The Pharisaic roots of Jesus and the early church

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ABSTRACT

Some of the views of Jesus and Paul can be explained against the background of the schools of Hillel and Shammai of the first century AD. In the attitude of Bet Hillel to the Gentiles the greatest affinity emerges. The controversy between Paul and the Judaizers is explicable against the background of this distinction: Paul (Bet Hillel) is opposed to the Judaizers (Bet Shammai). In handing down the accounts of Jesus through the decades, Jesus' disputes with Bet Shammai tended to be presented as controversies directed against the Pharisees in general by the early Christians, because of their own situations of opposition. In this perspective the Jewish roots of Christianity emerge far more clearly.

A one sided picture of the Pharisees emerges from the New Testament. The Gospels, in particular, fail to present the tremendous spiritual and religious contribution which the Pharisees made to the study of the Jewish Torah, a contribution which has had an influence on Judaism from their times until our own. In a recent study on the interaction between Christianity and Judaism, Vermes writes:

Positively, what is required is an effort to examine the movement of Jewish religious theological thought as a whole, and while so doing, to determine the place, significance and distinctiveness of their constituent parts. In other words, instead of looking at the New Testament as an independent unit set against a background of Judaism we have to see it as part of a larger environment of Jewish religious and cultural history (Vermes 1984:86-87).

Vermes argues that Judaism is not simply the background or backdrop to the New Testament. Rather, Christianity and the New Testament are rooted in Judaism. In this perspective, the Pharisaic roots of Jesus are examined.

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At the time of Jesus and the emergence of the early Christian Church, the Pharisees were no monolithic group. Two leading Pharisaic scholars, the rabbis Hillel and Shammai, made a mark on the Judaism of their day. Each had a group of disciples, a school, whose activity continued until the end of the first century AD. In a recent publication Rabbi Harvey Falk (1985) endeavoured to argue that the teaching and thought of Jesus was close to that of Rabbi Hillel. This is an interesting investigation, made more noteworthy because it comes from a Jewish scholar and not a New Testament one. I shall examine this aspect of his thesis in this article.

THE CHARACTER OF THE SCHOOLS OF SHAMMAI AND HILLEL

Hillel and Shammai made a remarkable contribution to the oral law of Judaism. This eventually found its way into the Mishna (second century AD) and later into the two Talmuds (fifth century AD). A debate between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai comprised the major source of the oral law in the period prior to the destruction of the second temple and just after it (EJ 1971: Vol 4, 738).

Shammai and his school tended to offer a stricter interpretation of the law than did Hillel and his school. Various reasons have been advanced for their different perspectives. One rests upon the natures of the two leaders: Hillel was kind and gentle while Shammai was stern and ill-tempered. Two interesting anecdotes support this picture:

Our Rabbis taught: "A man should always be gentle like Hillel. and not impatient like Shammai. It once happened that two men made a wager with each other, saying. He who goes and makes Hillel angry shall receive four hundred zuz. Said one 'I will go and incense him.' That day was the Sabbath eve, and Hillel was washing his head. He went, passed by the door of his house, and called out 'Is Hillel here, is Hillel here?' Thereupon he robed and went out to him saying. 'My son, what do you require?' 'I have a question to ask,' said he. 'Ask my son', he prompted. Thereupon he asked: 'Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?' 'My son you have asked a great question,' replied he: 'because they have not skilful midwives" (B. Talmud: Shabbat 31A).
On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, "Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot". Thereupon, he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, "What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah while the rest is the commentary thereof: go and learn it" (B. Talmud: Shabbat 31A).

Prior to the destruction of the second temple of Jerusalem the school of Shammai exercised the greatest influence on Jewish life. After the destruction in AD 70 the structure changed with Bet Hillel exercising greater influence.

1 THE OUTREACH TO THE GENTILES

Hillel and Shammai and their respective schools differed in their approach to the Gentiles. The school of Hillel supported the contention that an outreach to the Gentiles was important. It contended that God-fearing Gentiles were entitled to salvation, just as the Jews were. In addition it hoped that such an outreach would avert the destruction of Jerusalem. Bet Shammai radically opposed such an outreach.

The three Synoptic Gospels all contain sharp rebukes against the Pharisees (Mt. 23:4-36; Mk. 7:1-9; Lk. 11:37-54). The double tradition handed down remembrances of an opposition between Jesus and the Pharisees. In the course of transmission these remembrances underwent development, according to the situation of the various communities which experienced opposition from the Jews. As regards Matthew 23 McKenzie (1970:102) writes: "The discourse frequently reflects the controversy between Jews and Jewish Christians; in its present form it clearly conveys the experience of the Palestinian Church and the fall of Jerusalem AD 70".

The charge that Jesus levels against the Pharisees, which lies behind the whole dialogue, is that of hypocrisy. Jesus is in fact repeating the old familiar charge of the prophets that their religion had degenerated into mere formalism: "But woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the Kingdom of Heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in" (Mt. 23:13).

Seen in the light of the divisions within the Pharisaic group at the time of Jesus one can note an allusion here to Bet Shammai.
His adherents constituted the greater part of the Pharisaic party at the time of Jesus and consistently adopted the more stringent interpretation of the Jewish Torah. The statement "You shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men" accords well with the view of Bet Shammai, as expressed by Rabbi Eliezer (Sanhedrin 105A), that Gentiles were barred from the world to come. The school of Shammai declared it impossible for Gentiles to obtain salvation. At the same time, Jesus upholds the Pharisees' authority and position! "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat: so practice and observe what they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice" (Mt. 23:2-3). In this regard Jesus shows himself as leaning towards the position of Bet Hillel. "Bet Hillel accepted the rulings of Bet Shammai when the latter constituted a majority. However, Bet Shammai did not view Bet Hillel's decisions as binding even when the latter constituted a majority" (Falk 1985:125). In upholding the authority of those he criticises, Jesus supports the approach of Bet Hillel's followers. They acknowledged their opponents' authority although they did not accept their interpretation. The distinction in Jesus' mind between the approaches of Hillel and Shammai became obliterated in the course of handing on the tradition of Jesus. Instead of preserving a criticism directed at one group of Pharisees (the majority group at the time of Jesus) the early church used the criticisms of Jesus against the Pharisees in general. Because of the persecutions that the Christians were experiencing at the hands of the Jewish leaders, the sayings of Jesus were directed in general against the Jewish teachers: "Not only will this generation be condemned for their misdeeds, they are also responsible for preventing many from becoming followers of Jesus ..." (Edwards 1976:119).

It is ironical that at the time the Gospel of Matthew was finally codified (after AD 70) the school of Hillel had become the majority group among the Jewish party of the Pharisees. The situation had changed dramatically in the course of the development of early Christianity. Whereas Jesus had begun with a favourable relationship to Hillel and his school, historical situations changed this. Christianity was viewed as a heresy and threatened the Jewish interpretation of the Torah. The relationship between Christianity and the groups within Judaism degenerated. From the Christian viewpoint the differences among the Jewish groups were obliterated and they were all categorised in the same way. Jesus' criti-
cisms against the school of Shammai were now directed against the Pharisees in general. This development would be taken further in John's Gospel, in which Jesus' criticisms were directed no longer against the Pharisees but against the Jews in general. "You are the children of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires" (Jn. 8:44 in the context of 8:31, where Jesus is addressing the Jews).

2 REFUSAL TO HELP ONE'S PARENTS
And why do you transgress the commandments of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, "Honour your father and your mother" and "He who speaks evil of father and mother, let him surely die". But you say, "If any one tells his father or his mother, what you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honour his father". So, for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. (Mt. 15:3-6).

Jesus refers to a custom whereby the son makes a vow to give to the temple what he could have used to care for his parents. Jesus indicates to his hearers a discrepancy between their law and their traditions. Their law expressly taught that they must care for their parents: "Honour your father and your mother", while their tradition allowed them to give to the temple what should in fact have been used for the support of their parents.

Rabbi Eliezer, who is to be identified with Bet Shammai, is given in the Talmud as an example of someone who did precisely this, namely vowed away all his possessions and hence maintained he had no obligations towards his son (Falk 1985:98-99). Bet Hillel, on the contrary, expressly forbade one to vow all one's belongings to the temple. Seen in this light it is understandable that customs such as these prevailed because of the dominance of Bet Shammai at the time. At a later stage, when Bet Hillel's became the dominant opinion, the situation was reversed. The interpretation given by Jesus is in line with the direction adopted by Bet Hillel as opposed to that of Bet Shammai.

3 BET HILLEL AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY
Judaism considered the seven Noachic Commandments as the foundation for every religion, seeing them as binding upon the whole human race. The origin of these laws is traced back by the
Rabbis to God's command to Adam (Gn. 2:16) or more specifically to Noah (Gn. 9:1-7). Over the course of time different numbers were given to the Noachic laws - ranging from five through seven to even thirty. L. Finkelstein (1930:20-42) attributes their origin to the period of the Maccabees when the Jew and Gentile within the state were in need of reconciliation.

The Talmud expresses the sevenfold Noachic Commandments in this way: "Our Rabbis taught: 'Seven precepts were the sons of Noah commanded: social laws; to refrain from blasphemy; idolatry; adultery; bloodshed; robbery; eating flesh cut from a living animal'" (B. Talmud: Sanhedrin 56A-59B). Bet Hillel contended that a non-Jew who practised these commandments was part of the Hasidim (the righteous ones) and merited a place in the world to come. This was not the position of Bet Shammai. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus of the first century AD was excommunicated because he refused to accept the majority view of the wise men. He maintained that a Gentile who observed the Noachic Commandments did not deserve a place in the world to come (Falk 1985:27). This agrees with the view of both Shammai and his school. "R. Eliezer meant to say that he accepted and taught only those teachings transmitted in the name of Shammai" (Falk 1985:27).

This shows that Judaism of the first century was divided in its approach to the Gentiles. While Bet Hillel favoured an outreach to the Gentiles, Bet Shammai radically opposed it. The view of Bet Hillel eventually triumphed within Judaism.

This view also triumphed with the development of Christianity. The stance adopted by Paul of Tarsus in his outreach to the Gentiles is also rooted in his training as a Pharisee by Gamaliel, a member of the Bet Hillel group. After his conversion to Christianity Paul came into frequent conflict with the group of Jewish-Christians, the Judaizers. They demanded that pagan Christians abide by all stipulations of the Jewish law, including the rite of circumcision. This is very close to the position of Bet Shammai.

In acting out his task of bringing salvation to the Gentile world Paul showed he was still close to the school of Hillel. His opponents, although they were Christians, were still under the influence of Bet Shammai. One has evidence here of the Bet Hillel/Bet Shammai dispute carried over into Christianity. Paul (Bet Hillel) is opposed by the Judaizers (Bet Shammai). Just as in Judaism it was Bet Hillel that triumphed, so in Christianity the views of Paul
gained more and more weight to become the official position of the Christian church.

When the Christian church offered to admit Gentiles, it opened itself up to the admission of the Noachic Laws. In Acts 15:29 the first Gentiles admitted into the Christian church were instructed to "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what is strangled and from unchastity". These four stipulations, according to Falk (1985:48), correspond to "an early Tannaitic variant of the Noachic laws found in the Tosefta Avodah Zorah 9:4".

The early Christian church shows a problem similar to that noted by Finkelstein (1930:20-42), relating to the Maccabean state out of which he sees the Noachic laws emerging. To harmonize the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within their state, non-Jews were obliged to uphold certain laws seen to be imposed by God upon all mankind from the beginning. In this way the Jew is bound by the Torah, while the Gentile upholds the laws binding all people expressed in the Noachic laws. Harmony is restored within the state in so far as both Jew and Gentile each acknowledge a law directing their lives.

In a similar way the harmonious relationship between Jew and Gentile within the early Christian church was upheld. Gentiles were declared to be free from the stipulations of the Torah, but they had to abide by the demands made by the Noachic laws. It was for the sake of unity in the early Christian community that these laws were stressed. The early Christian church was not teaching that the obedience to these laws had a value in themselves, but rather it wished to ensure harmony between Jew and Gentile Christian. "James argues that Christians of pagan background, having lived among Jews, must certainly be aware of such Mosaic proscriptions, because they have been proclaimed again and again. His argument is thus an appeal for a sympathetic understanding of Jewish-Christian sensitivities" (Fitzmyer 1970:196).

4 DIVORCE

It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce". But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Mt. 5:31-32)
Jesus refers here to the custom in Deuteronomy 24:1 of a man giving his wife a written letter of divorce. In doing so Jesus shows that he distances himself from the custom. The schools of Sham­mai and Hillel differed as regards sufficient reason for divorce. According to their custom Shammai adopted the stricter view, while Hillel opted for a much more lenient concession. Shammai permitted divorce only on the grounds of adultery, while Hillel allowed it in the case of love for another woman, or for numerous trivial reasons such as inferior cooking, etc. In comparing the repudiation of divorce as it occurs in the three Synoptic Gospels, one notices that whereas Mark and Luke have a straightforward rejection of any form of divorce (Mk. 10:11-12; Lk. 16:18) Matthew names an exception. On the two occasions when he records this saying of Jesus, Matthew (5:13-32 and 19:4) adds the exception to divorce, namely "except on the ground of unchastity".

Consequently, it has been argued that Jesus allows divorce for this one case of "unchastity". Seen in this light many have argued that Jesus is following the stricter interpretation of the Mosaic law on divorce as upheld by Bet Shammai which allowed divorce only in the case of adultery. "The interpretation of the phrase as an exception to the repudiation of divorce would place Jesus within the school of Shammai" (McKenzie 1970:72).

This interpretation goes against the general thesis of this investigation, namely that Jesus tended to follow the line adopted by Bet Hillel, in preference to that of Bet Shammai. The interpretation offered above on the question of divorce fails to take into account the distinction drawn between divorce among Jews and Gentiles. The Deuteronomic law of a written divorce applied to Jews only. Jesus, however, has in mind here the question of divorce among Gentiles. The disputes between Hillel and Shammai regarding the reasons for a divorce do not apply here as they concerned divorce among Jews. They did not involve divorce among Gentiles.

The Gentiles, as has been indicated, are bound by the Noachic laws, one of which forbade unchastity (porneia). Reference has already been made to this in Acts 15:29 where the Gentile Christian was obliged to uphold this Noachic law. The same word porneia occurs here in Matthew 5:31 which presents it as a reason for divorce. Consequently, the interpretation of this word porneia must be seen in conjunction with Acts 15:29 as well as with the
Noachic laws. According to Matthew 5:31 Jesus says that the only reason for allowing divorce is where the partners are breaking the Noachic law of porneia. What exactly this Noachic law of porneia is, is greatly disputed. It would seem to be a law concerned with the very nature of man, and I would agree with the interpretation offered by Fitzmyer (1970:196): "Against this background porneia would refer to sexual union within certain degrees of kinship, a situation often called zenut (lit. "fornication") by the rabbis".

In a more recent article Fitzmyer (1983:362-364) gives evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls to illustrate this interpretation, whereby incest is proscribed as zenut (or porneia). This indicates that in the first century there was already an understanding of zenut which forbade a marriage to be entered into by those who were in some way related. This would constitute a reason for divorce, because it was not a marriage in the first place.

Seen in this light, Jesus is still within the tradition of Bet Hillel and not that of Bet Shammai. Bet Hillel argued that the Gentiles had to uphold the Noachic laws in order to obtain salvation. On the question of divorce, they are again called upon to uphold these Noachic laws. This, as has been shown, was not the position adopted by Bet Shammai, who required all stipulations of the Jewish law to be upheld. Although Jesus offers a more stringent teaching on the nature of divorce with regard to his followers, his teaching remains in line with that of Bet Hillel: a basic difference between divorce among Jews and Gentiles was upheld (Falk 1985:154) and at the same time the Gentiles were obliged to keep this stipulation of the Noachic commandments.

5 CONCLUSION
This investigation has tried to understand the teaching of Jesus against the background of the schools of Hillel and Shammai which exercised a great influence on Judaism from the end of the first century BC to the end of the first century AD. In many different ways the teaching of Jesus can be explained against the background of the school of Hillel, especially in the attitude of Bet Hillel to the Gentiles. In his teaching to the Gentiles, Paul indicates that salvation has came to the Gentiles, not through observance of the stipulations of the Jewish law, but rather through obedience to Jesus.
The controversies raging round Jesus and the Pharisees of his day can be explained against the background of the disputes between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel. In the handing down of the accounts of Jesus through the decades, Jesus' disputes with Bet Shammai tended to be forgotten in the sense that Bet Shammai was not seen as the object of his dispute, but the Pharisees in general. When the hostility between Judaism and Christianity grew over the decades after the death of Jesus, Christians tended to present the controversial sayings of Jesus as being directed against the Pharisees in general. This was the development that occurred within the synoptic tradition, whereas within the Johannine tradition the controversies concerned the Jews in general.

The council of Jerusalem's decision to admit Gentiles on condition that they abided by certain stipulations of the Noachic laws, and Paul's controversies with the Judaizers, can both be explained against the background of this distinction between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai. Paul's efforts were opposed by those Christians from Judaism who had previously belonged to the tradition of Shammai and wished Christianity to abide by all the stipulations of the Jewish law.

This is not to say that Jesus is simply to be understood as a faithful member of Bet Hillel. Although this interpretation of the Torah is seen, in the cases mentioned above, to conform to the interpretation offered by Bet Hillel, Jesus' message goes far beyond that of Bet Hillel. For example, it has been shown with regard to parental relationships that Jesus upholds the view of Bet Hillel that children have a responsibility to care for their parents and that they cannot vow all their possessions away to the temple.

However, in other teachings of Jesus, one notices the responsibility of placing allegiance to Jesus and his teachings above that of allegiance to one's parents: "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:26). This shows that discipleship of Jesus involves more than is implied in the context of belonging to the school of Hillel. Discipleship for Jesus is a radical discipleship, involving the renunciation of everything that stands in the way of following Jesus.

Christianity is more than simply the observation of the Noachic laws. It is the person of Jesus that is placed in the centre of the
stage: Jesus is the new Torah. He is also presented in the gospels as the Messiah, long awaited and foretold throughout the Scriptures. For Hillel the Torah is perfect, whereas Jesus presents himself as the one who is perfecting the Torah through his activity and teaching, through his person (Mt. 5:17). Ultimately the distinction between Jew and Gentile disappears in Christianity as the radicality of Jesus as the new Torah is understood more and more by the early Christian community. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gl. 3:28). Allegiance to the person of Jesus must characterise the fundamental option of both the Jewish-Christian and the Gentile-Christian.

This investigation has significance for dialogue between Jews and Christians. The anti-Jewish statements that appear in the New Testament come across as very harsh and hurtful to modern-day Jews. Seen, however, in the perspective offered above as arising out of the context of their time, the teachings of Jesus and Paul of Tarsus do not originate as an attack on Judaism itself, but rather on groups within Judaism. The Jewish roots of Christianity are seen to emerge far more clearly and Christianity is able to acknowledge its rightful indebtedness to Judaism for much of its inheritance.

WORKS CONSULTED

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