

# OpenTheo

## #120 New Testament Q&A: Pharisees, contradictions & oral tradition

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions on the New Testament. Were the Pharisees all bad? How do we reconcile the different Gospel endings about where the disciples stayed after the resurrection? Is the oral tradition, before the Gospels were written down, reliable?

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### Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Welcome back to the show where you get to ask the questions of New Testament historian, pastor and former bishop of Durham, Tom Wright and brought you in partnership with SBCK & NT Wright online. I'm Justin, I'm the host of the show and we bring you a whole range of shows from Premier Unbelievable these days. I'll tell you about some of them in a moment.

Today, Tom's answering listener questions on the New Testament. Were the Pharisee's all bad? How do we reconcile the different Gospel endings in the Bible and is the oral tradition before the Gospels were written down actually reliable? Thanks, Osiris, who got in touch to leave a review saying I listened to this podcast on a regular basis. Now, I agree with many things, but disagree with many things too.

I find it refreshing and intellectually challenging listening to other points of view, especially on social issues that I don't necessarily agree with. Well, that's what we like Osiris. Thank you for leaving that review.

Challenging each other is an important part of how we grow, isn't it? If you want more thinking, challenging faith, do go to our website, premier, unbelievable.com. We keep adding now new articles all the time, new videos and new shows too. It's a really exciting time as we're growing this ministry. We've got our new season of The Big Conversation has launched just recently, a new podcast called Unapologetic that you can find videos associated with those two.

You can find it all from premier unbelievable.com. For now, into today's show. Well, today on the show, we're talking about your New Testament questions. Last week, we had a podcast devoted to some questions around the Old Testament, its historicity, certain confusing passages.

Well, today, we're looking at some of the questions you have around Pharisees, gospel endings, oral tradition and that sort of thing. This is very much Tom's home turf. Looking forward to hearing what Tom has to say on some of these questions.

Here we go. John Flores, I think, in Tigard, Oregon has a question about the Pharisees. It says, I'm a Bible teacher at a Christian high school.

Love listening to the podcast. Often find myself learning something new. It's safe to say your program never satiates my interest in Christ, always needs me wanting more.

Well, thank you for the lovely words, John. Now, you say, how about your understanding of the Pharisees in the gospels, Tom? Are they the good guys or the bad guys? On the one hand, it seems the Pharisees wanted to help Christ and even protect him. Luke 1331 says that that's time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else.

Herod wants to kill you." But on the other hand, it seems as if the Pharisees wanted Jesus dead. John 11 verse 57, but the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should reported so that they might arrest him. So is it as simple as some wanted Christ dead and others wanted him alive? Is there something deeper going on here? What were the power dynamics at play? I've heard before that some of the early church was made up of converted Pharisees.

Did most of them come around after the resurrection? Also, very quick to point out the ways in which I might guard against becoming a little Pharisee myself. I even wrote a song this week says John about the life of a Pharisee and how that group seemingly enjoyed their status and rank above the least of these. It's called "Highway to Hell" and you've left a link to it which we'll enjoy listening to later.

But anyway, thank you very much for the question, John. And I think you've said before, actually, on the podcast, Tom, in another context that we shouldn't take too one dimensional approach to the Pharisees and who they were, even though they're often

our castors, the legalists and the baddies, as John puts it in some of the way we bring across scriptures. So tell us where you would begin with thinking about the Pharisees.

Yeah, thank you. There's a great deal that could be said and I'm going to have to rein in my temptation to give a whole hour-long lecture on this. I should say, if John or anyone else wants to follow up, there's quite a long section on the Pharisees in my book, "The New Testament and the People of God." And then I say more about the Pharisees in Jesus and the Victory of God.

And then my big book on Paul, Paul and the faithfulness of God, chapter two there is basically on the worldview of a Pharisee. This is on the place that Saul of Tarsus, who is a self-confessed, erstwhile Pharisee. This is where he's coming from, what he believed, what he was hoping for, how that all worked.

And of course, the gospels are being written for many people who didn't really know very much about the Jewish world. We remember that Mark, for instance, in chapter seven has to explain the Jewish traditions of washing pots and pans and so on, presumably because his audience was unfamiliar with Jewish customs. And so when Mark talks about the Pharisees, they're kind of a block.

This is a Jewish party or sect and it looks as though they are rather one-dimensional. If we only ever had Mark to go on, then we might think that way. Until we run into those passages of which John quotes one or two, it's not only Luke 13, where they warn Jesus that Herod is after his blood, but also elsewhere in Luke.

We have a Pharisee inviting Jesus to dinner. And even though Jesus ends up telling him off because he is being judgmental about the woman who is washing Jesus' feet, there is a sense that Jesus is quite happy to associate with Pharisees. So who were the Pharisees? It's a complicated question because, as we know from the historian Josephus, as well as from later traditions, because the Pharisees of the first century morph into the rabbis of the second and subsequent centuries, with this difference that the Pharisees in Jesus' days seem to have divided again into different groups, parties, positions, whereas by the second and third century, particularly after the destruction of Jerusalem, Phariseic Judaism, which becomes rabbinic Judaism, tends to settle down into one particular theological and practical position.

That's quite a long and involved historical story. But where it starts, and this is really important for Jesus, is with the two great teachers of the generation before Jesus, Shamiai and Hileil, and Shamiai and Hileil are constantly referenced by the later rabbinic works. And Shamiai is the stricter Pharisee, and Hileil is the softer or more gentle Pharisee, and they are strict and soft in terms of what obedience to God's law really looks like.

In order to see why that's important, we must remind ourselves that the whole point was

not, "How can I do good deeds to earn my way to heaven?" That is a medieval way of looking at life, which the early Pharisees are quite innocent and ignorant of. The Pharisees are saying to themselves, "God is going to do the great new thing that He's promised. He's going to bring about the great new world, the age to come.

He's going to raise the dead, a central Phariseic belief. All the righteous dead, and perhaps all the unrighteous dead as well, in the latter in order to be judged. But one day He will do that, Israel God's people will be vindicated, will live at peace, and so on and so forth.

And the question in the present is not how can I do this or that in order to go to heaven. But how can I be sure in the present that I am one of the people who will be vindicated when God acts in the future? And if you look at the Old Testament again and again, it looks as though it's saying, "Well, the way that you know in the present that you are the people of God is because you keep the law. You don't keep the law in order to become a member of the people of God.

You keep the law because God has graciously called you to be a member of His people and has said, "This is the way of life. Walk in it." And the Pharisees in particular, they look at the temple in Jerusalem and at the priests in Jerusalem. And they say to themselves, "These are the people who really enjoy God's presence." But wait a minute, most of us don't live in Jerusalem.

And by the first century of BC, most Jews didn't even live in the Holy Land. So how could they be the people of God in the same way? And the answer that the Pharisees were working on in different ways was that they were saying, "What would it be if every bit of our lives were to be so ordered that we would be holy like the priests in the temple so that then the presence of God would be with us?" And it was one of the Pharisees reported in the later Mishnah, the collection of Pharisee sayings made available roughly 200 AD but going back a long way before that, who says that when two or three people sit together and study Torah, they're the divine presence, the glorious divine presence, the Shekinah dwells among them. So that is the aim of being a Pharisee to be so ordered in every aspect of daily life that it makes sense for the presence of God to be there with you.

Now when I've lectured on this, I've often sketched that way of life without saying we're talking about the Pharisees and then I've said to the class, "By the way, the people who are aiming at this are the Pharisees and you see a gasp go around because that's not how people have normally seen the Pharisees." But the point is they have a particular agenda for God's kingdom and the chameites have a stricter one the hillelites have a more gentle relaxed one but they're still, by our standards, pretty rigorous and then Jesus has a different agenda not because he's playing the same game as them but because he is actually inaugurating the kingdom here and now and it doesn't look at all

like they imagined and that's why they see him as a danger. He is letting the side down. He is leading Israel into sin by feasting with tax collectors and sinners because they don't understand that in the new age God's people are going to be forgiven their sins and that's what the inauguration of the kingdom is partly all about and so there are some who see that actually he is a good and wise man and they want to find out what's going on and maybe they want really to be on side in some way but others see him as a real danger.

If people follow somebody like this, goodness knows what trouble we'll all get into. So those are the dynamics that are going on and as I say I've explained them in much much more detail in the books that I've referred to but let's get away from the cardboard cutout one size fits all and particularly the danger as in I haven't listened yet to John's song on highway to hell but no doubt we all have Christians as well as as as Jews. We all have ways in which we can invent legalistic structures which make us feel good about ourselves for keeping them but that's not the real thing that the Pharisees were all about that is a very modern misunderstanding of the real devout and godly intentions of the Pharisees.

Saul of Tarsus after all when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus he didn't convert from something called Judaism to something called Christianity he discovered that the god of Israel who he'd always worshipped had revealed himself in and as the crucified and risen Jesus and that of course changed everything. So helpful thank you I think sometimes it's so easy to fall into tropes isn't it when it comes to sort of things that just make it easy to refer to as you know legalism and phariseical views and so on. Inevitably traps indeed.

Yeah indeed and history is always a little bit more nuanced and complex than we sometimes imagine. Well look let's let's go to another completely separate question in some ways. Matthew in Beevitt and Oregon wants to know about the ending of Luke as compared to the ending of Matthew and Mark.

In Mark the angel tells Mary and the other women to tell the disciples to meet the resurrected Jesus in Galilee. Similarly in Matthew the disciples meet the resurrected Jesus in the Galil even in John which seems to highlight different aspects of Jesus's life than the synoptics the disciples meet Jesus in Galilee. But in Luke they stay around Jerusalem and Jesus ascends on the Mount of Olives.

Now why is this? I've learned to look at the Gospels as historical documents as much as their scripture and so differences in details or arrangement choice like this no longer intimidate me. Still it seems a bit odd. I suspect it's a choice by Luke so the ending of his gospel aligns with the beginning of Acts and the thematic significance in Acts of Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the world.

Am I on the right path or am I missing something? And Matthew adds his thanks for the

podcast and resources as well. Yeah so what's your take on where Jesus was located as well where the disciples were located at least at the time of of Jesus's resurrection and before the ascension? Yeah a perfectly good question of course and it will we're recording this before Easter and these stories are very much in my head even though you'll be listening to it after Easter but people come back to this again and again and sorry to go on referring to my own works but I have discussed this in considerable detail in my book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and there you'll find all kinds of arguments laid out and of course some skeptics have said well there you are the stories are so different that they can't possibly be true they're just vague made up later sort of half memories or whatever that's not how I read it. We actually have it's it's slightly more complicated even than what Matthew says because in Matthew the disciples do go to Galilee to meet Jesus but already Jesus is met by or Jesus meets the women at the tomb in Matthew 28 verse 9 Jesus met them and said hail and they came and took hold of his feet and worshipped him so that's before anyone goes off to Galilee so there are different stories circulating in the early church and very interestingly the historian Ed Sanders who is quite skeptical in many ways and I'm not sure if he is a man of faith or not he keeps those cards close to his chest but Sanders wrote about the resurrection stories that it looks as though the early writers were trying to tell us something for which they knew they didn't have very good language that's a very interesting analysis it's as though my goodness there was this and then there was that but that happened and this and and and it's all very surprising you can't extrapolate to the resurrection narratives from the beliefs of pre-Christian Jews you just wouldn't get there most obvious example being that in the the favorite text about the resurrection for early Jews was Daniel chapter 12 which says that the righteous will shine like the stars well in none of the resurrection narratives Matthew Mark Luke John or Acts do we have Jesus shining like a star you would have done if people had simply said oh after he died probably something like Daniel 12 happened that's what they would have described but they don't so I'm prepared to say these are very odd stories we can't easily construct a simple way of putting them together though people have tried and it's not actually totally impossible but what you have is is Mark with this very truncated ending of the women just finding the empty tomb and the angels saying go to Galilee Matthew with the women meeting Jesus and then the disciples going to Galilee John where you have clear meetings with particularly with Mary Magdalene and then with the 12 and with Thomas in Jerusalem in John chapter 20 but then you have the the the fishing trip in Galilee in John 21 with Jesus cooking breakfast by the shore and in Luke you simply as John says you have the appearances in and around Jerusalem with the wonderful story of the road to Emmaus and so on now it's it's not a problem Jerusalem and Galilee are not a million miles apart it only takes a day or two to walk from the one to the other maybe three days if you're if you're going reasonably leisurely it's quite doable and it's perfectly feasible to think that just as Jesus was going to and fro to Jerusalem during his public career according to John so that the disciples in the 40 days or more after Jesus was raised from the dead that they went to and fro so I'm not bothered historically by the reliability of these different

stories but I do notice that nobody in the early church has thought to say we need to tidy all this up we need to have one narrative which will make sense the narrative which they do come up with is much shorter in 1 Corinthians 15 the Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures was buried was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures and was seen by ABCD and E though interestingly not the women they have been airbrushed out of the account because by then it's for public consumption and women are believed in the ancient world particularly in the ancient Jewish world not to be credible witnesses so nobody would have made up the idea that the women were the first ones to find the tomb and to meet the risen Jesus which is which is a remarkable thing in itself so I want to say there are all sorts of signs which say though this is a very odd collocation of different stories and though we may find difficulty in fitting them all together people have often said it's like eyewitnesses at a trial in court when something very disturbing and distressing and sudden has happened the eyewitnesses will not all agree about what color that person was wearing and which direction the bicycle was going down the road and so on but that doesn't mean that nothing happened and in the same way it looks as though these are the stories the way that they were told right from the beginning and because the way people told the stories was so important and they did so so eagerly they fixed those forms for storytelling in the different minds of the people who heard the different people telling the stories and then they did not change them that spills over into another question they're about to get to us to how moral tradition actually works well let's go to that question because it does segue very neatly fill in sorry is asking um i'm fairly confident a good deal of accuracy of the written gospel accounts has been preserved over the years but i gather they were shared by oral tradition for some decades before they were written down what methods were adopted during the oral tradition period to preserve accuracy and maybe you want to just talk generally about this this oral tradition that preceded the actual you know setting down of the gospels um as as they've been handed down to us tom so yeah and what what how do we know that these were being transmitted faithfully as it were the stories about jesus and so on yeah um that there's there's a lot been done on this in the last 20 years and i haven't read all the literature on it i have seen reviews of people writing books about oral tradition and about the interaction of memory theory with oral tradition theory and these have taken on lives of their own and people have written a lot about it in my book jesus and the victory of god i referred particularly to the work of kenith balee who's now sadly no longer with us an american missionary who spent most of his life in the middle east working as a missionary in jordan in syria in palestine itself um and down into egypt and who who had seen those cultures before the arrival of widespread electronic and print media in other words the cultures as they existed when they were all working orally now i've been to the middle east several times myself and i've seen little bits of oral culture at work i'll give you a silly but interesting example one day leading a party of tourists in jerusalam we had arranged in the morning to meet our guide for receiving copies of photographs that have been taken and we were going to meet the guide at a particular place where the bus was going to meet us outside one of the gates

of the old city in jersalim it turned out during the morning that there was some police incident and it was impossible for the buses to get where they were supposed to be and our guide wasn't bothered at all when he heard about this he said they will be waiting for us and told us somewhere else and the mobile phones weren't weren't working um and i said how did you know and he said we call it the arabic telephone what do you mean the arabic telephone he said in a place like jersalim everyone is talking to everyone else all the time about what is going on and word gets around that party oh they're off there well they can't go there that's okay they'll get up and word gets back and i'll tell you another story from a different part of the world but very interesting about the same phenomenon um when idi amine was the big tyrant who was um terrorizing yuganda there was one famous bishop fester kavendry an anglican bishop in yuganda who had preached against amine's rule and had encouraged people to pray against it but was not inciting uh violence or whatever but anyway kavendry was was picked up and uh the story goes he the the amine's thugs picked him up and he was killed and his body was dumped somewhere and no one person saw the whole sequence of events it it happened um overnight or whatever it was but it was one group took him somewhere handed over to another group some people say that amine shot him himself but then his body was taken somewhere else but by the middle of the next day the connected narrative was being told as a connected narrative on the streets of campala and once it had been told that way it never changed because that was the story that everybody now knew this is what had happened to our beloved archbishop um now these are modern stories but what we're talking about is the habit of people in an oral culture in a pre-print pre-electronic media pre-mobile phone culture of telling stories in particular ways you have it in families where particular family anecdotes are told and everybody knows this is how grandfather and grandmother tell this particular story and these are the punch lines and this is how it works and if somebody then told the story differently everyone would round the table would say no no that's not what he says at that point it goes like this and i've sometimes used the silly example as well of of people who uh feed on the soap operas of the day um when i was a college chaplain the students would regularly watch the soap opera called neighbors um it was on after lunch and if you asked any of the students and what happened in today's episode if somebody told you what had happened and got it wrong three other people in the room would immediately say no no there wasn't like that at all not because they'd studied it they hadn't sat down and learned it it's because it was a world they knew and they were all living in now these are silly examples from one point of view but they do point up the fact that we're not talking about methods being adopted nobody sits down and says how are we now going to preserve these sayings it's just that when something significant happens in a in a village in a family everyone tells everyone else about it until the story reaches a relatively fixed form i say a relatively fixed form because then when a generation passes or they go to a different town or whatever they may miss out a bit which doesn't seem so relevant or somebody else may remember another bit which have been forgotten and which gets stuck in so when we then apply this to Jesus you know people often look at the gospels and say well in this



gospel it says this but in this gospel it's very similar but that that phrase has been changed or added well excuse me Jesus was a wandering teacher he went around from village to village there was no television no radio no newspapers he said the same things or very nearly the same things over and over and over again the kingdom of God is at hand i told the same stories the parables i bet he told the parable of the sower a hundred times and his followers knew it but they probably remembered that well that time he he told it a bit more briefly we were in a hurry so he he didn't go into such detail or whatever that's not a problem did Jesus tell stories about a sower sowing seed you bet he did and if there are variations well there are variations let's get used to it and likewise with the stories of Jesus healing people he comes into town here somebody's sick he heals them somebody says something he responds people at once are gossiping and telling each other all about it that's how the oral culture works that doesn't mean that every last word in the gospels must be like a tape recording of what Jesus exactly said on that occasion quite apart from anything else the stories come to us in greek and it's 99 percent certain that most of Jesus life he was speaking Aramaic people may have translated his Aramaic slightly differently and that will have generated a slightly different oral tradition as a result but i hope i've said enough to show that oral tradition doesn't have to be managed it doesn't have to be formal it just happens especially when that is the way that people in that culture operate in the absence of electronic gizmos and the print and i suppose just a reminder as we close that that god in a sense uses the the time place and culture of people and the means they have to record of course the bible doesn't somehow stand apart from the realities of the way in which history was recorded in its day and age and that's as you've often said before that's the bible we have and that's the bible god communicates to us through even if you know today we might have a different standard of you know the way we set things down and so on but but um we might so actually we probably don't good indeed indeed well thank you Tom um really helpful answers on the new testament i hope you've found them helpful as well we'll be back with more of your questions next time on the show but for now thanks for being with us and we'll see you next time well thanks for being with us on this edition of the show next time ahead of trinity sunday tom answers questions about the trinity like how do i explain it without falling into accidental heresy uh is there a hierarchy in the trinity and can you explain jesus' prayer for intimacy with the father and the spirit in john 17 now's actually a great time to send any of your questions in as i'll be sitting down with tom to record more episodes of the show if you want to do that you just need to sign up to our newsletter and then you'll receive the link with your welcome email to ask your own question go to premier unbelievable dot com to do that for now god bless see you next time

[buzzing]