

Jesus and the Jews – What’s the Beef?

Robert W. Peck

We read the Old Testament and find the Jews as the good guys of that story, then we turn the page to the New Testament and find Jesus as the good guy of that story. But if they’re both the good guys of the Bible, then why do we find them in constant conflict throughout the gospels? Discover why Jesus called the Jewish religious leaders hypocrites and why they opposed him and ultimately killed him. You’ll gain a new appreciation for the gospel stories and learn not to repeat the mistakes of the Jews.

INTRODUCTION

The conflict was between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders, not the common people. All Judea came out to John’s baptism, and multitudes followed Jesus.

Mark 12:37 ... And the common people heard Him gladly.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke tend to refer to all the various titles and categories of Jewish religious leaders, but John mostly lumps them together under the title “the Jews,” as does this lesson for simplicity.

JUDAISM AND ORAL TRADITIONS

It is common to assume that Judaism is merely the continuation of the religion of the Old Testament as found in the Book of the Law. However, it is not.

Modern Judaism teaches that the written Book of the Law (first five books of the Bible called by Jews Torah, meaning instruction, teaching, or law) was given at Sinai. Judaism teaches that additional instructions telling the people how to practice what is written in the law were also given at Sinai but not committed to writing, being kept by oral tradition. That oral tradition (sometimes called oral Torah and believed to be part of the law) was committed to writing during the third century AD in what is called the Mishnah. However, it is said that the Mishnah is difficult to understand, so rabbis wrote commentaries to explain the Mishnah. Around 500AD, the rabbinic commentary (called Gemara) was compiled together with the Mishnah into what is now known as the Talmud, the central book of Judaism. Two Talmuds were compiled, one in Jerusalem and one in Babylon, but the Babylonian Talmud is the primary text used in Judaism. The Talmud consists of multiple volumes of books containing 5,422 pages and 2.5 million words, more than three times that of the Bible.

Judaism consists of practicing what the rabbis say in the Talmud that the Mishnah means and what the Mishnah teaches as the correct way of practicing what is written in the Torah.

However, throughout the Old Testament, God never refers to any oral traditions, only what is “written” in the Book of the Law.

The oral traditions first appear in the gospels.

Matthew 12:1-2 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

2 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!"

The Book of the Law only says not to work on the sabbath. However, the Talmud teaches 39 categories of work that are prohibited on the sabbath, including removing grain from its husk. This extends to a prohibition against walking through a field of grain where the sandal latch might catch on a stalk and dislodge the grain from its husk.

Mark 7:5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

Once again, this washing is not commanded in the written Book of the Law but is found in the Talmud, aka, oral traditions.

Mark 7:6-13 He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME. 7 AND IN VAIN THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN.'

8 For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

9 He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.

10 For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO CURSES FATHER OR MOTHER, LET HIM BE PUT TO DEATH.'

11 But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban"—' (that is, a gift to God),

12 then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother,

13 making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

Jesus is saying that these traditions – the traditions of the elders, or the oral traditions now taught in the Talmud – are not God-given, but man-made.

Jesus is saying that treating the man-made traditions of the Jews as actual commandments made their worship of God vain, i.e., futile, ineffectual, fruitless.

Deuteronomy 4:2 You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

By adding their oral traditions, the Jews negated the written covenant and made their religion a cult.

Merriam Webster

- Cult: a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious
- Spurious: outwardly similar or corresponding to something without having its genuine qualities

JEWISH RELIGIOUS STRUCTURE

The Jewish religious structure consisted of priests, chief priests, elders, the council, scribes, and lawyers. Pharisees and Sadducees were two religious sects, or two theological camps to which the priests and other members of the religious order prescribed.

Pharisees – Taught the traditions of the elders and taught in synagogues throughout the land.

Sadducees – Rejected the traditions taught by the Pharisees, did not believe in resurrection, angels, or spirit, and rejected the prophets, holding only the five books of Moses as scripture. They were the aristocracy of the Jews and lived in Jerusalem and were mostly associated with temple service.

The Sadducees were mostly wiped out in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, and thus the doctrines of the Pharisees, which were taught in synagogues outside of Jerusalem, became the basis for modern Judaism.

WHY DID JESUS CALL THE JEWS HYPOCRITES?

E.W. Bullinger describes hypocrites as: “actors: i.e. those who speak or act from under a mask.”

Mark 7:6-7 He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME. 7 AND IN VAIN THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN.'

The Jews' hypocrisy was twofold:

1. As we discovered earlier, the Jews wore the mask of the true religion of Moses and the law, but behind the mask, they had become a cult of man-made traditions worshiping God in vain.
2. They wore the mask of religion, piety, and devotion to God in their words, but their hearts were far from Him. God discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart (Hebrews 4:12) because it's the spirit level love, devotion, and allegiance to him that matters.

The Jews had fallen in love with religion more than relationship with God, with works more than a walk with God, and with self-righteousness more than the true righteousness of God, and it led to pride and arrogance.

Luke 18:9-14 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men— extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

*Mark 12:38-40 Then He said to them in His teaching, "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces,
39 the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts,
40 who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."*

Matthew 23:27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."

The Jews criticized Jesus for healing on the sabbath because their heart was more devoted to their religious traditions than to God and to showing mercy.

The Jews criticized Jesus for associating with sinners because their self-righteous pride had made them too arrogant to come near low-life.

The true heart of God is to *"do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"* (Micah 6:8). But these were the farthest thing from the heart of the Jews.

Jesus called the Jews serpents and a brood of vipers (Matthew 23:33). Those are terms for the devil and demons. While practicing all manner of religious works and the appearance of piety, the Jews had become a home for demons that taught them to make doctrines from man-made traditions, then become puffed up with self-righteous pride and think themselves superior to others.

It is possible to have a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5). That's hypocrisy.

WHY THE JEWS DID NOT RECOGNIZE JESUS

The Jewish leaders had fallen into such self-righteous pride, conceit, sense of superiority, and outright arrogance that they failed to recognize their Messiah even though their heads were filled with the knowledge of the scriptures that told of him. But they had not let the spirit and life of God's word penetrate their heart.

John 5:38 But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe.

When the magi came looking for the king of the Jews, the Jewish leaders didn't even bother making the short journey to Bethlehem to check it out. In their self-righteous arrogance, they couldn't believe the sign of their king would be revealed to gentile magi before the all-wise and self-important Jews.

In John chapter 7, the Jews sent officers to arrest Jesus, but when they returned without him, explaining *"No man ever spoke like this Man!"* the chief priests and Pharisees answered (verses 48, 49), *"Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him?"* Their test for determining who was the Messiah was whether they themselves believed he was the Messiah, because certainly they, in their wisdom and self-importance, would know.

Even at Jesus' trial, the chief priest asked point blank if he was the Christ, the son of God. Jesus admitted the truth, saying, *"it is as you said."* But despite fulfilling all the prophecies about him and all

that Christ would do, the Jews still couldn't believe it because they were so sure the true Christ would reveal himself to them first, and would certainly affirm them and praise them for their righteous works, not criticize them as hypocrites. Pride had fully blinded them.

WHY THE JEWS OPPOSED JESUS

Sadducees – Jesus' miracles made the Sadducees look bad as they taught there was no supernatural power. Either Jesus was deceiving the people or the Sadducees' doctrines were wrong.

Pharisees – Jesus was not following the Pharisees' doctrines about the traditions of the elders, yet he was getting results, both in followers and miracles. Either Jesus was a deceiver or God was really with him, thus exposing the doctrines of the Pharisees as not being from God.

Hypocrites – Jesus was exposing all of the Jewish leadership for being hypocrites whose hearts were far from God.

Envy – Multitudes were following Jesus, hailing him as a prophet, or maybe even the Christ. He was the new mega church in town, eclipsing the popularity of the Jews, and Pilate rightly discerned that the Jews were envious.

Matthew 27:17-18 Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"

18 For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy.

Envy can kill. Envy leads to hate, and John says whoever hates his brother is a murderer (1 John 3:15).

ENDING OF THE OLD COVENANT AND BEGINNING OF THE NEW

Another key to the gospels is understanding that they are the ending of the old covenant and beginning of the new.

Luke 16:16 "The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.

The old covenant was conditional. Mere mortal sinful flesh was unable to fulfill its righteous requirements, and it was therefore doomed to fail. God addresses this in the giving of the law, where he says that when Israel ceases to obey God and breaks His covenant (Leviticus 26:14-16), he will:

- Execute the vengeance of the covenant (Leviticus 26:25).
- Scatter them among the nations (Leviticus 26:33).
- See that they perish from among the nations (Leviticus 26:38).

God further announces:

- His divorce from Israel, putting them away for their transgressions (Isaiah 50:1).
- That He will make a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31).

- That He will be found by those who did not seek Him and will say, “*here I am*” to a nation that was not called by His name (Isaiah 65:1).
- Hebrews 8:13 tells us that the new covenant makes the first obsolete.
- Ephesians 2:15 tells us that Christ has abolished the old covenant ordinances and created in Himself “one new man from the two,” so that in this new covenant there is neither Jew nor Greek (Galatians 3:28).

This theme is scattered throughout the gospel parables.

In Matthew 21:33-46, Jesus taught about a land owner (God) who let out a vineyard to tenants (Israel). The tenants did not give the land owner his due and abused his messengers (prophets), then killed the heir (Christ). In verse 40 Jesus asks the Jewish leaders what the owner of the vineyard will do to the tenants and in verse 41, they answer, “*He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers.*” In verse 43, Jesus says, “*Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.*” The Jews perceived that Jesus was talking about them and wanted to arrest him on the spot, but feared the people.

The parables about a man holding a feast but the invited guests would not come, so he invited others instead – those parables tell the same story of the Jews being out and a new covenant people coming in.

In Luke 13:6-9, Jesus taught that a fig tree (Israel) that was not bearing fruit was to be chopped down.

In Luke 3:7-9, John the Baptist told the religious leaders that “*every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire,*” announcing that “*even now the ax is laid to the root.*”

But God, in his mercy, did not leave the descendants of Abraham out in the cold with no escape from the judgment due them. Instead, he provided a new covenant and did so right on time so that the people of Israel could step out of the old and into the new, avoiding the wrath that was to come in 70AD. He even gave ample signs of the impending destruction of Jerusalem in the Olivet Discourse so people could know when to flee.

Nevertheless, those who clung to the old system of works in a spirit of self-righteous pride met with a horrible end at the hands of the Romans as the last vestiges of the old covenant system came crashing down once and for all.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

This is not about hating Jews or even being critical of them. This is about understanding the conflict between Jesus and the Jews that we see in the gospels.

It’s also about learning from the example of the Jews and not repeating the same mistake of starting to love religion more than our relationship with Christ, or works more than a walk with Christ, or self-righteousness more than the free gift of righteousness in Christ. Guard against habits that become traditions that can end up taking the place of the word of God.