

You Want to be a Pharisee

by J.K. McKee posted 22 March, 2005 www.tnnonline.net

How many of you, in your quest to become Torah observant, have been accused by Christian friends or family of being a “Pharisee”?¹

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 you are falling into the same mistakes that others in the First Century Body of Messiah fell into, that the Apostle Paul countered in his epistles?

Having the accusation of being a “Pharisee” is one that is not only commonly used by some Christians against us as Messianic Believers, but has become integrated into the vernacular language of many Christians relating to any individual or group that is perceived as being legalistic and/or archaic in its approach to society and the Bible. It is perceived among many people 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 that 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.”² *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* well-summarizes the thoughts of many 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 destroy his influence among the people.”³ Many Christians reading their Bibles, very seldom having any background information in First Century 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.”⁴ Unfortunately, far too many Christians are in the dark about this, and it has caused some problems to erupt between them and Messianic Believers.

The key in being able to combat the claim that is often made against us as Messianic Believers—that we are Pharisees and are thus hypocritical, legalistic, and perhaps even opposed to the liberating gospel message of Messiah Yeshua—is to understand that the Pharisees of First Century Judaism were a very complex group of people. Just like the Baptists, Methodists, or Presbyterians of today, so were there different types and subsets of Pharisees, just as there were similarities among them. We have to put ourselves back into the First Century context of the Gospel writers, who would have assumed that their readership would know certain things about the Pharisees, that today many Christian pastors and Sunday school teachers are not informed about. (Or, at least choose to remain uninformed about by failing to consult modern Bible encyclopedias, dictionaries, and various commentaries which have an ample amount of information on the Pharisees, some of which we will be consulting in this article.)

It is important for us as Messianic Believers to have the appropriate background information in relation to First Century Judaism,⁵ who the Pharisees were, what the Pharisees believed, how Yeshua interacted with them, and how the Apostle Paul was one of them. Is it true that the Pharisees were hypocritical, “evil people,” as is commonly believed in mainstream

¹ This article has been reproduced from the paperback edition of *Introduction to Things Messianic*, pp 59-83.

² The Greek verb rendered as “destroy” in the NASU is *apollumi* (ἀπόλλυμι), which has a wide variety of connotations, including: “to destroy, demolish, waste” and “to perish utterly, die” (LS, 101).

³ Matthew George Easton, “Pharisees,” *E-Sword 7.6.1: Easton’s Bible Dictionary*. MS Windows 9x. Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2003.

⁴ Lorman L. Petersen, “Pharisees,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed. et al., *New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 779.

⁵ It is notable that sometimes the term “First Century Judaism” is used similar to the term “mainstream Christianity.” There is no one “mainstream Christianity” present today, or for that same matter one “mainstream Protestant Christianity.” It would be more accurate to say that there are various “Christianities,” meaning different major groups claiming to be Christian present today. In a similar vein, there are some in the Messianic community who prefer to use the terminology “First Century Judaisms,” emphasizing the various sectarian differences that were present during the period prior to and immediately after Yeshua’s ministry.

Christianity? Or, have many of us perhaps oversimplified things, and we need to 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 Scriptures? Keep this in mind as we examine what it means to be a Pharisee.

A Separated Group

The Hebrew term for Pharisee is *Parush* (פָּרוּשׁ), meaning separatist. Its Greek transliteration of *Pharisaïos* (Φαρισαῖος) appears in the Apostolic Scriptures. *TDNT* remarks that 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.”⁶ The verb *parash* (פָּרַשׁ) is a term that 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.”⁷

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), 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 rose up to preserve the validity of the Torah for the people, and the rituals that had preserved the remnant of Israel since their 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. “Ceremonies originally part of the Temple cult were carried over to the home, and learned men of non-priestly descent began to play an important role in national religious affairs. While the priesthood exhausted itself in the round of Temple ritual, the Pharisees found their main function in teaching and preaching the law of God” (*EJ*).⁸

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 Hebrew 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 remarks, “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.”⁹ 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.

⁶ R. Meyer, “*Pharisaïos*,” in *TDNT*, 1246.

⁷ Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), 1241.

⁸ Menahem Mansoor, “Pharisees,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica. MS Windows gx*. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Important Theological Views of the Pharisees

The Pharisees had some distinct theological views which made them a unique group. While they advocated beliefs that any conservative, evangelical Christian would hold to today *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 believed in the validity of the Oral Torah or Oral Law. As *EJ* notes, they maintained “the validity of the Oral Law as well as of the Torah as the source of their religion.”¹⁰ The Pharisees advocated that “The law must be understood according to the interpretation of the teachers who are endowed with God-given reason to do so.”¹¹

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,”¹² meaning the changing religious conditions of the Jewish people living in the First Centuries B.C.E. and C.E. The Jewish historian Josephus explains 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).¹³

The antagonists of the Pharisees were the Sadducees. While there is much written concerning the theology of the Pharisees in ancient Jewish literature, and by First Century voices such as Philo and Josephus, not much is written concerning the Sadducees. The Sadducees are well-known in the Gospel accounts for *not* believing in the resurrection of the dead (Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27), and Acts 23:8 tells us more fully, “For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.” The *Jewish Study Bible* comments 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.”¹⁴

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 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*).¹⁵

The Pharisees, in contrast to the Sadducees, were quite conservative in their theology, believing that the whole of the Hebrew Tanach was valid Scripture. Ron Moseley comments 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 remarks 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

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 355.

¹⁴ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2138.

¹⁵ Steven Barabas, “Sadducees,” in *NIDB*, 885.

affections of love and hate, which were often aimed at those who opposed their views, and the total devotion to a simple life-style.”¹⁶

If we understand the Pharisees as a distinct group, advocating a distinct religious ideology, we can see that they are misunderstood by many Christians who have little background knowledge of who they actually were. The Pharisees arose out of an environment that 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, some were active in what we would today call “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).

“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).

These prophecies formed the basis of Pharisaical “missionary evangelism,” whereby steps were taken by the Pharisees to go out into the nations and make converts. These words both predict that the nations will acknowledge the God of Israel, and as Moseley remarks, “the Pharisees engaged in aggressive and effective evangelism for three hundred years, especially during the time of Christ.”¹⁷ 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? One major reason that there were Jewish synagogues in these distant locations was often because they were planted there by Pharisees, to convert the masses in anticipation of the eschaton, where all nations would acknowledge the God of Israel.

When understanding these important theological views of the Pharisees, why do many Christians seem to have an unbalanced view of who the Pharisees were? Is this unbalanced view rooted in a certain tradition, a particular contemporary Christian culture, or simply being ignorant and uninformed of who the Pharisees were within First Century Judaism? Do you think that conservative evangelical Christians today would have their beliefs align more with the Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection of the dead, angels, demons, an afterlife, and other foundational elements of the faith—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.”¹⁸

Perhaps Christians have more in common with the Pharisees than they are willing to see. If indeed so, how should this change our perspective of the Pharisees in the Apostolic Scriptures, their relation to Yeshua and the Apostle Paul, and how we are to practice our faith as Messianic Believers today?

The Different Sects of the Pharisees

One thing that has caused a substantial amount of confusion among many in Christianity 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

¹⁶ Ron Moseley, *Yeshua: A Guide to the Real Jesus and the Original Church* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 1996), 137.

¹⁷ Ibid., 125.

¹⁸ Mansoor, “Pharisees,” in *EJ*.

political party. The Pharisees were a distinct religious group within First Century 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. 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 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* (הלכה), 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 Schools of Hillel and 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 liberal than the other. These schools existed “until the second generation after the destruction of the Second Temple., i.e., until the beginning of the second century C.E.” (EJ).¹⁹ Knowing this is absolutely imperative when we see the Pharisees mentioned in the Apostolic Scriptures, because we have to ask ourselves the question of *what Pharisees* are being referred to: Hillites or Shammaites? This requires us to have the proper background knowledge relating to these groups so we do 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 notes, “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.”²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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 Beit Hillel or Beit Shammai? *This needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis in the Gospels.*

Very little is known about Shammai the man, aside from the teachings espoused by those who followed his School. Moshe David Herr remarks, “In general Bet Shammai took up a stringent attitude....Many of Shammai’s *halakhot* appear to be based on the literal interpretation of the biblical text...most of which deal with the laws of levitical cleanness and uncleanness.”²² Some of these sorts of rigid views may extend to the Sabbath, the dietary laws, and emphasizing ritual over spiritual substance. Concerning all the Torah issues that Shammai himself made rulings on, Herr does note 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.”²³ 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).²⁴ This seems to reveal that Beit Shammai was more concerned about its deed than its word. Consequently, some members of Beit Shammai may have been more concerned about *being seen*, as opposed to doing.

¹⁹ Shmuel Safrai, “Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai,” in *EJ*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Moshe David Herr, “Shammai,” in *EJ*.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 674.

Beit Hillel was the more popular of the 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,” being “described as a man of great humility...[who] set before himself the principle of bringing men closer to the Torah.”(*EJ*).²⁵ He was a reformer who sought to improve the lives of Jewish people, and many of Hillel’s sayings which emphasize morality, treating others with kindness and respect—and are indeed spiritually edifying—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 persuing peace, loving people and drawing them near to the Torah” (*m.Avot* 1:12).²⁶ This saying emphasizes love and peace, key concepts that none of us should be opposed to.

Regarding the School of Hillel’s interpretation of the Torah, Beit Hillel was “inclined most often to a liberal rather than a conservative interpretation of the demands of the law” (*IDB*),²⁷ in that the spirit of the Torah or its essence, should be emphasized above the Torah’s legal demands. J. Goldin notes that “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!’”²⁸ In the end, the School of Hillel became the more popular group among the Pharisees. The above account 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*” (*b.Shabbat* 31a).²⁹ This attests to the fact that in the end, theologically, the School of Hillel often wins out.

It is probable that Hillel was probably deceased by the time that Yeshua the Messiah began His ministry, but Hillel’s followers were most certainly still alive. You can probably 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 like a Jewish Rabbi of His time. When He spoke to the Pharisees about applications of Torah commandments, and seemingly had strong disagreements about them, He may very well have entered into internal debates between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai. Certainly, as Yeshua dealt with people with a fallen sin nature, there was legalism present in both Hillelites and Shammaites, so Yeshua could just as well be criticizing followers of Hillel as opposed to just followers of Shammai. But let us not assume that the Messiah is criticizing *all Pharisees* without having the appropriate background information.

Because Pharisaical theology profoundly impacted the theology of the First Century *ekklēsia*, it is important for us to understand that there were different types of Pharisees in the milieu of First Century Judaism. Many Christians have failed to consider this in their examinations of the Gospels, and in the corrections that Yeshua issued to the Pharisees. When we examine various issues related to Torah observance, and what has historically been interpreted by Christian theologians as a rebuke by Yeshua of the Torah—as opposed to Torah application—it will be very important for us to remember the different types of Pharisees that existed in His day.³⁰

²⁵ Encyclopedia Hebraica, “Hillel, the Elder,” in *EJ*.

²⁶ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 274.

²⁷ J. Goldin, “Hillel (the Elder)” in George Buttrick, ed., et. al., *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:605.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

³⁰ For a fuller overview tracing the development of Ancient Pharisaism for today’s Biblical Studies, consult S. Mason, “Pharisees,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, pp 782-787.

What Yeshua Said to Certain Pharisees

In spite of the reality that many Christians have failed to examine Yeshua's words to the Pharisees with the correct background information, by understanding that the Pharisees were dominated by the Schools of Hillel and Shammai in First Century Judaism, and the Messiah is often criticizing the Torah application of their followers (as opposed to the basic tenets of Pharisaical theology)—many people *in the Messianic community* 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 that rejects Yeshua. There is also substantial misunderstanding not only in mainstream Christianity, but also in the Messianic movement, regarding Matthew 23. Various editions of the NASB, for example, have as a heading for vs. 1-12: "Pharisaism Exposed."³¹ This chapter of Scripture is often interpreted as a definitive rebuke of the Pharisees, their doctrines, and their practices. In actuality, though, Yeshua's words in Matthew 23 are 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.

To this end, *BKCNT* explains that "The hypocrisy and unbelief of the nation's religious leaders, evidenced in chapter 23, prompted a strong message from Jesus. He turned to **the crowds and to His disciples**, who were in the temple listening to His debates with the various religious leaders. He warned them about their teachings saying that their *authority* was to be recognized (they **sit in Moses' seat**, i.e., they teach the Law), but their *practices*, being hypocritical, should not be followed."³²

Before rebuking the Pharisaical leadership, Yeshua recognizes the position of authority that they have been given. The Messiah says, "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). This verse is confusing for many people, because it would indeed seem that Yeshua is validating the Pharisees' position. Yeshua tells His followers, "practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do" (RSV). Some in Messianic Judaism, in particular, believe that Yeshua says that we are to follow all of the teachings of the Pharisees, which would extend to holding the Oral Torah on the level of Scripture, and thus we must be subject today to Orthodox Jewish authorities. But this is not what Yeshua says, as He no more expects blind obedience to all Pharisaical rulings than Paul expected the Romans to follow the government when it was in grievous error (cf. Romans 13). The Biblical text in Matthew 23 uses 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 admonishes His followers that they are to take their theological lead from the Pharisees, and this is clearly demonstrated by the beliefs of the early Believers in Yeshua, compared to the theology of the Pharisees. Moseley notes 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."³³

But what are some specific examples of where Yeshua warns His followers not to be like the Pharisees, or at least their religious leadership? After identifying the Pharisees as sitting in the seat of Moses in Matthew 23, in vs. 4-12 He lists instances where these Pharisees in charge have 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

³¹ Zodhiates, *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, 1299.

³² Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in *BKCNT*, 73.

³³ Moseley, pp 91-92.

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).

Notice what Yeshua first says about the Pharisees, indicating for His listeners the reasons why He is rebuking them: “Everything they do is done for men to see” (NIV). While these Pharisees in leadership want their piety or religiosity to be seen by others, they are unwilling to physically do the hard labor or make the commitment that is required in the Torah to serve others. Yeshua specifically condemns them for the large size of their phylacteries and their *tzit-tzits* or fringes—because they want to demonstrate their “godliness” before everyone. In v. 6 Yeshua says that “they love also the chief couches in the supper” (YLT), and in v. 7 says 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 First Century Judaism, would immediately assume that while Yeshua is criticizing all of the Pharisees for their actions, He is also condemning the Torah practices that they are following. But is Yeshua actually condemning God’s Torah, or the attitude in which the Pharisaical leadership here is practicing it? Many have assumed, from v. 5 for example, that Yeshua condemns the practice of wrapping *tefillin* (תפלין) and wearing *tzit-tzityot* (ציציות). But He is not. He is condemning how the Pharisees here are enlarging the size of them so as to be noticed by others.³⁴ The *Ryrie Study Bible* confirms this, noting, “Christ criticizes not the custom itself but the spirit that corrupted it.”³⁵

Yeshua’s comments criticizing the attitudes of the Pharisees continue in vs. 8-12: “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.”

Yeshua tells His Disciples how the leadership of the Pharisees has been corrupted. With a surface reading of the text, He seems to say that His followers are not 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” in the Messianic movement should not exist. But what is the context of Yeshua saying these words? Yeshua is saying these words in the context of speaking about the hypocrisy of these Pharisees in leadership, and He connects not being called rabbi, or father, or leader with this hypocrisy. This is because these Pharisees here no doubt view 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 notes in v. 4, they are unwilling to move to serve. I do not believe Yeshua is speaking against titles such as “rabbi” or “leader” or even “pastor,” but rather is speaking against calling oneself by these titles if a person is unwilling or unable to properly fulfill the requirements that these offices demand.³⁶

The rest of Matthew 23 goes on and details specific examples that Yeshua warns His followers about, and how the Pharisaical leadership will be judged by God. Yeshua demonstrates by His words how they have failed, as teachers of the Torah, to properly follow it. These rabbis and leaders have instead preferred to focus on everyone watching their outward observances, when their attitudes and motivations are not right. Not surprisingly, we have many people today who are seeking to keep the Torah, not because they want to necessarily obey God out of love for Him as a part of the sanctification process, but because they want to be seen by others.

Even though Yeshua criticizes the leadership of the Pharisees here—those who have seated themselves in the chair of Moses and who make authoritative declarations concerning its laws—of all the theological groups that existed in the realm of First Century Judaism, which one

³⁴ The Greek verb *platonō* (πλατύνω), rendered either as “broaden” (NASU) or “make...wide” (NIV), means “enlarge, widen; open wide” (CGEDNT, 143).

³⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, ed., *The Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 1487.

Consult the FAQ entries on the TNN website, “*Tefillin*,” “*Tzit-tzits*.”

³⁶ And certainly, no person today going by “rabbi” or “pastor” should employ these titles of authority unless he or she not only possesses the right temperament for spiritual leadership, but also the proper skills as a Bible teacher and exegete of God’s Word, including the appropriate undergraduate and/or post-graduate credentials.

did Yeshua most closely align with? Have centuries of Christian Bible teaching, while correctly recognizing that we are not to be hypocritical like the Pharisees rebuked in Matthew 23, failed to recognize that in spite of these rebukes, **Yeshua's theology is more Pharisaical than any other of the groups that existed?** Have we as the Body of Messiah honestly asked ourselves the question why Yeshua targeted these Pharisees for such a strict rebuke? Why does it appear in the Gospels as if the Pharisees are the primary antagonists of our Lord? Is it perhaps because the reason why Yeshua is so direct with the Pharisees is because *He was indeed one of them?* Would you not be the hardest on members of your own faith community—who you know should know better—rebuking them for doing things that they should realize are unacceptable in the eyes of God?³⁷

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."³⁸

Much of his 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 the Messiah. 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, something firmly rooted in the Torah of Moses. The Messiah says, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Treating others morally with respect was a key emphasis of Rabbi Hillel, and is most certainly a key emphasis in the teachings of our Lord. Moseley validly states, "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."³⁹

Sadly, too many of us have viewed the Pharisees in a negative light, and we 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. 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)."⁴⁰ We need to keep all of these facts in mind as we read the Gospels and examine them for who Yeshua is as a First Century Jewish Rabbi, and not just our Lord and Savior.

³⁷ Indeed, my own approach to Messianic faith is somewhat self-critical, based on Yeshua's words "first take the log out of your own eye" (Matthew 7:5), and the Rabbinic dictum, "Get yourself a teacher, find someone to study with, and judge everyone favorably" (m.*Avot* 1:6; Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and trans., *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* [New York: UAH Press, 1993], 5).

For a further discussion, consult the author's article "How Are We to Live as Modern Messianics?"

³⁸ Jacob Neusner, *The Way of Torah: An Introduction to Judaism* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 50.

³⁹ 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).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 106-107.

True Pauline Theology

Many Christians and even Messianics today are uninformed about the fact that many Jewish Bible teachers are aware that Jesus was a Jew, and He taught as a First Century Jewish Rabbi. Such Jewish teachers recognize the fact that Yeshua did not speak against the Torah, but rather debated with the Pharisees just as they debated among themselves. Their issue, if you will, over the Messiahship of Yeshua is not with Yeshua, but 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 such Jews believe that Paul was the founder of Christianity, because they believe that Paul in his letters speaks against the Torah and its commandments. But does 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.⁴¹ Even though Yeshua says in Matthew 5:17-19 that He came to “fulfill the Torah,” Paul in contrast says in Romans 10:4 that “Christ is the end of the law,” meaning that He terminates 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 is abolishing it.

This is a flawed way of examining the Scriptures, and is a way that even the Apostle Paul would not agree with. Paul himself says, “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). 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 says that He came to fulfill the Torah, meaning live it out to its perfect extent for us, 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.⁴² The Apostle Paul's words must be interpreted, *and indeed translated*, from this point of view. When examining Romans 10:4 and the Greek word *telos* (τέλος), most commonly rendered as “end,” we see that it also can mean “*outcome, result, goal, aim, fulfillment*” (CGEDNT),⁴³ and it can be validly translated as “Christ is the goal of the Law,”⁴⁴ 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 for us 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.

⁴¹ The failure to properly understand Paul is often compounded by a failure on behalf of many Messianic Bible teachers who do not have any ability to read or understand Greek, seeing how some of these biased translations are inserted into most mainstream Christian Bibles.

⁴² “The goal of Jesus' mission is fulfillment. He does not simply affirm the law and the prophets but actualizes the will of God that is declared in them from the standpoint of both promise and demand” (G. Delling, “*plērōō*,” in *TDNT*, p 869). Yeshua, in coming to Earth, could only fulfill the demands of the Torah because He is God in the flesh and lacks a sinful nature. As human beings, we are incapable on our own of doing what He did. He fulfilled the demands of the Torah to be the example for us of how we are to follow it.

⁴³ CGEDNT, 180.

⁴⁴ A note in the margins of the *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* (NASB) for Romans 10:4 actually reads “Or, goal” (p 1498); rendered as “culmination” in the TNIV.

If Paul's words are to be interpreted in light of Yeshua's words, and if Yeshua upholds the Torah, then what does this tell us about Paul's theology and the perspective from which he writes? Paul writes 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." He clearly identifies himself as being a Jew of the Southern Kingdom that returned from exile, 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 he considered these things to be of no effect to him at all. Paul writes,

"[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).

Paul's words of "[I] count them *but dung*, that I may win Christ" (Philippians 3:8, KJV), are commonly thought that he does not have any regard for his Pharisaical ways or theology any more. However, in these verses in Philippians, Paul is reflecting on his life as a Pharisee *and* how he persecuted the early Believers in the Messiah, and such a life he considers 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.⁴⁵ But should we all of a sudden think that he does not identify with the Pharisees in any capacity by these remarks, 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 when he stands before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23. In Acts 23:1-7, Paul is accused of crimes before the Sanhedrin, and he is forced to defend himself pertaining to why he believes 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.'" 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."

Notice that Paul accuses 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 ask Paul why he is rebuking the high priest, and indicating that he did not know that Ananias was the high priest, he apologizes by quoting Exodus 22:28, "You shall not curse God, nor curse a ruler of your people," indicating his obedience to the Torah. Paul concedes 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* (אֲנִי פְרוּשׁ בֶּן-פְּרוּשִׁים), "I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees!"⁴⁶ The Greek text of Acts 23:6 records him as saying *egō Pharisaios eimi* (ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι), "I myself a Pharisee am." The verb *eimi* (εἰμι) 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 make these statements before the Sanhedrin if he had abandoned *all things* that 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 himself a Pharisee."⁴⁷ The Apostle Paul considered himself a Pharisee long after his conversion of faith, very clearly because he identified himself with the theology of the Pharisees, here in the context of believing in the resurrection of

⁴⁵ For a further discussion, consult the author's commentary *Philippians for the Practical Messianic*.

⁴⁶ This is according to the Salkinson-Ginsburg modern Hebrew New Testament translation.

⁴⁷ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 309.

the dead. He asks those assembled why he is even on trial, because the Pharisees gathered believed in the resurrection of the dead just as he did. As *BKCNT* validly notes, “By using this clever tactic, Paul divided his enemy. Amazingly the **Pharisees** defended Paul, a fellow **Pharisee**.”⁴⁸

Paul would not have been able to say “I am a Pharisee” without meaning that he followed Pharisaical doctrines and beliefs. He certainly would not have been able to say such a statement if he believed that the Torah were invalidated through the work of Yeshua on the cross. 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 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). He says 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*).⁴⁹ 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.” Gamaliel’s influence over the Sanhedrin seems to indicate that he favored a more lenient view to the Believers in Yeshua, in some ways favoring them over the Sadducees. Gamaliel was so highly valued in First 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 into the world, and they used to study Torah sitting. *And that is as it taught*: After Rabban Gamaliel died, the honor of Torah was lost” (b.*Megillah* 21a).⁵⁰

By mentioning Gamaliel, the question can be made whether Paul is 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 having been trained by Gamaliel. Many, especially in Christianity, do not want to view Paul as being a Pharisee at all, while there are others in the Messianic movement who attempt to synthesize his theology with all forms of Orthodox Judaism today. Bruce Chilton observes 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*).⁵¹

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* 9b). Having been trained as a Pharisee and being a teacher, Paul never separated himself from the Pharisaical theologies of his day, which would have included him believing in the validity of the Torah.⁵² On the contrary, Paul appears to have been given **the best education** to be the Apostle to the nations!

⁴⁸ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts” in *BKCNT*, 419.

⁴⁹ “Gamaliel,” in *NIDB*, 371.

⁵⁰ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

⁵¹ Bruce Chilton, “Gamaliel,” in David Noel Freedman, ed. et. al., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 2:906.

⁵² N.T. Wright concludes that prior to his salvation encounter, due to Paul’s great zealousness as a Pharisee (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:14, 23), he had been a Shammaite extremist (actually comparable to Yitzhak Rabin’s assassin Yigal Amir!). After his encounter with the risen Yeshua, though, Paul’s views shifted back to the more

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, rebuking them with the words, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, 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). By the time Yeshua spoke these words, the intent of going out and making converts 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 converts so that the religious leadership could boast (cf. Galatians 6:13). However, the Pharisees who first went out to make converts 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 notes, “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*).⁵³

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 converts of all the nations. 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 does not deviate from the Pharisaical norms, including Torah observance, but he does always keep in mind his audience and who they are when he writes to them and visits them in person. The Messianic community would do well in its Pauline studies to seriously examine Paul for who he is as a Pharisee, and in its application of the Torah to look at things through a (moderate) Pauline-Pharisaical lens.⁵⁴

Modern-Day Pharisees Versus Modern-Day Hypocrites

There exist some major problems in the Messianic community today 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 means “a self-righteous, hypocritical person,”⁵⁵ as exhibited by the example of *some* of the Pharisees that Yeshua condemned. Yet at the same time the original meaning of the Hebrew word *P'rush* (פְּרִישׁ) was one who was to be separated, and being separated from the world is a key concept exemplified in the Torah, and indeed all of Scripture. Secondly, a problem exists in relation to the Pharisees rooted in what is often perceived as being Yeshua’s condemnation of *all of them*, as opposed to just *some of them*, in that there are Messianics 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 Messiah Yeshua 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?

moderate Hillelite Pharisaism in which he had been originally trained (*What Saint Paul Really Said* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], pp 26-29).

⁵³ M.H. Pope, “Proselyte,” *IDB*, 3:925.

⁵⁴ The quintessential work in pro-Torah Pauline studies for the Messianic movement is Tim Hegg’s book *The Letter Writer: Paul’s Background and Torah Perspective* (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 2003).

Also to be considered is progress being made within a theological strata commonly known as the New Perspective of Paul (NPP). For a review of the NPP, the author recommends you peruse the following books: E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977); James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990); *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); N.T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁵⁵ *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Cleveland: Wiley Publishing, 2002), 477.

One of the claims that is often made against the Pharisees in the Messianic movement today is their adherence, or sometimes strict adherence, to the Oral Torah or the Oral Law. There are many Messianics who do not want anything to do with the writings of the Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, etc., 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.”⁵⁶

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.

While the Sadducees died out when the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. by the Romans, 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. As the *Jewish Study Bible* notes, they were “the 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.”⁵⁷ The reason that they were opposed is because their “practices differed in various ways from rabbinic norms”⁵⁸ which were rooted in Pharisaism. Because of the rejection by the Karaites of the Oral Torah, some Messianics today are beginning to adhere to, or already do adhere to, 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 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 considered to be just as much Scripture for Orthodox Jews as rulings of the pope from the Vatican are to be considered infallible for Roman Catholics. 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.”⁵⁹

If any of you examines the Oral Torah, you are going to see a mishmash of discussions, legal rulings, and debates not unlike any court proceeding you might see today. 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? *Karaites and others would 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 tell him how they are to be fulfilled. As the *Jewish Study Bible* observes, “The oral law was...as its name suggests, originally transmitted orally alongside the Torah, as the authoritative interpretation of the Torah.”⁶⁰ It also indicates that “it was committed to writing by the Rabbis, in stages, in the first millennium C.E.”⁶¹

Within the Torah there is an important stipulation that needs to be considered by us, especially when divisive issues face God's people. Deuteronomy 17:10-11 gives a significant degree of authority to the religious leaders, in fact specifying, “According to the terms of the law which

⁵⁶ Consult the FAQ entry on the TNN website “Torah, Command not to ‘Add to.’”

⁵⁷ Berlin and Brettler, 2132.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ For a summary on the formation of post-Second Temple Jewish religious literature, consult the Hermann L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 2135.

⁶¹ Ibid.

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.” The Hebrew clause *al-pi ha'torah* (עַל-פִּי הַתּוֹרָה) 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 we cannot easily cast aside—especially not haphazardly or summarily—the rulings of the Jewish religious authorities. *They at least have to be consulted*, and put to the edification test of Philippians 4:8.

The Apostle Paul, a Pharisee, writes several times in his epistles that he delivered several traditions to his listeners. He tells 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). In 1 Corinthians 11:2, he says, “Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the **traditions**, just as I delivered them to you.” The Greek word *paradosis* (παράδοσις) specifically pertains to “tradition, of teachings, commandments, narratives et al.,” and can refer to “the tradition of the rabbis” (BDAG).⁶² Whether some people like it or not, Paul’s words are clear that he probably taught some Rabbinical traditions or disciplines to his listeners. And, 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 that 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 that were originally given to Moses orally could be exaggerated by 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 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 Scripture. It means that it can be considered commentary that contains explanations of *how* the Torah’s commandments can be kept, but not how they *must* necessarily be kept.

Should we as 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 First Century 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 in the basic theological tenets of the Pharisees. The Pharisees respected Moses, respected tradition, they wanted to be separated from the world—but they 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 one conducted himself in society. He says, “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). How many of us fall into the same trap today of believing that since we as Messianics are practicing things like keeping *Shabbat*, the appointed times, the dietary laws, wearing *tzit-tzits*, etc., that it is unimportant to be concerned about social justice or regard for how we treat our fellow human beings? How many of us are not concerned with how we treat other people, be they other Messianics (especially new ones) or our Jewish or even our Christian

⁶² BDAG, 763.

brethren? How many of us understand Yeshua's rebuke here for what it truly was, and how it extends to today?

Craig S. Keener notes in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew what Yeshua was no doubt really saying to these Pharisees. He remarks, "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 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."⁶³

Certainly, not all 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. 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.⁶⁴

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⁶³ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 335.

⁶⁴ For a more detailed, yet brief synopsis of Pharisaical teachings, consult pp 85-157 of *Yeshua: A Guide to the Real Jesus and the Original Church* by Ron Moseley, and pp 25-29 of *Introduction to Torah Living* by Tim Hegg (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002).