

THE SEAT OF MOSES

by Ross K Nichols

Introduction: In 1995 I was given a copy of an interesting article written by Mark Allan Powell of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus Ohio. This article, published in the prestigious Journal of Biblical Literature [JBL 114/3 (1995) 419-435] proposed another interpretation of Matthew 23:2-3. This single text is becoming more relevant in our day as a result of a growing number of Christians who are being "drawn" to the Jewish/Hebraic roots of the Faith.

By the fall of 1996, I had almost forgotten about Mark Powell's article, and perhaps would have never looked at it again if I had not studied the Hebrew Matthew contained in the polemical treatise of a Spanish Jew named Shem Tob ben Isaac ben Shaprut. This treatise was composed in 1380 and had become the latest work of New Testament scholar George Howard of the University of Georgia. In 1987, Dr. Howard had published this Hebrew Matthew text in *The Gospel of Matthew According to a Primitive Hebrew Text*, Mercer University Press. Eight years later, Dr. Howard revised and re-published this text under the title, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, Mercer University Press. This later edition is the one that I had obtained, and the one which led me to discover a variant text that could shed some light on the subject at hand.

I wrote an article on this particular reading and submitted it to Jouette Bassler, who was the presiding editor over the Journal of Biblical Literature at the time. She kindly told me that the article was "Not really suitable for publication in JBL." She wished me well and said that she hoped that my rejection did not diminish my interest in the Journal of Biblical Literature. It certainly did not. This journal is a very fine publication, and frankly my article was not as "academic" as the term is strictly defined. As so many others, I have resorted to the Internet in hopes of getting the message to the masses. It is hoped that this interpretation will earn a spot in many future discussions of this fascinating text as more and more people are directed to its location in the Web.

The Article (revised)

Perhaps no other passage in Matthew's gospel stands more at variance with the book's overall theology than Matthew 23:2-3. In *Matthew as Story [2nd edition, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988]*, Jack Dean Kingsbury said, "To date, no scholarly proposal for resolving these apparent contradictions has proved entirely satisfactory".

In 1995, while engaged in a study of Shem Tob's Hebrew Matthew, I discovered a variant reading which deserves a place in this discussion. Although Shem Tob's Matthew text comes to us from a Jewish polemical treatise dating only to the middle ages, Professor Howard has effectively argued that the "evidence suggests that the Matthew text predates the fourteenth century". In both editions of Howard's work, he argues that the text predates the fourteenth century, and that Shem Tob received his text from earlier Jewish scribes, but beyond this he does not attempt to date the text.

Shem Tob's Matthew is the earliest known complete copy of the Gospel in the Hebrew language. It is replete with puns, alliterations, and word connections which far exceed what is found in the Greek text. For a complete list of such Hebrew word play, the reader is directed to Howard's, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 184-190. While early church sources report that Matthew was originally penned in Hebrew, Howard makes no claim that Shem Tob's Matthew is the original, nor even a copy of that missing document. His research is sound and non sensational. In fact there are many New Testament scholars that propose that when early sources say that

Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, they mean Aramaic - a related Semitic language prevalent in the time of Jesus.

However, the very lack of a definitive solution to the problem raised by Matthew 23:2-3 in previous attempts at resolution compels the seeker to look around for a possible explanation. I propose that the reading found within Shem Tob's Hebrew Matthew, and supported by the Old Latin ff² is a good start to understanding this ancient saying of Jesus.

The Party Line

KJV Matthew 23:2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:

Whether taken literally or figuratively, the "*seat of Moses*" is generally understood to represent the authority to teach Moses. The authority to teach Moses means authority to teach the Law of Moses. Almost all interpreters begin here. According to our text, the Pharisees and Scribes occupy the seat of Moses, and so therefore most interpreters assume that "they" are the inheritors of this Mosaic authority - a fact that even Jesus apparently admits. The next thing we read, following the initial admission of Jesus, is that his disciples must follow these religious leaders - at least in word if not in deed.

KJV Matthew 23:3a All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do;

Based upon the above reading, it would appear that Jesus is charging his disciples to do all that the Jewish religious leaders tell them to do. This is a most puzzling charge when the gospel of Matthew is viewed as a whole. The latter half of verse 23:3 is used to put the proverbial "nail in the coffin" for this interpretation:

KJV Matthew 23:3b but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

In this line of thinking, the only caution Jesus gives his followers is that they not follow their works - a path that would lead to hypocrisy. While these religious leaders are at times accused of hypocrisy, the Pharisees are most often pictured as doing what they say. The problem with these religious leaders is elsewhere defined as more serious than saying one thing while doing another. To Jesus, they say *and* do the wrong things. Jesus is displeased with the actions and teachings of his co-religionists. To Jesus, these religious leaders were perfectly described by Isaiah when he said;

KJV Isaiah 29:13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near *me* with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: 14 Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, *even* a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hid. (Compare Matthew 15:8)

According to Matthew's Jesus, the religious leaders teach commandments of men which make void the commandments of God (15:6). Their teachings are plants which will be uprooted (15:13) since they were not planted by God, but by an enemy (13:37-39). Their teachings placed emphasis on human ordinances which affected the outer man while leaving the inner man untouched (23:25-28). Their teachings miss the deeper spiritual truth which Moses intended; they strain at a gnat and swallow a camel (23:24). Jesus considered the teachings of these religious leaders to be likened unto leaven, which left unchallenged, would leaven the whole lump (16:11-12). The leaders erred because they knew not the Scriptures (22:29). Their traditions had led them away from true loyalty, truth and faithfulness - the weightier matters of the Law (23:23). Indeed, the Pharisees and Scribes practiced what they preached. The problem, according to Matthew's Jesus, was that they preached the wrong things. Hypocrisy then, as Powell notes in his JBL article, is a conflict between the "inward nature observed by God and the outward appearance observed by others".

A New Proposal

The Hebrew text found in Shem Tob's text reads:

"Upon the seat of Moses the Pharisees and the Scribes sit, and now, all which HE will say unto you - keep and do; but THEIR ordinances and deeds, do not do, because THEY say and do not." (My translation of the Hebrew found in Shem Tob's Matthew text) It should be pointed out that Howard translates the verb y'omer in the plural (they will say), while this is clearly singular (he will say).

The Hebrew of Shem Tob's Matthew allows for a clear distinction to be made between what He says and what They say. The context of the chapter, as well as the overall contents of Matthew, would suggest that the HE represent Moses while the THEY represent the religious leaders. While admitting that the religious leaders "sit upon the seat of Moses", the Jesus of Shem Tob's Hebrew Matthew does not demand that his followers do and keep what THEY say, but rather that they obey the teachings of Moses.

This reading should add some fire to the ongoing debate as to whether modern Hebrew Christian types should accept the Oral traditions espoused by the inheritors of Pharisaic Judaism or simply return to the words of Moses, words which Jesus said would remain forever (Matthew 5:17-20).