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Presenting the Pharisees as self-righteous hypocrites concerned more with the law than with people is prejudicial, biblically inaccurate and offensive to many Jews, several scholars said.

The prejudice has been around for so long and is so deep that dictionaries in most languages list one of the definitions of "pharisee" as: "A self-righteous or hypocritical person."

From the early Christian theologians to Pope Francis, Christianity has a long tradition of repeating the stereotyped view of Pharisees, but Rome's Pontifical Biblical Institute and the Pontifical Gregorian University hope to gather the best in recent scholarship on the important Jewish leaders and offer suggestions for how to preach on Gospel readings that portray Pharisees in a bad light.

Pope Francis already has accepted a request to meet participants in the conference on "Jesus and the Pharisees: An Interdisciplinary Reappraisal," which will be held May 7-9 at the Gregorian University.

Fr. Joseph Sievers, a professor at the Biblical Institute and the driving force behind the conference, told reporters April 3 that "for Jews, the Pharisees were the antecedents of the rabbis, they were admirable teachers who kept Judaism alive apart from the Temple and in the diaspora."

Yet Christians, relying particularly on Matthew 23 with its repeated examples of Jesus saying, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees," became convinced that they were the perfect example of a hypocrite, he said.

As a result of modern scholarship, including study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, he said, "we know less today than previous generation thought they knew," which is why the conference will seek the best in current knowledge from Catholic, Jewish and Protestant Scripture scholars, theologians, historians, archaeologists and experts in preaching, education and the arts.

As for Pope Francis' regular use of the Pharisee stereotype, Sievers said that "we are aware of those references," but one also must recognize "the unquestioned love of Francis for Jews and Judaism," seen in his long-term friendships.

The pope's references to Pharisees, he said, are "a detail," which pales in comparison to his "basic attitude" toward Jews and Judaism.

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar from Vanderbilt University involved in organizing the conference, told reporters that the only self-identified Pharisee whose writing survives to this day is St. Paul. In Philippians 3:5 he writes that he was "of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee."

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For the Jews of Jesus' day and immediately after, she said, the Pharisees were "the best teachers, the most accurate interpreters of Torah, they had the support of the masses."

But the Gospels portray them not only as hypocrites, but also "lovers of money and enemies of Jesus," Levine said, which is why a multidisciplinary approach is needed to understand the Pharisees.

Jesus' arguments with the Pharisees in the New Testament, she said, are a very Jewish depiction of how Jewish teachers wrestled with religious questions.

"You don't need to make the Pharisees look bad to make Jesus look good," she said. "He looks good on his own."

The widespread prejudice against Pharisees, she said, fits into the anti-Jewish presentation of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures being a "God of wrath" and the God of the New Testament being a "God of love."

Fr. Etienne Veto, director of the Gregorian's Cardinal Bea Center for Judaic Studies, told reporters, "a lot is at stake for our understanding of the Christian religion and also of present-day Judaism," which finds its roots in the Pharisees and their influence on how the faith was to be lived after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE.

"There is a relation between an incorrect view of Pharisees and anti-Semitism," Veto said.