

Where Rabbis and Christian Ministers BOTH Went Wrong!

What Do You Mean, “The Pharisees sit in Moses’ Seat”?

What is the true explanation of the puzzling Scripture in Matthew 23:2-3? Christ said, “The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, But do not according to their works: for they say, and do not do.” Yet in Matthew 16:6 He said, “Take heed and BEWARE of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Is this a contradiction? How can we understand this question? What is the truth?

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A man wrote to me saying, “In regards to Matthew 23:2-3, the ‘word for word’ translation of the Hebrew Shem Tov version of the gospel of Matthew says, literally, ‘Now all which is said [by them] to you keep and do; but their ordinances and deeds do not do, because they say and do not’ (Matt.23:3). The subject of the part quoted is the ‘scribes and Pharisees’ (v.2). So why do you claim the things said refers to the things written by Moses, the Torah? The expression ‘their ordinances and deeds’ obviously refers to the Rabbis and Pharisees’ teachings. The subject of this passage is the Pharisees and the sages, not the words of Moses!”

Let’s get this straight! There is no contradiction in God’s Word! “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (II Tim.3:16). “Every word of God is pure [“tested, refined, found pure”, margin]” (Prov.30:5). “Your word is very pure, therefore your servant loves it” (Psalm 119:140).

In Matthew 23, Jesus Christ seems to say that the Pharisees sat in “Moses’ seat,” and that therefore we should do and observe according to their teachings – or so many believe, today. But what did the Messiah REALLY say?

“Snakes, Fools, Blind Guides, Hypocrites”

In many other Scriptures, He called the Pharisees names such as “snakes,” “vipers,” “hypocrites,” and said they were “blind,” and warned His followers to “beware” of their doctrines! Read the rest of Matthew 23, verses 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24,25,26,27, 29, 33. He calls these very Pharisees “hypocrites” seven times, “fools and blind” twice, “blind guides” twice,” and even “serpents, brood of vipers”!

Therefore, just what did He really mean in Matthew 23:2-3?

In the King James Version of the Bible, we read in Matthew 23:2-3, the following words of Jesus: “The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.”

The NIV Bible has these verses: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you to. But do not what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”

Moffatt has this passage: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses; so do whatever they tell you, obey them, but do not do as they do. They talk, but they do not act.”

Now, it *sounds, on the surface*, that Jesus is saying do everything the scribes and Pharisees teach, command, whatever they tell you – EVERYTHING! But in view of their hypocrisy, blindness, and wickedness, that makes no sense at all!

This same Jesus also says: “*Take heed and beware* of the LEAVEN of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” (Matt.16:6). The disciples thought He was talking about physical bread, containing leavening, but He explained He was not talking about physical bread, but their TEACHING! “Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the DOCTRINE of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” (verses 7-12).

So what did Yeshua really mean in Matthew 23:2-3? The answer is given in a book written by a Jewish scholar, who used to be an Orthodox Jew.

Shem Tov’s Version of Matthew

Nehemia Gordon used to be an Orthodox Jew. He wrote a book in which he sheds new light and understanding on the “seat of Moses” discussed in Shem-Tov’s Hebrew gospel of Matthew. Entitled *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus: New Light on the Seat of Moses from Shem-Tov’s Hebrew Matthew*, this new book is a trenchant, cogent, concise new translation of the Hebrew of Shem-Tov’s Matthew.

Shem-Tov’s Hebrew version of Matthew is slightly different from the Greek version of Matthew. – but with a whole lot of difference in meaning! It says, translated into English:

“The Pharisees and sages sit upon the seat of Moses. Therefore all that **he** says to you, diligently do, but according to **their** reforms (*takanot*, תְּקִנּוֹת) and **their** precedents (*ma’asim* מַעֲשִׂים) do not do, because they talk but they do not do.”

Says Nehemia Gordon, “In the Hebrew Matthew, Yeshua is telling his disciples *not* to obey the Pharisees. If their claim to authority is that they sit in *Moses’ seat*, **then diligently do as Moses says!**” (page 48).

The Greek differs from the Hebrew here. The Greek says “they,” and can be misunderstood. The Hebrew says “he,” referring to Moses himself! In Hebrew, Yeshua told His disciples to obey “all that *he* [Moses] says to do, in the Torah!

These are two fundamentally different messages – “they” versus “he.” But amazing as it sounds, in the Hebrew there is a difference of only *one single letter!* In Hebrew, “he says” is

yomar. But “they say,” in Hebrew, is *yomru*. The only difference in the Hebrew text is the addition of a single *vav* [ו]. Notice below:

“he says”	<i>yomar</i>	אמר
“they say”	<i>yomru</i>	אמרו

Such a simple difference! It is easy to see how the *vav* may have been left out of the Greek translation from the Hebrew somewhere along the line by a copyist.

The point is, however, this interpretation adds so much more insight and meaning and relevance to the passage of Scripture in Matthew 23:2-3.

Where the Pharisees and Modern Rabbis Went Wrong

The rabbis distinguished between Biblical law and their own invented laws which they called by the term *takanot*, “reforms.” In actual fact, they place their “Oral Law” of rabbinic interpretations and “decisions” ABOVE the written law of the Torah – ABOVE SCRIPTURE!

In the Mishnah – the compendium of Jewish Oral Law – we read this astounding statement!

Sanhedrin 11:3. Greater stringency applies to [the observance of the words of Scribes than to [the observance of] the words of the [written] Law.” (*The Mishnah*, translated by Herbert Danby, Oxford University Press, 1933).

“A more strict rule applies to the teaching of scribes than to the teachings of Torah” (*The Mishnah, a New Translation*, by Jacob Neusner).

Interestingly, the Mishnah goes on to expound on the PENALTY for going against the “teaching” of the scribes, the oral Law and its interpretations, saying.

“A. They put him to DEATH not in the court of his own town or in the court which is in Yabneh, but they bring him up to the high court which is in Jerusalem.

“B. ‘And they keep him until the festival, and they put him to death on the festival,

“C. as it is said, *And all the people shall hear and fear and no more do presumptuously.*

“D. R. Judah says, ‘They do not delay the judgment of this one, but they put him to death at once.

“E. ‘And they write messages and send them with messengers to every place;

“F. ‘Mr. So-and-so, son of Mr. So-and-so, has been declared liable to the *death penalty* by the court’” (Sanhedrin 11:4).

NO WONDER CHRIST THUNDERED AGAINST THE JEWISH APOSTATES AND REBELS AGAINST THE TORAH!

The “Traditions of Men”

The Pharisees and Rabbis placed their own “traditions” above Scripture! In Matthew 15:3, Yeshua told the Pharisees to their faces, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your TRADITION?”

He then went on, explaining, “This people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And IN VAIN they worship Me, *teaching as DOCTRINES the commandments of MEN*” (Matt. 15:8-9).

And as the gospel of Mark declares, “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the TRADITION OF MEN” (Mark 7:8). The Greek word for “tradition” here is *paradosis* and means, “transmission, i.e. a precept; spec. the Jewish *traditionary law*” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, #3862).

Shem-Tov’s text of Matthew shows us that Yeshua was warning his disciples not to follow the *takanot* or man-made laws of the Rabbis. Yeshua accused the Pharisees of putting their own invented laws above the law of the Torah. Interestingly, the very same Hebrew word Yeshua used for “traditions” of the Pharisees in Matthew 15:3 and Mark 7:8 is the very same word in the Hebrew Shem-Tov – the word *takanot*.

Yeshua also warned His disciples about the *ma’asim* of the Pharisees. This word means “precedents” or “acts or deeds that serve as precedents” (Gordon, p.51). The term is unique to Phariseeism. They reasoned that if one of their teachers did an act, it must have been what the Oral Law required. (The Oral Law is that law handed down by oral communication, from generation to generation, rabbi to rabbi, later written down in the Mishnah).

The phrase *ma'asei hatorah* in Hebrew can also mean “works of the law,” something that the apostle Paul condemned in the book of Galatians in no unclear language. It also means “precedents,” as obtained from Rabbinic interpretations of the law, which could often negate the very law of God itself. As Gordon says, “‘works of the law’ refers to the application of the Torah as interpreted by the authors of this legal document [one of the Dead Sea Scrolls known as 4QMMT] *which at times significantly differs from what the Torah actually says*. Based on this explanation, Yeshua would be instructing his disciples to follow the Torah but warning them not to accept the Pharisaic interpretations of the Torah” (p.52).

Clearly, whether we use the Greek or the Hebrew text, however, Christ was by no means telling His disciples to “do what the Pharisees said to do,” UNLESS what they said to do came from the very Torah or Law of God itself! He clearly said NOT to do “according to their works,” but to obey God’s Law always (Matt.19:17; 5:17-19).

The “works” of the Pharisees included claiming “total authority” in the interpretation of Scripture and laying down “rules” and extra “laws” for the people to obey, thus putting a “yoke of bondage” over the necks of the people!

“Absolute Authority”

A major fundamental precept of Rabbinic/Pharisaic Judaism is the belief that the Rabbis have absolute authority to interpret Scripture, and what they say in religious matters is binding even if it is known to be factually untrue. Many so-called “Christian” ministers and churches seem to have the SAME PROBLEM!

This is best expressed by the Rabbinic doctrine that if the Rabbis say right is left or left is right you must obey them! For example, one of the latest *Midrashim* is *Seder Olam Rabbah* which dates to the second century of the present era. It states, concerning the religious authority of the Rabbis:

“Even if they instruct you that right is left or left is right, you must obey them” (*Sifre Deuteronomy* 154 on Deut. 17:11).

Does that make sense to you? Of course not!

This reminds me of the famous “oral law” of Evangelist Waterhouse who used to say of Herbert W. Armstrong, head of the Worldwide Church of God, “Follow him – *right or wrong!*” Many religious leaders today, from the Pope on down to many self-styled “prophets,” claim such “authority.” Such a claim is VERY DANGEROUS to the people of God!

Twisting Scripture

A renowned Jewish Rabbi and teacher, Moses Maimonides in the 12th century, went so far as to say, dogmatically, “If there are 1000 prophets, all of them of the stature of Elijah and Elisha, giving a certain interpretation, you shall ‘incline after the majority’ (Exodus 23 :2) and the law is according to the 1001 rabbis, not according to the 1000 venerable prophets.”

He went on, “Thus God did not permit us to learn from the prophets, only from the Rabbis who are men of logic and reason” (see Nehemia Gordon, page 84).

Can you believe it?

The incident of Rabbi Eliezer in the *Babylonian Talmud*, *Baba Metsia* 59b holds a central place in modern Rabbinic theology. According to the story, Rabbi Eliezer was the greatest of the Rabbinical sages of his time. One day he was engaged in a debate over some minute points of the rabbinic law, and he brought forth every imaginable argument to support his stand. But the other rabbis were not convinced. He grew very frustrated. They were just hardheaded, stubborn,

intransigent, and unwilling to bend or listen to reason. In desperation, he invoked a miracle, “If I am right, let the trees prove it!”

There was a great rumble, and all the trees of an orchard outside their meeting place were uprooted and began flying through the air. The rabbis retorted, “We do not listen to trees!”

Eliezer then cried out, “If I am right, let the rivers prove it!” The rabbis ran outside, and saw the great river begin to flow backwards. They were very impressed, but stonily replied, “We do not listen to rivers!”

So the rabbi exclaimed, “If I am right, let the walls of the academy prove it!” The walls of the building where they were sitting began to cave in and crumble. Again the rabbis obdurately replied, “We do not listen to walls.”

Finally, Eliezer shouted, “If I am right, let Heaven prove it!” A voice from heaven then thundered, “Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that the law agrees with him?” The rabbis were still unconvinced, and declared, “Sorry, we do not listen to Heaven!”

Thus modern rabbis conclude that *the interpretations of the rabbis* supercede the direct decrees of God Himself in heaven!

Rabbinic theologians, based on this apocryphal incident, claim that any prophet who prophesies that the Rabbis are wrong on even a minor point of interpretation, must be *executed*.

Moses Maimonides

Moses Maimonides (Rambam), a 12th century Rabbinic theologian and scholar, wrote as follows:

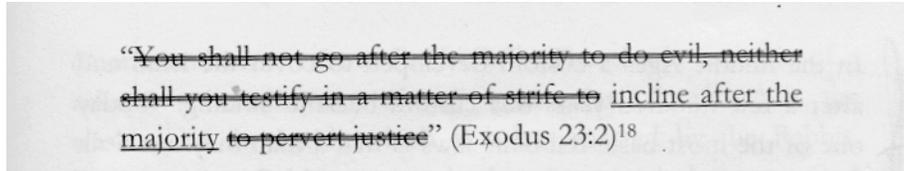
“If there are 1000 prophets, all of them of the stature of Elijah and Elisha, giving a certain interpretation, and 1001 rabbis giving the opposite interpretation, you shall ‘incline after the majority’ (Exodus 23:2) and the law is according to the 1001 rabbis, not according to the 1000 venerable prophets. And thus our Sages said, ‘By God, if we heard the matter directly from the mouth of Joshua the son of Nun, we would not obey him nor would we listen to him!’ The Sages said further, ‘If Elijah comes and tells us, “The levirate obligation is cancelled through a shoe” (see Deuteronomy 25:9), we will listen to him [because this is what the Oral Law teaches], but if he says it is cancelled through a sandal, we will not listen to him [because that is contrary to the Oral Law].’ . . .

“And so if a prophet testified that the Holy One, Blessed be He, told him that the law of a certain commandment is correct, that prophet must be EXECUTED., as it is written, ‘it is not in heaven’ (Deuteronomy 30: 12). *Thus God does not permit us to LEARN from the prophets, ONLY FROM THE RABBIS who are men of logic and reason*” (Maimonides, p.27-28).

No wonder that Yeshua was furious with them and their works! If you carefully read the Scripture Maimonides cited (Exodus 23:2), you will see that it said the very *opposite* of his statement! It says:

“You shall NOT follow a majority in wrongdoing. . . you shall NOT side with a majority to pervert justice.”

But notice! Here is what the esteemed RABBIS do to this Scripture –



God often sends prophets to WARN a “majority” when they are WRONG and going ASTRAY! What will happen if the people follow the ministers, or rabbis, instead, and do not listen to the prophet sent by God?

The Warning of Ezekiel

Ezekiel the prophet records the words of God who says: “When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at YOUR hand.

“Nevertheless if you WARN the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall DIE in his iniquity but you have delivered your soul” (Ezekiel 33:8-9).

The Jewish people have written their traditions, and rabbinical reasonings, so that they REPLACE THE ORACLES OF GOD! Therefore if and when God sends a prophet to them, they WILL NOT LISTEN – because they put their “traditions” and “rabbis” before the prophets of God and the very word – the Scriptures – of God Himself!

The overwhelming vast majority of so-called Christian “ministers” of various churches do the very same thing. They have “sanctified” the words of a mere man, such as Herbert W. Armstrong, and therefore rule that any new teaching, Biblical truth, or knowledge that God sends through an inspired servant or prophet or minister CANNOT BE RIGHT, so they reject it out of hand, with hardly a murmur or whimper or whisper.

And thousands are being deceived and being led straight into the JAWS OF HORROR and the FURIOUS FLAMES OF THE LAKE OF FIRE – GEHENNA HELL ITSELF!

True Authority

The apostles Peter and John had the right answer for those who attempt to coerce us to “follow men” or their rules and statements, right or wrong. They told the Sanhedrin full of rabbis, Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, in their day:

“WE OUGHT TO *OBEY GOD* RATHER THAN MEN”
(Acts 5 :29).

Joshua himself put it plainly, when he addressed Israel, as they were about to settle down in the Promised Land. He asserted:

“*Choose for yourselves* this day whom you will serve
But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD!”
(Joshua 24:15)

Or as Elijah the prophet put it:

“How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him”
(I Kings 18:21).

Or as the apostle Paul declared:

“EXAMINE YOURSELVES as to whether you are in the faith. TEST YOURSELVES. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified”
(II Cor.13:5).

Isaiah puts it plainly. He wrote, “Bind up the *testimony* and seal up the *law* among my disciples” (Isaiah 8:16). Isaiah declares, “To the LAW [Torah] and to the testimony [of the prophets!]: if they [any rabbis or ministers or teachers] speak not according to *this word [these instructions]*, it is because there is NO LIGHT in them” (Isaiah 8:20).

In other words, the SCRIPTURES are the final authority ! We must look to THEM in order to be warned, preserved, and protected from deception and false teaching!

“**All Scripture** is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (II Tim.3:16-17).

Every Word of God is reliable, truthful, and pure (Psalm 19:7-11; see also Psalm 119:9-11,17,57,74,89-92, 97-104). “Prove all things,” the apostle Paul wrote (I Thess.5:21). How? Do as the Bereans did! “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and EXAMINED THE SCRIPTURES EVERY DAY *to see if what Paul said was true*” (Acts 17:11).

The Danger and Peril Today

What is the real message, then, in Matthew 23, for all of us, today? It is a warning to BEWARE of false ministers, or even supposedly “true” ministers, who claim to “sit on Moses’ seat,” and who lead people astray by stressing their own authority, but who pervert, twist, and distort the truth of Scripture and the Word of God!

The Pharisees were guilty in their day, and they will suffer great judgment as a result. Jesus said of them, “Serpents! Brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?” (Matt.23:33). The same could be said of MANY ministers of different churches, as well as rabbis among the Jews, and Messianic Jewish groups, *TODAY!*

There are many MODERN Pharisee like teachers and ministers lurking out there today, ready to deceive and being deceived (II Tim.3:13).

Orthodox Judaism says they are to be followed, since they sit in Moses’ seat. Even when they contradict the Scriptures, they say it is all right, because they have replaced the Scriptures as our final authority.

The Pope at Rome does the very same thing. He claims the rulings of the Popes are above the Scriptures and must be obeyed and followed, to the letter! Many churches have used the same reasoning, and apply it to Christians. Don’t worry about doctrine, or teachings, they say – that is “our responsibility.” But “just be loyal, and follow us – if we are wrong, that does not concern you. It is our responsibility.”

And so they lead their flocks straight to Hell!

All they want is your allegiance to them. They want your money, your tithes and offerings. They say, in effect, “Just pray, pay, and obey” – pray to God, pay your tithes, and obey your ministers! But to follow a pernicious teaching like that – which is commonly done among churches today – is to set yourself up for self-destruction, the Great Tribulation, and even the wrath and fury of God.

To follow men and ignore His plain Word, is to commit IDOLATRY! Such a course of action is ultimately a short-cut to the fierce flames of Gehenna fire, which will consume, destroy and blot out forever the lives and souls of the wicked!

Where do you stand?

There should be no confusion, or divided sense of loyalty. Christ rejected the authority of the Pharisees, except where they taught the Word of God. He rejected every law or tradition they introduced which “abolished” or “changed” a divine, eternal law of God.

This includes their changing of the true Calendar of God in 358 A.D. when they replaced God’s Calendar with their “fixed” calendar, adding “postponements,” and “averaging out” new moons. Many of the remnant churches err also in following them in this idolatrous apostasy! Others, on the other hand, do even worse, by observing a pagan Roman calendar, and HUMAN PAGAN TRADITIONS, dressed up to “look” as if they were “Christian,” such as Easter, Christmas, Halloween, or in some cases, even a Paganized “Passover” kept on the wrong day and in the wrong manner, and a Paganized “Pentecost,” also observed on the wrong day! You need to WAKE UP, and “PROVE ALL THINGS,” as Paul cried out!

Where will you be standing when Christ returns?