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You Want to Be a Pharisee

How many of you, in being a part of the Messianic community and living a Torah obedient lifestyle like Messiah Yeshua—have ever been accused by various Christian family or friends of being a “Pharisee”? How many of you have been told that you are being a hypocrite and should not only not be concerning yourself with God’s Torah, but that you are falling into the same mistakes that others in the First Century fell into, which the Apostle Paul refuted in his letters?

Having the accusation of being a “Pharisee” is one that is not only commonly used by various Christians against Messianic people, but has become integrated into the vernacular language of many Christians relating to any individual or group which is perceived as being legalistic and/or archaic in its approach to society and the Bible. It is asserted among many that being “Pharisaical” is a status that no born again Believer should even try to attain to, because after all, were not the Pharisees the primary antagonists of Jesus Christ? Did not Yeshua have most of His conflicts with the Pharisees and the Pharisaical religious system? Did He not rebuke the Pharisees time and time again for their keeping of the Law?

The example which many readers see of the Pharisees in Scripture is exemplified well in Matthew 12:14: “But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, *as to* how they might destroy Him” (NASU). *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* well-summarizes the thoughts of many contemporary Christians: “From the very beginning of his ministry the Pharisees showed themselves bitter and persistent enemies of our Lord. They could not bear his doctrines, and they sought by every means to

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destroy his influence among the people.”¹ Many Bible readers, very seldom having any background information in Second Temple Judaism, fail to understand that the Pharisees were too broad of a group to be considered the “persistent enemies of our Lord.” *NIDB* validly points out, “the discriminating Bible student should bear in mind that not everything about every Pharisee was bad. It is perhaps not just to say that all Pharisees were self-righteous and hypocritical. Many Pharisees actually tried to promote true piety.”² Unfortunately, far too many contemporary Christians are in the dark about this, and it has caused some problems to erupt between them and many people in today’s Messianic movement.

The key in being able to combat the claim which is often made against Messianic people—that we are Pharisees and are thus hypocritical, legalistic, and perhaps even opposed to the liberating message of the gospel—is to understand that the Pharisees of Second Temple Century Judaism were a very complex group of people. Just like the different Protestant denominations of today—Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, or Episcopalians—so were there different types and subsets of Pharisees, just as there were similarities among them. Bible readers must put themselves back into the First Century context of the Gospel writers, who would have assumed that their audience and readership would already have known certain things about the Pharisees, which today many Christian pastors and Sunday school teachers are not that informed about. (Or, at least choose to remain uninformed about by failing to consult modern Bible encyclopedias, dictionaries, and various commentaries, which may indeed have a sufficient amount of information on the Pharisees.)

It is important for Bible readers and students to have the appropriate background information in relation to Second Temple Judaism, who the Pharisees were, what the Pharisees believed, how Yeshua the Messiah interacted with them, and how the Apostle Paul was one of them. Were all of the Pharisees hypocritical, evil people, as is commonly believed in a great deal of today’s Christianity? Or, have things perhaps been oversimplified, and Bible students need to instead look at the Pharisees as being composed of multiple sects—each of which existed under the broad umbrella as being “Pharisaical”—but had differing applications of the

¹ Matthew George Easton, “Pharisees,” *E-Sword 7.6.1: Easton’s Bible Dictionary*. MS Windows 9x. Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2003.

² Lorman L. Petersen, “Pharisees,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed. et al., *New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 779.

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Scriptures of Israel? Keep this in mind as we review what it actually means to be a Pharisee.

A Separated Group

The Hebrew term for Pharisee is *Parush*, meaning separatist; its Greek transliteration of *Pharisaïos* appears in the Apostolic Scriptures. *TDNT* details how it is “A common term in the NT and Josephus, usually in the plural, *Pharisaïos* transcribes an Aramaic word denoting ‘separated.’ The Hebrew equivalent, whose root can have both positive and negative nuances, is very rarer and does not cover all aspects of Pharisaism.”³ The verb *parash* is a term which is used quite frequently in the Mishnah, Talmud, and other Rabbinical literature to refer to the concept of being separated. *Jastrow* defines it as “to go away, go aside, depart; to keep off.”⁴

Being separated (at least to one degree or another) is one of the principal emphases of the Torah, as God’s people are to be different from the world and resist assimilation to the sinful ways of the world (cf. Leviticus 11:45). Yeshua prayed to His Father, “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15, NASU), a theme which would have resonated with many ancient Pharisees.

The Pharisees arose as a religious sect during or immediately after the Hasmonean revolt of around 165-160 B.C.E., when Hellenization threatened the survival of the Jewish people. The Pharisaical sects arose to preserve the validity of the Torah for the people, and the rituals which had preserved the remnant of Israel since its return from Babylonian captivity. The Pharisees highly emphasized the Torah commandments regarding purity, but more than anything else connected with the common people in a way that the aristocratic Sadducees, their dominant rivals who controlled the Temple and priesthood, were unable to do. The Pharisees were placed in a position as teachers. The Pharisees also saw that various Tabernacle/Temple rituals were brought into Jewish homes, to some extent, with non-priests playing a greater religious role. More than

³ R. Meyer, “*Pharisaïos*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1246.

⁴ Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), 1241.

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anything else, though, the Pharisees were known for their exposition on the Torah.⁵

While the Pharisees arose as a response to Hellenism, they quickly became the primary teachers of the common people in the Land of Israel. From this environment arose the majority of their religious views and teachings concerning the Tanach Scriptures. Many of their theological beliefs formalized as a response to the needs of those in Israel before and immediately following the period of the Maccabees. As Menahem Mansoor summarizes,

“Pharasaic theological doctrines were giving utterance to the hopes of the oppressed masses and affecting the entire life of the Jews. This hope was especially seen in doctrines which included belief in the resurrection of the dead, the Day of Judgment, reward and retribution in the life after death, the coming of the Messiah, and the existence of angels, and also divine foreknowledge along with man’s free choice of, and therefore responsibility for, his deeds” (EJ).⁶

These beliefs, as you should no doubt be aware, are clearly espoused in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) and were taught by Yeshua and His Disciples. Yeshua and His Disciples ministered and taught to almost the exact same audience as the Pharisees did: the oppressed masses who were in desperate need of a message of hope.

Important Theological Views of the Pharisees

The Pharisees had some distinct theological views which made them a unique group. While they advocated beliefs which many of today’s evangelical Protestants would also adhere to and *would agree with*, the Pharisees saw themselves primarily as teachers of the Torah or Law of Moses. Not only did the Pharisees see themselves as the proper expositors of the Torah, but they also strongly believed in the validity of the Oral Torah or Oral Law as a source of their authority.⁷ As Mansoor describes it, the Pharisees advocated that “The law must be understood according to

⁵ Menahem Mansoor, “Pharisees,” in Roth, Cecil, and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), 13:366.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13:364.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13:363.

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the interpretation of the teachers who are endowed with God-given reason to do so" (EJ).⁸

While the validity of the Written Torah given to Moses on Mount Sinai by God was firmly believed by the Pharisees, so were the oral teachings of the Rabbis, which were also believed to be given by God to Moses and then passed down by word-of-mouth via the religious leadership (m.*Avot* 1:1). Much of this Oral Torah was used because the Pharisees "tried to adapt old codes to new conditions" (EJ),⁹ meaning the changing religious conditions of the Jewish people living in the First Centuries B.C.E. and C.E. The Jewish historian Josephus explained that

"the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 13.297).¹⁰

The antagonists of the Pharisees were the Sadducees. While there is much recorded concerning the theology of the Pharisees in ancient Jewish literature, and by Second Temple Jewish voices such as Philo and Josephus, not much is recorded concerning the Sadducees. The Sadducees are well-known in the Gospel accounts for *not* believing in the resurrection of the dead (Mark 12:18; Matthew 22:23; Luke 20:27), and as Acts 23:8 details more fully, "For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all" (NASU). The *Jewish Study Bible* indicates that "They held to a strict application of Torah and to maintain order to continue the Temple practices without interference, the Sadducees were apparently willing to collaborate with the occupying Roman power to some extent, including accepting Roman interference in the choice of high priest."¹¹

The Sadducees were, for the most part, in league with the Roman occupiers of the Land of Israel. They did not have a great amount of influence over the common people, who viewed them as collaborators

⁸ Ibid., 13:365.

⁹ Ibid., 13:363

¹⁰ Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 355.

¹¹ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2138.

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with Rome. “There is no record of a Sadducee being admitted into the Christian church. According to Josephus (*Antiq.* 20.9.1), they were responsible for the death of James, the brother of the Lord. With the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Sadducean party disappeared” (*NIDB*).¹²

The Pharisees, in contrast to the Sadducees, were quite conservative in their theology, believing that the whole of the Hebrew Tanach (Old Testament) was valid Scripture. Ron Moseley describes in his book *Yeshua: A Guide to the Real Jesus and the Original Church*, that there appear to be many similarities between the Pharisees and the Puritans who settled early colonial America. He concludes that shared characteristics between them

“include an emphasis on self-discipline, the determination not to remove their standards, the desire for learning, the pursuit of freedom, the mixture of idealism and realism, which was often confused with hypocrisy, the fluctuating affections of love and hate, which were often aimed at those who opposed their views, and the total devotion to a simple life-style.”¹³

If we understand the Pharisees as a distinct group, advocating a distinct religious ideology, it is not difficult to see how they are often misunderstood by many contemporary Christian people, who have little background knowledge of who they actually were, who just assume things when they should not. The Pharisees arose out of an environment which resisted assimilation to the world’s ways, and their movement emphasized separation via God’s Torah and its ritual commandments. They advocated the message of the Hebrew Scriptures: the redemption of Israel and the judgment of Israel’s enemies. They believed in the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment on sinners. They believed in angels, demons, and a combination of free will and predestination. They respected tradition as it bound the Jewish people together as a society. And, surprisingly, a few might have participated in a sort of “missionary evangelism,” based on Scripture texts such as Isaiah 2:20 and Jeremiah 16:19:

“In that day men will cast away to the moles and the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship” (Isaiah 2:20, NASU).

¹² Steven Barabas, “Sadducees,” in *NIDB*, 885.

¹³ Ron Moseley, *Yeshua: A Guide to the Real Jesus and the Original Church* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 1996), 137.

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“O LORD, my strength and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of distress, to You the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, ‘Our fathers have inherited nothing but falsehood, futility and things of no profit’” (Jeremiah 16:19, NASU).

These prophecies would have formed any basis for Pharisaical authorities going out into the nations to make proselyte converts. These words both predict that the nations will acknowledge the God of Israel, and as Moseley thinks, “the Pharisees engaged in aggressive and effective evangelism for three hundred years, especially during the time of Christ.”¹⁴ Why were there many Jewish communities outside the Land of Israel in the First Century in such foreign areas such as Northern Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome? Being dispersed and establishing economic networks are valid reasons. But another major, possible reason, was that there were Jewish synagogues in these distant locations because they were planted there by Pharisees, to convert the masses in anticipation of the eschaton, when all nations would acknowledge the God of Israel.

When we recognize some these important theological views of the Pharisees, why do many of today’s Christians seem to have an unbalanced view of who the Pharisees were? Is this unbalanced view rooted in a certain theological tradition, a particular contemporary Christian culture, or simply being ignorant and uninformed of who the Pharisees were within Second Temple Judaism? Do you think that conservative evangelical Protestants today would have their beliefs align more with the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection of the dead, angels, demons, an afterlife—or with the Sadducees who did not believe in any of these things? Mansoor perhaps says it best in his statement,

“Pharisaic doctrines have more in common with those of Christianity than is supposed, having prepared the ground for Christianity with such concepts as Messianism, the popularization of monotheism and apocalypticism, and with such beliefs as life after death, resurrection of the dead, immortality, and angels.”¹⁵

Perhaps many of today’s evangelical Believers have more in common with the Pharisees than they are presently willing to see. If indeed so, how should this change one’s perspective of the Pharisees in the Apostolic

¹⁴ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵ Mansoor, “Pharisees,” in *EJ*, 13:366.

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Scriptures, their relation to Yeshua and the Apostle Paul, and how the Messiah's followers are to practice their faith in emulation of Him today?

The Different Sects of the Pharisees

One thing which has caused a substantial amount of confusion among many evangelical Believers today, and their failure to see the Pharisees as actually holding to the *same* principal doctrines and beliefs that they do, is they often refer to them as that: **"the Pharisees."** The Pharisees, although the dominant party in the Sanhedrin, the religious-political council which controlled the internal affairs of First Century Israel in which Yeshua and His early followers lived, were not just a political party. The Pharisees were a distinct religious group within Second Temple Judaism, and like all branches of Judaism and Christianity today, there were sects and sub-sects of Pharisees which advocated different views and interpretations of the Torah or Law of Moses. While there were commonly shared beliefs among all the Pharisees, to say that all Pharisees believed exactly the same way would be to say that all members of a particular denomination of Protestantism or branch of Judaism today believe in exactly the same way.

During the time of Yeshua, two distinct groups of Pharisees rose up in the Land of Israel, which by-and-large had differing persuasions in their handling of the Torah and the *halachah*, meaning how the Torah was to be walked out in daily life. These two schools were the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai. They are named after their respective founders, Rabbi Hillel (unknown B.C.E.-unknown C.E.) and Rabbi Shammai (50 B.C.E.-30 C.E.). The individuals themselves may or may not have been alive during the teaching ministry of Yeshua, but their students certainly were. The School of Hillel and School of Shammai, while both being groups of Pharisees, held to different points of view with how the Torah was to be applied, with one being more lenient or liberal than the other. Both of these Pharisaical schools existed until the beginning of the Second Century C.E, about a generation after the fall of Jerusalem and the Second Temple.¹⁶

Knowing that there were two main groups of Pharisees, the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai, is absolutely imperative when one sees the Pharisees mentioned in the Apostolic Scriptures. An astute Bible reader has to often ask the question of *what Pharisees* are being referred to in a passage: Hillites or Shammaites? This requires one to have some

¹⁶ Shmuel Safrai, "Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai," in *EJ*, 4:738-741.

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background knowledge relating to these groups, so an interpreter does not misunderstand Yeshua's interaction with the Pharisees, His criticisms of them, and the beliefs of the First Century *ekklēsia*.

Generally speaking, the School of Hillel was founded to be more liberal and lenient in matters of the Torah than the School of Shammai. As Shmuel Safrai indicates, "Tannaitic tradition emphasizes that Bet Shammai adopted the stricter, Bet Hillel the more lenient view.... Many scholars have sought to define the basic principles underlying the divergences between the two schools. The generally accepted explanation is that they reflect the individual traits of their founders, of Hillel who was gentle and kind, and of Shammai who was stern and short-tempered" (*EJ*),¹⁷ although this may be more true of the schools which bore their names, and not necessarily the individuals' relationship personally to each other. In regard to interpretation of the Torah, "Bet Shammai tends in the former to the plain and sometimes even to the narrow, literal interpretation of a verse, as opposed to the wider significance assigned by Bet Hillel" (*EJ*).¹⁸ This is important to keep in mind when seeing Yeshua's interactions with the Pharisees, and His criticisms of them keeping the Torah. Was He criticizing the Pharisees in general, or a specific interpretation and application espoused by the House of Hillel or the House of Shammai? *This needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis in the Gospels.*

Very little is known about Shammai the individual, aside from the teachings espoused by those who followed his School. In general, scholars recognize that the House of Shammai followed a Torah *halachah* which was literal, and widely dealt with Torah codes of cleanliness and uncleanness. The House of Shammai may have also held to some rigid views pertaining to the Sabbath, the dietary laws, and emphasizing ritual over spiritual substance. Concerning all the Torah issues that Shammai himself made rulings on, Moshe David Herr notes that he "did not always adopt a stringent line, and of some 20 *halakhot* transmitted in his name, he adopts a stringent view in about two-thirds of the cases" (*EJ*).¹⁹ Shammai's motto is perhaps summed up well in his statement recorded in the *Pirkei Avot* or Sayings of the Fathers: "Make your learning of Torah a fixed obligation. Say little and do much. Greet everybody cheerfully" (*m. Avot* 1:15).²⁰ This

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:739-740.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:740

¹⁹ Moshe David Herr, "Shammai," in *EJ*, 14:1291.

²⁰ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 674.

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seems to reveal that the House of Shammai was more concerned about its deed than its word. Consequently, some members of the House of Shammai may have been more concerned about *being seen*, as opposed to *doing*.

The House of Hillel was the more popular of the major two schools of Pharisees. *Hillel haZaken*, as he is commonly called, is considered in Judaism to be “the greatest of the sages of the Second Temple period...described as a man of great humility...[who] set before himself the principle of bringing men closer to the Torah.”(EJ).²¹ Hillel was a reformer who sought to improve the lives of Jewish people, and many of his sayings which emphasize morality, treating others with kindness and respect, are contained in the Rabbinical writings of the Mishnah and Talmud. As the *Pirkei Avot* attest of Hillel’s primary sayings, “Be disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them near to the Torah” (m.*Avot* 1:12).²²

Regarding the School of Hillel’s interpretation of the Torah, it was “inclined most often to a liberal rather than a conservative interpretation of the demands of the law” (IDB),²³ in that the spirit of the Torah or its essence, should be emphasized above the Torah’s legal demands. IDB summarizes,

“The sources delight in repeating a number of anecdotes, all of them contrasting the proverbial patience of Hillel with the impatience and irascibility of Shammai, the most famous anecdote being the one of the proselyte who wanted to learn the whole Torah while standing on one foot. After Shammai had rebuffed him, the proselyte came to Hillel. ‘What is hateful to thee do not do to thy fellowman,’ Hillel told him; ‘this is the whole Torah; all else is commentary. Now go learn that!’”²⁴

In the end, the School of Hillel became the more popular group among the Pharisees. The account noted is summarized in the Talmud as, “*Our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: A person always should be humble, like Hillel the Elder, and not captious, like Shammai the Elder*”

²¹ Encyclopedia Hebraica, “Hillel, the Elder,” in EJ, 8:482, 484.

²² Neusner, *Mishnah*, 274.

²³ J. Goldin, “Hillel (the Elder)” in George Buttrick, ed., et. al., *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:605.

²⁴ Ibid.

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(b.*Shabbat* 31a).²⁵ This attests to the fact that in the end, theologically, the School of Hillel often won out.

It is probable that Hillel was deceased by the time Yeshua of Nazareth began His ministry, but Hillel's followers were most certainly still alive. You might already see a few parallels between Hillel's teachings and those of Yeshua, just from cursory memory. This is not to say that Hillel's teachings are those of Yeshua's, or vice versa, but it is to say that Yeshua did very much teach and communicate like a Jewish Rabbi of His time. When the Messiah spoke to various Pharisees about applications of Torah commandments, and seemingly had strong disagreements about them, various scholars have certainly suggested that He may very well have entered into internal debates between the Pharisaical Schools of Hillel and Shammai. Certainly, as Yeshua dealt with people with various human limitations, there was legalism and rigidity present in both Hillelites and Shammaites, so Yeshua could just as well have been seen criticizing followers of Hillel as opposed to just followers of Shammai. But Bible readers should not assume that the Messiah was criticizing *all Pharisees*, without having some appropriate background information about the variance of Pharisaical opinion.

Because Pharisaical theology profoundly impacted the theology of the First Century *ekklēsia*, it is important to understand that there were different types of Pharisees in the world of Second Temple Judaism. Many contemporary evangelical Believers have failed to consider this in their examinations of the Gospels, and in the corrections that Yeshua issued to the Pharisees. When one examines various issues related to Torah observance, and what has historically been interpreted by Christian theologians as a rebuke and abrogation of the Torah of Moses by Yeshua—as opposed to some form of errant Torah interpretation and application—it will be very important for one to remember the different types of Pharisees which existed in the First Century.²⁶

What Yeshua Said to Certain Pharisees

Beyond the reality that many Christian people have failed to examine Yeshua's words to the Pharisees with some of the correct background

²⁵ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

²⁶ For a fuller overview tracing the development of Ancient Pharisaism for today's Biblical Studies, consult S. Mason, "Pharisees," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp 782-787.

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information—by understanding that the Pharisees were dominated by the Schools of Hillel and Shammai in Second Temple Judaism, and the Messiah was often criticizing the Torah application of their followers (as opposed to the basic tenets of Pharisaical theology)—many people in the Messianic community have been seen to likewise have a negative view of the Pharisees. Much of this is rooted in failing to examine the Gospels objectively, and perhaps even in a desire *not* to follow Pharisaical interpretations of the Torah, which are viewed as the primogenitors of a modern-day Orthodox Judaism which rejects Yeshua. Connected to this is often some substantial misunderstanding regarding Matthew 23. Various editions of the NASB, for example, have as a heading for Matthew 23:1-12: “Pharisaism Exposed.”²⁷ This chapter is often interpreted as the Messiah’s definitive rebuke of the Pharisees, their doctrines, and their practices. In actuality, Yeshua’s words in Matthew 23 were a warning to His followers not to follow the hypocritical ways and attitudes of the Pharisaical leadership of His day, not the basic tenets of their theology.

Before rebuking the Pharisaical leadership, Yeshua recognized the position of authority that they had been given: “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*” (Matthew 23:2-3, NASU). This is confusing for many people, because it would indeed seem that Yeshua validated the Pharisees’ position. Yeshua directed His followers, “practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do” (RSV). A few you may encounter in Messianic Judaism, believe that Yeshua has directed today’s Messianic Jews to follow all of the teachings of the Pharisees—which would extend to holding the Oral Torah on the level of Scripture, and perhaps even that Messianic Jews must be subject, to some degree, to Orthodox Jewish authorities. But this is not what Yeshua implied in Matthew 23:2-3, as He no more expected blind obedience to all Pharisaical rulings than Paul expected the Romans to follow the imperial government when it was in grievous error (cf. Romans 13). The Biblical text in Matthew 23 employs particularization, meaning that these introductory statements by Yeshua are then followed and explained with *how His followers were not to emulate certain Pharisaical attitudes*.

Yeshua admonished His followers that they were to take their theological lead from the Pharisees, and this is certainly seen by the how beliefs of the First Century followers of Yeshua compared to the theology

²⁷ Zodhiates, *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, 1299.

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of the Pharisees. Moseley thinks that “Jesus probably held to the beliefs of the fundamentalist Pharisees, although not to all the ‘fences’ that were added. It was Jesus who exhorted the disciples to do what the Pharisees taught.”²⁸

But what are some specific examples of where Yeshua warned His followers not to be like the Pharisees, or at least like their religious leadership? After identifying the Pharisees as sitting in the seat of Moses in Matthew 23:2-3, Yeshua then listed instances where these Pharisees in charge had come up short:

“They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with *so much as* a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels *of their garments*. They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men” (Matthew 23:4-7, NASU).

Notice what Yeshua first said about the Pharisees, indicating for His listeners the reasons why He was rebuking them: “Everything they do is done for men to see” (NIV). While these Pharisees in leadership wanted their piety or religiosity to be seen by others, they were unwilling to physically do the hard labor or make the commitment which is required in the Torah to properly serve others. Yeshua specifically condemned them for the large size of their *tefillin*/phylacteries and their *tzitzits*/fringes, precisely because they wanted to demonstrate their “godliness” before everyone. Yeshua also said that “they love also the chief couches in the supper” (YLT), and that they love “salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men” (RSV).

A typical Sunday school teacher, with little or no knowledge of Second Temple Judaism, would immediately assume that while Yeshua was criticizing all of the Pharisees for their actions, He was also condemning the Torah practices that they were following. But was Yeshua actually condemning God’s Torah, or the attitude in which the Pharisaical leadership was practicing it here? Many have assumed, from Matthew 23:5 for example, that Yeshua condemned the practice of wrapping *tefillin* and wearing *tziziyot*. But He was not. He was condemning how the Pharisees here were enlarging the size of them so as to be noticed by others. The

²⁸ Moseley, pp 91-92.

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Ryrie Study Bible actually confirms this, noting, “Christ criticizes not the custom itself but the spirit that corrupted it.”²⁹

Yeshua’s comments criticizing the attitudes of various Pharisees continue:

“But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call *anyone* on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, *that is*, Messiah. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:8-12, NASU).

Yeshua told His Disciples how the leadership of the Pharisees had been corrupted. With a surface reading of the text, He seems to have said that His followers were never to call themselves rabbi, or father, or even leader. Many have interpreted this as meaning that titles such as “Rabbi,” or positions even as “leader,” should not exist in faith communities. But what is the context of Yeshua having said these words? Yeshua was saying this in the context of speaking about the hypocrisy of these Pharisees in leadership, and He connected not being called rabbi, or father, or leader with this hypocrisy. This is because the Pharisees here, no doubt, viewed themselves as being the only people “worthy,” if you will, of having these sorts of positions in the eyes of everyone else—who, as Yeshua noted (Matthew 23:4), they were unwilling to move to serve. I personally do not believe Yeshua was speaking against titles such as “rabbi” or “leader” or even “pastor,” but rather was speaking against calling oneself by these titles if a person is unwilling or unable to properly fulfill the requirements which these offices demand.³⁰

The rest of Matthew 23 goes on and details specific examples that Yeshua warned His followers about, and how the Pharisaical leadership He addressed, would be judged by God. Yeshua demonstrated by His words how they failed, as teachers of the Torah, to properly follow it. These rabbis and leaders instead preferred to focus on everyone watching their outward observances, when their heart attitudes and motivations were not right. Not surprisingly, we have many people who we will encounter today, in various Messianic circles, who are seeking to keep the Torah—not because they want to necessarily obey God out of love for Him

²⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, ed., *The Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 1487.

³⁰ Consult the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, “Rabbi, Title.”

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as a part of the sanctification process, but because they want to be seen and admired by others. They want everyone to know how “distinct” they are.

Even though Yeshua criticized the leadership of the Pharisees in Matthew 23—those who had seated themselves in the seat of Moses and who made authoritative declarations concerning its instruction—of all the theological groups which existed in the realm of Second Temple Judaism, which one did Yeshua most closely align with? Have centuries of a great deal of Christian Bible teaching, while correctly recognizing that the Messiah’s followers are not to be hypocritical like the Pharisees rebuked in Matthew 23, failed to recognize that in spite of these rebukes, **Yeshua’s theology was more Pharisical than any other of the groups which existed?**³¹ Have Bible readers honestly asked themselves the question why Yeshua often targeted these Pharisees for such a strict rebuke? Why does it appear in the Gospels as if the Pharisees are the primary antagonists of the Lord? Is it perhaps because the reason why Yeshua was often so direct with the Pharisees, was because He was indeed *one of them*? This is a provocative question for many to consider. Yet, would you not be the hardest on members of your own faith community—who you know should know better, and be doing better, regarding their attitudes and behavior—rebuking them for doing things that they should realize are unacceptable in the eyes of God?

Consider the words of Jacob Neusner in his book *The Way of Torah: An Introduction to Judaism*, relating some of the parallels between Yeshua’s teachings and the contemporary Rabbis of His time:

“[T]he single most important figure in the chain of tradition from Sinai onward to the sages who created the Mishnah is Hillel, a sage who flourished about the same time as Jesus and to whom is attributed a statement strikingly like the Golden Rule: ‘What is hateful to yourself, do not do to anyone else. That is the whole of the Torah. All the rest is commentary. Now go learn.’ Both the teaching of Hillel and that of Jesus on the Golden Rule—‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’—state in other language the commandment of the Torah at Leviticus 19:18: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Many great sages of Judaism have maintained that that statement summarizes the whole of Judaism.”³²

³¹ A further treatment of Matthew 23:2-3 is available in the author’s article, “Who Sits in the Seat of Moses?” (appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*).

³² Jacob Neusner, *The Way of Torah: An Introduction to Judaism* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 50.

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Much of Neusner's book is written with the understanding that it will be read by many Christians, who need to see a connection between the teachings of the Rabbis and Yeshua of Nazareth. Here, Neusner basically connects Yeshua's teachings with those of Rabbi Hillel. Hillel emphasized concepts that we generally attribute to being part of the "golden rule," which is to love one's neighbor. Yeshua said, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:1, NASU). Treating others morally with respect was a key emphasis of Rabbi Hillel, and is most certainly a key emphasis in the teachings of the Messiah. Moseley concurs, "The teachings of Jesus had more in common with the teachings of the Pharisees, especially the school of Hillel, than any other group of His time."³³

Sadly, too many have viewed the Pharisees in a negative light, and have failed to see Yeshua's rebuke of the Pharisees as being a natural reaction of Him rebuking those with whom He shared many of the same beliefs. Many of Yeshua's early followers were Pharisees, and there are examples from the Apostolic Writings where many of the Pharisees were good people who earnestly strived to serve the God of Israel. As Moseley summarizes,

"Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimethea...believed in Jesus and endeavored to follow Him (John 7:50, 19:39 and Mark 15:43). In Acts 5 we find Gamaliel, the teacher of Paul, arguing for tolerance toward the Christians. On at least one occasion, some Pharisees warned Jesus of an attempt on His life, and others are seen showing hospitality to the Lord (Luke 13:31, 7:36, 11:37 and 14:1)."³⁴

Bible readers need to keep all of these factors in mind as they encounter the Gospels and examine them for who Yeshua is as a First Century Jewish Rabbi, and not just Lord and Savior.

True Pauline Theology

Many Christian people, and even a few Messianic people today, are uninformed about the fact that many Jewish scholars are very much aware of how Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, and that He even taught as a First Century Jewish Rabbi. Such Jewish teachers recognize the fact that Yeshua

³³ Moseley, 107.

One notable exception would have been divorce, where Yeshua's teachings (Matthew 5:32) align more closely with the School of Shammai (m.*Gittin* 9:10).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 106-107.

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did not speak against the Torah, but rather debated with the Pharisees just as they debated among themselves. Their frequent issue, if you will, over the Messiahship of Yeshua, is not with Yeshua—but their frequent issue is often with the Apostle Paul and what he seemingly taught (or what the Church at large has attributed to him teaching). It is not uncommon to hear that many Jewish scholars believe that Paul was the founder of Christianity, because they believe that Paul in his letters spoke against the Torah and its commandments. But did Paul speak against the Torah? Was Paul the founder of “Christianity,” as some try to insinuate?

The challenge that many have when seeing Yeshua as a First Century Jewish Rabbi, but then seeing the letters of Paul, is that they fail to interpret Paul’s words in light of the Messiah’s words. Instead, some would prefer to interpret the Messiah’s words in light of Paul’s words. This, most notably, extends to how his Greek letters are translated into English, as they are most often translated with an anti-Torah bias. Even though Yeshua said explicitly in Matthew 5:17-19 that He came to “fulfill the Torah,” Paul in contrast apparently said in Romans 10:4 that “Christ is the end of the law,” meaning that He terminated it. If you examine Scripture from the hermeneutic that Paul’s words are primary to Yeshua’s words, then the understanding of “Christ is the end,” or termination, of the Law of Moses, will be read into the text of Matthew 5, so that by “fulfilling” the Torah Yeshua abolished it.

This is a flawed way of examining the Scriptures; it is a way that even the Apostle Paul would not agree with. Paul himself said, “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited *and* understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Timothy 6:3-5, NASU). Paul wrote Timothy that if anyone “does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing” (NIV). **Paul’s own hermeneutic was that Yeshua’s words stand first.**

Yeshua said that He came to fulfill the Torah, meaning live it out to its perfect extent for His followers to emulate, and that “not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18, RSV), and all has certainly not been accomplished. The Apostle Paul’s words must be interpreted, *and indeed translated*, from this point of view. When examining

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Romans 10:4 and the Greek word *telos*, most commonly rendered as “end,” we see that it also can mean “*outcome, result, goal, aim, fulfillment*” (CGEDNT),³⁵ and it can be validly translated as “Christ is the goal of the Law” (Common English Bible), meaning that the Torah is to point to Him. This is only one of several significant examples (also Ephesians 2:14-15) of where Paul’s words have been mistranslated from the Greek into English, so as to be perceived as having an anti-Torah perspective, when often he is only clarifying the position of the Torah in the life of a born again Believer maturing in faith, placing one’s primary attention upon the God who sent His Son as salvation.

If Paul’s words are to be interpreted in light of Yeshua’s words, and if Yeshua upholds the Torah, then what might this indicate about Paul’s theology and the perspective from which he writes? Paul testified in Philippians 3:5 that he was “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee” (NASU). He clearly identified himself as being a Jew, descended from the Southern Kingdom exiles who returned from Babylon, in fact a Benjamite, who was a Hebrew of Hebrews and who kept the Torah as a Pharisee. Yet, many Christian theologians, because of his next words, say that Paul considered these things to be of no importance to him at all:

“[A]s to zeal, a persecutor of the [assembly]; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Messiah” (Philippians 3:6-7, NASU).

Paul’s words, “[I] count them *but* dung, that I may win Christ” (Philippians 3:8, KJV), are commonly thought that after coming to salvation in Yeshua he did not have any more regard for his Pharisaical background or theology. However, in these verses in Philippians, Paul was reflecting on his life as a Pharisee *and* how he persecuted the early Believers in Yeshua, and such a life he considered to be all but “refuse” (RSV) in light of knowing Yeshua as His Lord and Savior and being conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). This is the *same* reflection any born again Believer should make concerning his or her previous life prior to salvation. So, given the remarks of Philippians 3:6-8, should Bible readers conclude that the Apostle Paul did not identify with the Pharisees in any

³⁵ Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, Revised Edition (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies/Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010), 182.

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capacity following His salvation experience in the Messiah, and has turned his back on their theology?

One of the most important scenes in the Bible, as it relates to the beliefs and the theology of the Apostle Paul, is witnessed when he stood before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23. In Acts 23:1-7, Paul was accused of crimes before the Sanhedrin, and was forced to defend himself pertaining to why he believed in Yeshua and His resurrection:

“Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, ‘Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.’ The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, ‘God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?’ But the bystanders said, ‘Do you revile God’s high priest?’ And Paul said, ‘I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, “YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE [Exodus 22:28].”’ But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul *began* crying out in the Council, ‘Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!’ As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided” (Acts 23:1-7, NASU).

Notice that Paul accused the high priest Ananias, “You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!” (NIV). Those sitting in the court asked Paul why he was rebuking the high priest, and having indicated that he did not know that Ananias was the high priest, he apologized by quoting Exodus 22:28, “You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people” (NASU), indicating his obedience to the Torah. Paul conceded that he was in error not to give the high priest respect, but then is forced to proclaim before the Sanhedrin the Hebrew words *ani P’rush, ben Perushim*, “I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees!” (Salkinson-Ginsburg). The Greek text of Acts 23:6 records him as saying *egō Pharisaios eimi*, “I myself a Pharisee am.” The verb *eimi* appears in the present active indicative tense, meaning that Paul considered himself a Pharisee *right then* – not just at some previous point in time. Why would Paul have made these statements before the Sanhedrin if he had abandoned *all things* which made him a Pharisee?

David H. Stern remarks in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* that “Though a Messianic Jew for some twenty years, Sha’ul still considers

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himself a Pharisee.”³⁶ The Apostle Paul considered himself a Pharisee long after his Damascus Road encounter with the Lord Yeshua, very clearly because he identified himself with the theology of the Pharisees, here in the context of believing in the resurrection of the dead. He asked those assembled why he was even on trial—precisely because the Pharisees gathered believed in the resurrection of the dead just as he did! And the Pharisees present, had to obviously take note of his words.

Paul would not have been able to say “I am a Pharisee” without meaning that he followed basic Pharisaical doctrines and beliefs. He certainly would not have been able to say such a statement if he believed that the Torah were abrogated through the sacrificial work of Yeshua. He could have easily said, “I was a Pharisee, but still believe in the resurrection of the dead.” Instead, he said “I am a Pharisee, and believe in the resurrection of the dead.” How much Christian (mis)understanding of Paul has failed to consider Paul as a Pharisee? How much Messianic (mis)understanding today has, perhaps, failed to consider Paul as a Pharisee, who respected the Rabbis who taught him?

Before being taken before the Sanhedrin, Paul addressed a crowd in Jerusalem in Hebrew with the statements, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today” (Acts 22:3, NASU). He said that “Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today” (NIV). How many people when reading this even know who Gamaliel was?

Gamaliel was the “grandson of Hillel and first of only seven rabbis to be given the title of Rabban” (*NIDB*).³⁷ He is perhaps most widely known for his statement concerning the early Believers in Acts 5:38: “So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown” (NASU). Gamaliel’s influence over the Sanhedrin seems to indicate that he favored a more lenient view to the followers of Yeshua, in some ways favoring them over the Sadducees. Gamaliel was so highly valued in Second Century Judaism that the Talmud says of him, “*The rabbis taught*: From the days of Moses until Rabban Gamaliel, they did not study Torah [in any posture] other than standing. After Rabban Gamaliel died, an infirmity descended

³⁶ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 309.

³⁷ “Gamaliel,” in *NIDB*, 371.

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into the world, and they used to study Torah sitting. *And that is as is taught: After Rabban Gamaliel died, the honor of Torah was lost*" (b.Megillah 21a).³⁸

By mentioning Gamaliel, the question can be made whether Paul was fully identifying with his teachings and perspective of the Torah—because after all he was born in Tarsus of Cilicia, and was not a native to the city of Jerusalem—even though he was trained by Gamaliel. Many, especially in Christianity, do not want to view Paul as being a Pharisee at all, while there are others you may encounter in the Messianic movement who attempt to synthesize his theology with all forms of Orthodox Judaism today. Bruce Chilton is one Christian scholar who looks unfavorably on Paul's Pharisaism, concluding that "Comparison with rabbinic sources suggests that Paul should not be seen preeminently as a rabbi in the mode of the Pharisees in Jerusalem...He was rather a provincial hanger-on of the movement, who turned a zeal for the Temple and purity into a zeal for the oral law" (ABD).³⁹

A balanced view of Paul will likely reveal that while being trained in Jerusalem by Gamaliel, he still maintained himself as a Jew being born in the Diaspora, as the Lord did commission him to be the Apostle to the nations (Romans 11:13). Those of the School of Hillel were notably trained in not only Torah study, but also the Greek language and philosophy, as they would often be the ones to interact with the Roman government (b.Sotah 49b). Having been trained as a Pharisee and being a teacher, Paul never separated himself from the Pharisaical theologies of his day, which would certainly have included having a high view of the Torah of Moses.⁴⁰ On the contrary, Paul appears to have been given **the best education** to be the Apostle to the nations!

Perhaps we may wonder why the Apostle Paul was chosen by Yeshua as being the Apostle to the nations. Yeshua criticized the leaders of the Pharisees for their techniques of going out and making proselytes, having rebuked them with the words, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,

³⁸ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

³⁹ Bruce Chilton, "Gamaliel," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:906.

⁴⁰ N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp 26-29 concludes that prior to his salvation encounter, due to Paul's great zealousness as a Pharisee (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:14, 23), that he had actually been a Shammaite extremist (comparable to Yitzhak Rabin's assassin Yigal Amir). After his encounter with the risen Yeshua, though, Paul's views shifted back to the more moderate Hillelite Pharisaism in which he had been originally trained.

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hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15, NASU). By the time Yeshua spoke these words, the intent of going out and making proselytes was not necessarily with the purpose of bringing all nations to the knowledge of the One True God, but with the purpose of being able to make proselytes so that the religious leadership could boast (cf. Galatians 6:13). However, the Pharisees who first went out to make proselytes in the Greek and Roman world, did so with the expressed intent to take the knowledge of the One True God, so that all nations might be saved. M.H. Pope details,

“From the first the Jews in Rome exhibited such an aggressive spirit of proselytism that they were charged with seeking to infect the Romans with their cult, and the government expelled the chief propagandists from the city in 139 B.C. In the early decades of the first century B.C., considerable numbers of Jews were in Rome and other cities of Italy, as well as in the farthest reaches of the Empire” (*IDB*).⁴¹

Paul was in a unique position, having received Rabbinical training from Gamaliel, and being a Roman citizen (cf. Acts 22:28). Part of Paul’s training would have included the strong belief that it was the job of the Jewish people to go out into the world and make proselytes of all the nations, in anticipation of the Messianic Age. Yeshua called out Paul not just because he was a Roman citizen with the ability to traverse the Empire, but because he was a Pharisee who was trained with this key concept. Paul’s theology in his epistles did not deviate from the Pharisaical norms, including Torah observance, but he was seen to always keep in mind his audience and who they were when he wrote to them and visited them in person. The Messianic community would do well in its Pauline studies to seriously examine Paul for who he was as a Pharisee, and in its application of the Torah to look at things through a (moderate) Pauline-Pharisaical lens.

Modern-Day Pharisees Versus Modern-Day Hypocrites

There exist some major problems in much of today’s Body of Messiah, as it relates to the Pharisees. One of these problems exists in the fact that being a Pharisee, as defined by many modern English dictionaries, is that it

⁴¹ M.H. Pope, “Proselyte,” *IDB*, 3:925.

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means “a self-righteous, hypocritical person” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus*),⁴² as exhibited by the example of some of the Pharisees who Yeshua was seen to condemn. Yet at the same time the original meaning of the Hebrew word *P’rush* was one who was to be separated, and being separated from the world and its ways is a key concept seen all throughout Holy Scripture, which God’s people are to follow. Secondly, a problem exists regarding what is often perceived as Yeshua’s frequently condemnation of *all* Pharisees, as opposed to just *some* Pharisees. There are Messianic people, you will encounter—and in following a great deal of customary Christian approaches to the Pharisees—who want nothing to do with any Pharisaical doctrines or theologies or lifestyle practices, when in fact they are clearly evident in the teachings of Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostle Paul.

How do we avoid being perceived as hypocrites? How do we practice our faith in the way Yeshua and Paul would have, consistent with the teachings of the Pharisees, yet where the Pharisees might (seriously) contradict Scripture, adhering to Scripture?

One of the claims that is often made against the Pharisees is their adherence, or sometimes strict adherence, to the Oral Torah or the Oral Law. There are many who do not want anything to do with the writings of the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, or Midrash, viewing them as containing errant theologies and teachings contrary to those of the Written Torah. They believe that it is in direct contradiction to Deuteronomy 4:2, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (NASU).⁴³

The Sadducees fully rejected what is referred to as the Oral Torah, and they only accepted the Written Torah or the Pentateuch, Genesis-Deuteronomy, as being authoritative Scripture. They rejected the Prophets and the Writings as canon. Their beliefs do not mimic those of the early Believers in Yeshua whose theology was rooted in Pharisaism. **They did not believe in the resurrection of dead.**

While the Sadducees died out when Jerusalem and the Second Temple were destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., and the Pharisees of the School of Hillel predominately helped formulate what we now call Orthodox Judaism today, the call of the Sadducees was raised in the Eighth Century C.E. by some Jews in Babylon with the founding of the Karaite movement.

⁴² *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Cleveland: Wiley Publishing, 2002), 477.

⁴³ Consult the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, “Torah, Command not to ‘Add to.’”

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As the *Jewish Study Bible* describes, they were a “theological movement in Judaism dating from Babylonia in the 8th century C.E. Karaites claimed to be restoring an original form of Judaism from the Second Temple period, and were opposed by the rabbis of their time.”⁴⁴ The reason that they were opposed is because their “practices differed in various ways from rabbinic norms”⁴⁵ which were rooted in Pharisaism. Because of the rejection by the Karaites of the Oral Torah, you will encounter many people today (especially in the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement) who adhere to many Karaite applications of Torah commandments (notably, a different calendar than the one followed in mainstream Judaism). They do this because they feel that Pharisaical Judaism has violated the Torah by adding the “Oral Law.”

It is a fact that in Orthodox Judaism today, the Oral Torah is considered as authoritative as the Written Torah. It is believed in Orthodox Judaism today that the Oral Torah was given alongside of the Written Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai. Following the destruction of the Second Temple, and with the formation of Judaism as a religion without it, the Oral Torah was transcribed in approximately 220 C.E. in the form of the Mishnah. By 470 C.E. Rabbinical discussions on the Mishnah had been written down into what we know as the Talmud. The Mishnah and the Talmud form the basis of what we now commonly call the “Oral Torah.”⁴⁶

If any of you examines the Oral Torah, you are going to see a mishmash of discussions, legal rulings, and debates. You are going to see contradictions between it and the pages of the Bible. But does this mean that none of it is valuable? Do we just throw it all out and disclude it from theological conversation, as valuable history, commentary, and philosophy? *Karaites and others would apparently believe so.* But what was the purpose of any oral instruction? It does not make sense for God to have given Moses the commandments on Mount Sinai, and not to have told him how they these commandments, or at least a selection of them, were to be fulfilled.

Within the Torah there is an important stipulation which needs to be considered, especially when divisive issues face God’s people. Deuteronomy 17:10-11 gave a significant degree of authority to the

⁴⁴ *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2132.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ For a summary on the formation of post-Second Temple Jewish religious literature, consult Hermann L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959).

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religious leaders, in fact specifying, “According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left” (NASU). The Hebrew clause *al-pi ha’Torah* means “according to (the) mouth (of) the torah,” indicating an oral, standing ruling, to be followed. This directive within the Written Torah itself indicates that Bible readers should not just cast aside—especially not haphazardly or summarily—the rulings of the Jewish religious authorities. *They should at least have to be consulted*, and put to the edification test of Philippians 4:8.

The Apostle Paul, a Pharisee, wrote several times in his epistles that he delivered several traditions to his listeners. He told the Thessalonians, “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the **traditions** which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (2 Thessalonians 2:15, NASU). In 1 Corinthians 11:2, he said, “Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the **traditions**, just as I delivered them to you” (NASU). The Greek word *paradosis* specifically pertains to “tradition, of teachings, commandments, narratives et al.,” and can refer to “the tradition of the rabbis” (*BDAG*).⁴⁷ Whether some people like it or not, Paul’s words indicate that he probably taught some Rabbinical traditions or disciplines to his listeners.

Whether we are able to admit it to ourselves or not, the religious tradition in which we have been raised—be it Jewish or Christian—does impact how we look at the Bible and practice our faith. This tradition need not at all be something which is always negative.

I personally believe that Moses was given some oral instructions by God at Mount Sinai regarding how many of the commandments of the Torah were to be kept. These oral instructions would have been passed down generation to generation by word of mouth. However, because they were not written down, it would have been very easy to add things to the tradition. Over time, explanations which were originally given to Moses orally could be exaggerated by many of the Rabbis. Some of this may have not been done intentionally, but some of it could have been done intentionally, and/or various parts of these oral understandings could have been embellished. Much like our modern-day game of telephone, where someone is told a message and then each player repeats it to the next

⁴⁷ Frederick William Danker, ed., et., al. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 763.

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player—and often the final message is much different than the original message—so could the Oral Torah have been transmitted. This does not make the concept of God’s giving Moses oral explanations invalid, but it does mean that the Oral Torah contained in the Mishnah and Talmud cannot be considered authoritative as Scripture. It means that it can be considered commentary which contains explanations of *how* the Torah’s commandments can be kept, but not how they necessarily *must* be kept.

Should today’s Messianic Believers be Pharisaical, meaning that our theology and practice should be closest to those of the Pharisees than any of the other sects of Second Temple Judaism? **I believe so.** I am convinced based on a reading of the Gospels and the writings of the Apostle Paul that what we may call today “Messianic faith” is rooted within the basic theological tenets of the Pharisees. The Pharisees respected Moses, respected tradition, they wanted to be separated from the world—but many of them also wanted all the world to know of the good news of the God of Israel. The Pharisees in the Gospels are often accused, however, of having the problem of being hypocritical.

Yeshua’s ultimate problem with the Pharisaical leaders was that they did not pay attention to the major thrusts of the Torah, which dealt with how people conducted themselves in society. He said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23, NASU). How many of us fall into the same trap today of believing that since Messianics people may be practicing things like keeping *Shabbat*, the appointed times, the dietary laws, etc.—that it is unimportant to be concerned about the downtrodden in society and how we treat our fellow human beings? How many of us are not concerned with how we interact other people, be they other Messianics (especially new ones) or our Jewish or even our evangelical Protestant brothers and sisters? How many of us understand Yeshua’s rebuke here for what it truly was, and how it extends to us today?

Craig S. Keener remarks in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (1997) what Yeshua was no doubt really saying to the Pharisees in Matthew 23:

“In today’s terms, Jesus was thundering against many popular preachers and people who seemed to be living holy lives—because they were practicing human religion rather than serving God with purified hearts....I suspect that much of what passes for Christianity today is

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little more than human religion with the name of Jesus tacked onto it, because like most of the religion of Jesus' contemporaries, it has failed to transform its followers into Christ's servants passionately devoted to his mission in the world. When rightly understood, Jesus' woes may strike too close to home for comfort."⁴⁸

Certainly, not all of the Pharisees in the First Century were just practicing outward religion—just like not all in Jewish synagogues or Christian churches today (or even Messianic congregations) are practicing outward religion. Many are very sincere about their faith and are earnestly seeking God with all their hearts and minds. As Messianic Believers today, as our faith community grows and matures, we have to understand where we are theologically and spiritually. **Theologically and doctrinally speaking, we want to be Pharisees.** We do not want to be Sadducees or Karaites. Spiritually speaking, we want to be like Yeshua, serving the Body of Believers without complaint, and seeking to transform other people through our example of faith. We want to follow the Golden Rule, which was in fact taught by the Pharisaical School of Hillel, treating other people the same way we would prefer to be treated.

⁴⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 335.

Introduction to Things Messianic

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 5

1. As a Messianic Believer, have you ever been accused of being a “Pharisee”? Describe your experience.
2. What does the term “Pharisee” mean? Explain the general theology of the Pharisees. Is there anything that you (significantly) disagree with?
3. Why do you think the Pharisees gave credence to the Oral Torah or Oral Law?
4. What were the theological views of the Sadducees? How did they differ from those of the Pharisees?
5. Describe why the Pharisees were involved in a type of “missionary evangelism.”
6. Why do you think many Christians are unable to recognize the theological values they have in common with the Pharisees?
7. Briefly summarize the Pharisaical schools of Hillel and Shammai.
8. How did Yeshua criticize the Pharisees? Did He contradict their basic theology, or their attitudes?
9. What and who did Yeshua specifically criticize in Matthew 23? Do you take issue with the traditional interpretation of these verses? Why or why not?
10. Do you believe that the Apostle Paul considered himself a Pharisee after his salvation experience? Why or why not?
11. Why do you think Paul was chosen as the Apostle to the nations? Do you think this had to do with anything related to Pharisaism?

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12. Do you believe the Messianic movement today should follow a Pharisaical-based theology? Why or why not?