

# AS TO THE LAW A PHARISEE: PAUL'S ROOTS IN RABBINIC JUDAISM

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A paper delivered at the Society of Biblical Literature, November 1978

Paul has left us two tantalizing mementos of his sojourn in Judaism. One of these is recorded in Galatians 1:

“For I would have you know, brethren,” he admonishes the Galatians who are being seduced by the preachers of a false gospel, “that the gospel which was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus” (Galatians 1:11-17).

The other memento is to be found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

“Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews; as to the Law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.” (Philippians 3:2-6)

In these two autobiographical recollections, Paul has revealed all that he needed to reveal to impress upon the Galatians and the Philippians that there was no one who could challenge his rootedness in Judaism or who could match him in his knowledge of the Law. To the Galatians, he writes of his precociousness in the traditions of the Fathers; to the Philippians, he ticks off, one by one, his credentials “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the Law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the Law blameless.”

There is nothing casual about these revelations. They are set down with passion and in anger. They are hard-hitting reminders that Paul is no ordinary apostle, no ignorant upstart, no frivolous mocker of the Law and its demands. Indeed, in each recollection, he underscores his zealous persecution of the church as being, like his attachment to the Law, precocious—“I persecuted the church violently and tried to destroy it.”

Brief though he may be, Paul packs into these few sentences a lifetime of passion, zeal, and determination. Paul’s Galatian and Philippian brethren presumably needed no exegesis. Paul’s early life in Judaism was presumably known to them. Paul could count upon their knowing what he meant when he referred to the “traditions of my Fathers,” and the Philippians understood what he was communicating when he said that he had been “as to the Law a Pharisee, and as to

righteousness under the Law blameless.” What the Galatians and the Philippians knew so well, we know so poorly. What Paul took so completely for granted, we fumble feebly to find the meaning embedded in those crisply phrased words.

Nor is our task lightened by Paul’s use of the expression “as to the Law a Pharisee,” for our sources—Josephus, the New Testament, and the Tannaitic Literature—do not yield a simple and easy definition. The Tannaitic sources are especially confusing, for they leave us in doubt as to when the Hebrew term *perushim* means Pharisees and when the term means “separatists.” Scholars, unable to differentiate with certainty as to when *perushim* is to be read with a capital “P” and when it is to be read as a small “p” have, for the most part, rendered *perushim* in Mishnah Hagigah 2:7 as Pharisees. Thus they define the Pharisees as a sect of pietists who are meticulously concerned with the laws of ritual purity and who separate themselves from the less meticulous masses, the *am ha-aretz*. Hence, the Mishnah tells us that the garments of an *am ha-aretz* are a source of *midras* uncleanness for *Perushim*, Pharisees. With such a picture in our minds, Paul’s words “as to the Law a Pharisee” conjure up a pietist who strictly observed the laws of ritual purity and who kept his ritual distance from the masses, even as his words “righteousness under the Law blameless” fortify this image by seeming to stress that Paul was the most meticulous Pharisee of them all. They do not evoke an image of Paul striving to earn eternal life for his soul and resurrection for his body. They do not picture for us one who strains to be blameless lest the Heavenly Father condemn his soul to endless torment. They do not image Paul as ripe and ready for the loving, saving and redeeming Christ.

Yet such an image of Paul would be conjured up if our picture of the Pharisees were drawn exclusively from those Tannaitic texts where the term *perushim* must be Pharisees because they are juxtaposed to *Zedukkim*, Sadducees. And when this testimony is conjoined with that drawn from Josephus and the New Testament, we are compelled to draw a picture of the Pharisees which has no resemblance to the *perushim* in the Hagigah text, cited above. We find, not a sect, distinguished by its meticulous concern with ritual purity, but the authoritative teachers of the two-fold Law, the Written and the Oral—authorities who preached the good news that God so loved the individual that He revealed His two-fold Law to Israel so that each Law-abiding Israelite might gain eternal life for his soul and at some distant and unknown date, resurrection for his body. If these, then, were the Pharisees, then Paul is telling us that in his former life in Judaism he was straining to attain eternal life and resurrection by living a blameless life under the two-fold Law. To be a Pharisee was to strive, day and night, for one’s salvation in the world to come. The two-fold Law was the way, not the destination.

But before following where such a premise would lead, let me first set down proof texts from Josephus, the New Testament, and the Tannaitic Literature which reveal (1) that Pharisees were indeed the authoritative teachers of the two-fold Law, and (2) that they taught the good news of eternal life and resurrection.

Josephus’ most explicit definition of the Pharisees is to be found in *Antiquities* XIII: 297:

“For the present,” Josephus tells his readers, “I wish merely to explain that the Pharisees had transmitted to the people certain laws from the Fathers which are not written down in the Laws of Moses, for which reason they are rejected by the Sadducean group, who hold that only those laws which were written down are to be expounded, and those which had been transmitted from the Fathers are not to be observed.”

The Pharisees are thus the authoritative teachers of the laws which have been transmitted from the Fathers—laws which have not been written down. They are the expounders of the *paradosis of the Fathers*, the very *paradosis* which Paul so precociously obeyed prior to his transfiguration.

Josephus’ testimony to the Pharisaic belief in eternal life and resurrection is to be found not only in his description of Pharisaic beliefs (*Wars* 11:163, *Ant.* XVIII:12-17), but in his

remonstrance on suicide in the Wars (“Know you not that they who depart this life in accordance with law of nature and repay the loan which they received from God, when He who lent is pleased to reclaim it, win eternal renown; that their houses and families are secure; that their souls, remaining spotless and obedient, are allotted the most holy place in heaven, whence, in the revolution of the ages, they return to find in chaste bodies a new habitation? But as for those who have laid mad hands upon themselves, the darker regions of the nether world receive their souls and God, their father, visits upon their posterity the outrageous acts of the parents...” [Way III: 374-5]; in his explanation of the rewards awaiting the Law-abiding Jew in his *Against Apion* (“For those. . . who live in accordance with our laws the prize is not silver or gold, no crown of wild olive or of parsley with any such public mark of distinction. No; each individual relying on the witness of his own conscience and the lawgivers prophecy, confirmed by the sure testimony of God, is firmly persuaded that to those who observe the laws and if they must need die for them, willingly meet their death. God has granted a renewed existence and in the revolution of the ages the gift of a better life. . .” [*Against Apion* II:217b-218]); and in his formulation of Abraham’s speech to Isaac as he prepared to offer him up as a sacrifice (Aye, since thou wast born [out of the course of nature, so] quit thou now this life not by the common road, but speed by thine own father on thy way to God, the Father of all, through the rites of sacrifice. He, I ween, accounts it not meet for thee to depart this life by sickness or war or by any of the calamities that commonly befall mankind, but amid prayers and sac-rificial ceremonies would receive thy soul and keep it near to Himself ...) (*Antiquities* 1:230-31).

Like Josephus, the Gospels reveal that the Pharisees were the authoritative teachers of the two-fold Law, the Written Law and the *paradosis* of the Elders, and the preachers of the good news of eternal life and resurrection. Thus in Mark 7:5 the Pharisees and the Scribes ask Jesus, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled? To which Jesus responds, after citing Isaiah, “You leave the commandment of God and hold fast the tradition of men (Mark 7:8)... You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition (7:13...[you make] void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on. . .”

The Pharisees, so the gloss in Mark 7:3 reassures us, do not eat unless they wash their hands, “observing as they do the tradition of the elders.”

Matthew (15:2-3, 6) likewise reaffirms Mark’s linkage of the Pharisees to the *paradosis* of the elders, and has them sitting as of uncontested right in Moses’ seat (Matthew 23).

Paul’s “as to the Law a Pharisee” and Paul’s zealotry for the *paradosis* of the Fathers are thus two ways of saying the same thing: “I was nurtured on the two-fold Law as taught by the Pharisees and not on the one-fold Law as taught by the Sadducees. And I was so precocious in my adherence to this two-fold Law that I could believe that I was beyond reproach. I therefore had every reason to believe that eternal life awaited my soul and resurrection awaited my body as the ultimate reward for my impeccable loyalty.”

These teachers of the *paradosis* also teach the belief in the resurrection. Thus Mark (12:28) tells us that a scribe applauded Jesus’ refutation of the Sadducees “who say there is no resurrection” (12:18), while Matthew has the Pharisees impressed by Jesus’ putting-down of the Sadducees (22:34). Similarly, we read in Acts (23:6-9) how Paul provoked a tussle between the Sadducees and the Pharisees when he blurted out at his trial, “Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial” (Acts 23:6). Following on which the author of Acts explains that “the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all” (23:8).

And when we turn to the Tannaitic literature, we discover that here, too, the Pharisees are the teachers of the two-fold Law and the preachers of eternal life for the righteous soul and resurrection for its body. That the Pharisees were teachers of the two-fold Law is evident from the very few Tannaitic texts which juxtapose the *Perushim*, Pharisees, with the *Zeddukim*, Sadducees. In one of these controversies the Sadducees berate the Pharisees for asserting that

“Holy Scriptures renders the hands unclean.” As any student of the Pentateuch is aware, there is no such explicit law in the Pentateuch, nor is there any implicit law which could lead by necessary inference to the conclusion that Holy Scriptures, itself a non-Pentateuchal, non-biblical term, renders the hands unclean. The Sadducees are thus on secure Pentateuchal ground when they deride the Pharisees for this seemingly bizarre dictum. The Pharisees, for their part, have no qualms since this dictum falls within the category of “the words of the Soferim,” which need not be logically deducible from the words of the Pentateuch.

The Pharisees are thus revealed to us as none other than the Soferim whose teachings enjoy a co-equal authority with the Pentateuch, and whose authority is self-affirming, self-sustaining, and free of Scriptural warrant. These Pharisees-Soferim in turn are the bearers of the good news of eternal life for the soul and resurrection for the body, as is evident from the following Tannaitic texts. The first is from Mishnah Berakhot 9:5:

“All those who used to conclude blessings in the Temple used to say, ‘From everlasting (*min-ha-olam*) to everlasting.’ But when the heretics perverted the truth and said there is one world only, they [the scholars] ordained that they should say ‘from everlasting to everlasting.’ (*Min ha-olam we-ad ha-olam*); i.e., from this world to the world to come.”

The second text is from Mishnah Peah 1:1:

“These are things which a person eats the fruits thereof in this world, while the principle remains enduring for him in the world to come.”

The third is from Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:2:

“When the [condemned] was about ten cubits away from the stoning chamber, they would say unto him, ‘Confess,’ since it was the custom of those condemned to death to confess; for whoever confesses has a share in the world to come. For we have found that in the case of Achan that Joshua said to him, ‘My son, give glory unto the Lord God of Israel and give praise unto him [*we-ten lo todah*].’ And Achan answered Joshua and said, ‘Of a truth, I have sinned against the Lord and this is what I did’ (Joshua 7:20).

“And how do we know that his confession expiated his sin? For it is said (Joshua 7:25), ‘And Joshua said, ‘Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord brings trouble on you this day.’ [The meaning is] This day you are troubled, but you are not to be troubled in the world to come.

“If the convicted one does not know how to confess, they say to him, ‘Say [the following] ‘May my death be an expiation for all my transgressions.

And the fourth is the well-known dictum:

“All Israel has a share in the world to come except, among others, those who deny that the resurrection of the dead is deducible from the Pentateuch (cf. Mark 12:18-27).

And most tellingly, the belief in the resurrection was thrice daily, four times on the Sabbath, and five times on Yom Kippur, to be affirmed and reaffirmed in the core blessings of the prayer, par excellence, the *Amidah* or *Shemone Esrae*.

When, therefore, Paul proudly enumerated his credentials to the Philippians and capped them with his assurance that as to the Law he was a Pharisee and as righteousness under the Law blameless, and when he reminded the Galatians that he had advanced in Judaism beyond many of his own age so extremely zealous had he been for the *paradosis*, he was conjuring up not Judaism in general, nor Sadduceism, nor Essenism, but one specific form of Judaism, to the exclusion of all others, namely, Pharisaism. He was telling the Philippians and the Galatians that he had been a precocious follower of the two-fold Law, the Written *and* the Oral; that he had fulfilled the demands of this two-fold Law so zealously that he could proclaim himself blameless; and that, by implication, if anyone could have anticipated eternal life for his soul and resurrection for his

body, it was he. Paul, in a word, was reminding the Philippians and the Galatians that as a follower of the Pharisees, he was straining for other-worldly salvation. For Paul, this world was but the ante-chamber to the world to come; the two-fold Law laid out the glory road to salvation; and Paul has been, law by law, trodding his way to that blessed world of eternal life.

But Paul's journey was abruptly halted when, on the road to Damascus, he saw the risen Christ. Here was the crucified Jesus, fully alive and reaching to embrace Paul with his undemanding love—the very Jesus who had challenged the authority of the Pharisees and had defied them. Yet here was Jesus resurrected from the dead, seemingly rewarded for his defiance rather than condemned. And if Jesus had indeed risen from the dead, then the Pharisees must be wrong. The two-fold Law does not map out the road to eternal life and resurrection, for if it did, then how could Jesus, who had defied these teachers, rise from the dead? But Paul had seen Jesus fully alive and reaching out to him. Christ, and not the two-fold Law, reveals the road, lights up the way, and is the destination. The two-fold Law is an obstruction, a snare, and a delusion. It is even an *agent provocateur* of sin; its promise of salvation fraudulent.

Here, then, is the source of Paul's remarkable critique of the Law in Romans 7:4-25:

“Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

“Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

“Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”

Here in Romans 7 we find a gospel unique to Paul. It is nowhere to be found in the Synoptics or in John. The Law, to be sure, might not be binding, but it could not be an agent provocateur of sin. Jesus, to be sure, had risen from the dead, but because man, unaided by divine grace, was helpless in the face of his primordial impulses. Jesus, to be sure, was the Christ, but his teachings were to be drawn from his life *and* resurrection, and not, as with Paul, exclusively from his resurrection.

Paul, who had never known Jesus in his lifetime, and who was not one of Jesus' disciples, preached the gospel of mutation. His gospel, and his gospel only, is the quantum jump out of

Pharisaic Judaism; for it is his gospel, and his gospel alone, which dissolves the claims of the Law in the most fundamental way imaginable—by charging it with unlocking the gates of sin.

Paul's quantum jump is thus rooted in his early life in Pharisaism. Yearning for eternal life and resurrection, he left no law unobserved. He appeared to himself and to others as having climbed, law by law, to heaven's gate. If anyone could be certain of sitting beside God the Father until the day of resurrection, surely it was Paul who "as to righteousness under the Law [was] blameless." Little wonder, then, that when the disciples of Jesus trumpeted the good news of the resurrection, his anger was as fierce as his loyalty to the two-fold Law was tenacious. If anyone persecuted the Church violently it was he. Yet, it seems that all was not peaceful and tranquil in Paul's inner house. His blamelessness had deluded him into believing that his primordial impulses to sin had been dissolved when they had only been dammed up. His righteousness had misled him into believing that every nook and cranny, every fissure and crevice had been sealed off to sin. And yet there came a moment of blinding revelation when, it seems, his very blamelessness and his very righteousness goaded his primordial untamed impulses into a raging torrent pouring through the restraining dams of the Law and spilled Paul into the arms of the risen Christ, and he was reborn, truly saved, and determined to preach the true gospel of Christ's undemanding love which dissolves and does not dam up the impulse to sin. Here were, at long last, the fruits of Paul's roots in Pharisaism.