

Pharisees as a Metonym for Hypocrite:

'A Family Dispute or Enemies at the Gates: The Pharisees & Yeshua'

In today's Western society, we have many slang terms that are implicitly understood by those who have grown up in the typical culture of the West (the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand and even Canada, for example).

With our Judeo-Christian heritage some of these slang terms or 'figures of speech' have a 2000 year old heritage and date back to the days when Yeshua last walked the Land of Israel.

One such slang term is the use of Pharisee meaning hypocrite. Another technical term for this is that Pharisee is being used as a metonym¹.

Because such slang is so implicit we often do not reflect on its validity or accuracy and it thus leads to the inculcation of understandings that may not be as valid as we might imagine.

So, in this short article I would like to take the time to reflect on how accurate this metonym actually is, and whether even if in some ways it is a valid figure of speech, that it may be unhelpful to our broader and deeper appreciation of who and what Yeshua was.

To start with the easy part, were many or perhaps even most, of the Pharisees in Yeshua's day actually hypocrites in some way? I would certainly argue 'yes they were'.

But the full picture is a lot more revealing than this simple and expedient response.

To dig deeper and provide the logic and evidence for a fuller picture on just how relevant and true this categorization is, we need to start with a better understanding of who this group was, and then of what their relationship was with Yeshua and how Yeshua saw them.

The historical setting:

Prior to 70 CE Israel and at least for a century or two, Israel had many (maybe 24) 'denominations' of Judaism with the main ones being Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.

To broadly define these four main groups, the Sadducees were the true political elites of their day. They managed to have some of the political power even though beholden to the Roman authorities, and they had some theological differences to mainstream Jewish understanding of the time.

The Essenes were much more on the outside of Jewish society – a very austere group, they saw themselves as the true remnant and tried to avoid partaking in normal society, so they tended to live in small, isolated communities (such as at Qumran). They were very strict in the understanding of the laws of purity. For example, if water was poured from a pure jug into another which was then found to be impure, such an event meant that the first 'pure' jug of water was now considered impure as well!

The Zealots were the real extremists within the proto-Judaism of their day who felt that the sword should be raised against their Roman oppressors.

And the Pharisees (and scribes) were the religious representatives of the common people. They had the most interactions within normal society of all these groups and so really were (or should have been) the best exemplars of righteous God-fearing people for the common citizens of the Land of Israel.

¹ A figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated. Think Mark Antony asking the people of Rome to lend him their ears or the use of an author's name to refer to works written by that person, as in "We are studying Hemingway". New Testament examples are the use of 'circumcision' in Acts 15 to refer to conversion to Judaism and the Apostle Paul using the phrase 'works of the law' to refer to the rites of proselytization i.e conversion to Judaism.

An interesting anecdote of Jewish history may be informative as to who and what the Pharisees were.

The story concerns King Yannai, who was the second king of the Hasmonean dynasty, who ruled over an expanding kingdom of Judea from 103 to 76 BCE (when he died at the age of 59). A son of Yochanan Hyrkanos, son of Simeon, a son of Mattathias, the son of Yochanan the High Priest. Thus, King Alexander Yannai was a great-grandson of the first Hasmonean, who, together with his heroic sons, were victorious against the Greek King Antiochus as remembered by the Festival of Hannukah (which Yeshua also observed).

But King Yannai, while also the High Priest, did not follow in the footsteps of his grandfather and was far from righteous. In Sotah 22a-b, there is an interesting accounting of his last days:

"... The Gemara concludes with the advice that King Yannai offered his wife Shlomtzion before his passing. He told her that she should fear neither the perushim [Pharisees] nor the Tzedukim (Sadducees), but rather she should fear the hypocrites who present themselves as though they are perushim, when in fact they are not.

"Their actions are those of Zimri (see Bamidbar [Numbers] 25:14) but they expect to be rewarded like Pinchas (see Bamidbar 25:10-13)."

The perushim are the Pharisees, the sages of the Talmud, while the zedukim are the Sadducees, the elite class that rejected many of the traditions of the perushim. According to the Gemara, King Yannai was suggesting to his wife – who was to take the throne upon his passing – that although he and the perushim had been enemies throughout his life, she had nothing to fear from them, since they would not hold his excesses and cruelty against her. Those who made use of their outward religiosity to hide their own desire for personal power were the dangerous ones.

This deathbed speech is recorded differently in Josephus (Book XIII, Chapter 15, number 5), where we find King Yannai telling his wife that she should run her affairs of state entirely according to the direction of the perushim. Historical evidence shows that she did so throughout her rule.

Yannai felt close to those "modern," "aristocratic" circles who called themselves Tzedukim (Sadduces) who were in no small measure influenced by the Greek culture. Opposing these were the Torah-true Jews, the "Prushim" (Pharisees), at the head of whom were the Tannaim, who strictly followed the Torah and Massorah [textual notes] handed down to them by the Anshei Knesset Hagdolah (Men of the Great Assembly), who received the Tradition from the Prophets and Elders, all the way back to Moshe Rabbeinu."

What these notes would appear to imply is first that King Yannai was not Torah observant (there are other historical notes that reference his murderous cruelty), yet he was still able to distinguish between Pharisees who were genuine in their lived faith and those who appeared righteous but were really immoral and corrupt and hence hypocrites as per Yeshua's indictment of some of them.

This historical anecdote also helps confirm that the Sadducees were less observant and more Hellenistic in their outlook.

There is also now clear evidence as to what a Pharisee or a man with a Pharisaic mindset, like Yeshua meant when he made the Matt 5:17 statement.

A crucial and central example of his Pharisaic approach:

When Yeshua said he came to 'fulfill the Torah' he meant to correctly interpret and enact it.

To 'destroy the Torah' was to interpret in incorrectly.

Matt 5:17-18, *"Do not think that I am come to destroy the Torah, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say to you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the Torah till all be fulfilled,"*

The Hebrew idiom "I have come" obviously means "it is my purpose to," and the terms "destroy" and "fulfill" were

commonly employed in Yeshua's day as technical terms in rabbinic argumentation.

When a rabbi felt that his colleague had misinterpreted a passage in the Tanakh, he would say, *'You are destroying the Torah.'* Needless to say, in most cases his colleague disagreed. What was 'destroying the Torah' for one rabbi, was 'fulfilling the Torah' (correctly interpreting Scripture) for another. These discussions were often over minor points of contention as they all very much agreed on the fundamentals.

The relevant takeaway from this is that Yeshua's statement was very typical of a Pharisee, and of what a Pharisee would challenge another Pharisee with.

Hellenism began to influence the life and mindset of the Jewish people from the time of Alexander the Great (324 BCE). The works and beliefs of Plato were seen as attractive. The reclaiming of the Temple in the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes saw something of a rejection of Hellenism though and of course Hanukah² celebrates and remembers the overthrow of this Greek tyrant.

As already mentioned, Yeshua also celebrated Hanukah ('the festival of lights' John 10:22). After-all he was THE true light of the world!

Yeshua's first priority was to call the 'sick' back to Yehovah, to seek the lost and call for repentance. When those with elitist attitudes who were serious hypocrites among the Pharisees (the religious group he most identified with), he certainly called them out on it. He respected their position in the system, but repeatedly called out their hypocrisy (see Matt 23:23 for example).

Also, the fact that a great many Pharisees ended up being followers of Yeshua suggests to me that he was able to get through to them, which I doubt he would do so if he totally rejected them.

The Apostle Paul also wore his background as a Pharisee as a badge of honour. If Yeshua had had no respect at all for the Pharisees, I am quite sure that the Apostle Paul would have followed his lead and made it clear that he no longer considered himself a Pharisee, or in any way wanted to be associated with the Pharisees.

Also given that the Apostle Paul refers to the Pharisees in relation to his status as a Torah observant Jew, it should be even more clear that he associated Pharisaism with following Torah.

The reason that Yeshua railed against them so much, was firstly that he shared community with them and secondly that he saw that they should be the best examples of God-fearing people, as they had such a leading role in the society of his day, so that, when instead some or even many of them acted hypocritically, he was quick to point this out in the hope and desire that they would act as they taught in the synagogue when they sat on 'Moses seat'.

I would argue that Matt 23:2-3 is informing us that Yeshua said to heed what the Pharisees spoke when speaking the words of Moses, rather than heeding how some or many of them acted.

There is no question that Matthew 23 is a very strong polemic against the scribes and Pharisees (yet not against the Sadducees, who were in bed with Rome and the real elites of their day). But in the context, such polemics and the use of hyperbole were very much a part of the public discourse.

To modern Hellenistic ears it certainly sounds extremely harsh and there is a sense in which it is, as I believe Yeshua, as the greatest advocate for God who has ever walked this earth, wished that the scribes and Pharisees were much better at representing God and supporting him in helping the Jewish people turn back to the Father.

It is true that at times Yeshua did rebuke both the Pharisees and Sadducees, but when the Sadducees spoke with him separately, he said that they 'know' neither the Scriptures nor 'the power of God', which to a religious Jew is more condemning than any of the rebukes he directed at the Pharisees.

Interestingly, after the Pharisees and scribes were impressed with his knowledge of Torah and that he had silenced the Sadducees, they clearly gave him more respect as well, even though they initially tried to catch him out and lost.

² The Hanukkah oil miracle: I recommend a reading of the story of the Maccabees

Further, the Book of Acts clearly highlights the serious differences between these two sects and the Apostle Paul appeals to the Pharisees, not the Sadducees (Acts 23).

Professor David Flusser's intimate understanding:

The late Professor David Flusser, who spent his long life studying Yeshua and the Gospels always argued that Yeshua himself was essentially a Pharisee, not just the Apostle Paul.

Prof David Flusser, in my opinion the most knowledgeable scholar on Yeshua in modern times, wrote in his book in "Jesus" (2001) p36: *"In the Pharisees, Jesus saw the contemporary heirs of Moses, and said that men should model their lives upon their teaching. This makes sense, for although Jesus was apparently indirectly influenced by Essenism, he was basically rooted in universal non-sectarian Judaism. The philosophy and practice of this Judaism was that of the Pharisees. It would not be wrong to describe Jesus as a Pharisee in the broad sense."*

The Pharisees also had 2 main schools of thought. Those of Rabbi Hillel and those of Rabbi Shammai. Yeshua mostly, though not exclusively supported Hillel.

Interestingly, their own condemnations of each other were very similar to Yeshua's condemnations of the Pharisees that we read in the New Testament. So again, we are clearly mis-interpreting the language and contextual approach of Israel in the first century CE when we think that Yeshua saw the Pharisees as extreme hypocrites and people to reject and have no association with.

That many Pharisees decided to join Yeshua's sect of Judaism after his ascension (as a careful reading of Acts will reveal), would also indicate that they found his teachings and his interpretation of Torah very much in line with their own, though they may still have disputed a number of minor points of halacha (Torah living).

Akiva or Rabbinic Judaism and the legacy of the Pharisees:

Orthodox Judaism, which today has a number of sects, is essentially a development of the Rabbinical Judaism of the late 1st Century CE. As Rabbi Akiva is considered as a major, if not the major founder of Rabbinical Judaism, some refer to this movement or sect of Judaism as '**Akiva Judaism**' (this also helps to distinguish it from '**Yeshua Judaism**', at least in any discussion and comparison of these two sects).

Here is a little of the 'historical'³ background to Akiva and Rabbinical Judaism:

Akiva developed as a sage during the period after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), a time of transformation for the Jewish community as Rabbinic Judaism began to take shape. Since the Temple no longer served as the focal point of Jewish life, the Sages (who later became known as rabbis) reconstructed Judaism with Torah study at its center. The rabbinic academy at Yavneh, near what is now the Israeli city of Tel Aviv, became the new center of Jewish life, while other academies sprung up across the land of Israel.

... one legend relates that the reason God placed "crowns" on the letters of the Torah, a calligraphic detail, was so that Akiva would later find meaning in these ornamental marks. He was also known to have been well versed in mystical studies and practice, as exemplified by the famous legend of the Pardes, in which four rabbis enter the so-called mystical paradise and Akiva is the only one to survive the experience unscathed. Akiva helped to systematize the Mishnah, which was still in development at the time. "The Mishnah as we know it is ascribed to the work of Akiva as interpreted by his students," notes Hammer in Akiva: Life, Legend and Legacy.

... His work, and that of his disciples, would help to establish Rabbinic Judaism as the new normative version of Judaism that would last to this day. Considering he accomplished this task at the same time that Christianity was evolving from a fringe Jewish sect into a competing religion, Akiva's work was a major achievement in this history of Judaism."⁴

Two main points to note here.

Firstly, later Rabbi's and Jewish scholars within Rabbinical Judaism have managed to elevate the status of Akiva to

³³ Reputedly historical as the only sources for his life appear in the Talmud and are not corroborated by historical evidence at this time.

⁴ Excerpts from [Who Was Rabbi Akiva? | My Jewish Learning](#)

even far exceed that of Moses (though this article does not mention this, you can see hints of such un-Biblical elevation even in the article I quoted from). Such a false and essentially immoral placing of Akiva on a pedestal has unfortunately led to further foundational errors in Orthodox Judaism as a result of placing a man and not Torah as the heart, and as the bedrock, of the faith.

And secondly, because the Pharisees spoken of in the New Testament, were also Rabbis in a time just preceding the Rabbinic academy at Yavneh, it is also assumed by many that this Rabbinical Judaism (now known as Orthodox Judaism) is really just an outgrowth of the Pharisaic movement of Yeshua's day. This additional error results in a false dichotomy between Orthodox Judaism and Yeshua Judaism.

When we instead better understand the bigger picture of Yeshua's actual relationship with the Pharisees as I have tried to outline here, we should be able to see that there really was no significant dichotomy or difference between Pharisaism and Yeshua's adherence to and love of Torah. Yeshua's faith in Yehovah, what we have labelled Yeshua Judaism, really should look the same as Orthodox Judaism, but only if Orthodox Judaism can throw off the shackles of Akivaism and its consequent elevation of the Rabbis to a papal-like status of God's, and instead return to a Torah-centric faith.

In conclusion I hope that this short article might enable you the reader to reflect on two main issues.

The first is a better appreciation of Yeshua's actual relationship with the Pharisees, which should lead to a better appreciation of the reality that the Torah was at the very core of their faith.

And secondly, that the divide between Orthodox Judaism and Yeshua Judaism (the true faith of all of Yeshua's followers), really should not be so vast and deep as it may appear.

Paul F Herring

www.circumcisedheart.info

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