

Matthew's *Hebrew* Gospel helps solve the Riddle of the true "authority" of the Pharisees who sat on "Moses' Seat"

What Is "Moses' Seat"?

In Matthew 23, Jesus Christ said 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? 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! Therefore, just what did He mean in Matthew 23:2-3? Amazing new light has been shed on this subject by scholarly research from the HEBREW original version of Matthew's gospel!

William F. Dankenbring

The complete Hebrew text of the gospel of Matthew is still in existence! Although many may not be aware of it, Matthew originally wrote his gospel in the Hebrew language. The early church fathers attested to this fact in their writings.

Eusebius in his *Church History*, discussing the canonization of the Scriptures, quoted Origen as follows: "Among the four gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was *prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language*" (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Church History of Eusebius*, book VI, chap.xxv, 4, page 272).

Eusebius himself tells us, "For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing *in his native tongue*, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence" (*ibid.*, book III, chap. XXIV, 6, page 152).

Eusebius quotes Irenaeus also on this matter of Matthew's gospel. According to Irenaeus, "Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews *in their own language*,

while Peter and Paul were preaching and founding the church in Rome” (*ibid.*, book V, chap. VIII, 2, page 222).

Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, made this statement. He declared, as recorded in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church” (book III, chap.I, 1, vol. 1, page 414).

Eusebius also quotes Papias, (circa 60-130 A.D.), as the earliest church father who related that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew. He declared: “But concerning Matthew he [Papias] writes as follows: ‘So then Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able’” (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Church History of Eusebius*, bk. III, chap.39, 16, page 173).

Matthew’s Hebrew Gospel

But do we have a copy of Matthew’s gospel in the Hebrew language, as it was originally written, according to these ancient sources?

The amazing fact is that the complete Hebrew text of Matthew’s gospel was preserved in the body of a 14th century Jewish polemical treatise entitled *Evan Bohar*. The author of the treatise, one by the name of Shem Tov Ben Isaac Ben Shaprut, completed his work in 1385 A.D. and revised it several times afterwards. He utilized nine different Hebrew manuscripts of the preserved Gospel of Matthew to compile his translation.

Ben Shaprut was no Christian. He was a Jewish rabbi who was writing to defend his faith against the encroachments of Christian theologians. To counter-act the teachings of Matthew, he used Matthew’s original Hebrew Gospel, and carefully compiled his translation.

The gospel of Matthew, in the Hebrew, has now been translated into English, and is available from Mercer University Press, in Macon, Georgia (ISBN 0-86554-4700). It is titled simply, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, by George Howard. It is a fascinating book to read, and compare with our modern English versions, translated from the Greek copies of the Gospel. The similarities are most remarkable, as well as the many insights the Hebrew gives in many textual areas where the Greek seems mystifying.

Says George Howard, it is clear from the evidence that the Hebrew Matthew contained in the text of Shem Tov’s *Evan Bohan* predates the 14th century – in fact, the evidence strongly suggests it goes back to the earliest centuries since Christ!

Howard declares that of the nine manuscripts used by Shem Tov Ben Shaprut, two of the writings are virtually identical, are carefully copied, and show3 minimal tendency toward scribal error or assimilation to the canonical Greek and Latin.

Says Howard, since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, many of which are written in Hebrew, it is now known for a fact that Hebrew was used as a written medium in the first century – the time of Christ and the apostles. Hebrew, and even Greek, were both spoken in first century Palestine.

Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew is the earliest complete Hebrew text we now have of Matthew's gospel. However, Jewish and anti-Christian writings prior to the 14th century often quote excerpts from Matthew in Hebrew, in a Shem-Tov type form. Says Howard, "Shem-Tob's comments, scattered throughout the Hebrew text, confirm that this text is not a creation of the fourteenth century. The comments preserve telltale remarks implying that Shem-Tob had before him a preexisting Hebrew Matthew" (*Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, page 173).

Although Howard says Shem-Tob's Matthew "does not preserve the original in a pure form," nevertheless, he adds, "Considerable parts of the original, however, appear to remain, including its unpolished style, ungrammatical constructions, and Aramaized forms" (p.178).

The Hebrew gospel of Matthew, he points out, is saturated with literary devices, such as puns, word connections, and alliteration, which make sense in Hebrew, but are lost in the Greek form of Matthew. They belong to the very structure of the Hebrew text, thus showing that the Hebrew is authentic, and was not translated from the Greek texts of Matthew which were extant.

Interestingly, the Hebrew Matthew text of Shem Tov has "significant agreement" with the Codex Sinaiticus, which was discovered in the middle of the 19th century, five centuries after Shem Tov translated his copy from the Hebrew. The Codex Sinaiticus was discovered in the monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula where it had been hidden for many centuries, since the medieval period, until its discovery. As Howard states, therefore, "The roots for their agreement, therefore, must go back to the early centuries of the Christian era" (page 192).

Also pointing to the early age of the Shem Tov Matthew, it is striking in that it has many agreements with the Old Syriac gospel of Matthew, which was displaced by the Peshitta text around the end of the fifth century, and only two copies have survived. However, "The many readings shared by Shem-Tob and the Old Syriac, therefore, strongly suggest a relationship, whose roots go back to the early centuries of the Christian era" says Howard (p. 196).

Howard points out that there are also readings in Shem-Tov's Matthew which agree with one of the other Gospels, but disagree with the Greek version of Matthew. This fact, he says, suggest that the author of John's gospel, for example, which was written later, must have known of a Shem-Tov type of text for Matthew's gospel, and used it when he wrote his gospel.

Thus, when we look at it objectively, there is strong reason to believe that the Shem-Tov Hebrew Gospel of Matthew is a very useful and helpful copy of the original gospel of Matthew, which was indeed written in Hebrew, according to the early church fathers, based on knowledge handed down to them.

Let us, therefore, examine the text of Shem-Fov's Matthew, in Matthew 23, where the controversy arises as to just what Matthew was recording concerning the "seat of Moses," upon which the scribes and Pharisees "sat."

Moses' Seat in History

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."

Moffat 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 this cannot possibly be, because 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).

The Pharisees claimed to represent Moses; they said they followed Moses' teachings. But all too often, they did not! They were hypocrites! They added many additional commands to the laws God gave through Moses – including many "Sabbath" restrictions, holy day restrictions, and spiritual minutiae, turning the laws of God into a yoke of miserable bondage which nobody could bear.

Jesus told His disciples, in Luke's gospel,, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. Therefore, whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be preached upon the housetops" (Luke 12:1-3).

Jesus certainly did not mean for us to do *everything* that the Pharisees taught – for He Himself often contradicted them, and disobeyed their “legal requirements” regarding the Sabbath, washing the hands, and such like! In fact, He upbraided and corrected them on these and similar issues, where they had made the laws of Moses, and of God, whom they claimed to represent, of NO EFFECT!

When the Pharisees questioned why His disciples did not wash their hands before eating, according to their ritual and practice, Jesus replied: “Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; and honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. *Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But IN VAIN they do worship me, teaching for DOCTRINES the commandments of men . . .*” (Matt.15:3-9).

Jesus certainly did not mean for His disciples to do EVERYTHING the scribes and Pharisees taught, regarding the Scriptures, the law of God, because they added many VAIN TRADITIONS and false interpretations to that LAW given by God through Moses!

What, then, did He mean in Matthew 23:2-3?

What Do You Mean, “Moses’ Seat”?

In Exodus 18.13 we read, "And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses SAT to judge the people: and the people stood by Moses from the morning unto the evening." Now, let's be honest with the Word of God. Moses sat, judging the people. Obviously, then, he was sitting down – in a “seat” of some sort, as he exercised his authority, given to him by God. What was this “authority”? Well, he JUDGED among the people! How did he do this?

Let us read on, and see exactly what Moses did, while he "sat" in his seat! Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, was concerned that Moses would wear himself out, handling so many people's problems. He asked him why he did this.

"And Moses said unto his father in law, 'Because the people come unto me to INQUIRE OF GOD: When they have a matter, they come unto me; and I *judge* between one and another, and I DO MAKE THEM *KNOW YHE STATUTES OF GOD, AND HIS LAWS*'" (Exodus 18.15-16).

Do you see? Moses, in his "seat," TAUGHT THE PEOPLE THE LAWS, COMMANDMENTS, AND STATUTES OF GOD! He was a ruler and a teacher. He expounded and interpreted God's Laws, and helped people see HOW THEY APPLIED in specific, human and societal situations.

This was the primary function of those who later "sat in Moses' seat." This was what Jesus said plainly that the Pharisees were responsible for. He said they sat in Moses' seat – so the responsibility of explaining, expounding, interpreting God's laws, and issuing judgments based upon them, was theirs to handle. Jesus said so. BUT – did He really say we should do WHATEVER they tell us to do – *even if it disagreed with the words of Moses – and the Torah – the WRITTEN LAWS of GOD?*

Of course not! The Scriptures CANNOT be broken (John 10:35). God's Word is TRUTH (John 17:17). Therefore, one Scripture cannot contradict another one. If it appears to be so, then it must be our UNDERSTANDING that is wrong!

Jesus plainly said we are to do what the scribes and Pharisees said, and observe what they said, but elsewhere to plainly told us to BEWARE of their doctrines and their teachings – particularly their "TRADITIONS OF MEN," which they ADDED TO the Laws of Moses and the Laws of GOD!

Notice His precise words again, and write them on your heart:

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: ALL therefore, whatsoever they bid you observe, that OBSERVE AND DO . . ." (Matt.23;1-3).

Clearly, their authority was to be obeyed *so long as it was not used to contradict the very Word of God itself*, so long as their words were NOT CONTRARY to Scripture, or the plain meaning of God's LAW, or the express commands of Jesus Christ, the Word of God (John 1:1-3, 14).

The Apostles and the Jewish Sanhedrin

In the book of Acts, the Pharisees, sitting in the Sanhedrin, their Supreme Court, *commanded* the apostles of Christ not to preach in His Name. This was a direct command, which they gave while they "sat" on the "seat of Moses," and issued their judicial rulings and decisions. We read in Acts: "And when they [the officers] had brought them [the apostles], they set them before the council [the Sanhedrin]: and the high priest asked them, saying, Did not we straitly COMMAND you that ye should not teach in this name? And, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, "*We ought to OBEY GOD rather than men*" (Acts 5:27-29).

Notice! The apostles themselves ran into this situation, where the scribes and Pharisees commanded them not to preach in the name of Jesus. This was a "command" issued by the Sanhedrin – by those who "sat" on "Moses' seat."

According to some people's interpretation, therefore, Peter and the apostles should have said, "Okay, you are right. You sit in Moses' seat. Whatever you say, we must do – everything you say. Therefore, we apologize, and we will no longer preach in

the name of Christ!”

Does that make any sense? Of course NOT!

Peter and the apostles responded, "We must *obey God rather than man*" (Acts 5:29). How clear! The REAL meaning of Jesus' words, therefore, in Matthew 23:2-3, is that we should OBEY the Pharisees and scribes SO LONG AS WHAT THEY SAY IS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE WORD – THE WRITTEN LAW – OF GOD!

Otherwise, when they disagree with God's plain instructions, we must "OBEY GOD *rather than men*" – *even men who "sit" in "Moses' seat"*!

The fact that the Pharisees, scribes, and priests of Jesus' day, sometimes *abused* their authority, did not give the people license to disobey them when they taught the truth according to the Scriptures. Their office, as leaders and teachers, was to be respected and honored. But whenever they issued a decree or command that contradicted GOD's Word, then, we are to obey God rather than even human authority which sits in Moses' seat! We should, however, obey them, in all those matters where there is no conflict with the Word of God!

Let me reiterate this vital point: The fact that the Pharisees, and priests of Jesus' day, at times abused their authority, did not give the people license to disobey them *when they taught the commandments of God*, for those commandments did not originate with the Pharisees, but with GOD!

Laws of God Vs. Traditions of Men

We all know that the Pharisees were hypocrites, and fools, in Christ's time (see Matthew 23:13,14,15,17,19,23,24,26,27,28,29,33). They, as a whole, had become a "generation of vipers."

But that did not do away with their authority from God, as they "sat on Moses' seat," to teach the commandments of God!

We know, however, that they added many human "do's and don't's" to the law of God, and human traditions, making the law of God of no effect -- such as the "washing of cups, pitchers and kettles" (Mark 7.4).

Jesus rebuked them powerfully, saying, "Howbeit in VAIN do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of MEN. For laying ASIDE the commandments of God, ye hold the *tradition of men*, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said to them, *Full well ye REJECT the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition*" (Mark 7:7-9).

These "traditions" – called "halacha" by the Rabbis -- they "added" to the laws of God, as a sort of "fence" to prevent the laws being trampled. But the FENCE often

replaced the LAW itself, becoming another LAW!

There “traditions of men,,” therefore, were not binding upon the people. God never gave the scribes and Pharisees authority to ADD TO His law -- merely to explain and interpret it correctly!

Jesus rebuked them severely for this excess and abuse of their God-given authority. He castigated them for sometimes supplanting their own traditions of men for the commandments of God (Matt.5, 15; Mark 7). But He never once accused them of changing the day of a holy day, or counting Pentecost wrongly, or found fault with their observation of the New Moons, and the calendar which they followed, based on those monthly observations, and backed up by their calendar calculations!

It should be clear then that we must understand Jesus’ words in Matthew 23:2-3 in the light of the other Scriptures which bear on this subject of the authority of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus very plainly said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever THEY bid you observe, *THAT OBSERVE AND DO*" (Matt 23:2-3). But He could not contradict Himself! He also called them a pack of wolves, a den of snakes, hypocrites and fools, and said to BEWARE of their doctrines!

So where do we draw the line?

The *Jamieson, Fasset and Brown Commentary* points out regarding these verses:

"In Moses' seat that is, *AS INTERPRETERS OF THE LAW* GIVEN BY MOSES.

"All therefore -- that is, all which, as SITTING IN THAT SEAT, and TEACHING OUT OF THAT LAW, they bid you observe, that observe and do. The word 'therefore' is thus, it will be seen, of GREAT IMPORTANCE, AS *LIMITING* THOSE INJUNCTIONS WHICH HE WOULD HAVE THEM OBEY TO WHAT THEY FETCHED FROM THE LAW ITSELF. In requiring *EXPLICIT OBEDIENCE* to such injunctions, He would have them to recognize the AUTHORITY BY WHICH THEY TAUGHT over and above the obligation of the law itself -- an important principle truly; but He who denounced the traditions of such teachers (chap. 15:3) cannot have meant here to throw His shield over these [traditions, and rules which were *not* "fetched from the law itself"] . . ."

In other words, "Moses' seat" meant authority to administer the LAW OF GOD -- the Law given by God to Moses – correctly. And, as long as they were administering that Law, and teaching it correctly, they were to be OBEYED. However, this did not include their own humanly devised *traditions*, or man-made “laws,,” because such "traditions of men" and “added” human commandments were NOT given to Moses and were never part of the Law of God!

In other words, the Pharisees were guilty of SIN -- breaking God’s Law (I John 3:4) – because they ADDED to God’s Laws their OWN legal requirements as hedges around the Law of God, and many other additional laws and regulations, which were a

heavy and grievous YOKE of bondage over the people! They violated God's commandment in Deuteronomy, where He said plainly: "*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" (Deut.4:2, NKJV).

This principle is SO important, that God said it TWICE! He declared in chapter 12 of Deuteronomy, "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe IT; *you shall not ADD TO it nor take away from it*" (Deut.12:32).

The Pharisees were guilty of BOTH! They not only added many self-righteous regulations to the simple Sabbath commandment to REST on that day, they proceeded to enumerate 24 different kinds of "work" which was prohibited. As Jesus Christ said, they were, "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matt.23:24).

But not only did they ADD their own rigorous requirements and legal absurdities,, the Pharisees also abrogated and rescinded parts of God's Law. Jesus Himself pointed out how they in effect rescinded the commandment "Honor thy father and thy mother" by their interpretations concerning gifts their children might give to the priests, nullifying their responsibilities to their parents.

A famous example of a nullification of God's Law perpetrated by the Pharisees was a commandment of God which was rescinded by the famous Pharisee leader Hillel, who is highly admired by all Orthodox Jews. Hillel in the decades before Christ, saw that the people were not obeying God's law to lend to the poor, especially as the Jubilee year of debt "release" approached (see Lev.25:14-17). Hillel therefore abrogated the Divine commandment, thinking that if the debts would not be forgiven in the 50th year, then lenders would be more apt to lend to the poor!

God certainly gave the Phariesees no such authority to tamper and mess with His divine Word!

Since that time, of course, the Jews have made many such "modifications" and changes in the Laws of God, calling their changes "halacha," and deeming them necessary for the application of God's law in each succeeding generation. As the centuries passed, they became more tied to the additional "traditions" which they added, and more removed from the original intent of the Law and the Law Giver Himself!

An example of this occurred in 357 A.D. Rabbi Hillel II (aptly named, since he followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, Hillel I, who changed God's laws by his halachic ruling regarding the "year of release") also made a very significant "change" in the laws of God. He changed the CALENDAR of God from a visual, observational calendar, to one which no longer involved physical observation of the NEW MOON each month, but relied instead only upon calendar calculations which utilized mathematical means and averages to determine the beginning of each month. Thus the modern Jewish calendar, which was invented by him and his cohorts, is often a day or so early or late, in beginning a month, as compared to the visual sighting of the New Moons from

Jerusalem!

Not only did Hillel II change the nature of the calendar in this respect, however. He also added unbiblical and completely unjustified “POSTPONEMENTS” to the calendar, that is, new laws which regulated when the Feast of Trumpets, Atonement, and Hoshana Rabbah (the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles) might fall. According to Hillel II’s new laws, the Day of Atonement could not fall immediately before or after a weekly Sabbath (which thereby meant Trumpets could not fall on a Sunday or Wednesday). Hoshana Rabbah could not fall on a Sabbath, because the custom of waving the lulavs and beating the willow branches, which was done in the synagogues, was considered “work.” Hillel II reasoned that for the Day of Fasting to occur right before or after a weekly Sabbath “feast” day was inappropriate and difficult; going from fasting to feasting or feasting to fasting was not “proper,” and caused interference with the observation of the Fast, or the weekly Sabbath feast. Therefore his new laws SEPARATED the Day of Atonement from proximity to the weekly Sabbath!

What “authority” did he have to make this CHANGE in the revealed laws of God, given to Moses? NONE WHATSOEVER! But the rabbis of later generations, who followed in the footsteps of the Pharisees, also added even *MORE* unbiblical commandments and traditions, contradicting the Law of God itself!

Because of these man-made alterations and changes, no wonder God says in His Word, to the Jews, “*Your* New Moons, and *your* appointed feasts, My soul *hates*; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will NOT hear” (Isaiah 1:14-15, NKJV).

Many Jews wonder why God allowed the Holocaust in World War II; they wonder why a loving God would allow such unmitigated and cruel suffering and bloodshed upon the Jewish people. Could their attitude towards His divine Laws be part and parcel of the real Answer? Think about it!

A New Look at Matthew 23:2-3

With all this in mind, therefore, let’s take a new look at the pivotal Scripture in Matthew 23:2-3. Just what kind of authority DID Jesus Christ the Messiah say the “scribes and Pharisees” actually possessed? Just how far did their authority, as they sat upon Moses’ seat, extend? Did they have the right to enact NEW laws and regulations? Did they have the power to issue NEW commandments, to inaugurate NEW statutes and judgments, which were not in the Word of God?

The answer is a resounding, reverberating, thundering *NO!* A thousand times *NO!!!*

We have already seen how the rest of the gospel of Matthew itself answers this question. Christ pointedly declared we must “BEWARE” of the doctrine and teaching of

the hypocritical Pharisees, who pretended to worship God, but who invalidated His commandments by supplanting them with their own “commandments of men.”

We have also seen how this sort of situation played itself out in the days of the apostles, when the Pharisees again abused and misused their authority, in the Sanhedrin, to bully, whip, and imprison the apostles, who taught in the name of Jesus Christ, Yeshua the Messiah.

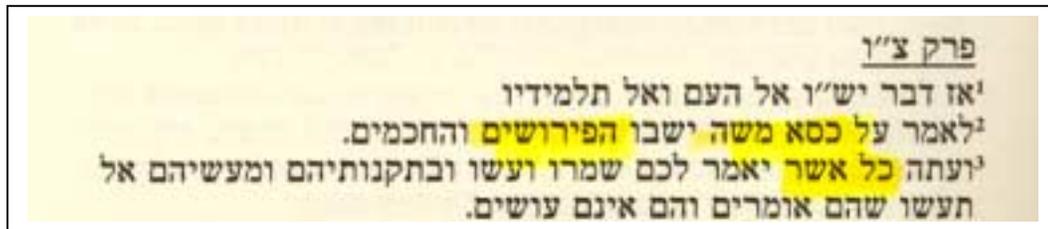
But we still have that strange-sounding passage in Matthew 23:2-3. Just what did Jesus really mean? We know He could not and would not ever contradict Himself. So what was He really talking about?

The solution to this riddle – the answer to this problem – has been hiding in the HEBREW gospel of Matthew all these centuries! Until recently, it seems, no body had thought to even look there for insight to solve this problem!

Let us notice, now, the HEBREW rendition of these verses, in the original Hebrew gospel of Matthew, and see what light the Hebrew itself will shed on this controversy.

Notice!

Below is the actual Hebrew for Matthew 23:1-3. And following the Hebrew, is the English translation.



The English translation of the Hebrew of Matthew 23:1-3, line by line, reads as follows:

“Then Jesus spoke to the people and to his disciples saying, Upon the seat of Moses the Pharisees and the sages sit. Now all which (they) say to you keep and do; but (according to) their ordinances and deeds do not do because they say and do not.”

Now let’s see exactly what Jesus was saying. Notice! First of all He admitted that the Pharisees and sages, or scribes, sat on Moses’ seat. They were therefore in authority; they held or wielded that authority. Whether they sat themselves on Moses’ seat, or how they got there, was not the issue. Jesus did not address that question. All He said was

that they DID sit on Moses' seat. However they came to sit upon that seat is another question altogether, and is immaterial to the discussion. What Jesus said was that they WERE on Moses' seat. So we must DEAL with it.

The next thing He said was that we must keep and do" what "they" said. But who is the "they" referred to here? Moses and the prophets, who went before, through whom God gave His Laws? Or the conniving, hypocritical, self-righteous Pharisees, who condemned the Son of God, and had Yeshua named to the crucifixion stake out of jealous, envy, and hatred?

To answer this question, let us proceed to the next part of the passage. Jesus said, in plain language, according to the HEBREW gospel of Matthew,

“BUT (ACCORDING TO) THEIR *ORDINANCES* AND
DEEDS DO NOT DO . . .”

Now this is not clear in the Greek version of the gospel of Matthew, which our English Bibles are translated from. But the Hebrew original version of Matthew makes it crystal clear. Jesus Christ plainly said, in no equivocal terms, we are NOT BOUND BY THE “ORDINANCES” – that is, the halachic decisions and commandments – of the Pharisees and rabbis!

The “ORDINANCES” of the Pharisees and rabbis, Jesus Christ said, are NOT BINDING UPON TRUE CHRISTIANS, OR ANY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD!

In fact, Jesus said in very plain language, “Do NOT do according to their ORDINANCES and deeds”!

What “ordinances” did the Pharisees decree as legislation upon the people? Many, many “traditions of men,” and “commandments of men,” as Jesus called them. Among them were many Sabbath laws, laws of washing the hands, pots and pans, laws concerning the releasing of debts, and in 357 A.D., laws adding “postponements” to God calendar, thus changing the dates upon which His annual holy days might fall, as well as doing away with the visual observation of the New Moons each month!

Jesus Christ said in powerful terms, we are *NOT TO DO ACCORDING TO – OR BE BOUND BY -- THESE RABBINICAL ORDINANCES AND RULES!*

Now let's understand, and get this straight! Let's go back to these verses once again. Notice carefully. Jesus declared:

“Upon the seat of Moses the Pharisees and the sages sit. Now all
which (they) say to you keep and do; but (according to) their
ordinances and deeds do not do . . .”

When we carefully analyze this passage, it becomes clear that the “they” whom we

are to obey is MOSES AND THE TORAH – the Word of God – as opposed to the whims, decrees, and “ordinances” enacted by the Pharisees and their ilk!

The actual Hebrew language of this passages makes this truth abundantly clear. It reads as follows:

Lamor, al kish Moshe hyoshveh haprushim vehacchochmim.
Vatah, kol asher yomer lachem shomru veassu. Ovtachnutahem
Umaashem al tasu. Sh hem omrim vehem anam osim.

Now, before parsing this passage word by word, let’s be sure we get the picture right. All through this chapter, Matthew 23, Jesus Christ spends 39 verses of Scripture telling us how wicked, deplorable, and serpentine, the Pharisees were! He even calls them “SNAKES” and says they are “BLIND guides of the BLIND”! Would He then want His followers to follow “snakes,” and those who are “blind”?

Of course not!

That would be like saying, as one Messianic leader put it, “Uncle Charlie is a pedophile. Uncle Charlie molests children. Uncle Charlie cannot be trusted with your children. *Nevertheless, when you need a baby sitter, drop your children off at Uncle Charlie’s house!*”

Our translations of the gospel of Matthew from the Greek are unclear in this passage. However, according to Eusebius, the Hebrew gospel of Matthew was preserved and stored at the early church library at Caesaria Philipi. It has been handed down to us today, and preserved by the Jews themselves, and appears in Shem Tov’s gospel of Matthew.

Now the way some people take Matthew 23:2-3, Jesus Christ was telling His disciples that regardless of the fact that the Pharisees were hypocrites, blind, and wicked beyond measure, we must follow them anyway, since they sit on Moses’ seat. However, such an interpretation clearly contradicts the rest of Jesus’ saying and commandments, regarding the Pharisees and their teachings!

Could He really be saying, “Yes, the Pharisees are hypocrites and snakes. But listen to them anyway! Do whatever they tell you, regardless!”?

This same Jesus said of them: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte (convert), and when he is won, you make him *twice as much a son of hell* as yourselves” (Matt.23:15, NKJV). Therefore, if you DO follow them, Jesus says, you will become *twice as much a son of hell as they are!*

Wow! I might add, therefore, not only “WOE to the scribes and Pharisees, but WOE to all those foolish people who FOLLOW them!!!

Jesus also declared of the Pharisees: “But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you *shut up the kingdom of heaven* against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (verse 13).

Yeshua also declared: “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, *you will by NO MEANS enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt.5:20, NKJV). Isn’t that plain enough?

Again, some people misunderstand Jesus’ words in Matthew 23, and misapply them, to their own destruction and spiritual hurt. They seem to think we must blindly accept and follow the Pharisees, *right or wrong!* This, however, is a total perversion of understanding the principles of Church Authority! I know a minister who used to say, “Follow Herbert Armstrong, right or wrong!?” He later said, essentially, “Follow Joseph Tkach, right or wrong!?” How did he come to that conclusion? Because, in his mind, they were “God’s representatives.” That is to say, in effect, he taught that they sat on Moses’ seat – and therefore had to be obeyed, regardless of whether they taught the truth of God or not!

For shame! How spiritually MAD can people get? How crazy is that? Jesus Christ NEVER said we are to observe whatever the Pharisees tell us, *right or wrong!*

He never said, “Don’t ask questions – just OBEY!”

Many of God’s people today seem to be in bondage to a “FEAR religion,” where they fear their minister, and are AFRAID to ask questions, and DARE NOT ever disagree with a minister of their Church – lest they would be thrown out!

Well, many Jews in Jesus’ day also feared the Pharisees and their “authority,” and were afraid of being cast out of the synagogues, and forced to become pariahs in society, if they professed Christ (John 3:1-2; 7:11-13; 9:28-34). Some churches have a “Hitlerian” approach to Church authority. When the minister commands you, “JUMP!,” you are expected to ask “How high, Sir,” as you go up!

Jesus therefore was not endorsing the authority of the Pharisees, *carte blanche*, without qualification or restraint. Rather, He was simply telling His disciples, and the others who were listening, that the religious leaders – the ministry of that time – the scribes and Pharisees, specifically – ought to be obeyed and respected, in their office,, *so long as they taught the laws of God in truth.*

He was not endorsing their authority any more than that!

The same principle applies to every supposed “minister” of God, today. The people are obligated to respect and follow them *only so long as and where they teach the TRUTH OF GOD, and uphold the LAWS and commandments of Almighty God, as they are revealed in His Word!* To follow ANY man when he leads you astray, away from the true laws of God, is to sign your own spiritual DEATH WARRANT!

Jesus said very plainly, of religious leaders in general, and of the scribes and Pharisees in particular: “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch” (Matt.15:13-14).

To *follow* such a one, and their teachings, He implied, was a short-cut to disaster and even death!

“Kol Asher Yomer”

Now let’s go over this passage again, analyzing the original Hebrew words and meaning of Christ.

- “Iamor. Al kishah Moseh.” -- “on the seat of Moses.”
- “yoshvei haprushim vehacochmin” -- “sit the Pharisees and the sages”
- “Veatah, kol asher yomer lachem” -- “and now, all that is said to you, do”
- “Shomru veassu. Uvtachnotahem uma-ashem al tasu.”
- “Guard and do. But their ordinances and deeds do not do.”
- “Sh hem omrim vehem anam osim”
- “Because they say [Moses] but do not [do Moses].”

So, when we study the original Hebrew of this passage, the meaning of Christ becomes much clearer. The contrast between the Hebrew and the Greek is palpable. According to the original Hebrew, the meaning is: Because the scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat, now all that was said by an individual *in the past, you must do*. In other words, the word “yomer” refers to “all that is said” or has been said, in the past – that is, in the Torah itself, by Moses and the prophets who followed. Christ is telling us that because the Pharisees and scribes sit in Moses’ seat, we are to obey all that was said in the past, by Moses and the prophets, that they now teach – the **WHOLE** Word of God.

The word “yomer” is a singular form in the Hebrew for the word “said.” In the Old Testament, we often read, in the Torah, “va-yomer Yahveh el Mosheh,” that is, “God spoke to Moses.” The word “yomer” refers to what is being said by an individual (singular) to others. Thus “kol asher yomer” is translated, “all that is said.” Not “all that **THEY** (the Pharisees) say.”

Since Jesus used the singular form, He meant that which was said by God, Moses, or God’s representative” – that is what we must obey and observe and do. IF He had meant we were to do and observe whatever the Pharisees and scribes – **PLURAL** – commanded us to do, then He would have used the **PLURAL** form of the verb, which is “omrim.”

If Jesus meant for us to blindly follow the scribes and Pharisees, His words would have been: “kol shehem omrim” – that is, “all that they say.”

The term ‘kol asher yomer’ speaks of an individual’s commands or an individual’s declarations to others!

Thus, Matthew 23:3 literally means, “all of which he has said to you.” Who is the “he” spoken of? Why, Moses, of course – or, to be exact, God who was speaking through Moses!

Whatever God says, through Moses, in present tense, we are to KEEP – DO – OBSERVE! Or, the word “yomer” in the ongoing present tense can mean also what Yahveh said and continues to say, because His Law is continual, unchanging, and everlasting! God says, “For I am the LORD [Yahveh], I do not change” (Mal.3:6, NKJV). God also says of His Law, which speaks to us eternally: “All His precepts are sure. They stand fast forever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness” (Psalm 111:7-8).

Thus Christ is saying it is GOD’S WORD which we are to obey and observe and do – whether through Moses or the prophets. He is not saying we are to follow a GROUP such as the sayings of the Pharisees, and their declarations. If He had meant this, He would have used the plural form “omrim.”

Therefore, when we analyze it carefully, we find that Jesus Christ in Matthew 23:2-3 is CONTRASTING what GOD and MOSES are saying with what the scribes and Pharisees were saying! This is not a carte blanche endorsement of those hypocrites, but a clear CONTRAST between the words of God through Moses, which we must and should follow, and the words of the Pharisees, who professed to follow Moses, but did not!

Jesus plainly said of the Pharisees, “Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you – Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (John 5:45-47).

When we look at this passage in the Hebrew, therefore, it is filled with insight and additional understanding. It shows a vivid CONTRAST between the words of God, through Moses, which we are to follow, and the “ordinances” and teachings of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees. In reality, this passage then SETS THE STAGE for the ongoing and following remarks Jesus makes in the chapter about the character and teachings of the reprehensible Pharisees and their modern-day ilk – all those “ministers” who would seek to establish their “authority” by claiming Moses’ mantle, or who claim to be the inheritors of Herbert Armstrong’s “baton,” but teach contrary to the Scriptures and the Laws of Almighty God! Herbert Armstrong had his faults; that we all know. But to my knowledge, at least, he did not deliberately teach contrary to God’s Word, and kept an open mind to the extent that he did admit and confess ERROR when he saw it proved to him!

This passage in Matthew 23:2-3, therefore, is a severe WARNING to all of those who would claim to sit in “Moses’ seat,” with “authority” from God to support their

teachings. The point is, *they had better get their teachings straight from the revealed Word of God, or they are in DEEP spiritual TROUBLE – just like the hypocritical Pharisees!*

Jesus is making it clear in this verse that Rabbinical Judaism claims to be saying and teaching the same thing as Moses, and saying the same thing as Moses, but in reality, they are doing NO SUCH THING! Not in any manner, shape or form! They have gone beyond the boundaries of God’s law, and replaced them with boundaries of their own! This is sacrilege – this is an appalling abomination – this is blasphemy in the sight of God!

When referring to the collective anti-Torah teachings of the Pharisees, Christ uses the plural form in the words “*uvtachnotahem uma-asehem.*” The suffix “*hem*” is in the plural form, referring to their “ordinances” and their “deeds.”

If the Messiah Yeshua had wanted us to follow the Pharisees blindly, without question, and worship at the footstool of their “authority,” then He would have told us to follow “*kol shehem OMRIM*” – using the plural form of “*yomer*,” just as He did when referring to their collective man-made ordinances. When referring to God’s Word, or Moses, He uses the word “*yomer*,” for the singular, but when referring in verse 3 to the ordinances and deeds of the Pharisees, he uses the collective present plural, “*omrim.*”

In truth, therefore, what Yeshua is telling us in Matthew 23:2-3 is not to follow the scribes and Pharisees, but to DISTANCE OURSELVES FROM THEM! They follow their own ideas and opinions, contrary to Moses. We are to follow the explicit words of Moses and Scripture, without adding anything to them, or subtracting anything from them! By the time of Christ, those who sat on Moses’ seat had corrupted Moses’ seat, and had forsaken the true Laws of God given through Moses. We are commanded to separate ourselves from all such corruption, and evil, done in the name of God.

Matthew 23:1-39, therefore, is a strong admonition which is completely unified in nature, with no self-contradiction. It is a strong statement of reproof of false and cowardly religious leaders who seek to impose their own word and authority in place of that of the Word of God. The Pharisees were supremely guilty of these things in their day. Many churches and ministers professing to serve God are equally guilty, today.

It behooves each one of us, today, therefore, to do as the apostle Paul exhorts, and “*PROVE ALL THINGS; hold fast that which is good*” (I Thess.5:21). It is urgently important for us to follow the admonition of the apostle Jude, also, who declared that we must “*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3).

Matthew 23 therefore is a strong statement by the Messiah showing the difference between good and evil, godly teaching contrasted to perverted teachings. Verses 2-3 fit right into this theme, contrasting the teachings of Moses with the ordinances and sayings of the Pharisees. In a manner of speaking, this chapter contrasts the difference between

God's written Torah, His Word, and so-called "Oral Torah," or "traditions of men." In like manner, it contrasts the teachings of God's word with modern-day so-called "church authority," and those men and churches who MISapply Christ's teachings on this subject, to cause men to bow down to their supposed "authority," to support them, and to follow their erroneous teachings!

In essence, then, Christ is telling us to reject the teachings or sayings of the Pharisees, and all such self-appointed "ministers," which are "omrim," plural, given by many, and rather obey and follow and observe the teachings of Scripture, which are "yomer," that is, singular, as referring direct to Moses, or God's true representative, or God Himself.

In reality, the Pharisees rejected Moses, Jesus said – so we should reject them! But when they teach correctly, according to Scripture, then we should follow the correct teaching, regardless of the source!

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 "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).

Orthodox Judaism says it is to be followed, since they sit in Moses' seat. Even when Scripturally wrong, they say, because they are our covering and authority. Many churches have used the same reasoning, 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. But since we are in authority, we sit in Moses' seat, just follow us. We are your covering. The responsibility is ours. Not yours."

But to follow a pernicious teaching like that – which is commonly done among churches today – is to set yourself up for the wrath and fury of God, and the pangs of the Great Tribulation – and ultimately is a veritable short-cut to hell – the fiery flames of Gehenna, which will destroy and blot out forever the lives of the wicked!

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" an eternal law of God. This includes their additions to the Sabbath command, and their fretting over gnats, and swallowing camels. This includes their rejection of God's true calendar, and introduction of unbiblical "postponements."

Churches today are equally guilty. Many follow the Jewish calendar, merely because they consider it “orthodox,” and the responsibility of the Rabbis, or modern descendants of the Pharisees. So they cease looking to God’s Word, and look to mere *men* and their man-made *traditions* instead!

Isn’t it about time we quit following the many hypocrites who claim to sit in Moses’ seat, today, and follow the pure and undefiled Word of God?

Jesus Christ, Yeshua the Messiah, said: “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). How precious is the truth of God to you? Do you fear and tremble before it? Do you love it with all your heart and soul?

In Jesus’ day, the guardians of the Law, the preservers of Moses, had long since stopped guarding the Law, and had forsaken Moses. They had plunged off the straight path. They had a semblance of righteousness, but their deeds were hypocritical and wicked.

How many churches in our day and age have professed to be guardians of God’s Law, and teachers of the truth – but have also compromised with wickedness, plunged into sin, and said, “We are in charge – just follow us!”

The apostle Paul warns us to BEWARE of such men, ministers, rabbis, and churches! He declared: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION, *WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING*; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil.2:12-13, NKJV)..

We who are true Jews (Rom.2:26-27), the true “Israel of God” (Gal.6:16), must not blindly follow the past rulings of those who profess to “sit in Moses’ seat” – whether they are rabbis, or whether they are ministers of the remnant churches of God.

What should we do? Jesus said, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Paul wrote, “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). Jesus added, giving us the proper overview: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by EVERY WORD that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt.4:4). Isaiah also put it concisely: “To the LAW (Old Testament) and to the testimony (New Testament)! If they do not speak according to THIS WORD [the holy Scriptures], it is because there is *no light in them*” (Isaiah 8:19-20, NKJV).

Matthew chapter 23, from the first verse to the final verse, from 1-39, is a scathing, withering indictment against ALL who claim to sit in Moses’ seat, as teachers of God’s Word! – whether minister, priest, rabbi, or church leader of any kind! The apostle James warned, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall

receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1, NKJV).

Woe unto those who “sit on Moses’ seat” and teach pernicious error! WOE also to those who follow them in their egregious errors!

May God help us all to truly tremble before His holy Word, and get back to His TRUTH, the true faith once delivered to the saints!

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!” (Matt.23:39).