

The Charge of Hypocrisy in Matthew 23 and in Jewish Sources

by Moshe Weinfeld

Matthew 23 constitutes, as is known, a charge sheet against the Pharisees. The main charge is hypocrisy. The author compiled all sorts of traditions and structured them in a way that would enhance the image of insincerity and hypocrisy.¹ The chapter may be divided into three main parts: 1) the programmatic section (verses 1–12); 2) seven passages that open with “woe to hypocrites” (verses 13–30); and 3) a concluding section about the doom of Jerusalem (verses 31–39).

The programmatic section opens with a statement about the scribes and Pharisees who sit on Moses’ seat² and preach, but do not practice what they preach (verses 2–4). Then comes a passage that exemplifies the false ostentatious behavior of the scribes and Pharisees (verses 5–7). This passage, which concludes with the accusation that the Pharisees love to be called “rabbi,” leads to the Christological passage (verses 8–12) that elaborates the idea that the real “rabbi” is Jesus.

The purpose of this study is to show that most of the accusations of hypocrisy contained in this chapter are rooted in Jewish tradition. In the programmatic section, moreover, this applies not only to the contents but also to the structure. Indeed, while the woes also have their roots in Jewish admonitions, the programmatic part already raises the fundamental issue (verses 2–3):

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do, for they preach but do not

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1. Cf. D. Flusser, “Two Anti-Jewish Montages in Matthew,” *Immanuel* 5 (Summer 1975), 37–45. For the nature of the composition of Matthew 23, cf. recently D.E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23* (Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* 52; Leiden, 1979).
 2. ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας, corresponding to the expression קהרריא דמשה in Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana 1:7 (Mandelbaum ed., p. 12). Such chairs were indeed discovered in various synagogues in the Land of Israel. See E.L. Sukenik, *Tarbiz* 1:1 (1929), 150–151; J.N. Epstein, *ibid.*, p. 152.

practice. They bind heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with their finger.

As has been seen by scholars,³ the charge should properly refer to scribes (γραμματεῖς)⁴ and *teachers of Law* (νομικοί). For it was these two groups who were in fact sitting on Moses' seat, rather than *all* the Pharisees as Matthew tries to present the matter. Indeed Luke 11, which contains a parallel to the woes passage, reflects some awareness of this distinction. There the first three "woes" are addressed to the Pharisees (verses 42, 43, 44), but the other three to the teachers of Law (verses 46, 47, 52). Thus in Luke the charge of loading people with burdens hard to bear is directed at the latter group⁵ and not at the Pharisees in general.

Condemnation of scribes and teachers who do not follow their own teaching goes back as far as Jeremiah 8:8:

How can you say: "We are wise and we possess the Torah of the Lord?"
Surely, for naught has the pen labored, for naught the scribes.⁶

The prophet condemns the scribes and the wise men for not observing the teaching that they themselves had committed to writing. The pen of the scribes had made the Torah, as it were, into a lie.⁷

Condemnation of scribes and teachers of Torah who do not follow their own prescriptions is also well known from rabbinic literature. They are called there, as in Matthew, "hypocrites in regard to Torah" (חנפני תורה). As we shall see presently, they are even accused of the same sins as in the Gospels. About such teachers there existed proverbial sayings in rabbinic literature, as for example:

יש נאה דורש ואין נאה מקיים

— "there are those who preach well but do not practice well,"⁸ and in positive form:

נאין דברים כשהן יוצאין מפי עושיהן

3. Cf. Garland, pp. 41 ff.

4. The scribes (γραμματεῖς = סופרים) fulfilled administrative-judicial functions, as has been shown by D.R. Schwartz, "'Scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites': Who Are the Scribes?" (Hebrew), *Zion* 50 (1985), 121–132. The scribes were identified with the Levites and the שוטרים; on the latter, see my "Judge and Officer in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East," *Israel Oriental Studies* 7 (1977), 83–86. But the νομικοί were of a scholarly character: teachers of the Torah (see next note).

5. סאטמס = דורש תורה, "the interpreter of the Law" (cf. Sirach 35:15 and the Qumran literature, passim), who was sometimes interchangeable with the scribe. Compare 4 Mac. 5:4 with 2 Mac. 6:18. Moses, on whose chair the teachers sit, is called נומיקה in the midrashic literature; cf. S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1950), pp. 81–82.

6. Cf. the Jewish Publication Society's *The Prophets: A New Translation* (Philadelphia, 1978). לשקר here means "in vain," as in 1 Sam 25:21.

7. See my *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford, 1972), p. 160.

8. tHagigah 2:1; tYevamot 8:7 and the parallels in talmudic literature.

— “good are the commands that come out of the mouth of those who perform them.”⁹

What is most instructive in these rabbinic sources, however, is that they link the contrast between preaching and practicing to knowledge of the divine will or to the “key of heaven,” an idea that occurs also in the context of the woes passages in Matthew (23:13) and Luke (11:52). The sages admitted that it is hard to find a person whose teaching and practice are in complete harmony, since preaching implies the revealing of God’s will, but knowledge of God’s will is very hard for a man of sinful nature. As Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 39 puts it:

Because of his sin it is not granted to man to know what likeness is on high, and were it not for that, the keys would have been handed over to him and he might have known what heaven and earth were created with and would have obtained knowledge from the most High.... The one who follows the right path will be happy.¹⁰

Only the most outstanding of the sages, such as R. Eleazar b. Arakh, could break their way through to heaven so as to get the divine knowledge. Thus tHagigah 2:1 says that when Eleazar b. Arakh succeeded with his study of the Merkavah (“divine chariot,” i.e., a knowledge not available to the many), Rabbi Johanan b. Zakkai proclaimed:

There are those who preach well but do not practice, there are others who practice well but do not preach well, but Eleazar b. Arakh preaches well and practices well. Happy are you Abraham, our father, that Eleazar b. Arakh descended from you who knows and understands to preach in honor of his Father in heaven.

As has been noted by S. Lieberman, what Johanan b. Zakkai meant was that receiving heavenly knowledge depends upon the performance of the Lord’s will,¹¹ a view reflected in the statement of Rabbah bar Rav Huna in bShabbat 31b:

A man who possesses learning without the fear of heaven is like a treasurer who is entrusted with the inner keys but not with the outer; how is he to enter?

This passage provides a link between Matthew 23:13 and Luke 11:52, showing that they reflect the same view: because of their non-compliance with the divine norms, neither the teachers of the Law nor their students will enter the divine realm, whereby they are deprived of the key of knowledge. Each of these verses, however, contains half of the idea: Matthew 23:13 speaks about closing the way to heaven but says nothing about knowledge, whereas Luke 11:52 talks of taking away the key of knowledge but says nothing about this knowledge being heavenly.

Also the position of the two verses is significant. The one opens the series of woes in Matthew where they are directed at “hypocrites,” while the other closes the series of woes in Luke where they are directed at “teachers of Law.”

9. tYevamot 8:7; Genesis Rabbah 34:6 (Albeck ed., p. 326).

10. Regarding the conclusion of the passage, we follow the manuscript in Schechter’s edition, p. 75a. See S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutab: Moed*, p. 1288.

11. Lieberman, *ibid*.

This woe is therefore a most important factor in both versions of the homily; it can be explained only against the background of the rabbinic sources according to which hypocritical teachers who do not observe what they preach cannot get the key to heavenly knowledge. Moreover, the opening dictum in Matthew 23:2–3, about those who preach but do not practice, is thus ideologically and structurally related to that first woe in Matthew 23:13, which refers to those who shut the Kingdom of Heaven against themselves and their followers.

That Matthew 23:13 has close affinities with the preceding verses may be learned from the insertion of verse 14 after it. The interpolator of this verse, who missed in verses 6–7 the clause about the devouring of the widows' houses (cf. Mk. 12:38–40, Lk. 20:46–47; and see below), found the proper place for it here after the statement about shutting the way to heaven. He saw that verse 13 is an integral part of the introductory unit, although stylistically it belongs to the section of the seven woes of the next passage.

The programmatic section in verses 1–12 opens with the charge of ostentatious behavior. This charge is presented differently in the various Synoptic Gospels. Matthew 23:5–7 reads:

They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the first couches at the table and the first seats in synagogues¹² and salutations in the market places and being called “rabbi” by men.

Mark (12:38–40) and Luke (20:46–47; cf. 11:43) have:

...who like to walk around in long robes and to have salutations in the market places and to have the first seats in synagogues and the first couches at the table, who devour widow's houses and for a pretense make long prayers.

Before adducing evidence to show that the charges listed here are attested in rabbinic literature, a general remark should be made: Pharisees are reproached as hypocrites in the rabbinic sources themselves. Thus tSotah 22b contains a whole passage dedicated to this topic, opening with a *baraita* that lists seven types of Pharisees (פרושים).¹³ The characterization of the types and the exact meaning of the definitions there elude us, because of the antiquated language of the tradition. It is clear, however, that some of those seven types of Pharisees are criticized for showing off their religious devotion in every possible way. Among them are one who “carries his piety on his shoulder” (פרוש שכמרי), and one who looks for a task to perform in order to prove that he observes everything possible (פרוש אדע חובתי ואעשה).¹⁴

This *baraita* is followed by a dictum of R. Nahman b. Isaac, said in connection with the hypocritical types of Pharisee, which reminds us of the charge in Mark 12:38 and Luke 20:46 (see further below) about Pharisees who walk around in long robes: “Let the great court call to account those who are wrapped up in

12. πρωτοκλισία and πρωτοκαθεδρία correspond to Hebrew ישיבה בראש and הסבה בראש respectively.

13. For the *baraita* on the seven types of Pharisee, see also jSotah 5:7, 20c; jBerakhot 9:7, 14b. Cf. also Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A:37 (Schechter ed., p. 109) and B:45 (ibid., p. 124).

14. Cf. the explanations in the Talmud.

a cloak [גוּרְדָּאִי]” (Rashi: “those who wrap themselves in cloaks as though they were true Pharisees”). By way of association, the talmudic editor adduces a historical anecdote about Alexander Jannai (103–76 B.C.E.):

King Jannai said to his wife: “Fear neither the Pharisees nor their opponents, but [fear] the hypocrites who pretend to be Pharisees but whose deeds are those of Zimri and who expect a reward like Phinehas.”

The true meaning of this episode may be understood against the background of Josephus’ account (*Antiquities* 13, 398 f.) of how King Alexander Jannai advised his wife concerning her peacemaking with the Pharisees. The Pharisees knew how to influence Queen Alexandra and apparently not without flattery (cf., e.g., *Antiquities* 13, 405–406).

The Qumran sect, too, accused the Pharisees of hypocrisy in this period. Its writings call them דוּרְשֵׁי חִלְקוּחַ, which means “seekers of smooth things,” paralleled by “lying interpreters” (מְלִיצֵי כֹזֵב) and “seekers of deceit” (דוּרְשֵׁי רַמְיָה) (cf. 1QH II:31–34). As has been shown by D. Flusser and others,¹⁵ the “seekers of smooth things” in Peshar Nahum (4QpNah 169 3–4, I:7; III:6–7) and in other places in the Qumran literature are none other than the Pharisees. These are depicted there as hypocrites, “who by their false teaching and their lying tongue and a deceitful lip lead many astray” (4QpNah 169 3–4, II:8–9):

אֲשֶׁר בַּחֲלָמוֹד שִׁקְרָם וְלִשׁוֹן כֹּזְבֵיהֶם וְשֹׁפֵחַ מְרֵמָה יַחְזֵרוּ רַבִּים

The same source notes that they had invited Demetrius, the Greek king, to join them in their struggle against Alexander Jannai. It was for this reason that the latter hanged them alive (4QpNah 169 3–4, I:6–7). Apparently it was a period when the Pharisees exploited their status in order to assert power. This historical situation is what gave rise to the stigma of hypocrisy ascribed to the Pharisees. As we have seen, however, the Pharisaic literature itself preserves the bad memories of that period, which find expression in the passage quoted from tSotah 22b.

Let us now turn to some individual accusations made in Matthew 23:5–7 and their parallels in Mark and Luke. We shall inquire in what measure they, too, are reflected in Jewish-Pharisaic literature.

1) Ostentatious display of formal attire: parading in cloaks (ἐν στολαῖς, Mk. 12:38 and Lk. 20:46). This accusation is quite common in rabbinic literature. In the passage from tSotah 22b quoted above, R. Nahman b. Isaac denounces the sin of those who wrap themselves with cloaks in order to show off. Such demonstrations of one’s formal position are often condemned by the rabbis. Thus ben Azzai said: “It is easier to rule the world than to teach in the presence of two men wrapped in cloaks [הַעֲטוּפִים בְּסַדְרֵינִים].”¹⁶ A somewhat different version is found in the Midrash on Psalm 18:44:

15. Cf. D. Flusser, “Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes in Peshar Nahum” (Hebrew), in *Essays in Jewish History and Philology in Memory of Gedaliahu Alon* (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 133 ff. See also Y. Yadin, “Peshar Nahum (4Qp Nahum) Reconsidered,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 21 (1971), 1–12.

16. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A:25 (end, Schechter ed.). On the attire of rabbinic scholars, cf. S. Krauss, “The Cloak of Rabbinic Scholars” (Hebrew), *Jubilee Volume for M.S. Bloch* (Budapest, 1905), pp. 83–93.

“You have rescued me from strife” — so that I will be saved from being judged before them. Ben Azzai said: “It is easier to rule the world than to rule [influence] two men wrapped in robes.”¹⁷

This refers to the judges who used to wrap themselves in their robes before taking up a case (bShabbat 10a).¹⁸ As we shall see, this kind of admonition is directed toward judges and official leaders who care about their prestigious position but do not pay attention to the oppressed who need help.

It is not the formal attire itself which is condemned here, but the abuse of it. Sometimes, therefore, praise is given to those who, though wrapped in robes, do not flaunt their importance. Commenting on the meaning of Isaiah 23:18, “Rather shall her profits go to those who abide before the Lord,” the sage says to R. Ishmael b. R. Jose: “It refers to people like you and your friends and two men wrapped in cloaks like you who do not feel yourselves important.”¹⁹

2) Arrogant demonstrations of piety: exaggerated details of ritual attire (Mt. 23:5). Whereas Mark and Luke speak of “cloaks,” the parallel in Matthew speaks of the wearing of “broad phylacteries” (φυλακτήρια, signifying תפלין)²⁰ and “long fringes” (κράσπεδα, ציצית). These details, too, are mentioned in rabbinic criticism of Pharisaic peacockery, besides the already mentioned flaunting of the cloaks to which those fringes were attached. Thus on the verse “I further observed all the oppression ... behold the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them” (Eccles. 4:1), Ecclesiastes Rabbah comments:

R. Benjamin interpreted the verse as referring to hypocrites in regard to Torah [תורה]. People suppose that they can read the Scriptures and the Mishnah, but they cannot. They wrap themselves in cloaks and put phylacteries on their heads. Of them it is written, “Behold, the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them.” “It is mine to punish” says God, as it is said: “Cursed be they who do the work of the Lord deceitfully.” (Jer. 48:10)

The juxtaposition of the demonstration of ceremonial piety on the one hand, and oppression of the underprivileged on the other, is thus clearly reflected in the rabbinic literature too. Similarly, in interpreting the commandment against taking God’s name in vain, Pesiqta Rabbati 22:5 states:²¹ “You are not to put on phylacteries and wrap yourself in your [fringed] cloak [טלית] and then go forth and commit transgression.”

The responsa of the Gaonic period include an elaborated version of the interpretation of this commandment. To the ostentatious wearing of phylacteries and the fringed cloak, it adds the accusation of arrogating to oneself the first place at dinner, also mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 23:6, Mk. 12:39 and Lk. 20:46):

17. Midrash on Psalms, Buber ed., p. 81.

18. Buber, *ibid.*, notes.

19. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:9.

20. For the equation of φυλακτήρια in Matthew with תפלין, see J.H. Tigay, “On the Term Phylacteries (Matt. 23:5),” *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1978), 45–52.

21. Friedmann ed., 111b.

“Do not take God’s name in vain” — R. Simon said: “If this refers to a false oath, this is superfluous because it has already been said: ‘You shall not swear falsely by My name’ [Lev. 19:12]. But what it means here is that you are not to wrap yourself in a cloak, cover yourself with the fringes, transgress the Torah in secrecy, presume to make the blessing first, open [the meal] first or take the portion first.”²²

Making the phylacteries broad as an ostentatious sign of status, exactly as found in Matthew 23:5, is mentioned in the testimony of R. Hai Gaon (10th century C.E.):

It was the custom in the academy for the students to make their phylacteries small, no higher than a finger ... whereas the great rabbis would make theirs some three fingers high, so that the students should not be equal to them.²³

The term “hypocrites in regard to Torah” (חנפֿי תורה), quoted above from Ecclesiastes Rabbah, is attested also in Leviticus Rabbah interpreting Ecclesiastes 5:5:²⁴

“Do not let your mouth bring you into disfavor” — R. Benjamin interpreted this verse as referring to hypocrites in regard to Torah.

3) Ostentatious behavior in tithing all kinds of petty things: observing minutiae of the Law, such as tithing mint, dill and cumin, while sinning against the great principles of the Law (Mt. 23:23; Lk. 11:47). This, too, has its parallels in Jewish Pharisaic lore, which accuses Esau of exactly the same behavior pattern. On Genesis 25:28, “because [the meat from his] hunting was in his mouth” [כִּי צִיד בְּפִיו], the Midrash comments: “He [Esau] used to ask his father, ‘Does one give tithe from straw? Does one give tithe from salt or water?’”²⁵ In “mouthing” such questions, according to this interpretation, Esau “hunted” his father’s esteem by pretending to be a very pious man.

To sum up, accusations of Pharisaic hypocrisy in the Gospels contain motifs identical with the accusations in the rabbinic sources. These are: 1) not practicing what one preaches; 2) ostentatiously wearing cloaks; 3) showing off phylacteries and fringes; 4) demanding the first place at dinner; 5) tithing trivial things. All these are denounced in rabbinic literature, a fact which shows that such a critique was prevalent in Judaism at the time when Christianity began to take shape.

It appears that the critique of Pharisaic hypocrisy was a common phenomenon in Judaism of the first centuries of the common era. When the authors of the Synoptic Gospels wrote about Pharisaic hypocrites, they were using material that was widespread in Pharisaic lore itself.

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22. J. Mueller, *Teshuvot Ge'onet Mizrab u-Ma'arav* (Berlin, 1888), par. 132; cf. par. 171.

23. Cf. J.H. Tigay, op. cit., p. 49 and reference there.

24. Margulies ed., p. 357.

25. See Genesis Rabbah 63:10, Albeck ed., p. 693, and note there.