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MINISTRIES

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“Do Whatever They Tell You”: Scribes, Pharisees, and Moses’ Seat (Matthew 23:2-3)

Matthew 23:2-3 presents a challenge for readers of Matthew’s Gospel. In this passage, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—tells his listeners to “do and observe” whatever the scribes and Pharisees tell them. This instruction seems very strange considering how negatively Yeshua speaks about the Pharisees throughout Matthew. Is Yeshua really validating the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees in this text, or is there something else going on?

In this teaching, we will examine this passage and attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction. Let’s begin by reading it:

Matthew 23:1-3

Then Jesus [Yeshua] said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.”

In this passage, Yeshua explains that the scribes and Pharisees “[sit on Moses’ seat](#),” and therefore his listeners must do and observe whatever they tell them. He immediately follows this instruction with a warning against imitating their “[works](#)” because they fail to practice what they preach.

On the surface, this instruction gives the impression that Yeshua fully endorses the religious authority and teachings of the scribes and Pharisees but condemns their hypocritical behavior. Simply put, Yeshua is saying, “Do what they say, but not what they do.” However, this understanding of the verse seems inadequate for a couple of reasons.

First, throughout Matthew, Yeshua repeatedly condemns not just the scribes’ and Pharisees’ actions *but also their teachings*. Let’s consider a few examples.

In Matthew 5:20, Yeshua warns that the “[righteousness](#)” of the scribes and Pharisees falls short of what is required of members of the kingdom of heaven. In this context, “[righteousness](#)” does not just mean one’s actions, but according to verse 19, it also includes one’s teachings. Later in Matthew 5, Yeshua

criticizes the shallow and sometimes twisted teachings on the Torah that his listeners have “[heard](#)” from the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:21-48). For instance, they permitted divorce for any reason (Matthew 5:31-32; cf. Matthew 19:3), promoted seeking personal revenge (Matthew 5:38-42), and endorsed hating your enemies (Matthew 5:43-48)—all of which were distortions of the Law of Moses.

For more on these topics, see our teachings [One Flesh: Marriage & Divorce Part 3](#), [Do Not Resist the One who is Evil \(Matthew 5:38-42\)](#), and [Love Your Enemies \(Matthew 5:43-48\)](#).

It’s no surprise that, later in chapter 23, Yeshua accuses the scribes and Pharisees of “[shut\[ting\] the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces](#)” (Matthew 23:13). Their teachings, not just their behavior, result in a “righteousness” that fails to meet what the kingdom of heaven requires.

We might also consider Matthew 15:3-6, where Yeshua highlights how certain traditions of the scribes and Pharisees have led to violating God’s commandment to honor one’s parents. Yeshua explicitly states that their “[tradition](#)” has “[made void the word of God](#)” (Matthew 15:6). Once again, Yeshua’s critique in Matthew targets not only the scribes’ and Pharisees’ behavior but also their teachings.

In Matthew 16:12, Yeshua warns his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees—referring to their *teaching*:

Matthew 16:11-12

[How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the **teaching** of the Pharisees and Sadducees.](#)

Finally, within Matthew 23 itself, Yeshua directly condemns the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees in a couple of places. In verse 4, he rebukes them for placing heavy burdens on people’s shoulders, clearly referring to their teachings, which had turned the Torah into an oppressive yoke. We see this earlier in Matthew’s account of the Sabbath controversies, where Yeshua opposed the Pharisees’ unreasonable man-made restrictions on activities like plucking grain and healing, which distorted the purpose of the Sabbath by neglecting human wellbeing (Matthew 12:1-14). In verses 16-22, Yeshua directly condemns the Pharisees’ teaching on binding vs. non-binding oaths (cf. Matthew 5:33-37). Their hypocritical behavior concerning oaths stems from their *teaching* on the subject, which is comprised of legal loopholes to get out of honoring their commitments.

So, throughout Matthew, Yeshua condemns the Pharisees’ teachings. If his point in Matthew 23:3 was to validate their teachings, that seems to go against everything he has been telling the disciples.

Second, throughout Matthew, Yeshua challenges not only the teachings but also the authority of the scribes and Pharisees. After Yeshua gave his Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records that the crowds were astonished at his teaching because he taught as one “[who had authority](#),” in contrast with the scribes who lacked authority:

Matthew 7:28-29

[And when Jesus \[Yeshua\] finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.](#)

Furthermore, in his final commission in Matthew 28:19-20, Yeshua declares that *he* has “[all authority](#)” and tells his disciples to teach the nations all that *he* has commanded. Matthew clearly presents *Yeshua*,

not the scribes and Pharisees, as having the authoritative teaching on the Law of Moses. Yeshua cannot be instructing his disciples to follow both the Pharisees' teachings and his own teachings, as Matthew consistently highlights that Yeshua's authoritative teaching often directly opposes the non-authoritative teachings of the Pharisees.

As we've seen, interpreting Matthew 23:2-3 as Yeshua affirming the teachings and authority of the scribes and Pharisees directly contradicts literally everything else said about them in Matthew. Given the challenges posed by the overall context of Matthew, we should consider an alternative interpretation.

An Alternative Interpretation

Before instructing his listeners to observe whatever the scribes and Pharisees tell them, Yeshua notes that they “[sit on Moses' seat](#).” In fact, their position as those seated on Moses' seat serves as the basis for Yeshua's instruction to obey their words:

Matthew 23:1-3

Then Jesus [Yeshua] said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on [Moses' seat](#), so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.”

This raises the question: what is meant by “[Moses' seat](#)”? Some suggest that this expression refers to a literal chair in the synagogue, where teachers would sit to deliver their teaching. Archaeologists have uncovered stone chairs in excavations of ancient synagogues, which some have proposed could be identified as “[Moses' seat](#)” (Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 325; Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (Brooklyn: KTAV Publishing House, 1978), 260). There are also references in rabbinic literature of sages sitting in a chair to deliver teachings (Mid. Rab. *Lamentations* 1.1; Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 43.4).

However, both the archaeological evidence and rabbinic references to a special chair in the synagogue are relatively late, dating to the 4th century AD or later. Additionally, the only explicit mention of “[Moses' seat](#)” appears in the 4th-century midrash *Pesikta de Rab Kahana*, which is specifically referring to the throne of Solomon mentioned in 1 Kings 10:19 (*Pesikta de Rab Kahana* 1.7). So, while it is possible that there was a literal “[Moses' seat](#)” in the synagogue, the evidence for this is not very strong.

Others have suggested that “[Moses' seat](#)” is merely a metaphor for a position of teaching authority. Regardless, both these literal and metaphorical interpretations assume the same thing: the scribes and Pharisees possess authority as teachers of the Torah by virtue of their role as those seated in “[Moses' seat](#)”. Since they have this authority, the implication is that their teachings ought to be obeyed.

But is that what Yeshua means to convey with this phrase? Is he saying that the scribes and Pharisees have the authority to teach the Torah? If so, wouldn't that conflict with other passages in Matthew, where the Pharisees' teachings are condemned, and *Yeshua* is presented as the one having the ultimate authority to teach the Torah? As we've already discussed, we believe it would. Hence, we don't find this common interpretation of “[Moses' seat](#)” to be likely.

Is there a better interpretation of this phrase? We believe so. Yeshua is not necessarily validating the authority of the scribes and Pharisees as teachers. Instead, he is acknowledging their social position as those with access to the Scriptures and the ability to read them to the people. As the Scholar Mark

Powell explains:

When Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses, he might not be referring to their role as teachers at all, but to their social position as people who control accessibility to Torah. They are the ones who possess copies of the Torah and are able to read them. They are the ones who know and are able to tell others what Moses said.

—Mark A. Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says (Matthew 23:2-7), *JBL* 114/3 (1995), 431

It’s important to remember that in the first century, not everyone had their own copies of the Scriptures. People learned the Scriptures by hearing them read in the synagogues. In the book of Acts, we see that there were those who proclaimed the words of Moses every Sabbath in the synagogues:

Acts 15:21

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.

So, when Yeshua describes the scribes and Pharisees as sitting in Moses’ seat, he may not be highlighting their teachings but rather their role in the public reading of *the Law of Moses*. The scribes and Pharisees are the ones who read the Law of Moses to the people—they provide the people access to the Torah. Hence, when Yeshua instructs his listeners to “do and observe whatever they tell you,” he is instructing them to do and observe whatever they tell you *when they are reading the words of Moses*.

There may be some precedent for this idea within the Torah itself. Consider this passage from Exodus:

Exodus 18:13-16

The next day Moses **sat** to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. When Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you **sit** alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?” And Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God; when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know **the statutes of God and his laws**.”

Here, we see that when Moses was in his “seat,” the people came to him to hear his rulings concerning “**the statutes of God and his laws**.” So, it is reasonable to suppose that when the scribes and Pharisees “**sit in Moses’ seat**,” they are passing along these same rulings of Moses—that is, the words of Moses contained in the Torah. In other words, “**Moses’ seat**” may not indicate the pharisees’ authority but rather *Moses’* authority. Elsewhere in Matthew, both Yeshua and the Pharisees affirm the authority of Moses regarding God’s laws (Matthew 8:4; 19:7-8; 22:24). Thus, in Matthew, the scribes and Pharisees sitting in Moses’ seat may simply refer to their role in passing along the rulings of Moses.

Powell provides a good summary:

In saying that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, Jesus may be simply acknowledging the powerful social and religious position that they occupy in a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah are not plentiful. Since Jesus’ disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribes and Pharisees to know what Moses said on any given subject. In light of such dependence, Jesus advises his disciples to heed the words that the scribes and Pharisees speak when they sit on the seat of Moses, that is, when they

pass on the words of the Torah itself.

— Mark A. Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says (Matthew 23:2-7), *JBL* 114/3 (1995), 431-432

This interpretation also seems to make better sense of Yeshua’s instruction to avoid following the works of the scribes and Pharisees. He says that they “[preach but do not practice](#).” Yeshua does not seem to be criticizing them for failing to live up to their *own* teachings but rather for failing to truly obey the Law of Moses. Their teachings distort the intention of the Torah by placing heavy burdens on people and seeking their own glory rather than God’s glory (Matthew 23:4-7). Earlier in Matthew, Yeshua also highlights how their teachings make void the word of God and result in breaking God’s commandments (Matthew 15:3-6). So, hypocrisy with regard to their own teachings isn’t the problem. The problem is that neither their teachings nor actions align with the Law of Moses. They proclaim the words of Moses, but they do not practice them.

Of course, this interpretation is a more nuanced reading of the text. It requires us to understand the phrase “[whatever they tell you](#)” to be referring specifically to the words of Moses that the scribes and Pharisees read aloud in the synagogues. However, this qualification is reasonable, considering the well-established tradition of public Torah readings in the first century (cf. Acts 15:21). Additionally, this interpretation also has the advantage of bringing this passage into alignment with the rest of Matthew’s Gospel, which consistently condemns the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. Hence, in our view, the interpretation we’ve proposed is the most coherent and satisfying option.

The Shem-Tov Hebrew Gospel of Matthew

Before we conclude, it is worth mentioning that there is a Hebrew version of Matthew, known as the Shem-Tov Matthew. Among its nine manuscripts, three contain a variant reading of Matthew 23:3. Here is what it says:

Now all that **he** [Moses] will say, keep and do, and in **their** [the scribes and Pharisees’] ordinances and deeds, do not do, for they speak and they do not do.

—Matthew 23:3, Shem-Tov (Quoted in Tim Hegg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 4 [Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2012], 1017).

The significant detail about this variant reading is that it has “he” instead of “they,” making it clear that Yeshua is telling his disciples to obey whatever *Moses* says, not whatever the scribes and Pharisees say. Some have argued that this variant reflects a more authentic version of the text. If true, this would strongly support the interpretation we’ve suggested in this teaching!

However, there are major problems with the idea that this variant is more authentic. First, the Greek manuscripts, which predates the Shem-Tov Matthew by hundreds of years, unanimously have the plural “they” rather than the singular “he.” Second, among the nine Shem-Tov Matthew manuscripts, six also have the plural “they,” aligning with the Greek evidence rather than supporting the singular “he.” Third, the entire purpose of the Shem-Tov Matthew was not to preserve an accurate version of the Gospel of Matthew but to serve as a tool for Jewish polemics against Christianity. Therefore, its textual integrity is rather dubious (See Tim Hegg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 4 (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2012), 1015-1019).

So, the variant found in three manuscripts of the Shem-Tov Matthew is not more authentic than the Greek text. At most, it may suggest that a Jewish teacher in the 1400s interpreted this passage as Yeshua endorsing Moses's teachings rather than the Pharisees', which aligns with our interpretation. However, this would simply show that a Jewish teacher from the 1400s happened to agree with our perspective. Thus, we do not place significant weight on this variant reading even though it supports our interpretation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, at first glance, Matthew 23:2-3 seems to endorse the teachings and authority of the scribes and Pharisees. However, this interpretation conflicts with other passages in Matthew that explicitly condemn their teachings and instead present Yeshua as the authoritative teacher of the Torah. Hence, Yeshua is not endorsing their teachings and authority in Matthew 23:2-3; instead, he is acknowledging their role in reading and proclaiming the words of Moses to the people. When Yeshua tells his listeners to "do and observe whatever they tell you," he is instructing them to do and observe *the words of Moses* that the scribes and Pharisees proclaim to them in their public Torah readings. This interpretation resolves the apparent contradiction, harmonizing this passage with the broader context of Matthew's Gospel.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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