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MATTHEW 23:2-3

Who Sits in the Seat of Moses? 2013

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There is no doubting, that when one surveys much of the broad Messianic movement, that there are some significant issues which not only divide us, but which spur on some strong emotions. One passage in the Gospel of Matthew frequently stirs vehement emotions, from all sides of the theological and ideological spectrum: **Matthew 23:2-3**. These verses appear within a much larger section of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 23:1-36, which is hardly an easy passage for Bible readers to encounter and evaluate. For much of Christian history, even extending into the present, individual Christians have read Matthew 23:1-36 as a widespread condemnation by the Messiah of all things represented by the Jewish Pharisees, and by extension the religion of Judaism. Many scholars involved in Second Temple Jewish Studies and/or New Testament studies have been much more tempered, and have only seen the hypocrisy of the leaders of the scribes and Pharisees being targeted—not their basic beliefs and convictions about God, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the general value of Jewish tradition—and such views have been followed by many contemporary Messianic Jewish examiners. When one enters into the fray of **Matthew 23:2-3** views in the more independent sectors of the Messianic movement, some significant variance regarding Matthew 23:2-3 is witnessed, with more negativity issued toward the Jewish Pharisees than would seem appropriate.

What did Yeshua the Messiah actually communicate to His First Century followers in Matthew 23:2-3, and how do they apply for us today? He said, "**The Torah-teachers and the P'rushim...sit in the seat of Moshe. So whatever they tell you, take care to do it. But don't do what they do, because they talk but don't act!**" (CJB). Is this a blanket endorsement of the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, and that they are to be blindly followed in all matters? Is this a recognition of the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, and that their input into theological and spiritual matters is to be consulted, not disregarded—but to be disregarded if it runs contrary to the ethos of written Scripture via significant hypocrisy? Or, as many people have concluded, is the canonical Greek text of Matthew to be disregarded, in favor of some readings present in the hypothetical (and highly controversial) Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, derived from the Fourteenth Century anti-missionary work *Evan Bohan*?

Matthew 23:2-3 is a passage which has been used to justify everything from today's Messianic Jewish Believers following almost every single *halachic* ruling of the ultra

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Orthodox and/or Chassidic Jewish authorities and their literature, *to* Messianic Believers completely disregarding all forms of ancient and/or modern Jewish tradition in their approach to the Torah or Law of Moses, totally dismissing works like the Mishnah or Talmud as valuable historical records. Unfortunately, for whatever reason or series of reasons, moderating the extremes on Matthew 23:2-3 has not been too permitted in the Messianic movement of 2013—for it is easy to see the negative spiritual and theological fruit of the extremes of Matthew 23:2-3, either **(1)** representing a widescale dismissal of all forms of Rabbinic Jewish tradition and custom, or **(2)** requiring a blind obedience to Orthodox Judaism on the part of contemporary Messianic Believers. A third, depolarizing alternative to the current interpretations widely touted, desperately needs to be presented.

The perspective of **Matthew 23:2-3**, that will be defended in this article, is that while Yeshua the Messiah had very strong, condemning words for the leaders of the scribes and Pharisees, He also recognized their significance as interpreters of the Torah of Moses. The Messiah had very strong words of rebuke for much of the hypocritical behavior of the scribal and Pharisaical leaders, but He did recognize their leadership importance, nonetheless. Messianic Believers today are to regard the ancient Pharisees—and by extension the Orthodox Jewish, and also the Conservative Jewish (and possibly even Reform Jewish) traditions—as having some degree of what should be regarded as *consultative authority*. Yeshua's word about the leadership place of the Pharisees, should be taken as being most similar to various Apostolic admonitions to obey the Roman government¹—which was certainly to be disobeyed when civil authority was in significant clash with the interests of the good news.² **The Jewish Pharisees of the First Century, and their Rabbinical successors, should not be just dismissed and tossed away by today's Messianics**—for we will inevitably have to consult their perspectives, among others,³ for how they handled various Biblical, spiritual, and social issues in their generations.

¹ Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13.

² Acts 5:29.

³ The Pharisaical Jewish tradition is widely represented in ancient bodies of literature such as the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, and Midrashim. It is also detectable in works such as those of the philosopher Philo and historian Josephus, and also various writings of the Pseudepigrapha.

Other bodies of literature, germane to the broad First Century period, would include the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Jewish Qumran community, as well as various classical philosophical and historical works of Greece and Rome.

Consult the Theological Resources: Biblical History, Contemporary Literature, and Other Religions subsection of the Messianic Apologetics website <<http://messianicapologetics.net/resources>> for a further listing.

Matthew 23:2-3

"The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*" (NASU).

epi tēs Mōuseōs kathedras ekathisan hoi grammateis kai hoi Pharisaioi. panta oun hosa ean eipōsin humin poiēsate kai tēreite, kata de ta erga autōn mē poieite legousin gar kai ou poiouσin

ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι. πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν ποιήσατε καὶ τηρεῖτε, κατὰ δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν μὴ ποιεῖτε· λέγουσιν γὰρ καὶ οὐ ποιοῦσιν

"Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 'The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat'" (Matthew 23:1-2, NIV). This statement affirms the place of some sort of seat or chair of Moses (*tēs Mōuseōs kathedras*, τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας). Such a seat, or chair, could have been a literal feature of the architecture of various ancient synagogues, akin to a kind of throne, from which leaders of importance would issue various teachings and rulings. For certain, "the seat/chair of Moses" represented an office of power exercised by the leaders of the scribes and Pharisees within Second Temple Judaism, where important doctrines would be issued to the people, as well as decisions on *halachah* relating to how the Torah of Moses was to be applied corporately and individually within the Jewish community.

After having acknowledged that the scribes and the Pharisees sat on the seat/chair of Moses, and that they possessed and exercised some level of authority within the First Century Jewish community, Yeshua further says, **"So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach"** (Matthew 23:3, NIV). There has understandably been much controversy over Yeshua stating **"practice and observe whatever they tell you"** (Matthew 23:3a, RSV), with the plural neuter pronoun *hosa* (ὅσα), likely **"pert. to a comparative quantity or number of objects or events; how much (many), as much (many) as"** (BDAG).⁴ It is not enough that Yeshua just tells His audience to do "all" (*panta*, πάντα), but this is qualified as speaking of a wide number of areas pertaining to the Torah or Law of Moses—**"all things therefore whatsoever"** (American Standard Version).

Immediately after, though, recognizing the place of the scribes and Pharisees in speaking various instructions to the people—which are to be followed—Yeshua concludes His opening statement to the crowd with a qualification: **"But do not do according to their works [kata de ta erga autōn, κατὰ δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν], for they say, and do not do"** (LITV). This is properly akin to **"don't follow their example"** (NLT) or **"you must not imitate their lives"** (Phillips New Testament).

While Christian laypersons examining Matthew 23:2-3 might be at a total cunundrum at times in reading what Yeshua says—finding themselves widely glossing over Yeshua's word about the scribes and Pharisees exercising *some kind* of authority, and moving on to

⁴ BDAG, 829.

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His condemnation of their hypocrisy—various Christian commentators and theologians have had to be far more tempered. It cannot go overlooked, for example, that immediately prior in Matthew 22:23-33, Yeshua decisively stands on the theological side of the Pharisees, and starkly against the Sadducees, when it comes to the issue of the resurrection of the dead. Likewise, Yeshua takes the side of emphasizing the Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 Torah admonitions as the most important of the commandments (Matthew 22:34-40), which would be in widescale alignment with the classic view of a Pharisee like Hillel (b.*Shabbat* 31a).⁵ In the narrative of Matthew 23:2-3a following, it is logical for the Messiah to recognize some level of significant power that the scribes and Pharisees yield—surely over major doctrinal matters like the resurrection! The scribes and Pharisees surely also issued many fair and reasonable and common sense rulings for the First Century Jewish community for the application of God's Torah. At the same time, as should not be surprising, the scribal and Pharisaical leaders are specified, in Matthew 23:3bff, to have problems with their attitudes and behavior—**attitudes and behavior which are not to be imitated by Yeshua's followers.**

In briefly surveying a selection of Christian commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew, one will encounter two principal views held on **Matthew 23:2-3**:

1. The Messiah recognizes and broadly endorses the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, but His followers are not to observe their hypocrisy, and should not follow them when their rulings are in stark contradiction to the ethical intentions of the Mosaic Torah.
2. The Messiah appears to endorse the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, but via ironic rebuke undermines them, and their presumed authority, completely.

Even with demonstrating a variance of positions and perspectives on the continued validity of the Torah or Law of Moses in the post-resurrection era, there are quite a few Christian commentators of Matthew who conclude that the Messiah recognized some degree of authority that the scribal and Pharisaical leaders legitimately possessed, but that His followers were not to emulate their attitudes:

- Leon Morris: "[Jesus'] complaint is not that these men were false teachers; they were orthodox and they were rightly drawing people's attention to the things that Moses had taught and that were of permanent importance for the people of God...They studied the law of Moses closely and expounded it in great detail. There was nothing wrong with this part of what they were doing, and Jesus commends it. Of course, when they went beyond the law of Moses they could and did go wrong, and Jesus criticises them for it....Jesus warns his hearers that they should not live in the way the Pharisees lived, though they should take careful note of what the Pharisees taught. When the Pharisees brought out the significance of the teaching of Moses, they were doing something of great importance for the

⁵ "There was another case of a gentile who came before Shammai. He said to him, 'Convert me on the stipulation that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot.' He drove him off with the building cubit that he had in his hand. **He came before Hillel: 'Convert me.'** He said to him, "**What is hateful to you, to your fellow don't do.**" That's the entirety of the Torah; **everything else is elaboration. So go, study**" (b.*Shabbat* 31a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

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people of God. What they were teaching was both meaningful and creditable: they should be heard. But when they acted hypocritically, that was another matter: they should not be imitated or followed.”⁶

- M. Eugene Boring: “‘Moses’ seat’ is a metaphorical expression representing the teaching and administrative authority of the synagogue leadership, scribes and Pharisees. Surprisingly, and in contrast both to what precedes (16:6, 12) and to what immediately follows (23:4, 16-22), Jesus condemns only the practice of the scribes and Pharisees, not their teaching...Jesus has, in fact, just been defending the doctrinal perspective of the Pharisees (22:23-40)...Matthew probably intends by the present passage that the Pharisees and scribes are right in founding their way of life on exposition of the Torah, which his Christian community also affirms (5:17-48), without here taking into account their different interpretations.”⁷
- Craig S. Keener: “Jesus agrees that many of the scribes and Pharisees’ ethical teachings are good; the problem is not their teaching but their lives (vv. 2-3; Rom 2:21), a dichotomy known to exist among many religious professions and other religious people today. The religious leaders have seated themselves *in Moses’ seat*, probably meaning that they have adopted the role of the law’s interpreters...Although Pharisaic ethics emphasized being as lenient or strict with others as one was with oneself...in practice Jesus accuses them of being too strict with others and too lenient with their own failings...which fits the way Christians often evaluate sins today.”⁸
- Michael J. Wilkins: “The declaration is somewhat surprising, given [Jesus’] antipathy toward [the Pharisees] in the following warnings and woes. While this may be sarcasm or bitter irony, Jesus’ statement follows from the religious leaders’ position as expounders of Moses’ teaching. He gives a scathing denunciation, yet he recognizes their official capacity when exercised in a proper manner. Any and all accurate interpretation of Scripture is to be obeyed. The Pharisees had many good things to say, and their doctrine was closer to Jesus’ on many crucial issues than to other groups. Jesus does not deny that their teaching is beneficial for spiritual life, and he endorses, in principle, their desire to pursue righteous ends. In this sense, Jesus does not condemn them for developing their teaching, but he does condemn oral tradition when it incorrectly interprets the intent of the Old Testament and inappropriately supplants it (cf. 15:1-9).”⁹

⁶ Leon Morris, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 573.

⁷ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 431.

⁸ Craig S. Keener, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), pp 332-333.

⁹ Michael J. Wilkins, *NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp 745-746.

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- Donald A. Hagner: "To begin with, Jesus makes a positive statement concerning the Pharisees that applauds them in principle for being those who occupy themselves with the important task of interpretation of the teaching of Moses...This means that as the custodians of Moses' teaching they share in his authority and are accordingly to be respected...Because...the Pharisees expound the Mosaic Torah, one is to follow their teaching...That...[this] is an approval in principle rather than fact...becomes clear from vv 13-33, and especially vv 16-22, where Jesus explicitly rejects what the Pharisees say (cf. v 4)...Jesus has on several occasions earlier in Matthew distanced himself remarkably from the teaching of the Pharisees (cf. 9:10-11, 14; 12:1-2, 10-14; 15:1-20; 19:3-9) and at one point actually warned his disciples to 'beware of the leaven [i.e., the teaching] of the Pharisees and Sadducees' (16:6, 11-12)."¹⁰

While there are Christian examiners who take **Matthew 23:2-3** to be a recognition of the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, where their human rulings are consistent with the Torah of Moses—there are others who view Yeshua's words as being a form of ironic rebuke, not to be taken at all literally or seriously. D.A. Carson, noting that "because Jesus has during his ministry repeatedly criticized the scribes and Pharisees for their teaching," takes His word about the scribes and Pharisees being seated in the seat/chair of Moses as being akin to, "The Jewish religious leaders have 'presumed' to sit in Moses' seat,"¹¹ and thus their place and authority are to be completely disregarded. R.T. France is one who similarly concludes, "in what follows Jesus [in vs. onward] will dispute their right to [an] authoritative role, so that it is probably right to read this verse, like the exhortation which follows in v. 3a, as ironical...Their behavior in effect annuls their 'Mosaic' authority."¹²

Without knowing too much of the personal psychology of different Christian examiners of Matthew 23:2-3, the fairer interpreters are going to weigh in not only where Yeshua *disagrees* with the Pharisees, but where He *agrees* with them. The **defense of the doctrine of the resurrection**, actually preceding in Matthew 22:23-33—where Yeshua obviously agrees with the Pharisees—cannot be overlooked or dismissed, as having some role in interpreting what is meant in Matthew 23:2-3.¹³ And, it would seem that various Christian interpreters, in allowing the Messiah to demonstrate some affinity for the scribes and Pharisees, have weighed this fact into their deliberations.

It would not be inappropriate, in evaluating the place of **Matthew 23:2-3**, situated between Matthew 22:23-23:1 and Matthew 23:4-30, that Yeshua did indeed endorse the scribes and Pharisees on their official doctrines as they pertained to the major, overarching issues of substance, surrounding the First Century Jewish community. When it came to the scribal and Pharisical leaders' perception of themselves, and their

¹⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, Vol 33a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 659.

¹¹ D.A. Carson, "Matthew," in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:472, 473.

¹² R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp 859, 890.

¹³ Consult the FAQ, "Resurrection, Late Belief."

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adherence to minute regulations at the expense of the much larger matters of social justice and acts of kindness and mercy to people in need—the scribes and Pharisees are then heartily and forthrightly condemned. An honest reader of Matthew 23:2-3, with the preceding and succeeding context in view, hardly sees a blanket endorsement by the Messiah of following every single ruling and practice that the Pharisees prescribed or communicated—but likewise the scribes and the Pharisees can hardly just be ignored or disregarded as a useful voice within Second Temple Judaism. That the scribes and Pharisees had a *consultative authority* for the First Century Messiah followers, and for Biblical examiners today to consider on a range of issues, is a fair conclusion to draw.

Messianic Jewish Approaches to Matthew 23:2-3

There is little doubting the fact that when seeing Yeshua make the statement, “**The Torah scholars and Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses. So whatever they tell you, do and observe...**” (Matthew 23:2-3a, TLV), that there have been wide numbers of Messianic Jewish individuals, and even a few Messianic Jewish leaders, who have taken Yeshua’s words far, far off the map. While none of us should doubt the fact that Yeshua the Messiah was a First Century Jew, who not only kept the Torah but also a reasonable number of the customs of His people—and that the term “tradition” need not be viewed as a dirty word by any of us—the argument that *Yeshua practiced Judaism* has been used by some contemporary Messianic Jews to justify blind obedience to the Talmudic Sages, or to endorse ideas equating Yeshua as their First Century version of a Kabbalistic mystic, or to basically synthesize as much of the Apostolic Scriptures with Orthodox Judaism as they can. While a fair appreciation of Yeshua endorsing the lead of the scribes and Pharisees on the big issues of importance, such as the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33), must be acknowledged—it can be observed that one can take His argument in principle for ancient Rabbinic authority beyond what is acceptable, **for followers who must first acknowledge His authority and the authority He gave to His Apostles** (Matthew 16:19).

It would be most impossible to summarize all of the views present in the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement on **Matthew 23:2-3**, regarding the issue of authority possessed by the First Century scribes and Pharisees. What Matthew 23:2-3 means in terms of today’s Messianic Jews following their successors, down to Orthodox and ultra Orthodox Rabbis today, are widely going to be found in views held by various minorities in Messianic Jewish congregations and fellowships. Most Messianic Jewish leaders and teachers do not believe that Matthew 23:2-3 requires a blind obedience on the part of Messianic Jews to follow all of the rulings of ancient Rabbinical literature or the *halachah* of the Orthodox, or even Conservative, Synagogue. Yet at the same time, ignoring the vast bodies of literature and perspectives, offered by the Jewish theological tradition, is something hardly present, either.

In order to facilitate how **Matthew 23:2-3** has been viewed in the Messianic Jewish movement, up to the present, this section will summarize and briefly comment on a selection of significant views, from published writers, which we are all likely to encounter in one form or another:

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David H. Stern, in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (1992), did not choose to explore the ramifications of Matthew 23:2-3 in great detail, although he did acknowledge that it can be taken to mean that Messianic Jews might be required to follow Orthodox Jewish *halachah*. Instead, he mentions how *halachic* authority was widely transferred from the Jewish religious leaders to Yeshua's Apostles:

The Torah-teachers and the P'rushim...sit in the seat of Moshe, exercising the power of "the *cohen* or judge in office at that time" (Deuteronomy 17:8-13), officially interpreting the *Torah*. There are some who understand this verse to mean that, according to Yeshua, the Oral *Torah*, as expounded in Orthodox Judaism, is binding on Messianic Jews today. I do not believe this, because I think Yeshua had already initiated a process of transferring halakhic authority from the *cohanim*, judges and rabbis to the emissaries and later leaders of the Messianic Community.¹⁴

Stern then goes on to refer the reader to further remarks made in his *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* (1991), which was republished in 2007 as *Messianic Judaism: A Modern Movement With An Ancient Past*, where he has commented on the place of traditional *halachah* for today's Messianic Jews, with the statements of Yeshua in Matthew 23:2-3 as a factor.¹⁵ Stern appears to recognize the value of considering the Oral Torah for various issues, such as a woman getting a divorce, but places the supreme value and importance upon the teachings of Yeshua and the ethos of the Apostolic Scriptures:

When the Oral *Torah* was truly oral, not fixed as it has been since the compiling of the *Talmud*, there was more room for flexibility. Conservative Judaism tries—albeit in a very limited way, since its rule-making bodies are controlled by its right wing—to modernize certain *halachot*. A well-known example is the rule concerning the *agunah*, the woman whose husband has disappeared and whose whereabouts is unknown. According to Orthodox *halakhah*, the woman cannot obtain a divorce, because the husband is not there to write her a *get* [bill of divorce], nor can she be regarded as a widow, since there is no definite evidence the husband has died. Therefore she cannot remarry. This can cause great hardship—a young *agunah* who never learns the fate of her husband must stay single all her life. Conservative Judaism has developed a different *halakhah* which allows remarriage under certain conditions and thus alleviates the hardship.

All this is by way of background of considering what the role of *halakhah* might be in light of the New Covenant. According to the New Testament, every believer has in him the Spirit of God [Romans 8:9]. It is written that the letter kills, but the Spirit [makes] alive [2 Corinthians 3:6]. It does not say that the *Torah* kills, for the *Torah* is holy, just and good. It does say that love fulfills the *Torah*, which I see as another way of saying that obedience to the *Torah* by the Spirit makes the *Torah* come alive.

It is clear that people need guidance in ethical behavior...Messianic *halakhah* can provide specific guidance for those who seek it. It can provide a basis for discussion, for probing in the direction of finding godly solutions to ethical questions, as well as for ceremonial situations, helping to establish communal norms—*norms*, not hard-and-fast

¹⁴ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 67.

¹⁵ David H. Stern, *Messianic Judaism: A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books, 2007), pp 140-154.

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rules! A balance must be struck between heavilyhandedly imposing halakhic decisions on the believing community and carelessly failing to give adequate guidance, with the result that each must fend for himself.¹⁶

It is safe to say that Stern's view would be entirely compatible with Matthew 23:2-3 being interpreted along the lines of the scribes and Pharisees, and their various successors, as possessing a *consultative authority*. Neither blind obedience nor outright dismissal of the traditions present in the Oral Torah should be permitted by today's Messianic people.

The Zondervan publication *How Jewish is Christianity? 2 Views on the Messianic Movement* (2003), includes a variety of perspectives, widely for and against the modern Messianic Jewish movement, along with some nuances interwoven within. The issue of Rabbinic authority is only scantily touched on, but given the wide distribution of a publication like this, it is important that we note what has been stated about **Matthew 23:2-3**. Messianic Jewish theologian **John Fischer**, in responding to a Christian detractor about the Messianic Jewish movement, states per Matthew ch. 23, "Yeshua condemns *not* the oral law, *not* the Pharisees, *but only* the hypocrites among some Pharisees...Furthermore, in the beginning of Matthew 23 (verses 2-3), Yeshua pointedly instructs his followers to practice all that the Pharisees teach!"¹⁷ Fisher makes note of some Talmudic discussion where various Pharisees are critical of themselves (b.*Sotah* 20a-22b; b.*Yevamot* 16a), and so his remark about not all Pharisees being chastised in Matthew ch. 23 should be well taken. The publication *How Jewish is Christianity?* was not the place to hammer out all of the details on what Yeshua meant in Matthew 23:2-3, but a Messianic Jewish figure such as Fischer would be among those who would probably give a higher place to the Oral Torah and Rabbinic tradition, beyond a consultative sense.

One useful study, which need not escape the attention of any examiner of **Matthew 23:2-4**, is the article "Matthew 23:2-4: Does Jesus Recognize the Authority of the Pharisees and Does He Endorse Their *Halakhah*?" by **Noel S. Rabinowitz**, appearing in the September 2003 edition of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (JETS).¹⁸ Rabinowitz goes into detail, summarizing many of the interpretations present (some of which were summarized in the previous section of this article). He notably recognizes how it is inescapable that Matthew 23:2-4 affords some level of authority to the First Century Pharisees, and also how trying to separate out Pharisaical authority into the realms of civil law or religious law would not be at all useful. He also interjects the important point of how Yeshua's seeming endorsement of Pharisaical authority echoes the instruction of Deuteronomy 17:11,¹⁹ the key passage in the Torah upon which the Pharisees would have based their office:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 152-154.

¹⁷ John Fischer, "Response: Yes, We Do Need Messianic Congregations!", in Louis Goldberg, ed., *How Jewish is Christianity? 2 Views on the Messianic Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 64.

¹⁸ Noel S. Rabinowitz, "Matthew 23:2-4: Does Jesus Recognize the Authority of the Pharisees and Does He Endorse Their *Halakhah*?" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 46 No. 3 (2003):423-447. Back issue available for download at <<http://www.etsjets.org/JETS>>.

¹⁹ "According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left" (Deuteronomy 17:11).

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The separation of the Jewish world into civil and religious spheres is artificial and cannot be sustained. A better solution is to interpret Jesus' command to do what the Pharisees teach to mean simply that—the disciples are to recognize the teaching authority of the scribes and Pharisees because they sit in the Seat of Moses.

Many scholars find this thesis unacceptable and...insist that Jesus is not issuing a sincere command. Jesus' choice of words seems to make this conclusion unlikely, however. His command to do what the Pharisees teach invokes Deut 17:11, the very text upon which the authority of the Sanhedrin, the Sages, and later rabbis is based. In verse 11, Moses instructs the [Israelites] to submit to the legal rulings of the priest or the judge of each generation...

...Jesus' command to do and keep whatever the Pharisees say clearly resembles this passage and it is unlikely that his choice of words was merely coincidental. If Jesus did not intend for his listeners to take his command seriously, it is unlikely that he would have used language invested with such legal and binding authority.²⁰

Rabbinowitz notes that Yeshua followed some significant traditions of Pharisaical Judaism, such as those pertaining to the order of service on *Shabbat* in the synagogue (Luke 4:16-21),²¹ or the order of the Passover *seder* (Matthew 26:26-28).²² The conclusion of Rabbinowitz' lengthy article is that the Messiah upheld Pharisaical authority in principle, but that a hyper-literal, or even just literal, pressing of "all" in Matthew 23:3, was not our Lord's intent:

Because of the fact that Jesus attacks the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and for their corrupt teaching in so many other biblical passages, many scholars find [my] interpretation completely unacceptable. I have argued, however, that this apparent contradiction can be resolved by understanding that Jesus did not mean for his disciples to literally do "all" that the Pharisees taught. He meant rather that they were to obey their teachings regarding the Torah and *halakhah in principle*, a fact supported by Jesus' own basic observance of oral tradition.

...I have suggested that Jesus' condemnation of Pharisaic hypocrisy cannot be reduced to a black-and-white rejection of their authority. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, not because of their *halakhah*, but because they had forsaken the grater commandments of justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

On one level, the Pharisees did genuinely wish to keep the Law. By means of oral tradition, they labored to keep the Torah at the center of Jewish life and worship. As those who sat in the Seat of Moses, the Pharisees provided the Jewish people with practical answers and specific instructions regarding how one actually fulfilled the commands of the Torah.

On a deeper level, however, the inner motives of the Pharisees often betrayed them, and their zeal for the Torah frequently became self-serving. When Jesus rebukes the Pharisees in the woes section of Matthew 23, he reveals that their wrong teachings were a manifestation of their wrong motives. In their heart, these Pharisees yearned for the praise of people, but in their minds, they believed they honored God. They

²⁰ Ibid., 432-433.

²¹ Ibid., 436.

²² Ibid.

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meticulously paid their tithes of dill and cummin, but they neglected the weightier provisions of the law of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23).²³

Rabbinowitz' position is certainly one which may be said to support Yeshua affording the Pharisees a *consultative authority* in Matthew 23:2-3.

While his book *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism* (2005) was widely focused on issues of ecclesiology, and not necessarily Torah *halachah*, **Mark S. Kinzer** nonetheless did comment on the seeming connection between Deuteronomy 17:10-11 and Yeshua's word of **Matthew 23:1-3**. He not only concludes that the Messiah widely recognized the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, but implies that such authority needs to also be recognized of their Jewish successors:

Seeing only the anti-Pharisaic polemics of Matthew and not his own proto-rabbinic orientation, most commentators have been unable to make sense of this text. This perspective has also prevented them from recognizing a biblical allusion in the text [to Deuteronomy 17:10] and its radical implications...Whatever synagogue architecture was like in Yeshua's day, the "seat of Moses" in this verse refers primarily to the correspondence between the high court of Deuteronomy 17 and the role of Moses during Israel's time in the wilderness. Thus, Matthew's Yeshua states that the Pharisaic teachers occupy the position of the judges in Deuteronomy 17—they are the legitimate heirs of Moses and have authority to interpret and apply the Torah in their generation as Moses did in his. This way of reading Matthew 23:1-3 is confirmed by what Yeshua says about how their words are to be received: "carefully observe all that they say to you." This is a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 17:10: "carefully observe all that they instruct you to do."

The importance of this text for our purpose cannot be overestimated. Yeshua here employs the same verse to justify the halakhic legitimacy of the Pharisaic teachers as is later used in rabbinic tradition to justify the halakhic legitimacy of the rabbis. As in the examples cited above, it is highly likely that this community reflects Matthew's intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the early rabbinic movement and his own affirmation of much of its traditional teaching. The rabbinic and Matthean reading suits well Deuteronomy 17's original function within the Pentateuch as presented above. Though Matthew 23 proceeds to castigate those very same Pharisees for unworthy conduct, this fact only throws the initial verses into bolder relief. Matthew apparently approves of the central Pharisaic tradition but cannot stomach the Pharisees themselves...²⁴

In Kinzer's succeeding volume, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God* (2011), he goes into some further detail regarding Pharisaic authority. Kinzer is entirely right to emphasize how while various Pharisees are noted to be opponents of Yeshua, at the same time "many Pharisees invite Yeshua to their homes—even though he regularly uses such occasions to admonish them [Luke 7:36-50; 11:37-52; 14:1-24]."²⁵ He also states, correctly, "Some Pharisees warn Yeshua that Herod Antipas wants to arrest him and have

²³ Ibid., 446-447.

²⁴ Mark S. Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), pp 250-251.

²⁵ Mark S. Kinzer, ed. Jennifer Rosner, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2011), 55.

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him executed; thus, they evidently seek to protect him from harm [Luke 13:31-33]. Yeshua tells some Pharisees that ‘the reign of God is among you’—and this may imply that God is especially among them *because* they are Pharisees [Luke 17:20-22].”²⁶

It is easily discerned that not only does Kinzer afford a high level of authority to the Oral Torah in the lives of today’s Messianic Jews, but that he is also probing many religious and philosophical issues that the broad Messianic community is too widely unaware of:

What do we, as twenty-first century Messianic Jews, make of all of this? In order to form theological judgments based on this biblical analysis, we must go beyond mere biblical analysis and examine the historical developments of the last two millennia. Is it really possible for us to acknowledge the authority of a tradition that has emphatically denied the messiahship of Yeshua? Can we see this tradition as embodying “Oral Torah,” carrying on the work of Moses from one generation to the next?

The *halakhic* authority given to Yeshua’s followers encourages us in our efforts to develop a distinctly Messianic Jewish way of life. However, it is not sufficient to enable us to accomplish that task. This is the case for three important reasons. First, according to Matthew, the *halakhic* authority of the messianic community operates within the context of the Pharisaic scribes. Each is apparently incomplete without the other. Second, because the Torah-observant Jewish Yeshua movement faded away in the early centuries of the Common Era, no continuous tradition of Messianic Jewish *halakhah* exists. We do not know in any detail how the early Jewish Yeshua-movement kept *Shabbat*, *kashrut*, or the laws of family purity. However, even if we did, we would still not have the living memory of an ongoing community’s attempt to live out the Torah and pass it on to their children through the changing circumstances of the past twenty centuries. Such a living memory is essential to the Jewish people’s observance of the Torah. Third, the Jewish community as a whole decided to accept the *halakhic* authority of the rabbinic movement. Given the divinely appointed role of the community in establishing and confirming the legitimate successors to Moses, we cannot ignore rabbinic tradition, even if we believe that we also have a crucial contribution to make in the *halakhic* process.²⁷

A significant part of Kinzer’s theological work is to establish in the minds of many that Messianic Jews can be faithful to Yeshua and to their Jewish heritage, and as such recognize the value of the Oral Torah and traditional *halachah*. Because no ancient Messianic Jewish *halachah* exists from the First-Third Centuries, Messianic Jews should not go out and totally make up their own orthopraxy, but can surely follow those many customs and traditions established by wider Judaism. Where some might stop and think that Kinzer is making a blanket endorsement of Orthodox Judaism, he is keen to note how “I have devoted much time and effort to argue for a conclusion that would be the starting point for other forms of Judaism. I am not here advocating any particular perspective on what the Oral Torah says to us today. Taking my conclusion as a premise, one could develop an Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist Messianic approach to Jewish tradition.”²⁸ Many would consider parts of Kinzer’s overall theology to be semi-

²⁶ Ibid, pp 55-56.

²⁷ Ibid., pp 59-60.

²⁸ Ibid., 61.

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liberal to liberal,²⁹ so it is highly doubtful that he would endorse an Orthodox *halachah*, as opposed to something more akin to Conservative Judaism. Suffice it to say, Kinzer's approach to the Oral Torah and role of various Rabbinic authorities would go beyond the *consultative authority* approach that is proposed in this analysis, and he does represent the orientation of a fair number of Messianic Jewish leaders.

A final perspective to be noted, which by far is probably the most extreme on paper that I have encountered to date (by 2013), is represented by the Israeli Messianic Jew **Tsvi Sadan**, in his article "Halachic Authority in the Life of the Messianic Community," appearing in the Winter 2012 edition of *Messiah Journal*, published by the popular ministry First Fruits of Zion.³⁰ Sadan's perspective of the place of the Oral Torah not only goes far beyond affording the Pharisaical authorities and their successors a consultative role, or even sifting through twenty or so centuries of Rabbinic materials per the more moderate-to-progressive branches of Judaism. Sadan affords the Oral Torah an almost equal place with the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament itself, stating,

"Because the New Testament teaches Yeshua's followers to observe Torah, it also necessarily teaches to keep the tradition of the fathers, or the Oral Law. I understand that many...today are deeply suspicious of this concept. Nevertheless, we must understand that the Oral Law is also part and parcel of the New Testament."³¹

While Sadan does think that the Oral Torah and the Sages have an almost equal role for today's Messianic Jews, he does, at least, acknowledge that there will be instances where Rabbinic authority is to be rejected in favor of the Messiah's authority. Yet, Sadan does seem to indicate that such Rabbinic authority must be followed by Messianic Jewish people, unless directly contradicted by Yeshua or the Apostles. He summarizes,

"Under what circumstances can rabbinic authority be overruled?...Those who demand that we reject this authority are actually calling for the rejection of our Jewish identity. Considering such an alternative, the obligation to overrule rabbinic authority is imposed on us only when it is clearly and unambiguously opposed to Yeshua, his teaching, and that of the apostles. Otherwise nothing should prevent us from acting in accordance with Jewish tradition, which embodies the wisdom of thousands of years."³²

An example provided by Sadan, of a place where Messianic Jews should disobey standing Jewish *halachah*, pertains to the rescue of a New Testament from a fire:

"There is halachah that says that a New Testament is not saved from a fire, which means that it is not sacred. The Torah scroll, on the other hand, must be saved even at the risk of losing one's life (b.*Shabbat* 116a). Our halachah, if we will ever have any, must rule that the New Testament must be treated in the same way as the Torah scroll. The significance of such a halachah is that it recognizes the New Testament as part of Jewish holy scriptures."³³

²⁹ Consult the highly useful observations in Michael Wolf and Larry Feldman (2009). *Unrecognized Mediation: A False Hope*. International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues. Available online via <<http://iamcs.org>>.

³⁰ Tsvi Sadan, "Halachic Authority in the Life of the Messianic Community" *Messiah Journal* Issue 109, Winter 2012/5772:13-26.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

³³ *Ibid.*

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(Sadan notably, though, does not state if this is a modern Hebrew New Testament translation, or some edition of the canonical Greek New Testament, which is to be saved from a fire.)

Sadan is one who is forthright, however, in equating all or most Jewish identity, with the Jewish people essentially following all of the Oral Torah, with few questions raised. Sadan would be one who likely favors today's Messianic Jews living in accordance with Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox Judaism. While he represents a small number of Messianic Jews in both the Land of Israel, as well as the Diaspora, his view will be one to recognize at present, as being held by a number of notable individuals, congregations, and organizations.

Just like Judaism itself has its major branches such as Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—and each approaches the Oral Torah, the Sages, and post-Biblical ancient Jewish literature a bit differently—so should we expect there to never be a monolith emerge within the Messianic Jewish movement regarding how it implements Yeshua's word of **Matthew 23:2-3**. We should expect, as Messianic Judaism goes through some changes in the future, to see a greater awareness for a place of Rabbinic authority arise. Overall, though, too many of today's Messianic Jewish individuals and leaders have too high a regard for the Apostolic Scriptures, and for Yeshua Himself, to really adopt anything other than affording the Pharisees and their successors a fair level of *consultative authority*, and one which will most likely mirror the more moderate-to-progressive branches of Judaism at that.

For certain, there should be a greater respect emerging by Messianic Jews for the traditions of their ancestors, but this should be highly tempered by the interests of the good news of salvation in Yeshua as well. The Rabbinic tradition will and should be a factor in determining *halachah* and theology, but most of Messianic Judaism will never consider it to be at an almost equal level of Holy Scripture. To its significant credit, the Messianic Jewish movement, on the whole, has been too influenced by evangelical Protestantism to allow for that. But, even evangelical Protestantism, despite various limitations at times, has sought to understand the Bible in its world—and Protestant scholasticism has a high view of the historical value of the major bodies of Second Temple literature originating from the Pharisees.

The Hebrew Yeshua versus the Greek Jesus?

Many individuals in the broad Messianic movement, when encountering a number of the Messianic Jewish views of **Matthew 23:2-3** which we have just summarized—particularly those which go beyond a *consultative authority* for the Rabbinic tradition—have been at a total loss of what to do. Many have seen the views where various Messianic Jewish individuals, and/or their assemblies, have basically thought that they need to follow virtually all of the Oral Torah and Orthodox Judaism, and have been a bit disturbed. Over the past eight to nine years (2005-2013), the alternative perspective to this extreme, which has been quite popularized throughout the more independent Messianic and Hebrew/Hebraic Roots sectors, has been for Torah obedient Messianic people to completely reject the scribes and Pharisees—and by extension a wide array of

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mainline Jewish traditions and customs as having any value—on the basis of what is communicated via the so-called Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, derived from the anti-missionary work *Evan Bohan*.³⁴ This Fourteenth Century text contains some variant readings, which have certainly stirred many people:

“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” (Matthew 23:2-3, HGM).³⁵

[2] על כסא משה ישבו הפירושים והחכמים
[3] ועתה כל אשר יאמר לכם שמרו ועשו ובתקנותיהם ומעשיהם
אל תעשו שהם אומרים והם אינם עושים

[2] *al kisei Moshe yeshvu haPerushim v'ha'chakamim* [3] *v'ata kol asher yomar l'khem shimru v'asu u'v'taqanotehem u'ma'aseihem al ta'asu she'heim omrim v'heim einam osim*

A huge amount of attention has been given to a minority reading present in this text, *kol asher yomar* (כל אשר יאמר), “all that he says.”³⁶ It has been concluded, on the basis of this reading of **Matthew 23:2-3**, that Yeshua the Messiah acknowledged that the scribes and Pharisees occupied the seat of Moses, but that they were to only follow what “he,” meaning Moses, said. Thus, any rulings issued by the scribes and Pharisees were to be largely rejected and ignored.

This perspective has been highly popularized since 2005, via the book actually entitled, *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus*. Its author, Nehemia Gordon, is a Karaite Jew, being part of a sect from the Middle Ages that accepts the canon of the Tanach or Hebrew Bible as authoritative, but rejects the Oral Torah as authoritative.³⁷

³⁴ The presumed legitimacy of the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew has been analyzed in the article/preceding chapter, “Is the Hebrew Matthew an Authentic Document?” by J.K. McKee.

³⁵ Cf. George Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 112-113.

The reconstruction present in Howard’s HGM is to notably be differentiated from the rendering offered by the Franz Delitzsch Hebrew New Testament, produced in the late Nineteenth Century, which has the following for **Matthew 23:2-3**:

ha'soferim v'haPerushim yoshvim al-kisei Moshe. l'kein kol asher-yomru l'khem shimru v'asu raq hishm'ru me'asot k'ma'asei'hem ki omrim heim v'ainam osim (עֲשִׂים) וְהַסּוֹפְרִים וְהַפְּרוּשִׁים יֹשְׁבִים עַל־כִּסֵּא מֹשֶׁה לְכֵן כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־יֹאמְרוּ לָכֶם שְׁמְרוּ וְעֲשׂוּ רַק הַשְּׁמְרוּ מַעֲשׂוֹת כְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי אֹמְרִים הֵם וְאֵינֶם עֹשִׂים).

“The scholars and *Prushim* sit in the seat of Mosheh, so whatever they tell you, observe and do it. Only be careful not to do their deeds, for they say things but they do not do them” (Aaron Eby and Robert Morris, trans., et. al., *The Delitzsch Hebrew Gospels: A Hebrew/English Translation* [Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2011], pp 90-91).

³⁶ Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, 112 where it is noted that *yomru* (יאמרו), “they say,” actually appears in the majority of the witnesses accessed in reconstructing this hypothetical text.

James Scott Trimm, trans., *The Hebraic-Roots Version Scriptures* (Northriding, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 2006), 1223, renders **Matthew 23:2-3** as follows: “On Moshe’s seat sit the scribes and P’rushim. And all that he says to you observe and do. But do not you according to their works, for they say, but do not.” He notably does state how “I have followed the reading יאמר [yomar] ‘he says’ found in two Shem Tob manuscripts...The other Shem Tob manuscripts as well as the DuTillet and Munster Hebrew, have יאמרו [yomru] ‘they say.’”

³⁷ For a brief review of Karaite Judaism, consult “Karaites, Karaism,” in David Bridger, ed. et. al., *The New Jewish Encyclopedia* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1976), 263; Daniel J. Lasker, “Karaites,” in R.J. Zwi

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Gordon used the variant reading in the so-called Hebrew Gospel of Matthew reconstructed by George Howard, "he says," to support the premise that Yeshua of Nazareth was a kind of proto-Karaite. Gordon's basic position regarding **Matthew 23:2-3**, as appears in his book *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus*, is summarized as follows:

(2) The Pharisees and sages sit upon the seat of Moses. (3) Therefore, all that **he** says to you, diligently do, but according to **their** reforms (*takanot* תִּקּוּנוֹת) and **their** precedents (*ma'asim* מַעֲשֵׂיִם) do not do, because they talk but they do not do.

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!**

To understand what happened, we must compare the Hebrew with the Greek. In the Greek, the disciples were commanded to obey "all that **they** [the Pharisees] says" but in the Hebrew, Yeshua told his disciples to obey "all that **he** [Moses] says." These are two fundamentally different messages, but in Hebrew, this is a difference of only one single letter! In Hebrew, "he says" is *yomar* יֹאמֵר while "they say" is *yomru* יֹאמְרוּ. The only difference between the two in an un-pointed Hebrew text is the addition of the extra *vav* ם in *yomru* יֹאמְרוּ "they say." That this is the basis for a completely different message is amazing because *vav* ם is one the smallest letters in the Hebrew alphabet, really just a single stroke! The addition of this tiny letter changes Yeshua's message from an instruction to obey Moses ("all that **he** says") to a commandment to obey the Pharisees ("all that **they** say"). In contrast, the Greek difference between "he says" (*eipei* εἶπε) and "they say" (*eiposin* εἶπασιν) is a much larger difference...

After instructing his disciples to do as Moses says, Yeshua continues that they must not do according to the *takanot* תִּקּוּנוֹת, and *ma'asim* מַעֲשֵׂיִם of the Pharisees. These two Hebrew words, *takanot* and *ma'asim*, are loaded with meaning when talking about the Pharisees....

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 proper 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 Rabbinic claim to authority is that they sit in Moses' seat.³⁸

From a textual standpoint, just regarding the Fourteenth Century C.E. materials from which the so-called Hebrew Gospel of Matthew was hypothetically assembled, Gordon's view of *yomar* (יֹאמֵר) or "he says," and not *yomru* (יֹאמְרוּ) or "they say," being the correct reading for **Matthew 23:2-3**, has been challenged. A Messiah Magazine article from Fall 2005, entitled "Original Hebrew Matthew Discovered?", which was published a number of months after Gordon's book *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus* was released, was

Werblowsky and Geoffrey Widoger, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp 391-392; "Karaism," in Geoffrey Wigoder, ed. et. al., *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House, 2002), 441; Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2132.

³⁸ Nehemia Gordon, *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus: New Light on the Seat of Moses from Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew* (Hilkiah Press, 2005), pp 48-49, 52-53.

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quite critical not only of the so-called Shem Tov edition of Matthew that he used, but more importantly of his methodology of favoring the reading "he says":

At the very crux of Gordon's argument lies the reading of Matthew 23:2-3 in two ShTb manuscripts. Instead of Yeshua saying, "...all that *they* tell you..." these ShTb manuscripts have, "...all that *he* tells you..." supposedly in reference to Moses on whose chair the Pharisees are seated. Gordon assumes that this must be the authentic, original reading of Matthew 23:3, and proceeds to correct the Greek to what it "should have read." Yet, as he mentions in a footnote (p. 49, n. 57), of the nine extant copies of ShTb Matthew, six of them contain the plural reading, "...all that *they* tell you..." (One fragmentary copy does not contain 23:3). Thus, the reading, "all that *he* tells you," upon which Gordon bases his argument, is read by only two of the recognized ShTb manuscripts. What is more, of these two manuscripts, one is clearly a copy of the other, meaning that only a single witness exists to support Gordon's argument. Gordon fails to mention that two other Hebrew Matthews (Münster and du Tillet) both read the plural here, as do all other known manuscripts (including Greek, Syriac, Aramaic, and Latin, etc.) save one 5th Century Latin text (Corbeiensis II).

The bottom line of all this is quite apparent: against the thousands of manuscripts that bear witness to Matthew 23, as well as the majority of Hebrew manuscripts that contain this text (including six manuscripts of the ShTb itself), Gordon opts for a variant reading from a single witness found in a manuscript that is manifestly of poor textual quality. It appears that the reason Gordon would receive a reading against such a preponderance of evidence is that it fits his Karaite theology...³⁹

Because of its hype-laden title of *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus*, Nehemia Gordon has become quite a sensation in much of the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots world, speaking at many conferences and gatherings—**despite the fact that Gordon is not at all a purported Believer in Yeshua of Nazareth!** The various reasons as to why Gordon has become so popular have both theological and spiritual dynamics to them, although some of Gordon's biggest "fans," if you will, think that he is quite close to recognizing Yeshua as the Messiah. Yet the Karaite Nehemia Gordon is probably having more of a spiritual influence on those who are purported to be Believers in Israel's Messiah, than such people are having on one who is openly a non-Believer...

Given the fact that Gordon's book *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus* has now had over eight years (2005-2013) to circulate throughout the Messianic world, the main base of enthusiasm he has had, has been obviously from widely non-Jewish, fundamentalist sectors—typically composing people who eschew Christianity, Judaism, and a wide level of formal Biblical scholarship. Gordon has been able to capitalize on the ignorance of many people on composition issues regarding the Gospel of Matthew,⁴⁰ but most significantly unfair prejudices held toward the ancient Pharisees, Judaism, and Jewish tradition in general. Gordon's place of influence has only helped to continue, not stop, the idea present among many people that they do not need to consider a possible role for ancient tradition, and contemporary Biblical literature, in developing theology and

³⁹ Brian J. Tebbitt and Tim Hegg. "Original Hebrew Gospel Discovered?" *Messiah Magazine* Issue 86, Bamidbar 5765 (2005):31.

⁴⁰ If you have not already, do be sure to read the entry on the Gospel of Matthew, appearing in the workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

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orthopraxy. Gordon's view of Matthew 23:2-3 failed to take into any significant account areas of theology and *halachah*, where Yeshua was quite compliant with the mainline Pharisaism of His day, as significant corrections were most properly and directly issued in responses to him, by teachers like Tim Hegg.⁴¹

Gordon's conclusions have been too simplistically accepted, by too many people, without enough critical thinking. The idea, for example, that in the canonical Greek version of Matthew 23:2-3, Yeshua the Messiah would endorse every single ruling of the human Pharisees, could only be a conclusion drawn by a strict fundamentalist reader. Yeshua the Messiah no more endorsed a blind obedience or following of the Pharisees, than the Apostle Paul or Apostle Peter expected First Century Believers to blindly adhere to the Roman government (Romans 13:1-7;⁴² Titus 3:1;⁴³ 1 Peter 2:13⁴⁴). Obviously, as Biblical history reveals, the Roman government was certainly disobeyed by the First Century Messiah followers, when the interests of the good news of salvation in Yeshua were significantly at stake.

That Yeshua afforded the Pharisees some place of authority for the *halachah* of His First Century followers cannot be denied. Yet, the Apostles themselves also had authority in determining *halachah* (Matthew 16:19)⁴⁵—and **they clearly did clash in various areas with the scribes and Pharisees, given the salvation-historical significance of the death and resurrection of their Lord!** Many of the negative things that the scribes and Pharisees believed about females, and those from the nations at large, were clearly rejected by those like the Apostle Paul (cf. Galatians 3:28 contra. t.*Berachot* 6:18), in favor of a much more egalitarian and inclusive view of Jews and non-Jews, and men and women, within the Body of Messiah.⁴⁶

The influence that Gordon—a non-Believer—has had in further splintering the broad Messianic movement, on non-essentials, is quite distressing and even infuriating. In Matthew 23:3, Yeshua did say of the Pharisees, “do not do according to their deeds,” and

⁴¹ Tim Hegg (2005). *Why Nehemia Gordon is Wrong About Matthew 23:3. Torah Resource*; (2005). *Some Responses to Nehemia Gordon's Rejoinder. Torah Resource*. Both accessible via <<http://torahresource.com>>.

⁴² “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor” (Romans 13:1-7).

⁴³ “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed” (Titus 3:1).

⁴⁴ “Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority” (1 Peter 2:13).

⁴⁵ “I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven” (Matthew 16:19, CJB).

⁴⁶ Consult the exegesis paper on Galatians 3:28, “Biblical Equality and Today's Messianic Movement,” appearing in the commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

Also consult the relevant sections of the commentaries *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic* and *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee, and also the FAQ, “Women in Ministry.”

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then He listed a number of key examples of where His *halachah* and theirs were in conflict. These included the scribal and Pharisaical leaders putting various burdens onto the people (Matthew 23:4), their wanting to be noticed via their inappropriate usage of *tzitzits*/tassels and *tefillin*/phylacteries (Matthew 23:5), their abuse of religious titles (Matthew 23:6-10), their style of leadership which kept people out of God's Kingdom (Matthew 23:13), their rancid proselytism (Matthew 23:15), their inappropriate offerings at the Temple (Matthew 23:16-22), and their subversion of justice (Matthew 23:23). Yeshua accused the Pharisaical leadership of being "blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24), and stated that they were "like whitewashed tombs" (Matthew 23:27), associating them with those who had murdered Israel's Prophets (Matthew 23:29-35).

Yeshua's criticism of those leaders who sat in the seat of Moses was their hypocrisy, and their disregard for the Torah's weightier matters such as "justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). The issues that Yeshua had with the scribal and Pharisaical leaders in Matthew ch. 23, are not, however, the issues that disciples of Nehemia Gordon have had. The types of issues that various Messianic persons, who have welcomed Gordon's interpretation of Matthew 23:2-3, have with the Pharisees and their Jewish successors, tend to be over issues like: the traditional Jewish calendar,⁴⁷ Judaism's widescale avoidance of using the Divine Name of God YHWH/YHVH (יהוה),⁴⁸ and mainline Jewish traditions like men wearing the *kippah/yarmulke* in religious services,⁴⁹ among others. Some of the rhetoric which has been witnessed against both Jewish and Messianic Jewish practice, in the widely non-Jewish quarters of the Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, can not only be credited to the conclusions witnessed in Gordon's book *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus*—but can also be said to be a major cause of much Messianic Jewish hostility to non-Jewish Believers in their midst, per the fear that they might oppose mainline Jewish practices via an inappropriate interpretation of Matthew 23:2-3.⁵⁰ It is fair to say in 2005, that Gordon's teaching on Matthew 23:2-3 has been applied in ways which would merit his followers and their attitudes **the same sort of criticism that Yeshua actually issued to the scribal and Pharisaical leaders.** Those who have accepted Gordon's view of Matthew 23:2-3 have been scarcely concerned with "the weightier matters of *Torah*—justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23, TLV).

Do not establish proper rulings? Toward a Fair Approach of the Rabbinic Tradition

Many in today's Messianic community—Messianic Jewish Believers *and* non-Jewish Believers—rightly look to the example of the Jewish people for insight into following God's Torah. This is good, because Judaism indeed has much valuable insight and

⁴⁷ Consult the FAQ, "Biblical calendar."

⁴⁸ Consult the FAQ, "YHWH, YHVH."

⁴⁹ Consult the FAQ, "Headcovering Garments."

⁵⁰ Consult the relevant sections of the publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?* by J.K. McKee.

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understanding concerning God's commandments.⁵¹ Yet, while not rejecting the validity of the Torah—unlike much of Christianity—the Jewish people have placed a fence around many of the commandments. The Mishnah asserts, for example, “Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah” (m.*Avot* 1:1).⁵² The Pharisees, Sages, and other Rabbis have added customs and traditions that have enhanced the keeping of God's commandments, **but** then various others that have skewed or negated some. The most significant and grievous mistake is that most Jews, unfortunately, have rejected Yeshua the Messiah as the Eternal Savior.

When looking to Judaism for spiritual insight, *every Messianic Believer* must use some degree of discernment and caution. The Jewish people have accumulated over two millennia of study, obedience, and communal experience surrounding the Torah. **To reject all Jewish interpretations and insight is wrong.** Jewish perspectives on the Tanach Scriptures are surely considered and consulted in Biblical Studies, along with Christian perspectives, when a viable interpretation is needed. This is even more true of areas of Torah instruction that have been largely kept by Judaism, and largely ignored by Christianity, throughout the centuries.

While Jewish perspectives and traditions should not be considered authoritative as *Scripture*, recognizing that they have a **consultative authority** for the Messianic community is something that will do far more to bring God's people together than keep them apart. *Learning how to do this, though, is an absolute art and science.* Unfortunately, a significant number within today's widely independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement (especially in Two-House sub-movement!)⁵³ are not at all up to this task, and lack the proper abilities, skills, and temperament to do so. And, a number of people in Messianic Judaism have been caught advocating that Rabbinical authority be pretty much blindly followed. **Extremes and fundamentalist approaches have to be steadfastly avoided!**

Why do many non-Jewish Believers in the Messianic community think that they can just widely cast aside the Pharisees, associated Jewish literature from the Biblical period,⁵⁴ and flat reject a majority of Jewish interpretations and applications of the Torah?

Much of what one encounters in the rejection of the Pharisees and mainline Jewish tradition, in the independent sectors of the Messianic movement, is a great deal of significance given to a passage of the Torah like Deuteronomy 4:2. Within this verse, Moses told the Ancient Israelites, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God

⁵¹ It should be observed, in total fairness, that the two main Protestant strands of Calvinism and Wesleyanism, which have always viewed the so-called “moral law” of the Torah as valid instruction for Christians to follow—surely also have much to teach and guide today's Messianic Believers.

Consult the relevant sections of the author's book *The New Testament Validates Torah*.

⁵² Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and trans., *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (New York: UAHC Press, 1993), 1.

⁵³ Consult the chapter “Anti-Semitism in the Two-House Movement,” along with a number of specific examples, appearing in the book *Israel in Future Prophecy* by J.K. McKee.

⁵⁴ For an excellent example of where contemporary Messianic people can certainly benefit from such extra-Biblical literature, be sure to consider *Sayings of the Fathers: A Messianic Perspective on Pirkei Avot* by William Mark Huey.

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which I command you.” The primary emphasis of this commandment, more than anything else, is that God Himself was the only One who could tell the community of Israel what to do and not to do. This was most serious given the overall message of Deuteronomy opposing idolatry and sexual immorality in the Promised Land, which the people were preparing to enter.⁵⁵ Yet, a noticeable number of individuals within the independent Messianic/Hebrew Roots movement, also think that Deuteronomy 4:2 quantitatively rules out **any** Jewish tradition from being recognized as a legitimate expression of Torah observance, to be followed by (any of) God’s people.

However, if we were to hold to a strict interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:2, then this likely means that when situations arise which require the faith community to make judgments on various issues or circumstances which are not directly or indirectly addressed in the Torah, or any part of Scripture, that *any decision* could possibly be acceptable. In the independent Messianic community today this has led to many interpretations of the Torah that are foreign to mainline Judaism, and can be quite offensive to Jewish people. It can lead to everyone doing what he or she feels is right (cf. Judges 17:6; 21:25), with confusion about what to do often abounding. (Even various evangelical Christians on the outside wonder about what they witness.)

It can be irresponsible to strongly assert that traditions are not at all commanded by God, when the Torah itself later says that if a matter arises within Israel, that His people are to follow the rulings of the priests and judges whom He has recognized as occupying positions of authority. **Deuteronomy 17:8-11**, as has already been noted, would have been a major place in the Torah that the ancient Pharisees of **Matthew 23:2-3** would have based their office of leadership:

“If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses. So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is *in office* in those days, and you shall inquire *of them* and they will declare to you the verdict in the case. You shall do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the LORD chooses; **and you shall be careful to observe according to all that they teach you. According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left.**”

The clause of interest is *al-pi ha'Torah* (עַל־פִּי הַתּוֹרָה), “According to the tenor of the law” (YLT),⁵⁶ which is given to those needing a definite judgment issued regarding a matter.

Some, as previously analyzed, would make the argument that *every Rabbinical ruling* made, or *almost every ruling* made, in Orthodox Judaism today needs to be followed by the Messianic community at large—but this definitely goes too far. At the same time, though, Deuteronomy 17:11 does give a berth of authority to those in Jewish religious

⁵⁵ Consult the article “The Message of Deuteronomy” by J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Fall Holiday Helper*.

⁵⁶ “according to the mouth of the law” (LITV); “According to the sentence of the law” (KJV).

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leadership which needs to be considered—with what we have argued should be regarded as a **consultative authority**. Many within today's Messianic Judaism believe that its Torah observance should parallel the major *halachic* matters which bind the broad Jewish community together (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform). This would include those areas of when it celebrates the appointed times (including *Chanukah* and *Purim*), how people would generally dress in a congregational environment, how people generally eat kosher, and other traditions which are beneficial to the broad community at large. Of course, there is certainly internal variance witnessed in Messianic Judaism, just as there is variance among various Jewish sects today.

If a person in the independent Messianic movement has never been exposed to Messianic Judaism, or if someone is naturally predisposed to “do his own thing” (or even worse, “buck the {proverbial} system”) and not respect any established order, then it should not be surprising to see a strong impetus to develop applications of the Torah that are (absolutely) foreign to mainstream Judaism (or at least Reform and Conservative Judaism). For many complicated reasons, both psychological and spiritual, outward un-conformity is something easily discerned within much of the independent Messianic world “out there.”

The instruction in Deuteronomy 17:11 is that God's people are to, “According to the teaching that they will teach you and according to the judgment that they will say to you, shall you do; you shall not deviate from the word that they will tell you, right or left” (ATS). We should not all believe that what is implied here is a blind obedience to the ancient rulings left by all of the Sages and Rabbis of Judaism. Messianic Believers have to ultimately evaluate their rulings against the canonical Word of God—and via the impetus of the Holy Spirit—to see if something aligns with the ethos or general tenor of Scripture, as most major rulings relate to ethical value judgments which the written Scriptures may not directly address. With all things, we have to see whether it parallels God's written Word, and enhances our relationship and walk with Yeshua. There are clearly things that have come down through history that can deter our walk with Him, but then there are many things which can surely enhance it. ***Each of us must use proper discernment and consideration—in our appeal to God for His Divine will.***

What is perhaps most important more than anything else is that the rulings anticipated by Deuteronomy 17:8-11 have to often be made by recognized, qualified spiritual leaders of the community of faith at large. The Torah is designed to be lived out in a community, as opposed to an exclusive “one-on-one” basis between oneself and God. A prime example of this witnessed today is that when you see kosher-for-Passover food items, they often say “consult your rabbi” on the packaging. This indicates in some way that there is debate over whether or not an item is kosher for Passover, and that the ultimate determination should go to your local rabbi, who can evaluate what your personal or family circumstances are.

This can be a difficult concept for many non-Jewish Messianics, who come from evangelical Christian backgrounds, to accept, because many are often not used to their pastor making “rulings” on what Believers should do or not do concerning God's commandments. Many non-Jewish Believers are taught in church that our relationship with God is just between us and Him. While this is *ultimately* true, each of us is also in corporate, covenant association with other members of the faith community. Just like

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many probably went to a pastor for spiritual guidance, prayer, counseling, or just help regarding an issue, and took his advice and followed it, so can the rulings of the Jewish Rabbis apply. Just as many of us would expect an evangelical Christian pastor to be anointed by the Lord, and for his words to carry authoritative weight, so can the rulings of the Jewish Rabbis.

Of course, as with all things, we should never follow the opinions of a Christian pastor blindly, nor should we ever follow the rulings of the Jewish Rabbis blindly, either. We have to test everything against God's Word, to make sure that it aligns with the character of our Heavenly Father, and we have to see if it is something that enhances our walk with Him, rather than takes us away from Him. More than anything else, ***we have to deal with things on a case-by-case basis***, and recognize the fact that there is a great deal of "grey" when it comes to interpretation and application. In today's emerging Messianic community, hopefully we can find a proper balance between Scripture and tradition, where neither is considered unimportant. We should also pray to have good local Messianic leaders be raised up by the Lord, who can issue sound decisions for their own communities and the issues they face (cf. Matthew 16:19). Per the issues surrounding Matthew 23:2-3, the Pharisees are deserving of a little more respect than they might have at present.