

Rabbi, Title

Why are there so many leaders in the Messianic movement who call themselves “rabbi”? Yeshua explicitly forbade this in Matthew 23:8.

Yeshua’s overall words, in Matthew ch. 23, have certainly provoked a wide number of emotional responses, from people all across the Messianic spectrum, as it pertains to the issue of authority and respect to be afforded to the ancient Pharisees—and by extension various Jewish authorities today. Within the wider context of Matthew 22:23-23:36, it is fair for readers to recognize a wide level of theological agreement that Yeshua had with the Pharisees, particularly in terms of the doctrine of resurrection (Matthew 22:23-32), and that Yeshua recognized a legitimate role of leadership that the Pharisees had—but consequently Yeshua also warned His followers not to emulate their behavior and attitudes.¹

Many leaders in contemporary Messianic Judaism, obviously in conjunction with their non-Messianic Jewish counterparts, do go by the title of “rabbi,” as opposed to customary Protestant Christian titles like “pastor” or “reverend.” Yeshua’s word of Matthew 23:6-10 has been commonly invoked, by many people, when encountering Messianic Believers who refer to themselves as “Rabbi XYZ”:

“They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call *any*one on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, *that is*, Messiah” (NASU).

Yeshua’s word, “you are not to let yourselves be called ‘Rabbi’” (CJB), has been widely and unfairly cast at many diligently serving and sincere Messianic Jewish leaders, who widely use the title “rabbi” as an alternative to “pastor.”

Aside from some of the specific context issues to be considered regarding Matthew 23:6-10, is how most individuals who see Yeshua’s word as being a uniform moratorium on using the title “rabbi,” have not made any attempt to insist that there be a similar moratorium on calling human fathers by the title “father.” Yeshua does say after all, “do not call anyone on earth ‘Father’” (CJB).

There is little doubting how many of the First Century Pharisaical leaders, whose hypocrisy Yeshua is describing, made being called *rabbi* (רַבִּי; pronounced *rab-bee*) an intense source of personal pride, arrogance, and condescension: “they love being greeted deferentially in the marketplaces and being called ‘Rabbi’” (Matthew 23:7, CJB). Yeshua’s answer to this is not just “do not be called Rabbi,” but also, “for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers” (Matthew 23:8). This One is easily recognized to be God the Father and/or Yeshua Himself. And, there is no doubting from any survey of the Gospels, that Yeshua did go by the title “rabbi.”

To this Yeshua further states, “Do not call *any*one on earth your father,” which is specified to mean, “for One is your Father, He who is in heaven” (Matthew 23:8, NASU). If one holds to a overly-literal meaning of Matthew 23:8, then our Earthly fathers, even as our legitimate parents, should never be called “father,” and the title “mother” should likewise be considered off limits. But again, there has been no upswell by any Messianic person to demand that people not call their parents by terms like “father” or “mother.”

Yeshua’s words about neither being called “rabbi” or “father” must relate to the position of significance that various people often ascribe to those who serve in such capacities. Many people look to human teachers, “rabbis,” as being the ultimate authority from which to receive instruction. Obviously, this is wrong, as the only ultimate Teacher is the Lord Himself. Similarly, and this is certainly borne out in much of Jewish history, the students of many rabbis can come to think of their teachers as being a sort of “father,” not only superior to their natural

¹ Consult the author’s article on Matthew 23:2-3, “Who Sits in the Seat of Moses?”, appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

parent, but also in many ways superior to God. *Yeshua obviously wanted this sort of misunderstanding to be corrected.* There is only One ultimate leader for the assembly: the Messiah alone (Matthew 23:10).

Given how Matthew 23:8 tends to be quoted alone, with only a demand for Messianic leaders to not be called “rabbi”—without a similar demand for Earthly fathers to never be called “father,” or even the term “leader” to never be used (Matthew 23:9, 10)—it is fair to deduce that Yeshua’s intention concerned the arrogance of those allowing themselves to be called “rabbi” *and* thinking that they had authority at the level of, or superior to, God. Such individuals were to be dismissed, with the attention of Messiah followers focused exclusively on the Lord. Yeshua wanted His disciples and followers to be especially focused on the needs of service of one to another (Matthew 23:11-12), which those presumed “rabbis,” “fathers,” and “leaders” of Matthew 23:8-10 were not doing. Yeshua did not issue a blanket prohibition on religious leaders possessing the title, or occupying the office of “rabbi,” any more than He issued a blanket prohibition on Earthly fathers being called “father.”

For the future, today’s Messianic community will witness many, many people say—either directly to a leader, or at least under their breath—“*call no man rabbi...*” without a greater consideration for the wider context of statements made by the Messiah. While there will always be those in leadership, whether they call themselves “rabbi” or not, who will have issues with hypocrisy and arrogance—we should not think that Yeshua is forbidding contemporary Messianic Jewish leaders from possessing the title “rabbi.” Yet at the same time, it is rather safe to conclude that a significant number of the Messianic Jewish leaders who go by the title “rabbi,” who might be meek and able servants of the Lord, do not possess the training or credentials to really possess or employ this title. In his short article, “The Title ‘Messianic Rabbi’ Carries Heavy Expectations,” Sean Emslie makes some valid observations:

“[An] important issue of ‘Messianic rabbis’ is the majority of ‘Messianic rabbis’ in our movement who are using this title without having taken a rigorous course of study in Torah, Rabbinics, Hebrew and Jewish studies.

“In the larger Jewish world, the training for the rabbinate involves many years of study—either a graduate level of study in Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism or in Orthodox Judaism—and a lifetime of study capped by intense Talmudic studies in yeshiva. With this rigor comes the title of ‘rabbi.’ The need to make our congregational leaders of the future knowledgeable in the Bible, in Hebrew and in Jewish studies is not an option but a mandate...

“If our ‘rabbis’ are merely those individuals who self-apply the title or those who receive ordination without a solid background in Hebrew, Rabbinics, Torah and Jewish studies, then we are misusing a title with great meaning in the Jewish world and we are also allowing for the Messianic community to be open to disrespect before the larger Jewish world...”²

The sad truth is that most Messianic Jewish congregational leaders, who go by the title “rabbi,” while not possessing the type of training or credentials to go by this title in Conservative or Reform Judaism—do not even have the minimum training or credentials required of an evangelical Christian pastor.³ And Emslie did leave out more important disciplines that Messianic “rabbis” must possess, including knowledge of: ancient Near Eastern and classical history, Christian history, and Greek language studies.

² Sean Emslie. (2013). *The Title ‘Messianic Rabbi’ Carries Heavy Expectations*. *Charisma Magazine*. Retrieved 29 May, 2013, from <<http://charismamag.com>>.

³ For a further discussion on this, and related issues, consult the relevant sections of the author’s commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.