition.

The danger of corrupting Christianity with Judaism was real. It's the subject of the Book of Hebrews as the Jews addressed were returning to Judaism in order to avoid persecution.

More to our point, we see a time in the life of the apostle Peter in which he and Barnabas were influenced by Judaizers to quit eating meals with Gentile Christians. The so-called Incident at Antioch is recounted in Galatians where Paul said,

Galatians 2:11 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed;

Galatians 2:12 for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.

Galatians 2:13 And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

God did not choose just any Jew to go to the Gentiles. He chose a Pharisee of Pharisees who knew firsthand the awful emptiness of religious observances in order to attain and maintain a right standing with God. There was no fear he would ever look back and become once again ensnared in law - not when he so fully had been saved by grace.

A couple of things suggest themselves for us to consider.

First, we may not have been deeply entrenched in some religion. But we don't need to have been in order to reject any and all efforts to add works of righteousness to our walk with God.

Second, we need to abandon our own limited ideas about how to best give out the Gospel. As I said earlier, we probably would not have looked at a map and said, "The best person for reaching the Gentile world outside Jerusalem is going to be the greatest Pharisee of our generation." No, we would have looked to a high-ranking or otherwise celebrated Gentile.

God is wanting us to discover His plan, the good works He has already ordained for us. Our own worldly wisdom must therefore be set aside if we are to discover them.