

Why Nehemia Gordon is Wrong About Matthew 23:3

A Response to Nehemia Gordon's Article in *Petah Tikvah* (vol. 23.1, Jan-Mar 2005)

Tim Hegg

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In a recent issue of *Petah Tikvah* (vol. 23.1), a short article by Nehemia Gordon appears under the title "The Seat of Moses: Phariseeism for Biblical Judaism?" (pp. 34-5). He begins his article with a reference to Matthew 15:1-3, that contains a dispute between some "Pharisees and scribes" and Yeshua.

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Yeshua from Jerusalem and said, "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"

Gordon uses this incident in the Gospels to outline the relationship of Written and Oral Torah in the viewpoint of the Sages. "Where," Gordon asks, "does the Torah command washing the hands before eating?" Obviously, there is no such commandment in the Written Torah. But the Rabbis, who consider the teachings of the Sages equally to embody the very commands of God, hold the position that obeying the Oral Torah can be understood as obeying God Himself. Thus, the common blessing before washing hands says: "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, King of the universe, Who commanded us to wash our hands." According to the Rabbis, "...the blessing that God commanded us to wash our hands is really a declaration of our obedience to the God-given authority of the Rabbis to enact new commandments."¹

Gordon then notes Deuteronomy 4:2, which prohibits adding to or deleting from the Torah as given by Moses, as well as Isaiah 29:13, which condemns the equating of the teaching of men with the words of God Himself. His conclusion is that "Yeshua upheld Biblical Judaism but rejected the innovations introduced by Phariseeism." He, of course, never mentions that Yeshua Himself put His own teachings on par with the Torah in that they are eternal: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away" (Matt. 24:35², cf. Mk 13:31; Lk 21:33, cp. Lk 9:26; Jn 14:24).

In measure, Gordon's emphasis up to this point in the article has some merit. Surely our Master scrutinized the traditions of the Sages in light of the enduring word of God, and rejected those that went contrary to spirit of the Torah, or even overtly set the Torah aside. Moreover, it seems clear that Yeshua's teaching and example regularly sought to unburden the Torah from its man-made encasements, and bring it back to the people as the gracious and vibrant teaching of the Almighty for His people. However, in doing so it is not evident that our Master rejected all the traditions of the Sages. It is telling that Gordon never mentions the fact that, in many instances as recorded in the Gospels, Yeshua appears to follow the *halachah* of the Sages in spite of the fact that such traditions are not explicitly stated in the Written Torah. For instance, Yeshua teaches that fasting in the presence of a bridegroom was not appropriate (cp. b.*Sukkah* 25b; t.*Berchot* 2.10, cf. Matt 8:14, 15); that the priests are innocent of breaking the Sabbath even though they carry on arduous work (cp. b.*Shabbat* 132b, cf. Matt 12:5); that offering a *b'rachah* before eating was appropriate (cp. m.*Berachot* 6.1, cf. Matt 14:19); that restricting one's travel on the Sabbath was appropriate (b.*Eiruv* 4.5; cf. Matt 24:20); that reclining at the Pesach seder was appropriate (m.*Pesachim* 10:1, cf. Matt 26:20); that healing on the Shabbat was permitted (m.*Shabbat* 22.5, cf. Lk 6:9); that overshadowing a tomb made one ritually unclean (m.*Ohalot*

1. "The Seat of Moses," p. 34. Gordon also references b.*Eiruv* 21b as proof of the authority accorded the "enactments" of the Sages in the minds of the Rabbis.

2. Curiously, the Shem Tov entirely omits the final clause of this verse, having only "heaven and earth will pass away." Its parallel in both Mark and Luke, however, attest to the authenticity of the statement regarding the eternal nature of Yeshua's words.

16.1, 2, cf. Lk 11:44); and that the accused must be given an opportunity to speak in his own defense (Mid. Rab. *Exod.* 23.1, cf. Jn 7:51), to name a few.

Nor would we expect Gordon to reference James 4:8 in his discussion on hand washing, since he would not receive the Epistle of James as Scripture:

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands (καθαρίσατε χείρας), you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Obviously, James is speaking in metaphor here, but the metaphor has no traction if washing of hands was something the followers of Yeshua had forsaken or even which He prohibited. One might presume that the common tradition of washing hands before a meal gave James a ready literary device for his message.³

But having concluded that Yeshua rejected the traditions of the elders, Gordon turns his attention to Matthew 23:2–3, and a text that would seem to undermine his conclusion:

“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.”

He recognizes that this text

has far-reaching application for modern disciples of Yeshua. Today’s Orthodox Rabbis hold ordination going back in an unbroken chain to the Pharisee Rabbis of the First Century. This means a faithful disciple of Yeshua today would have to obey all the man-made rules and regulations taught by modern Orthodox Rabbis who sit in ‘Moses’ Seat.’⁴

Here, however, Gordon turns to textual criticism in order to persuade his readers that rather than undermining his thesis, this text actually supports it. Referencing a copy of the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew known as the Even Bohan, or the Shem-Tov Matthew (a 14th Century work written by Shem-Tov ben Isaac ben Shaprut, sometimes called Ibn Shaprut, which included the Gospel of the Mathew in Hebrew), he writes:

In the ancient Hebrew version of Matthew, Yeshua does not command his disciples to obey the Pharisees as he does in the Greek.⁵

In this statement, Gordon appeals to “the ancient Hebrew version of Matthew,” as though there is a single Hebrew witness to Matthew that stands against the Greek, and that the Even Bohan or Shem Tov Matthew represents the *Vorlage* of Matthew’s original writing. That is clearly not the case, as we shall see. But in the Even Bohan version of Matthew, the text of 23:3 offers a variant, and this variant appears to support Gordon’s thesis. It reads: ועתה כל אשר יאמר לכם שמרו ועשו, “And now all that he (it) will say to you, guard and do.”

Gordon emphasizes that the verb is singular: “all *he (it)* says” rather than the plural of the Greek, “all *they* say.” His conclusion is that Yeshua was teaching His disciples to “guard and do” all that Moses

3. The metaphor of “cleansing hands” or “clean hands” is used in the Tanach, cp. Job 9:30; 17:9; Ps 24:4

4. “The Seat of Moses,” p. 35. In this quote, however, Gordon is not presenting the whole picture. He surely is aware of the scholarly debates over how much the extant rabbinic literature accurately represents pre-destruction *halachah*. To make a blanket statement, that current Orthodox Judaism has an unbroken chain of tradition to the Judaisms of Yeshua’s day, speaks in generalities that verge on being misleading. Moreover, this statement appears to address “Orthodox Judaism” as monolithic, which all recognize is not the case.

5. “The Seat of Moses,” p. 35.

says (singular “he”), not to “guard and do” all that the Pharisees and Scribes (plural “they”) say. Once again, at first blush this seems like a spectacular nugget of truth hidden away from the average reader. But has Gordon given us all the data?

The Even Bohan or Shem-Tov Hebrew is only one of several extant Hebrew manuscripts of Matthew. There is also the so-called “Münster” and “du Tillet.” In both of these, however, the verb is plural, not singular. Moreover, in all of the extant Syriac manuscripts that contain Matthew 23 (both the so-called “Old Syriac” and the Peshitta), the verb is also plural. Furthermore, no extant Greek manuscript includes a variant at this point that agrees with the singular verb of the Shem-Tov. One wonders why Gordon would present his case to the readers as though the Hebrew manuscripts of Matthew are all in agreement, (that the verb is singular), when in fact they are not. That is misleading.

In the fuller treatment of this issue, in Gordon’s book, *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus* (Hilkiah Press, 2005), the author admits that of the extant manuscripts of the Even Bohan, six have the plural rather than the singular.⁶ He also mentions that one witness to the Old Latin (ff2) also reads the singular (*dixerit*). He fails to mention, however, that all other witnesses to the Old Latin read in the plural. Gordon also claims to have found two additional copies of the Even Bohan: MS Roma-Biblioteca Casanatense 3099 and MS Livorno-Talmud Tora 53, which he claims also read the singular verb in Matthew 23:3. He gives no indication, however, of the date and provenance of these additional manuscripts.

As mentioned above, the Shem-Tov or Even Bohan Matthew is represented by a number of manuscripts, and as one would expect, there are variants between the extant manuscripts, as cataloged by Howard in his textual apparatus. George Howard published his work on the Shem-Tov in 1987,⁷ with a revised edition in 1995.⁸ In this work he lays out the extant manuscripts employed for his text and translation. There are nine manuscripts of the Shem-Tov Matthew used by Howard, and he groups them into three families.⁹ He employed Ms. Add. no. 26964 (British Library) as the primary text for his work, but since this manuscript stops at Matthew 23:22, he used Ms. 2426 (also called Marx 16) for the remainder of the Gospel text and translation. In grouping the manuscripts, he designated Add. no. 26964 and Ms. Opp. Add. 4° 72 (Bodleian Library, Oxford, which Howard designates as “C”) as Group 1 because “with few exceptions the two [manuscripts] are virtually identical.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Howard is very clear that he has not given a critical text in this edition of the Shem-Tov, but for sake of his work chose to translated one manuscript throughout (Add. no. 26964), only using a second manuscript (Marx 16) for the material lacking in his primary manuscript. Yet in order to give a fair representation of the other manuscripts, he lists the variants in a textual apparatus throughout.

In text critical matters, it is important to recognize that mere number of manuscripts does not necessarily represent a stronger witness to a given reading. One must ascertain whether the various manuscripts are copies of a known exemplar, or if they represent independent witnesses. For instance, in the extant manuscripts of the Even Bohan, Ms. Opp. Add 4° 72 seems to be a copy of Ms. Add. 26964. This is supported from the fact that Ms. Add. 26964 ends at Matt 23:22, and so does Ms. Opp. Add 4° 72. Such a phenomenon could hardly be coincidental. In other words, two separate manuscripts could not have been damaged at precisely the same location. So the reason Ms. Opp. Add 4° 72 ends at Matt 23:22 is because it is a copy of a previous manuscript (Ms. Add. 26964) that was itself incomplete.

To illustrate this principle of independent witnesses vs. mere copies of manuscripts, we could use the current technology of the copy machine. If one were to take a document, and make 30 xerox copies

6. p. 49, n. 57.

7. George Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text* (Mercer Univ Press, 1987), hereafter *The Gospel of Matthew*.

8. *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Mercery Univ Press, 1995).

9. *Ibid.*, p. xi.

10. *Ibid.*

of it, this would still only stand as a single witness. One could not claim that “31 manuscripts give witness to a particular reading.” So when Gordon claims that two manuscripts used by Howard attest to the singular verb in Matthew 23:3, he should really only claim one witness, since Ms. Opp. Add 4° 72 is clearly in the same family as Ms. Add. 26964. The other two manuscripts Gordon claims for the singular reading are not specified as to their relationship to Ms. Add. 26964, so one is unable to determine if these are merely copies, or independent witnesses.

Recognizing that we are dealing with an issue of textual criticism, one immediately wonders what the other manuscripts of the Shem-Tov read at Matthew 23:3, which is not difficult to ascertain, since Howard has cataloged all of the variants. According to Howard, six of the nine manuscripts have the plural rather than the singular.¹¹ Only the two manuscripts of Group 1 have the singular, and, as noted above, the two are of the same family. Thus, the majority of witnesses to the Shem-Tov itself read the plural rather than the singular, a fact that Gordon conveniently leaves out in the *Petah Tikvah* article (though in his book he does mention this in a footnote).

But there is another interesting datum that Gordon fails to disclose to his readers in the *Petah Tikvah* article. Howard, who admittedly has been at the forefront of scholarly work on the Shem-Tov to date, translates the verb in the plural: “Now all which (they) say to you keep and do...” In his book, Gordon berates Howard for this¹² because apparently he thinks Howard is inconsistent, or that he allowed the majority reading to sway his translation. But there may be another explanation for why Howard translated the verb in the plural (though putting his translation in parentheses in order to indicate a possible divergence from the actual Hebrew text): the plural translation, “they say” refers to the authority of those who occupy the seat of Moses by way of metonymy. In other words, the singular *יאמר*, “he says,” could be translated “it says,” referring to the Seat of Moses. This might be illustrated by our own English use of the word “congress.” When one reads that “the congress says...,” one understands that the singular word “congress” (which would take the singular verb “says”) represents a number of individuals. In like manner, the “seat of Moses” represents the authority of those who speak from it. If this were the case (and this is a legitimate understanding of the singular verb), then it would mean: “Now all that the Seat of Moses says to you, keep and do...,” which would mean, “Now all which those who occupy the seat of Moses say to you, keep and do...”

One other point of grammar should be mentioned. The verb *יאמר*, *yo 'mar*, is constructed as a prefix-conjugation verb (so-called “imperfect”). The Shem Tov most often utilizes the Biblical Hebrew consecutive tense system in narrative passages,¹³ and thus the imperfect form here should not be so easily construed as concessive. The more literal rendering would be, “what he *will* say to you,” not “what he *says* to you.” If the Shem Tov manuscript wished to convey that Yeshua was speaking of Moses (i.e., the written Torah) rather than the scribes and Pharisees (who sit in the seat of Moses), we would have expected a suffix conjugation (i.e., *אמר*): “what he (i.e., Moses) *has said*...” What the imperfect form would emphasize, even in the singular form, is that the instructions to be followed are yet future. This makes more sense if applied to the teaching of community authorities (“what *they will* say”) rather than to the words of Moses already written.

The science of textual criticism involves the evaluation of manuscripts and the variants they give for any particular reading. This includes a number of criteria: provenance, internal evidence of readings and documents, as well as evaluation of general quality, scribal tendencies, probable explanations for variants, and family groupings (determining the independence of various witnesses), among others. While it is not merely the number of manuscripts supporting a given variant that ultimately matters in deciding its acceptance or rejection, it is still an axiom of textual criticism that a single variant in a

11. *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 112. One fragmentary manuscript, Ms. Mich. 137, Bodleian Library, Oxford is missing the section of text that would have contained Matt 23:3.

12. *Hebrew Yeshua vs. Greek Jesus*, p. 49, n. 57.

13. See Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, p. 179.

single manuscript hardly outweighs the testimony of a reading by multiple families (witnesses) of manuscripts, especially if this consistent reading is held by manuscripts and families of manuscripts otherwise known to be of high quality by textual critical standards. Gordon, however, wants his readers to accept a variant found in two manuscripts (which are of a single family) against the consistent reading found in literally thousands of other manuscripts, including six manuscripts of the same Hebrew Matthew he claims represents the ancient *Vorlage* of Matthew. And he appears to put no weight whatsoever on the fact that two other semi-independent Hebrew Matthew traditions (Münster, du Tillet) both have the plural as well.¹⁴

There is one other area in which Gordon errors. He writes that the matter of Matthew 23:3 weighs heavily upon the followers of Yeshua, because if one accepts the plural reading, “Now that which *they say* to you, keep and do,” then one is obligated to obey “all the man-made rules and regulations taught by modern Orthodox Rabbis who sit in Moses’ Seat.” One is surprised at such a statement, coming from one who claims to have been raised in Orthodox Judaism. Clearly, as the Mishnah and Talmuds show, no one ever thought that a Jewish person was obligated, or even could keep every *halachic* dictum of all the Sages represented in these works! This is because the Oral Torah contains the opposing views of the Rabbis, and in a majority of cases, the *halachah* is never decided in a monolithic fashion. Clearly, local communities decided specific *halachah* based upon the decisions of their local leaders. One need only consider the differences between, for instance, the Sephardic and Ashkenasic traditions to understand this. Even the late work of the *Shulchan Aruch*, which attempted to standardize the *halachah*, did not result in a monolithic Judaism. Moreover, a number of leading rabbinic authorities decried the appearance of the *Shulchan Aruch* as contrary to the spirit of historical Judaism, which boasted a fluidity in matters of *halachah*.

Moreover, the fuller context of Matthew 23 shows that Yeshua’s point is this: those who sit in the seat of Moses give forth the words of Moses along with *halachic* instructions on how one should obey these words. What is at variance is the manner in which these teachers failed to follow their own instructions: “...but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them” (Matt 23:3). In other words, Yeshua was teaching against the *hypocrisy* of the teachers of His day, not against their instructions. For instance, in the ensuing context, Yeshua speaks of how the scribes and Pharisees lengthen their tzitzit or enlarge their tefillin in order to be noticed by men. There is no indication that Yeshua disagreed with their *instructions* about tzitzit or tefillin. He simply warned about the hypocritical manner in which they themselves failed to live out the purpose and meaning of these *miztvot*.

If, in fact, Yeshua were teaching that His disciples should disregard the instructions of the scribes and Pharisees, and adhere only to the written words of Moses, then the logic He uses here is a non-sequitur. For He reasons that His disciples should not “do as they do” because “they speak but do not do.” If His point had been that they have no authority, we would have expected Him to say: “don’t do as they *say*, because they have no authority. Moses is the only authority.” But that is not our Master’s argument. His point to the disciples is that they not follow the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, who *say* one thing, but *do* another.

In the end, one can only conclude that Gordon has not done sufficient work in the extant textual data of this Matthew text to arrive at his conclusions. One might speculate that his own theological bent (Gordon identifies himself as a Karaite) has figured into his highly selective use of the data.¹⁵ As a scholar from the prestigious Hebrew University,¹⁶ one would think we have the right to expect better

14. In all of the manuscripts cataloged in the extant Greek critical texts (e.g., UBS⁴, Westcott & Hort, Oxford 1873 edition of the H KAINH ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ), there exists not one witness to the singular verb attested by the two manuscripts of the Shem-Tov as noted. One may also consult Reuben Swanson, ed., *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Matthew* (Sheffield/William Carey International Univ Press, 1995).

15. The Karaites are known for having rejected the Oral Torah of rabbinic Judaisms.

16. The advertisement for Gordon’s book constantly emphasize that he graduated from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. But there is no mention of what degree he received from this prestigious university, which grants

work from him, with a fuller disclosure of the relevant facts. Unfortunately, readers of *Petah Tikvah*, as well as of his newly published book, who may have neither access to the manuscript data, nor acumen in matters of textual criticism, may easily fall prey to Gordon's conclusions.

It is also a sad commentary on the state of things that someone like Michael Rood would use sensationalistic hype to promote the Shem Tov Matthew as equally significant in proportion to the Dead Sea Scrolls! Even sadder is the fact that many unsuspecting, well meaning Messianics have uncritically accepted this ill-founded message of the Rood/Gordon dual. One can only hope that in time, people will seek a more substantial body of facts upon which to rest their beliefs.

undergraduate as well as graduate degrees. I was surprised to find Gordon's own admissions in his book, that he had never heard of Moses' Seat until recently, nor was he aware of the document called MMT from the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the past 10 years, a great deal of work has been done on both of these, both in archaeological as well as textual and theological treatises. One is at a loss to understand how someone like Gordon could have a degree in Archaeology and Biblical Studies, yet be unaware of the debate that has ensued in the scholarly world over these particular items.