

New Light on the Seat of Moses

What is the “seat of Moses”? What authority did the scribes and Pharisees really possess? Are we to do all that they say or command? What did Yeshua mean in Matthew 23:1-3? What is the truth about the Pharisees in the time of Christ? Here is a new look and new revelation on “Moses’ seat” and what it means to us, today – here is new light on a difficult Scripture, the subject of great controversy!

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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!

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 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).

What Do You Mean, “Moses’ Seat”?

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?

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* – 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 Pharisees 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!

New Evidence on What Yeshua Really Said

New evidence to help resolve this ancient controversy has come to light. That evidence is found in the Shem-Tov's Hebrew Gospel of Matthew! Let's take a good look!

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).

Clearly there was an original gospel account, written by the apostle Matthew, which was written in the Hebrew language! The early church fathers acknowledge it!

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.

A Karaite Jew Speaks Out

Let us, therefore, examine the text of Shem-Tov’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.”

In a new book by Nehemia Gordon, a Karaite Jew living in Israel, who used to be an Orthodox Jew, 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.

Gordon points out where the rabbis of the first century and others, including the Christians, vehemently disagreed. He states that a major fundamental precept of “Rabbinic/Pharisaic Judaism is the belief that the Rabbis have **absolute authority** [his emphasis!] to interpret Scripture, and what they say in religious matters is binding even if it is known to be factually untrue. This is best expressed by the Rabbinic doctrine that if the Rabbis say right is left or left is right you must obey them” (page 14). This, he relates, was a problem he faced daily when growing up. He had questions about places where the Talmud seemed to make statements that flew in the face of explicit words of Scripture. He says, “I was told time and time again that the Rabbis have interpreted it this way and we had no right to question it” (*ibid.*).

The Midrash states on the subject of Rabbinic interpretation, “Even if they instruct you that right is left or left is right, you must obey them” (see same page).

What is their reasoning? Says Gordon, “My rabbi’s conclusion from all this was that **the interpretation of the Rabbis even superceded a direct decree from God Himself**, so who was I to question them” (p.16). He says he knew right them that this was “not of God.”

How true!

No wonder Jesus Christ declared that the Rabbis were erring greatly, and had innumerable confrontations with them concerning the interpretation of the Law and Scripture! No wonder He told them repeatedly, “Woe to you, hypocrites,” and “blind guides of the blind!” (Matt.23:13,14,15,16,17,23,24,25,26,27,29), and denounced them as “ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” (v.33).

No man has authority over God, or over His Word! Be he minister or rabbi, no man has the authority to misinterpret the Scriptures, or to replace their authority with human laws, customs, or traditions!

The Scriptures interpret the Scriptures – and they do not lie and cannot be broken (John 10:35). Men, however, seem to lie and prevaricate whenever it suits their purpose, to deceive and to maintain their supposed “authority” and standing in the sight of the people! Many ministers and rabbis are alike in this regard!

Where Rabbis Went Wrong

Gordon points out that the rabbis equated customs and traditions with Laws of God, making them equal to divine decrees. The rabbis have a saying, “A custom of Israel is a law.” Or, literally, “A custom of Israel is Torah”! He states, “A classic example of this is the wearing of the *kippah* or skullcap. This was a practice unknown in Talmudic times. In the Middle Ages a custom developed to cover the head and after a few hundred years this custom became binding. Today one of the most basic Rabbinic laws is that a man may not walk four cubits without his head covered” (p.20).

Just as Jesus Christ implied, Gordon declares, “By keeping the nation busy with their man-made laws, the Rabbis were distancing people from the Torah. This is a message that rings as true today as it did 2000 years ago.” He explains, “In essence, by requiring these man-made laws, the Rabbis are driving people away from Torah” (p.22).

Rebuking this nonsense, Yeshua declared in plain, unequivocal words: “Do not think that I have come to do away with or undo the Law or the Prophets . . . For truly I tell you, until the sky and earth pass away and perish, not one smallest letter or one little hook [identifying certain Hebrew letters] will pass from the Law until all things [it foreshadows] are accomplished. Whoever then breaks or does away with or relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least [unimportant] in the kingdom of heaven, but he who practices them and teaches others to do so shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt.5:17-19, Amplified Parallel Bible).

Moses’ Seat Revealed

Now let’s notice Matthew 23:2-3 in Shem-Tov’s Hebrew Matthew.

The King James Version states: “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.”

Shem-Tov, however, is slightly different – 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* תקנות) and **their** precedents (*ma’asim* מעשים) 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>	יֹאמֵר
“they say”	<i>yomru</i>	יֹאמְרוּ

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.

The Hebrew word *takanot* in Pharisee language means “enactments, reforms,” specifically, “reforms that change biblical law,” Nehemiah Gordon points out. The rabbis distinguished between Biblical law and their own invented laws which they called by the term *takanot*, “reforms.”

Says Gordon, “If Shem-Tov’s text of Matthew is correct, then 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” (p.50). Interestingly, says Gordon, the very word Yeshua used for “traditions” of the Pharisees in Matthew 15:3 is the same very 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).

However, Gordon notes, the phrase used by Yeshua was not *ma’asei hatorah* but rather *ma’asim* alone, a plural word. Thus, I believe the word alone can refer to

“precedents” or “works” of the Pharisees – in essence, the “works” of the Pharisees which Christ denounced *were their very “precedents”* which became legal obligations for the community, in their eyes.

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).

Gordon sums up, “According to the Hebrew Matthew, Yeshua is warning his disciples not to look to the *ma’asim*, the precedents of the Rabbis, as the standard for perfect behavior. Nor are they to follow the *takanot*, the invented laws of the Rabbis. Instead they are to listen to what Moses says, because after all the Rabbis claim to authority is that they sit in Moses’ seat. This is reminiscent of the teaching concerning the coin with the picture of Caesar on it (Matt.22:20-21). If it is Caesar’s coin, give it to Caesar. If it is Moses’ seat, do what Moses says” (p.53).

Yeshua ended this statement saying, “But do not according to their works, for they say, but do not [obey the Law].” Boiled down to its essence, as Gordon says, “Yeshua was saying that the like the Samaritans of old, the Pharisees have their own statutes and judgments which they follow, while at the same time they talk Torah but they do not do Torah” (p.59).

EXTREME Error

How far did the Rabbis stray from the Word of God? In adding their enactments, precedents, and interpretations which nullified Torah, they caused the people to transgress the Laws of God (see Matt.15:3-9; Mark 7:6-13).

This was carried to the extreme. 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” (Maimonides, pp.27-28, quoted by Gordon on page 84).

Can you believe it? 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.” God often sends prophets to WARN a “majority” when they are WRONG and going ASTRAY!

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 (II Tim.3:16). Every Word of God is reliable, truthful, and pure (Psalm 19:7-11; Psalm 119:9-11, 17, 57, 74, 89-92, 97-104).

“Prove all things,” the apostle Paul wrote (I Thess.5:21). How? 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 “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 they is to be followed, since they sit in Moses’ seat. Even when Scripturally wrong, they say, because they are our authority.

Many churches have used the same reasoning, 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 e 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 teachers, your authority. The responsibility is ours. Not yours.”

“Just pray, pay, and obey” – pray to God, pay your tithes, and obey your ministers! That is what they mean!

But to follow a pernicious teaching like that – which is commonly done among churches today – is to set yourself up for self-destruction, and the Great Tribulation, nd even the wrath and fury of God. To follow men and ignore Hiis plain Word, is to commit IDOLATRY! Such a course of action is ultimately 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 veered off the straight path and had plunged down the slippery slope of perdition. They had a semblance of righteousness, on the outside, but inwardly their hearts were corrupted and their deeds were hypocritical and self-serving.

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 false teaching, refused to repent when shown error, and plunged into sin, all the while maintaining to all who would listen: "Don't worry – 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 of God, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). 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; Luke 4:4). The apostle Jude wrote, "Dearly loved friends . . . I find I must write [to you] . . . urging you to stoutly defend the truth which God gave, once for all, to His people to keep without change through the years" (Jude 3, *The Living Bible*). "Contend for the faith", NIV!

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

