

23 Then Yeshua discoursed with the crowds and with his disciples, ²and he said to them, In the seat of Moshe sit the scribes and the Pharisees.

—textual variants—

23:3 whatever they tell you to do – All manuscripts read the same way on the exception of Shem Tov's version which can be found in Even Bohan. It does not say "scribes" but "the sages" החכמים. Secondly the phrase "Whatever they tell you to do" is rendered in singular, כל אשר יאמר לכם "Therefore, whatever he tells you to do..." etc. Karaites say the singular "he" refers to Moshe and not to the sages; in other words, that we should obey Moshe, not the sages. There is a third alteration in this paragraph: instead of "do not do according to their works," Shem Tov reads "do not do according to their taqanot and their works" וכתקנותיהם ומעשיהם לא תעשו. The *taqanot* are Rabbinic enactments and decrees that constitute part of the Hallakha (Jewish law). Karaites, therefore, use Shem Tov's version to depict a Yeshua who is contrary to the sages of Israel, and this is why it is their preferred manuscript. However, Shem Tov's gospel cannot be separated from his anti-Christian polemic commentary, as the two are one. The Karaite's interpretation of Shem Tov is not historically accurate, nor does Mattai's gospel support the claim. In order to interpret it correctly, we cannot fail to realize that obedience to Moshe comes together with obedience to those who sit at his seat (i.e., who represent him in this generation), and according to Shem Tov, they are the sages. Secondly, it is imperative to know that not all surviving manuscripts of Shem Tov's Mattai have the verse in singular "Whatever he tells you to do;" most manuscripts actually read the traditional, "Whatever they tell you to do, that observe and do" כל אשר יאמרו לכם שמרו ועשו. Finally, the reference to the taqanot can be a criticism of the school of Shammai whose taqanot were a matter of dispute in the Talmud itself.

—commentary—

23:1 Then Yeshua discoursed – This is, after engaging in Torah discussions with a scribe and with a group of Pharisees. According to Mattai's narrative, he is still at the Temple with the crowds.

23:2 in the seat of Moshe – For the word "seat" Hebrew uses *kiseh* כסה, whereas Aramaic borrows the Greek word "cathedra." It conveys the idea of a rulership seat or even a throne. It is written, "The king made a big ivory seat" (*1Kings 10:19*), which the Midrash says, "like the seat of Moshe" כהדא קתדרא דמשה (*Pesiqta, Vayehi 7b; cf. Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 1*).

23:2 sit the scribes and the Pharisees – The word "sit" has a double meaning here. Firstly, when it comes to Torah, it refers to bringing forth a teaching (see how Yeshua stands to read Torah but sits to explain it in Luke 4:16-20 and in Matt. 5:1). "Whenever one of the sons of Jerusalem came to a country place, they spread for him a cathedra to sit on it and hear his wisdom" (*Eikha Rabbah 1:1*). It is written that Moshe "sat to judge the people" to "teach the statutes of God and his instructions" (*Exod. 18:13, 16*), but then Yitro told him it was not good to "sit" alone to judge all by himself (*Exod. 18: 14, 17*), and suggested to appoint elders who would rule the nation in his name (*ibid. 18:21-22*). He chose seventy men among the elders (*Num. 11:16*) and they received the "spirit of Moshe" (*Num. 11:25*). These men in each generation are what we called the Sanhedrin and later the sages of Israel. "You must come to the Levitical priest or the judge of each generation" (*Deut. 17:9*). Hence, the second meaning of sitting in someone's seat is to take their place, as it is written about the firstborn son of Pharaoh, that he "sat in his seat" הישב על כסאו (*Exod. 12:29*).

—relevant quotes—

"How was the system of teaching? Moshe used to learn the Torah from the mouth of the Almighty; Aaron entered and Moshe taught him his lesson. Now Aaron moved away and took his seat to the left of Moshe. Then his sons entered and Moshe taught them their lesson. They moved away and Eleazar took his seat to the right of Moshe, whilst Ithamar sat down at Aaron's left. The elders then entered and Moshe taught them their lesson. The elders moved away and took their seat at the side. Finally the whole people entered and Moshe taught them their lesson." (*Eiruvim 54b*)

³Therefore, whatever they tell you to do, that observe and do. But do not do according to their works, for they do not practice what they say.

commentary

23:3 whatever they tell you to do, that observe and do – It is written, “If there arises a matter too hard for you to judge... between blood and blood... etc... then you must rise and go up to the place Hashem your God chooses” (*Deut. 17:7-8*). Notice the expression “between blood and blood” appears in the Tanakh in the context of hallakha: “Between blood and blood, Torah and commandments, statutes and decrees” (*2Chr. 19:10*). And the text clearly reads, then: “*al pi haTorah asher yorukha*,” literally, “According to the spoken [oral] Torah which they will direct you... you must do, and do not decline neither to the right nor to the left” (*Deut. 17:11*). Yeshua’s exact words “whatever they tell you to do” are found in the midrash: “Do not say, I will not obey the words of the sages because they are not found in the plain text of the Torah. The Blessed Holy One says, No, my son, but everything they tell you to do, do it, because it is written, According to the oral Torah which they will direct you” (*Pesiqta Rabbati 3*). By applying Deuteronomy to the scribes and the Pharisees, Yeshua is clearly acknowledging their God-given authority to interpret the Torah for the peoples. Not the Sadducees, nor the Samaritans or the gentiles. There is a chain of authority: First Moshe, then the prophets, then the Pharisees and scribes, then everyone else. Like David said to Shlomoh, “Everything is in writing from the hand of Hashem, I am responsible to understand the works of this pattern” (*1Chr. 28:19*).

23:3 But do not do according to their works – He is not speaking of all scribes and Pharisees in their totality, but reprimanding the general hypocritical spirit of those teachers. The author probably comes from a background in which the Nazarenes were already perceived as a different Hassidic sect, separated from Phariseism. However, that was not necessarily so while Yeshua was still alive. He criticizes a specific group of people he considers his own cluster, for he is not against their theology, but only against a hypocritical spirituality. He does not criticize the paganism of the Romans, the heresy of the Samaritans or the polytheism of the Buddhists because they were foreign to him. He would speak harshly only against the hypocrisy of those who he considered his brethren in faith; those who were sitting at Moshe’s seat, who were teaching authentic Torah to the peoples. By reproaching the Pharisees, he is setting a higher standard of holiness, as the Zohar teaches, “the Messiah... will cause even the righteous to repent” (*Zohar 3:153b*). For Yeshua, our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees (cf. *Matt. 5:20*) by means of Hassidut, which is internalizing the spirit of the Torah, not merely turning it into a ritualistic religion.

23:3 they do not practice what they say – It is therefore taught, “Let your works be more abundant than your knowledge; you will be like a tree whose branches are small but its roots are big, and if the winds of the world blow up upon it, they are not able to move it” (*Avot 3:17*). Some religions use this passage to demonize the sages, some to demonize the Pharisees, and some to demonize the Jews in their entirety. Since it is an intrafamilial dispute, Yeshua’s criticism is not different than that of the Qumran community against the Pharisees or that of the Pharisees against their own. Yeshua’s harsh words towards the hypocrisy of his own imply that it applies to all of us and that we should self-reflect and read ourselves into the text, instead of demonizing an entire community of people. We sometimes have the right theology and the right

relevant quotes

“Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha said, Since the day of the destruction of the Temple, we should by right bind ourselves not to eat meat nor to drink wine. Only, we will not decree hardship on the community unless the majority can endure it. And from that day a wicked kingdom has come into power, which issues cruel decrees against us and forbids us the observance of the Torah and the precepts and does not allow us to enter into the week of a son, and others say, to the salvation of the son לישוע הבן. By right, we rather bind ourselves not to marry and beget children, so the seed of Avraham our father would come to an end itself.” (*Bava Bathra 60b; Tosefta Sotah 15:10*)

⁴They bind heavy burdens, grievous loads, and put them on the shoulders of men, but they themselves are not willing to touch them with one finger.

commentary

teachers, but we miserably fail in what really matters, having an honest heart towards God and compassion towards our neighbors. Instead, we condemn everyone who is not like us, and judge them in our hearts, while our Biblical observance remains superficial, having not internalized that God is one and that his name is one. How many people are nowadays Buddhists, or Christians, or Jewish, but only in name, for their moral attitude is lacking, being far from what they claim to believe! Oh, but they think everyone else is going to perdition! Still, they love being called “rabbi” or showing their tallit publicly, as if that made them better people. He who has ears to hear let him hear.

23:4 They bind heavy burdens, grievous loads – If Yeshua is speaking about morality, as he probably is, he refers to the hypocrisy of those leaders who command the masses to behave almost like the high priest, demanding a level of holiness they themselves fail to observe, for they lack the most critical aspect, which is compassion. Though they know their burden is heavy for the people, they do nothing to relieve it, because they are more interested in receiving praises than in helping. If my interpretation is correct, the group of people he is addressing are the *erev rav*. As it is taught, when Shavtai ben Marinus went to [the Jews in] Bavel, he looked for good deeds and found none, asked for food and nobody fed him. He then said, “These must be descendants of the *erev rav*” (*Beitzah 32b*). However, if Yeshua is talking about *hallakha*, which tends to be the common approach among other scholars, such terminology would fit – historically speaking – the *Haverim* in the school of Shammai, as the sages teach that usually “Hillel was lenient, whereas Shammai was strict” (*Mishna Betizah 1:1*). The opinions of Hillel would usually become the binding *hallakha*, as opposed to the opinion of Shammai, because “Hillel’s enactments were agreeable and forbearing” (*Eiruvim 13b*). Shammai would often say things like, We have to pray the Shema reclined, to which Hillel would respond, It does not really matter (cf. *Mishna Berakhot 1:3*). It is written that on one occasion the sages went up to the upper story of Beit Hananiah and debated topics of purity and impurity, as well as topics regarding relationships between Jews and gentiles. The debate became so intense that the Shammai school did not allow anybody to leave the house until they were done with those decrees. However, they were determined to win the debate. Rabbi Hillel was forced to submit to Shammai, and eighteen decrees were issued in his favour (*Shabbat 13b, Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:4*). The debate itself was a shameful day for the leaders of Israel, as the Talmud Yerushalmi says that the people of Shammai were downstairs actually murdering the Hillelites who wanted to vote... “they were standing around them with swords and lances.” The resolution of those decrees ended up making life more difficult for the average Jew in Israel. The Gemara says about this incident that “such a day was as difficult for Israel as the day they built the golden calf” (*Shabbat 17a*). Rabbi Yehoshua commented on this incident, “It is like an amphora filled with oil [the Torah and the mitzvot]; if you add water to it [that is, enactments that make it hard for people to obey the commands], it dilutes the oil” (*Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:4*). Shammai’s school kept for many years imposing these decrees on the people until they finally accepted them. “It is forbidden to lay a heavy yoke... and be particular... to the point of becoming an obstacle” (*Mishne Torah, Mamrim 6*). We must also add that since Yeshua was a Hassid, he would disagree with the over-detailed particularities of the *Haverim*, as the *Haverim* would take upon themselves many obligations that would separate them from the common folks, or *am haaretz* (*Tosefta Demai 2*).

⁵And all their works they do to be seen by men: They enlarge their tefillin and make the tehelet on their garments long; ⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called Rabbi by others. ⁸But you are not to be called Rabbi, for one is your Rebbe, and you are all brothers.

—textual variants—

23:5 enlarge their tefillin – The generic term in Greek is *'Phylacteria'* which originally meant “safeguard” but then morphed into “amulet.” The Peshitta uses the term *teflaion* תפליהון, plural of the authentic word תפלין tefillin, which derives from the word tefillah, prayer. The Old Syriac uses “straps of tefillah” ערק תפלא. Dutillet uses “their totafot” טוטפותיהם. The tradition derives from the words of the Torah, “bind them as a sign (לאות, symbol, mark) on your arm and they will be totafot (frontlets) between your eyes” (*Deut. 6:8*).

—commentary—

23:5 to be seen by men – “Among the Pharisees there were those who believed in the teachings of Yeshua, but because they were afraid to be expelled from the Synagogue, they did not follow him. For they loved the praises of men more than the praises of God” (*John 12:42-43*). “There are five types of erev rav within Israel... ..Masters of lashon hara, masters of lust, the [hypocrites] whose inside is not like their outside, those who hunt after honor so as to make themselves famous and those who are money greedy” (*Even Shlomi 11:8*). As we are seeing, Yeshua’s criticism of these so-called Pharisees defines the erev rav and not all the sages or all the Jews. “The erev rav give themselves power and honor whenever they have a chance, as it is written, Let us make for ourselves a name” (*Tiqunei Zohar 46b*).

23:5 They enlarge their tefillin – They are two small boxes which contain the Shema prayer and are worn on the forehead and on the arm, tied with a leather strap. Wearing tefillin is part of every observant Jew’s daily devotion. In the first century there were tefillin of many different shapes and forms. Yeshua does not criticize the use of tefillin, but the hypocrisy of making them wide to be noticed by others. Enlarging the tefillin may refer – not necessarily to make them physically bigger – but to enlarge the period of time wearing them, as it is historically known that for some period of time the Haverim and some of the sages donned the tefillin not only during prayer time, but during the entire day (cf. *Menakhot 36a*). Wearing tefillin must be done with a clean mind, in a state of humbleness. When wearing tefillin all day without the proper kavana, one is actually desecrating the command. The midrash says “They wrap their prayer shawls around them, they put tefillin on their heads, but they oppress the poor” (*Qohelet Rabbah 4:1*).

23:5 the tehelet on their garments long – In Aramaic *tekhmeta* תכלתא. It is an alternative name for the tassels or tzitzit, which back in the day were dyed with tehelet (a blue dye), as it is written, “they must put a cord of *tehelet* on their tzitzit” (*Num. 15:38*). Yeshua himself wore tzitzit (cf. *Matt. 9:20; 14:36*), so again, he is not against its use. He is condemning hypocrisy, and we should do self-introspection when reading these words.

23:7 to be called Rabbi by others – As the sages taught: “Do not seek greatness for yourself, and do not covet honor. Practice more than what you study, and do not lust after the table of princes” (*Pirquei Avot 6:5 [4]*). Rav Yehudah taught that “one who conducts himself with an air of superiority,” his days and years are shortened (*Berakhot 55a*). Rabbi Hama ben Hanina says this is proven from the verse “And Yosef died, and then all his brethren” (*Exod. 1:6*). Why did Yosef die first, when he was among the youngest? Because he conducted himself with an air of superiority.

23:8 You are not to be called Rabbi – It is written that Moshe “was very humble” (*Num. 12:3*). The meaning is that he did not seek his own honor. He did not consider himself superior to anybody, even over Aaron his brother (cf. *Ibn Ezra on Bamidbar 12:3*). No matter what your mission or position in this world is, do not seek your own honor or to be called titles by others.

⁹And do not call anyone on earth Abba for one is your Abba, and he is in heaven.
¹⁰Nor are you to be called guide, for you have one guide, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant.

commentary

23:9 do not call anyone on earth Abba – Abba means father. Not only in the parental sense, but as an honorific for scholars, as in the case of Abba Shaul. Also the Talmud includes an entire tractate entitled Pirquei Avot (the chapters of the fathers), in reference to the sages of early generations. The term Avot implies respect and reverence to the elders or ancestors. When it comes to bloodline lineage, the Talmud teaches: One may only call Avot (i.e., fathers) to three people [Avraham, Yitzhaq and Yaaqov, but not to the tribes] (*Berakhot 16b*). This can be seen in the letter of Yaaqov, Yeshua's brother, who refers to Avraham as *Avraham avinu*, Avraham our father (*James 2:21*). However, all the gospels include either implicitly or explicitly a situation in which a group of Judeans took pride in having Avraham for father, as if that alone served to justify them before the Creator of the world. To this Yeshua responded, "Do not say we have Avraham for father... rather produce fruit worthy of repentance because even from these stones God can raise children to Avraham" (*Luke 3:8*), or as the fourth Gospel puts it, "If you were children of Avraham, you would be doing the deeds of Avraham, but now you seek to kill me... you are of your father Satan" (*John 8:39-44*). It is written, "One who has compassion on people, it is made known he is a descendant of our father Avraham, but anyone who does not have compassion on people, it is made known he is not a son of Avraham... ..but of the erev rav" (*Beitzah 32b*).

23:10 Nor are you to be called guide – *Medaberana*, מדברנא, guide, leader. In Greek *kathegetes*, leader, with the meaning of educator. It refers more to an educator of conscience than a mere teacher of words and laws, hence, a spiritual guide.

23:10 for you have one guide, the Messiah – The three titles – Rabbi, father and guide/educator – were honorific titles in first century Israel. Even the Nazarenes acknowledged the existence of these religious duties (cf. *Acts 13:1*). It can be argued that none of the twelve disciples addressed anybody directly with such endorsements other than Yeshua himself. However, Shaul of Tarsus uses them quite often and even refers to himself as "father" of his disciples (cf. *Acts 22:1; 1Co. 4:15; Eph. 4:11; Philip. 2:22; 1Tim. 2:7*). He also taught, "Pay to everyone what you owe them... honor to whom honor is due" (*Rom. 13:7*). So if Yeshua's intention was to ban the use of honorific titles within the community, Shaul did not get the memo. This might be because nobody told him about it, or he did not care, or simply, because Yeshua's word did not mean what some scholars believe. The key to unlock Yeshua's words are the surrounding verses. He talks about leaders in the erev rav who love being called Rabbis, and then he says that those who exalt themselves will be humbled. In truth, what he was trying to convey was a two-fold sense of humbleness: firstly, he was trying to prevent that his followers would fall into the pride of the erev rav, who hunted after honorific titles and the praises of men, rather than seeking to honor God. Of them it is written (*Isa. 1:23*), "They all love bribes and follow after rewards" (*Tiqunei Zohar 21*). God cannot tolerate "he who has haughtiness and a proud heart" (*Psalms 101:5*). The Sifrei taught: "One should not say Behold, I will learn [Torah]... in order to be called Rabbi or in order to receive a reward. Instead, one should do everything out of love, and the honor will come on its own in the end" (*Rashi on Deut. 11:13*). Secondly, he wanted them not to elevate humans more than what is Biblically appropriate, because praises lead to arrogance, as it is taught, "A man who flatters his friend is spreading a net for his feet" (*Prov. 29:5*). He dislikes the egoistic desire for leadership and pre-eminence, not the exaltation of he who deserves it. In fact, Yeshua himself praised the Immerser and Yaaqov the Just "for whom heaven and earth came into being" (cf. *Matt. 11:9; Thomas #12*), but his praise was for their works and not for any of their positions of leadership. As a matter of fact, these two men lived in poverty and never tried to take the reins of the nation. It is thus written, "Let another man praise you and not your own mouth" (*Prov. 27:2*). Moshe did not want honor for his position, even though he was the greatest prophet of all.

¹²For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

commentary

Instead, he said: "I wish all of Hashem's people were prophets" (*Num. 11:29*). Come and see: He who awakens the messianic consciousness, which is the spirit of the Torah, which is called the Messiah, he has found the true guide of our soul, for the spirit of Messiah leads us to repentance and to attachment to the Creator, as the Targum says, "by his teachings his peace will increase upon us, and in that we attach ourselves to his words our sins will be forgiven" (*Targum Isaiah 53:5*). There is no honor or glory on earth for such a person other than uplifting God's name. Immersed in God's presence, he attains the state of self-nullification which is only moved by the principle that "There is nothing but him" (*Deut. 4:35*). When bringing Torah to the people nobody is superior to anybody; God is everything. We all are brothers, all ministers of Hashem, and Hashem alone is our father, as it is written: "Have we not only one father? Has not one God created us? Why should we betray each one his brother, as to profane the covenant of our fathers?" (*Malachi 2:10*).

23:12 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled – An almost identical phrase appears in the Talmud, the context being that the students of Hillel did not seek their own honor, as opposed to the students of Shammai, for which reason the decrees of the house of Hillel became the dominant Jewish Law. "This was to teach that he who humbles himself will be exalted by the Blessed Holy One, and he who exalts himself will be humbled by the Blessed Holy One" (*Eirubin 13b*). If those scholars are correct and Yeshua was arguing against hallakha in verse 4, then it is possible the author of Mattai and the Talmudic tractate of Eirubin were speaking about the same incident but from different perspectives; the Talmud narrating it from a distant point in time, being more focused on the decrees that were established, whereas Mattai has Yeshua immersed in the long debate between the two houses, dealing with the morality of it all. Hence, Yeshua's command not to call anybody Rabbi is clearly an attempt to maintain his disciples humble and separate from the *erev rav*, not necessarily a ban on those endorsements. Regardless, the phrase stands as a principle of Jewish morality.

relevant quotes

"Rabbi Yirmeyah said to Rabbi Zeira, What is it that it says [concerning the world to come] (*Iyov 3:19*), the humble and the great are there, and the servant is free from his master? Does it imply we did not know the humble and the great are there? Rather, anyone who humbles himself in matters of Torah in this world will be great in the world to come, and anyone who establishes himself as a servant in this world will be free in the world to come." (*Bava Metzia 85b*)

¹³Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven before the children of men. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are entering. --

textual variants

23:14 – Some manuscripts include here words borrowed from Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47, “For you devour the houses of the widows and for a pretense make long prayers, therefore, you will receive the greatest damnation.” Here the word houses denotes property. By pretending to look after the widow’s possessions, they took advantage of them, then prayed for long hours with a false appearance of piety. It is thus taught about the *erev rav*... “Your leaders are rebellious and companions of thieves... they judge not the orphan neither does the cause of the widow reach them” (*Tiqunei Zohar 21*).

commentary

23:13 Woe to you – Mattai sets up a series of seven woes towards them who he calls scribes and Pharisees. If we compare them to Luke’s version (cf. *Luke 11*), an oral tradition of woes that predates the gospel becomes evident. However, these seven were probably isolated teachings, having the author of Mattai put them together as a collection of woes against the *erev rav*. The woes being exactly seven may paralleled – although only in number – to what the Talmud calls the “seven types of Pharisees” or *Perushin* (*Sotah 22b; Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:5*).

23:13 You yourselves do not enter nor will you let those enter – The first woe serves as a preamble of the other six, thus paralleling the quality of the seven emotive *sefirot*. It appears in Thomas, albeit with a less friendly vocabulary, probably borrowed from Aesop’s fable, “Woe to the Perushim, for they are like a dog lying in the manger of some cattle; for he neither eats nor does he let the cattle eat” (*Thomas #102*). Aesop’s fable of the dog in the manger circulated and was known in every country which had had contact with the Greeks. The *Perushim* which he is referring to are of the *erev rav*. The “door of the kingdom” is rendered “door of knowledge” in Luke (*11:52*) and in Thomas (*#39*). The scribes’ ability to shut this door is due to their position as Torah teachers. However, their teaching was superficial and ritualistic. Instead of becoming an example to follow, practicing actual piety and opening the door for everybody, they rather set difficult standards that people could not follow. This was in order to give themselves an honor they did not deserve.

relevant quotes

“Of the plague of the Pharisees our sages taught, there are seven types of Pharisees: (1) The Pharisee of Shekhem, who does the deeds of Shekhem [who got himself circumcised for egoistic reasons]. (2) The self-flagellating Pharisee, who injures his feet [in an attempt to look humble]. (3) The bloodletting Pharisee, who lets his blood against the wall [because he walks with his eyes shut out of extreme modesty]. (4) The pestle Pharisee, whose head is bowed like a pestle in a mortar [displaying hypocritical humility]. (5) The Pharisee who says, Tell me what is my duty and I will perform it... for he implies [he is perfect and] is looking for further obligations. (6) the Pharisee out of love, and (7) the Pharisee out of fear [of punishment]. Abaye and Rava said to the tanna, Do not add in this teaching those Pharisees who serve out of love and those Pharisees who serve out of fear [because these are not necessarily negative traits]. ... For one must engage in Torah and mitzvot even *Lo-Lishma* [not for its own sake], because from *Lo-Lishma* one comes to *Lishma* [for its own sake; i.e., out of love]” (*Sotah 22b*)

“Pharisee from fear, like *Iyov*, and Pharisee from love, like *Avraham*. No one is more beloved than the Pharisee from love like *Avraham*.” (*Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:5*)

¹⁵Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him doubly more a son of Gehenna than you are.

—commentary—

23:15 to win a single convert – Convert, *gior* גיור, someone who does גירות *geirut*, migration, in this case spiritual migration, from a spiritual mentality into another. Yeshua is not against such missionary activity, but against the fact that the so-called “converts” become like them or worse. “Travel over land and sea” may be hyperbolic language or might refer to very specific incidents. Prior to mid-first century, there is not much evidence of Judaism being proactive on proselytizing gentiles, other than teaching them the Noahide laws. Rabbi Helbo, for instance, had the opinion that “converts are as harmful to Israel as a leprous scab” due to their negligence in the observance of the Torah (*Niddah 13b*). There are, however, a few historical exceptions; point in case, the last of the Maccabean leaders, Yohanan Hyrcanus, who forced the Idumeans to convert, giving them the choice to circumcise, to be exiled or to die (*Josephus, Antiquities 13:9:3*). Also, it is known that in the first century there was a certain merchant called Ananiah of Adiabene who travelled in order to convert the women that belonged to king Izaates with the intention to convert Izaates himself, which he did (*Josephus, Antiquities 20:2:3*). Furthermore, Izaates’ mother, the Queen Helene, also converted after some Jews repeatedly travelled through her land teaching the ways of the Torah (*ibid.*). The Immerser and Yeshua were also itinerary preachers, and although they did not seek pagans to convert to Judaism, they called those within Judaism to repent. The second-generation Nazarene movement, with Shaul of Tarsus in charge, was actively missionary, though (cf. *Acts 9:20*). Some scholars suggest that this “woe” is a redactional version.^a An original saying of Yeshua was edited and turned into a woe after the separation into sects took place (see *Acts 10:45; 15:1-2*). Although the term *gior* “convert” can imply gentiles who walk into Judaism (*like in Acts 2:11*), Yeshua might not necessarily be envisioning pagans but Israelites who, having debated or been in contact with the *erev rav*, became like them and began emulating their hypocritical way of life. For in fact, the *erev rav* mocks those who hold opposing views in order to sway more people towards them. Whatever the case was, we must know that when someone is moved from one faith into another forcefully, they will desecrate the religion they now belong to. Conversely, when they convert on their own, they are likely to strive to emulate their teachers. If said teachers are not an appropriate example of behavior, their zeal to emulate them will only make them worse. Hence, the common way in Judaism is not to actively seek converts, but rather brings them under the wings of the Shekhina passively, by being a light – i.e., an example – among them (cf. *Isaiah 42:6; Esther 8:17, Avoda Zara 3b*). This is implicit in the saying: “Israel was exiled among the nations so that converts will join them” (*Pesakhim 87b*). How many times have we seen in our generation people who abandon their faith due to some soulless missionary movement and then in their zeal for their new-acquired faith *lashon hara* against others becomes natural, thinking that because they now wear *tefillin* they are holier than anyone else? Their superficial attachment to God filled with arrogance and resentment keeps them away from the kingdom. As I said, we should not read this chapter as a criticism on someone else; it is imperative that we self-reflect and do introspection ourselves.

23:15 son of Gehenna – As Rabbi Elazar taught, he “brings wrath to the world” and “falls into Gehenna as it says (*Isaiah 5:20*), Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil. What is written afterwards? As the tongue of fire devours straw and as the chaff is consumed by the flame” (*Sotah 41b*).

^a cf. Pace Gundry, commentary, p. 461.

¹⁶Woe to you, blind guides! You say, If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath. ¹⁷You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? ¹⁸You also say, If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath. ¹⁹You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. ²²And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

²³Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! Because you tithe mint, dill and cumin, but you have neglected the more important matters of the Torah—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. ²⁴You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow down a camel.

commentary

23:16 blind guides – “When the shepherd becomes angry with his flock he makes the leader blind” (*Bava Qama 52a*).

23:16 whoever swears by the Temple is nothing – The Talmud takes Yeshua's side by stating that an oath made either by the Temple, by a sacrificial lamb, or by the altar all have the same effect (cf. *Nedarim 13a*). This Talmudic response comes from a Baraita, though, which means Yeshua is most probably addressing an issue which was not properly registered in the books but was nevertheless known among the first century Judeans.

23:23 you tithe mint, dill and cumin – See variation in Luke: “Woe to you Pharisees, because you tithe your mint, rue and all other kinds of herbs” (*Luke 11:42*). Only properly tithed food was considered acceptable (cf. *Mishna Demai 2:2; 5:1; see Deut. 14:22; Lev. 27:30*). The details of how tithing dill and cumin are addressed in the Mishna (cf. *Maasrot 4:5; Demai 2:1*). The key to understand this woe is in the phrase “but you have neglected... etc”.

23:23 You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former – This sentence makes it clear that Yeshua is not arguing against tithing herbs. He plainly says this should not be neglected. What he is saying is that the heart and goal of the Torah resides in the intention of the heart. “Will Hashem be pleased will the sacrifice of one thousand rams?... This is what Hashem demands of you: To do justice, mercy and to walk discreetly with your God” (*Micah 6:7-8*). With these three principles the prophet Micah reduced the entire Torah to its essence (*Makkot 24a*). The ritual practices of the Torah are a means to a goal. Without having such goal in mind, a person misses the point of obeying the external mitzvot.

23:24 You blind guides – The repetition of the statement from verse 16 is not superfluous. In order to strain out a gnat a person must have a good eyesight. However, by being so meticulous and focused on such small thing, they may fail to see the big picture, thus becoming “blind” to the whole. It can be compared to a man who is so focused on sewing the sleeve of a jacket that he fails to see that the entire jacket is torn apart. Gnat, in Hebrew *yatus* יתוש – which also means mosquito – together with the camel are used in a proverbial manner, like the Gemara says, an elephant dreads a mosquito [that might enter its trunk] (*Shabbat 77b*). As we know (*From Matt. 19:24*), the imagery of a camel in the Holy Land is replaced in Bavel with an elephant (because it's bigger and more common in that country). Therefore the “strain out a gnat” part is not to be taken as a criticism on anything literal, but as a parable.

²⁵Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶Blind Pharisee! Cleanse first the inside of the cup and dish, that their outside may also be clean.

²⁷Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and all uncleanness. ²⁸In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of iniquity and hypocrisy.

²⁹Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. ³⁰And you say, If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets. ³¹So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³²Fill you also up the measure of your fathers!

commentary

23:25 you clean the outside of the cup – Yeshua is using metaphorical language; the “cup” in this verse refers to the *Perushim* themselves. They appear to be saints on the outside, but inside are full of corruption. As it is obvious, the liquid is poured inside the cup, not outside. Hence, cleansing the inside is way more important. The external cleansing does not alter the liquid that is poured inside. Internal cleansing does.

23:27 whitewashed tombs – The Talmud (*Berakhot 28a*) talks about Rabban Gamliel, who saw in a dream the many Pharisaic students who joined his school. In the dream they were portrayed as “white pitchers full of ashes” ... “whose inside is not like their outside” (*ibid.*). One of the common Talmudic expressions for hypocrite is “double-faced” מעמיד פנים, in reference to someone who shows one side of him but conceals the other.

23:27 and all uncleanness – The hallakic implications of one being full of bones of the dead is precisely being unclean, so this second part of the sentence is explicative.

23:30 If we have lived in the days of our ancestors – Like the Qumramic expression “sons of light,” the implication of being someone’s son is that they share their same characteristics. They identify those who persecuted and killed the prophets as their ancestors (i.e., their fathers). This is similar to what Yeshua says in the fourth gospel, “If you were sons of Avraham you would be doing the works of Avraham... but you seek to kill me... this is not what Avraham would do... You are sons of your father Satan... he was a murderer from the beginning” (*John 8:39-44*). As it is taught, “The erev rav are sons of the primordial snake who seduced Hava and [they] are the filth with which he poisoned her” (*Zohar I:28b*). About this filth it is said that “Because of the counsel of the snake all inhabitants of the earth die” (*Targum Ruth 4:22*). The snake is thus called “the death of the world” (*Zohar I:52a*). Hence, Satan is called the “father of Qayin” because Qayin killed his brother Hevel (*Pirquei d’Rabbi Eliezer 21*).

23:32 Fill you also up the measure of your fathers! – In other words, “you will end what your fathers started and you will kill me as well, and because of this, judgment will fall upon you.” Because with their mouths they proclaimed they would not have killed the prophets have they been alive in those days, and they probably believed so, but the reality was that they sent Yeshua, a preacher of repentance, to be executed by the Romans. Those who overflow the measure of coals are those upon whom the fire will fall.

³³You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape from the judgment of Gehenna? ³⁴Therefore, behold! I am sending you prophets, and sages and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.

—commentary—

23:33 You snakes! You brood of vipers! – It has already been explained (*note on Matt. 3:7*), that “brood of vipers” is a code name for the *erev rav*. The evil inclination is referred to as *Tzifoni*, a viper (cf. *Yael 2:22*). “The viper set his eyes against the first temple and killed the Torah scholars that were therein” (*Sukka 52a*). “A generation of evil people filled with snakes and scorpions, meaning, they are scoundrels like snakes, and scorpions עקרבים since they uprooted עקרין the words of the sages and taught false words. Of them it is taught, (*Lam 1:5*) Her adversaries have become leaders” (*Zohar 3:279a*).

23:34 I am sending you prophets – This sentence goes all the way back to the beginning of the chapter where it has been stated that the scribes and Pharisees sit in the seat of Moshe. Prophets refers to men with the faculty to receive prophecy in the level of *ruakh haqodesh*, as this was also Yeshua’s level of prophecy. Moshe received the Torah through the highest form of prophecy (direct receiving, as one friend speaks to another). From Moshe to the Babylonian exile there was a level of prophecy which is considered sparks of Moshe’s impartment; this is the level attained by the Biblical prophets. After the Babylonian exile a much indirect form of prophecy became dominant; namely, *ruakh haqodesh* or divine intuition (*Shnei Lukhot haBrit, Torah Shebikhtav, Hukat, Torah ohr 39*). This is why the Biblical canon was closed after Malachi (cf. *Bava Bathra 14b*). The *ruakh haqodesh* [a guiding spirit] is the glimmering through which Oral Torah is built, like an echo reverberating from Sinai (cf. *Dover Tzedeq, Akharei Mot 4*). It has been taught, “Among the prophets there has not arisen one like Moshe, yet among the kings there are” (*Rosh haShana 21b*). This refers to Shlomoh, who ruled under *ruakh haqodesh*, for he judged the nation without witnesses or without warning, but based only on divine intuition, and a Bat Qol issued forth and spoke to him (*ibid.*). Whatever truths Moshe could access through prophecy, Mashiakh (i.e., the generation of Messiah)^b will access, and more, through *ruakh haqodesh*.^c For Moshe, [through the highest level of prophecy] revealed the external aspect of the Torah, but Messiah [through *ruakh haqodesh*] will reveal the innermost aspect of the Torah (cf. *Rebbe miLubavitch, Vort on the last day of Pesakh 5711 [1951]; Migdal Oz p. 187*).

23:34 and sages and scribes – The Lukan version uses a language more in line with the Pauline missionary work: “I will send prophets and emissaries” (*Luke 11:49*). Mattai retains a more Pharisaic language, “Prophets, sages and scribes.” The three groups make up for the groups that were corrupted or killed by the *erev rav* (*see Matt. 21:43*). The Pharisees who would compose the Mishna and the Gemara would become known as “the sages,” and whenever we speak about the sages of Israel, we mean them. Scribes refers to the scholars who would teach Torah. Mattai 24 teaches that this martyrdom of prophets and scribes – or emissaries, as Luke puts it – refers to Yeshua’s own disciples, as they would be persecuted and killed (*see note on Matt. 20:22-23*).

^b Messiah is the all embracing Yekhida soul of all Israel (cf. Ramaz on *Zohar 2:40b*; *Liquetei Sikhotei* vol 1, p. 173).

^c cf. *Shaar ruakh haqodesh 1*.

³⁵And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of Hevel the righteous to the blood of Zechariah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶Amen I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

³⁷Jerusalem! Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

—textual variants—

23:35 Zechariah – Most manuscripts read “Zechariah son of Berakiah,” but it is an evident scribal error. During the days of Zechariah son of Berakia (cf. *Zech. 1:1*) the Temple was in ruins. The mistake was surprisingly passed on to the Semitic manuscripts as well. However, the early Codex Sinaiticus as well as Codex 59 simply read “Zechariah,” having “son of Berakia” rightfully absent in the text. The earliest manuscripts containing the words “son of Berakia” are probably influenced by Josephus, as he wrote about someone named Zechariah ben Barukh, and whose death is similar to what Yeshua describes in this portion (cf. *Wars 4:5:4*). The problem is that Zechariah ben Barukh was killed years after Yeshua’s crucifixion, and therefore, Yeshua mentioning his martyrdom is anachronistic. Consequently, it can be concluded that the scribal error occurred after the fall of the Temple and that the original text has been edited.

—commentary—

23:35 from the blood of Hevel the righteous – Who was murdered by his brother after his offering was not accepted by the Creator. The midrash considers Qayin a son of the snake (cf. *Pirquei d’Rabbi Eliezer 21*), as it says, “Samael... came to her, and she rode the snake and conceived Qayin” (*Zohar 1:35b*). This same force that motivated Qayin to kill his brother was present with Pharaoh and the Egyptians at the exodus, as the Zohar says, “the sorcerers would produce serpents before Pharaoh... because from the origin of the snake began his dominion” (*Zohar 2:28a*). It is therefore written, “I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon sprawling amidst his stream” (*Eze. 29:3*). These Egyptian sorcerers who converted and joined Israel are what the Torah calls the *erev rav* (*Exodus 12:38; Numbers 11:4*). The soul of the *erev rav* is rooted in the tree which brings death to the nation of Israel (cf. *Zohar 1:26a; Tiqunei Zohar 66*). Qayin is, therefore, the prototype of the *erev rav*, being the first one to spill the blood of a *tzaddiq*.

23:35 to the blood of Zechariah – Yeshua makes mention of the first and the last *tzaddiqim* who were murdered in Scripture (*Gen. 4* and *2Chr. 24*). By last, I mean in its literary sense, since *2Chronicles* is the last book of the Hebrew Bible. Zechariah ben Yehoiada was a preacher of repentance, who told the princes of Judah, “Why do you transgress the commands of Hashem?” (*2Chr. 24:20*). But “they conspired against him and stoned him at the king’s command, in the forecourt of the House of Hashem” (*ibid. 24:21*). Upon his death he cried for vengeance, “May Hashem see and require” (*ibid. 24:22*).

23:35 between the temple and the altar – This has its parallel in the phrase, “He brought them to the inner court [that is, the Temple court]... and between the porch and the altar” (*Ezekiel 8:16*).

23:37 Jerusalem! Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets – The author is recording a lament from the Shekhina. It is commonly held that Yeshua is still speaking and referring to himself. This is not so; this a voice from heaven which either the author or Yeshua channeled through *ruakh haqodesh*. The imagery of the chicks under the hen’s wings is used in *Vayiqra Rabbah* (*on Lev. 19:23*). It represents the penitents being brought back under the wings of the Shekhina (cf. *Ruth 2:12; Nedarim 32a*). This lament derives from the words of the prophets, as it is written, “You brought them to the land that you promised to their fathers... and you vanquished for them its inhabitants, the Canaanites... but they disobeyed and rebelled against you, and they cast your Torah behind their backs and slew your prophets who warned them... and [therefore] you delivered them into the hands of their adversaries” (*Nehemiah 9:23-27*).

³⁸Behold! your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

—commentary—

23:38 your house is left to you desolate – Jerusalem itself cries “I am forsaken on account of my children’s sins” (*Barukh* 4:12). “Is left to you desolate” means the Shekhina is departing from it and therefore is no longer under Divine protection. It says “How often I have longed...” followed by “Behold! Your house is left to you desolate.” This teaches, as our sages have also explained, that the Shekhina did not depart from Israel all at once, but progressively. The more the nation sinned as a unit, the further the Shekhina departed from them. The Shekhina departed from Jerusalem in ten stages, with the hope that they would repent on time. “It travelled ten journeys. It went from the Ark cover to one cherub, and from one cherub to the other cherub, and from the cherub to the threshold [of the Sanctuary], and from the threshold to the courtyard, and from the courtyard to the altar, and from the altar to the roof, and from the roof to the wall [of the Temple], and from the wall to the city [i.e., outside the Temple], and from the city to a mountain [the mount of Olives], and from the mountain to the wilderness, and from the wilderness it ascended and rested in its place [in Heaven], as it is stated (*Hosh. 5:15*), I will go and return to my place until they realize their guilt” (*Rosh haShana* 31a).

23:39 until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord – This is a verse from the Psalms (118:26). An Israelite welcomes someone into his home with the phrase: “Barukh haba,” or blessed he who comes. Therefore, the meaning is: until you repent and welcome the Shekhina, it will not return to you. The author of Mattai shows the departing of the Shekhina with the imagery of Yeshua leaving the Temple, which happens right afterwards (cf. *Matt. 24:1-2*). This is because the Shekhina rests upon the tzaddiqim, and “the tzaddiqim are the Shekhina of Hashem” (*Liqutei Halakhot, Orakh Hayim, Haskamat haBoqer* 4:14:1) in the aspect of “Hashem appeared to him” (*Gen. 18:1*). How did he appear? Through righteous people. Making use of this principle we can then pronounce the Rabbinic expression, “The son of David will not come until...” (*Sanhedrin* 98a). Jerusalem will be rebuilt and only then the son of David will come (*Megillah* 17b). Keifa says, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins will be wiped out, when times of refreshing will come from God’s presence” (*Acts* 3:19).