

Pharisees Weren't Necessarily the Bad Guys.

By Rabbi Yehudah ben Shomeyr

Growing up in a Christian home and going to church most all my life one thing that has been pounded into my head is the so called “fact” that the Pharisees were conceited, haughty, holier-than-thou, selfishly evil men who invented the bondage of legalism and wanted Jesus killed! They were the “bad Guys” and we should not desire to be like them in any way, shape or form. Even in Hollywood movies about Jesus, the Pharisees were always the arrogant, snotty, hateful ones who always wore a scowl on their faces.

However, I have come to the conclusion that the Pharisees weren't the bad guys, and that if it wasn't because of them and their influence, Christianity and Judaism would exist today.

Many so called “Messianic” Jews today foolishly believe that the 1st Century Messianic movement sprang from the Karite movement. The Karites are a sect of Jews who do not adhere to the Talmud (Oral Torah) but only to the Written Torah of Moshe. However, the Karites didn't exist then. The Essenes were similar in their beliefs to the modern day Karites but they were isolationist and too small of a sect to have any sort of influence upon Judaism as a whole, let alone the 1st century Nazarene Jewish movement.

In Yeshua's day there were two major sects of Judaism; the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Sadducees pretty much ruled the Temple precinct and their form of Judaism was tied up in the Temple itself. So when the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. their sect slowly died off and the Pharisees persisted to exist, and they were the forefathers of the modern orthodox Jewish movement today. The Pharisees lived their lives as if they were serving in the Temple, making every day mundane activities holy and sacred. They produced Yeshivot (schools) and Synagogues modeled after the example of Ezra when Judah returned from exile. The home and the synagogue was the focus of activities of their form of Judaism and the Temple was important too, but their form of Judaism could exist on its own without a Temple and so it has even till this day.

We see Yeshua interacting very little with the Sadducees. He mostly dealt with the Pharisees, because this was the sect in which He grew up in; and in all their interaction, discussions and debates, the issues mostly revolved around Talmudic type issues. Issues of custom, tradition and the halachot (the customary way of performing the commandments of Torah) established by the Rabbi's, not clear cut

unarguable issues of Torah. And it makes sense that one's main opponents would be from one's own sect. Why would the Sadducees care if Yeshua and His Talmidim ate grain from a field on Shabbat without washing their hands? This takes place in Matt. 15:3-7 and was regarding Mishnah Nedarim 64 regarding how by some of their man-made traditions they make null and void the Torah itself, which wasn't penned until after the time of Yeshua but was taught and a well-known teaching in the time of Yeshua. Things they argued about would be comparable to two Christian pastors who believe in baptism by immersion arguing over the proper way to baptize a person, whether they dunk once or three times, and what formulated prayer or speech you say when performing the baptism.

There were two schools of Jewish thought in the Pharisaical movement; the school of Hillel and the School of Shammai. Most of the time (except on the issue of divorce) Yeshua sided with the school of Hillel; which may surprise one to learn it was considered the liberal school of that day because they were accommodating to a degree when a commoner wanted to study Torah and turn to Judaism. Shammai was more harsh and intolerant of the common Jew or Gentile. They were more rigid in their religious observances as opposed to the House of Hillel which was more flexible.

It was to the Pharisees he said that they do not need a Physician, for they were not sick, they were well because they followed and kept the Torah (Matt. 9, Mark 2). Yeshua said he was there for the common Jew who didn't keep Torah, partially on account of the man-made imposed rules the Pharisees added to the simple commands of Torah.

Christianity's greatest missionary hero and spokesperson, Paul, never gave up his Pharisaical Judaism when he accepted that Yeshua was indeed the Messiah (Phil. 3:5, Rom. 11:1, Acts 23:6, Gal. 1:13-14, Acts 28:17).

The major issues Yeshua had against the Pharisees, is one he would have against most Christians of today, putting their denominational and man-made doctrinal traditions ahead of the Torah itself. He also took up issue with heartless devotion and performance of the Torah, not the Torah itself. And I think we can agree that all of us deal with mechanically living out our faith at one time or another in our lives. So in reality there were only a handful of conceited, haughty, holier-than-thou, selfishly evil Pharisaical men as seen in the story of the pious Pharisee and the sinner (Luke 18). Yeshua was strict upon himself and his Talmidim, but liberal with the commoner who in essence didn't know better. This is how he won the love of the masses. He was unlike any other Pharisaical Rabbi at that time.

Yeshua didn't start a new religion or a new sect in that of major opposition to the Pharisaical movement in which He was raised in. However because of the people's belief in His claim to be Messiah a new Jewish sect was formed called the Netzarim / Nazarenes. But until the Bar Kochba revolt they lived, fellowshipped, worked and worshipped side by side in synagogues and the Temple without major opposition. This is because they were in agreement with most of the traditions, customs and the teachings of the Pharisees.