

Was Yeshua a Pharisee?

Some Further Notes on *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus*

by Nehemia Gordon

A recent review of my book *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus* claims that Yeshua did in fact support the “god-given” authority of the Pharisees who sit in the Seat of Moses. Part of the review consisted of personal attacks against me, and I will not dignify those with a response. A good portion of the review criticizes me for not including the same level of detail in a short article as I did in my book. This is of course absurd because a person can never have the same level of detail in a few pages as in a whole book. This is why in the short article I told people to read my book for the full story. In any event, a few of the points of the review are actually points of substance which are worth addressing.

One of the main claims in the review was that Yeshua upheld the Pharisee Oral Law. This is a common argument put forward by Oral Law-believing Messianics. For example, the following argument is common:

Fasting at a Wedding

Yeshua taught it was forbidden to fast in the presence of a bridegroom. The Oral Law supposedly has the same exact prohibition while the Torah does not. Therefore, goes the argument, Yeshua upheld the Oral Law.

I am not entirely sure whether this law actually appears in early Rabbinic writings. The source given by these Oral Law Messianics is Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 25b. In fact, what it says in that passage is as follows:

“Our Rabbis have taught, The bridegroom, and the shoshbins [=attendants of the bridegroom] and all the wedding guests are free from the obligations of prayer and tefillin, but are bound to read the Shema” (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 25b [Soncino])

Nothing is said in this passage about mourning or fasting in the presence of the bridegroom. But let’s assume for a moment that does appear somewhere in the Oral Law; this still has absolutely nothing to do with Yeshua’s statement in Mat 9:14-15. In Matthew 9:14, John’s disciples ask Yeshua why

Yeshua's disciples do not engage in fasting as other Jews of that period do. Yeshua responds in verse 15:

“And Yeshua said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.” (Mat 9:15 [KJV])

Yeshua's answer uses a metaphor based on common sense. The metaphor compares Yeshua to a bridegroom and explains that while he is still with them, the metaphorical wedding celebration is taking place. In ancient Israel, fasting was something done as a sign of sadness and obviously one would not fast expressing sadness during a celebration. Basically what Yeshua is saying is that a person should not cry during a party; a person only cries when the party has ended and especially when the host of the party is dead. Yeshua is saying that when he is gone the party will be over and his disciples will have reason to fast and mourn (a similar thought appears in John 16:20). Did Yeshua really need an Oral Law to tell him that one does not cry during a party or mourn at a wedding celebration?

Those who use this and similar arguments as proof that Yeshua upheld the Pharisee Oral Law are essentially legalizing Yeshua's use of common-sense metaphors and every-day normal actions by turning them into Pharisee laws. It would be like (hypothetically) saying: “The Pharisees require a person to wear shoes, so the fact that Yeshua wore shoes proves he upheld the Oral Law.” Maybe he wore shoes because his feet were cold or because he didn't like walking on rocks barefoot?

Reclining at the Passover Meal

Another example of the same sort is based on Matthew 26:20 which reports as follows:

“Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve.”

The argument made here is that the word “he sat down”, in Greek *anekaito*, can mean to “recline”. Now the same Greek word can mean to simply “sit down” without implying reclining. The same exact Greek word appears in Matthew 9:10 where Yeshua sits down to eat with the tax collectors and again in John 12:2 where it says that Lazarus was “was one of them that sat” down to dinner with Yeshua “six days *before* Passover”. Furthermore, Hebrew Matthew has the normal Hebrew word for “sit” in Matthew 26:20. But let's assume that Yeshua did actually *recline*. The argument goes that the Oral

Law requires that participants in the Passover Seder recline and therefore because Yeshua reclined at the “Last Supper”, he was being obedient to Pharisee Oral Law. What is not mentioned is that the custom of reclining at the Passover Seder goes back to Roman times when the Romans reclined on special couches called “triclinia”. In Roman culture reclining on one of these special couches was the sign that a person was a free man while slaves were forced to sit on stools.¹ Reclining as a sign of freedom from slavery is clearly the idea behind the Oral Law injunction to recline at the Passover meal. In any event, would the fact that Yeshua sat down on a reclining couch really prove that he upheld the Oral Law? Would it not just prove there were couches around the table?

The Sabbath Day’s Journey

A very interesting argument put forward by Oral Law Messianics is based on the “Sabbath day’s journey” mentioned in Acts 1:12. The idea of a “Sabbath day’s journey” is that there is a limit of how far a person may go outside his city on the Sabbath. Supposedly this idea is also referred to in Matthew 24:20. The argument of Oral Law Messianics is that this Sabbath limit on traveling has no source from the Torah whereas it is known from the Oral Law and therefore Yeshua and the Book of Acts are confirming the truth of the Oral Law. What the Oral Law Messianics fail to mention is that the Essenes, who were vehemently anti-Pharisaical and who totally rejected the idea of an Oral Law, also had the idea of a Sabbath day’s journey. This is mentioned explicitly in one of the main Essene documents known as the Covenant of Damascus (aka the Damascus Document) chapter 10 verse 21.

This raises the question: How is it that both the Essenes and the Pharisees had a concept of a limit of travel on Shabbat? The source of this concept cannot be the Oral Law, because the Essenes did not believe in the Oral Law. In fact, this idea comes from the Torah, Exodus chapter 16. In this passage the Israelites had been commanded not to collect the Manna on the Sabbath. The Israelites ignored this commandment and in response the Creator forbade them from even going out into the fields where the Manna was collected. This prohibition appears in Ex 16:29,

“See, for that YHWH has given you the sabbath, therefore he gives you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.”

¹ “To eat sitting was suitable only for children, who sat on stools or for slaves, who received permission to recline like their masters only on holidays.” (<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/temetfutue/glossary/glossaryT.htm>)

So what does it mean not to “go out” of one’s “place”? In context, the Israelites were leaving their camps to collect the Manna from the surrounding fields. So in context to leave one’s place would be to leave the encampment and enter the fields where the Manna could be collected. When the Israelites entered the land, they were no longer in encampments, so naturally this prohibition would apply to leaving a person’s city.

At this point we have to understand that cities in ancient Israel had three zones: 1) the city itself, 2) the surrounding MIGRASH or “pasture land” (KJV: “suburbs”) outside the city walls, and 3) finally the agricultural fields. This division into three distinct zones was a fact of ancient Israelite life which is mentioned in Nu 35:1-5. The purpose of the second zone, the *migrash*, is explained in Joshua 14:4 as the area where the animals live outside the city. Apparently both the Pharisees and the Essenes understood the prohibition of leaving one’s place as only applying to going into the fields (zone #3) but not entering the *migrash* (zone #2). Therefore, walking out of the city to the end of the *migrash*-zone was the maximum distance a person could walk outside their city. *This was the Sabbath day’s journey!*

How did both the Pharisees and the Essenes come to the conclusion that it was permissible to walk out into the *migrash*-zone? Common sense! In ancient Israel, indoor plumbing had not yet been invented and people had to walk out into the *migrash*-zone to relieve themselves. The Creator would not forbid people from walking to the outhouse!

Nu 35:4 defines the *migrash* belonging to the Levites as 1000 cubits. It can hardly be a coincidence that the Essene’s Covenant of Damascus 10:21 defines the Sabbath day’s journey limit as 1000 cubits outside the city. The next verse, Nu 35:5, defines the *migrash* belonging to the Israelites as 2000 cubits and not surprisingly the Pharisees defined the Sabbath day’s journey limit as 2000 cubits outside one’s city. As far as we know, all Jews in this period believed in the concept of a Sabbath day’s journey, which was a maximum limit a person could walk outside his city without entering into the forbidden field-zone where agricultural work took place. So the fact that Yeshua and Acts mention this Sabbath day’s journey just prove they read Exodus 16 and Numbers 35 the same way as other Jews, not that they were adherents of the Oral Law.

Here it is important to emphasize one of the major misconceptions put forward by Oral Law-believing Messianics. The argument they make is that because Ex 16 does not mention the *migrash* or the length of the Sabbath day’s limit, there must have been an Oral Law to define these things. This is a

misunderstanding of the Pharisee idea of Oral Law, which the Pharisees claimed was revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

On the other hand, what the ancient Israelites did when it came to Ex 16 was apply this Torah commandment to contemporary life. Ex 16 had spoken about the desert and the Manna and they asked how this would apply to towns and agricultural fields. The Torah requires us to consider how its commandments apply to new situations and circumstances. This must be done by searching Scripture according to its language and context and attempting to arrive at the clear principles behind the commandments, which can be applied to new situations. However, this is *not* an Oral Law! This is just living by Torah. **An Oral Law may do something similar, but it then claims that the answers arrived at are binding because they were revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai or alternatively because they are Rabbinical enactments based on the Rabbi's supposed god-given authority.** It is important to distinguish between the interpretation and application of Torah and a dependence on man-made authority and traditions. The latter is “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men”.

Sacrifices on Shabbat

Another argument of Oral Law-believing Messianics is based on Yeshua's statement in Matthew 12:5,

“Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?”

The argument goes that nowhere in the Torah does it say the priests are blameless for working in the Temple, this is only said by the Oral Law where it states that “the sacrificial service supersedes the Sabbath” (Babylonian Talmud, Sabbath 132b). Therefore, Yeshua is basing his statement on the Oral Law.

The problem with this argument is that Yeshua specifically says that he is basing his statement on the written Torah! He opens by saying, “have you not *read* in the Torah”. At the time of Yeshua, the Oral Law was still recited orally and therefore could not be “read”. So the “law” Yeshua is referring to *must be* the written Torah. So where in the written Torah do we learn that sacrifices may be brought on Shabbat? It says this explicitly in Numbers 28:9-10,

“(9) And on the sabbath day two lambs of the first year without spot, and two tenth deals of flour for a meat offering, mingled with oil, and

the drink offering thereof: (10) This is the burnt offering of every sabbath, beside the continual burnt offering, and his drink offering.”

Not only are the priests allowed to bring sacrifices on Shabbat, but they are specifically commanded to do so. By definition if YHWH commanded them to bring sacrifices on Shabbat, then it is not a sin to do so and hence they are blameless. This is the plain meaning of what it says in the written Torah.

Blessings Before Eating

Another proof brought by Oral Law-believing Messianics is that Yeshua made a blessing before eating, a practice not commanded in the Torah, but required by the Oral Law. Therefore Yeshua must have accepted the Oral Law. The passage in question is Matthew 14:19,

“And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.”

The Oral Law can hardly claim a monopoly on the idea of blessing the Creator when sitting down to a communal meal. We see that Melchizedek made such a blessing when he presented Abraham with bread and wine in Genesis 14:18-20. Here again we can also point to the fact that the Essenes, who vehemently rejected the Pharisee Oral Law, also made blessings before partaking in communal meals (1QS 6:3-5). So the fact that Yeshua also made a blessing before breaking bread does not prove he was a Pharisee anymore than the same action proves the Essenes or Melchizedek were Pharisees.

Healing on the Sabbath

Another argument put forward by Oral Law-believing Messianics is that Yeshua upheld the Oral Law by teaching it was permissible to heal on the Sabbath. They quote the Mishnah, Sabbath 22:5 as proof that the Oral Law teaches it is permissible to heal on the Sabbath but in fact that passage in the Mishnah says nothing whatsoever related to healing on the Sabbath. So what did the Pharisees believe about healing on the Sabbath? Modern Rabbinic law allows any and every sort of healing on the Sabbath, but ancient Pharisaic law had limitations on what was allowed and what was not allowed on the Sabbath. For example, Mishnah, Sabbath 18:3 declares that it is permissible to assist a woman in childbirth on the Sabbath. On the other hand, the laws

relating to treating wounds are more complex and this is only permissible under certain circumstances:

“If one manipulates an abscess on the Sabbath, if in order to make an opening for it, he is liable [i.e. he has sinned]; if in order to draw the matter out of it, he is exempt [from sinning].” (*Babylonian Talmud*, Sabbath 107a [Soncino])

It is really incredible that anyone would claim that Yeshua relied on the Oral Law for the issue of healing. In fact, the exact opposite is true! All one has to do is read the account in Luke to see that the *Pharisees* were the ones opposed to healing on the Sabbath,

“And the scribes and Pharisees watched him, whether he would heal on the sabbath day; that they might find an accusation against him.” (Luke 6:7)

Clearly what this is saying is that the Pharisees wanted to catch Yeshua healing on the Sabbath so they could accuse him of violating the Sabbath. This only makes sense if the Pharisees in that period believed that it was forbidden to heal (or at least forbidden to heal in the manner in which Yeshua was healing) on the Sabbath. Yeshua clearly did not agree with the Pharisees and according to Luke 6:8 he healed a man on the Sabbath despite the fact that the Pharisees were waiting for him to slip up by doing just this. **So rather than this incident proving that Yeshua was obedient to Pharisee Oral Law, in fact it is a clear example where he opposed the Pharisees and their Oral Law!** The fact that later Rabbinical Judaism changed its mind and today allows all forms of healing on the Sabbath cannot anachronistically be used as proof that Yeshua was a Pharisee!

By the way, as one who only looks to the Tanach for the Creator’s commandments, I am left wondering why on earth it would be prohibited to heal on the Sabbath in the first place. Even if a particular form of healing requires some violation of the Sabbath (for example, building a fire), we have a commandment in the Torah that specifically *requires us* not to sit idly by while someone is in mortal danger (Lev 19:16). So healing on the Sabbath is not just permissible, it is required at all times by the Torah.

Impurity from the Dead

Another argument from Oral Law-believing Messianics is that Yeshua was relying on the Oral Law in Luke 11:44. According to the argument Yeshua refers to the Pharisee idea of “overshadowing” a tomb which causes impurity.

This Oral Law doctrine refers to the idea that if an object covers a grave or dead body anyone standing under that object becomes ritually unclean. For example, if part of a tree overshadows a grave, than a person standing under any part of that tree becomes ritually impure by the dead. The argument continues that because the idea of overshadowing is not commanded in the Torah, Yeshua must be deriving this principle from the Oral Law.

There are a few problems with this line of reasoning. First of all, it could be argued that the idea of overshadowing is in fact derived from the Torah. In Nu 19:14 it says that if a person dies in a **tent**, anyone who enters that **tent** becomes impure from the dead. The Mishnah tractate dedicated to “overshadowing” is called *Ohalot* which means “tents” and the Hebrew for “overshadowing” is *tumat ohalot* which literally means “the impurity of tents”! So there can be no doubt that the Oral Law derived the concept of overshadowing from Nu 19:14 by reasoning that if one becomes impure by standing under the same tent as a dead person, then standing under any covering (e.g. a tree) which also covers a dead person also transmits impurity. So even if Yeshua did refer to overshadowing in Luke 11:44, this does not prove he adhered to the Oral Law, only that he interpreted Nu 19:14 in a particular way. But this brings us to the second problem with this whole line of reasoning, namely, that Yeshua says nothing whatsoever about overshadowing in Luke 11:44! Here’s what he actually says:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over them are not aware of them.”

To quote this verse as proof that Yeshua believed in the Oral Law and upheld the authority of the Pharisees is a perversion of reason! But that point aside, this verse makes no mention of “overshadowing”. What it is talking about is becoming ritually impure from the dead by touching a grave, something stated explicitly in the Torah:

“And whosoever toucheth one that is slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.” (Nu 19:16)

Yeshua is clearly speaking about touching a grave, not overshadowing. What Yeshua is referring to is a person who walks over an unmarked grave, touching it with his feet, and thereby becoming impure from the dead. The Pharisees, according to Yeshua, are like unmarked graves; people become defiled by coming into contact with them without even realizing what is

happening. In modern terms, Yeshua is saying the Pharisees are like hidden landmines. A person walks across a nice green pasture thinking it is beautiful and peaceful and then gets blown up by what lies hidden below.

Hearing the Accused

One of the weakest arguments of the Oral Law-believing Messianics is based on John 7:51:

“Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” (John 7:51)

The argument goes that the right of the accused to speak comes from the Oral Law, not the written Torah (but see Ex 22:10-11; Dt 19:17-18). This argument fails from the outset because the words in John 7:51 are those of Nicodemus who we are explicitly told is a Pharisee in John 3:1 and in the context he is speaking to a group of Pharisees. So to say that John 7:51 is proof for the Oral Law is a circular argument. The proof for the Oral Law is that a Pharisee who believes in the Oral Law quotes the Oral Law when speaking to other Pharisees?!

Washing the Hands

Another weak argument of Oral Law-believing Messianics is that even though Yeshua warned his disciples not to follow the Pharisee enactment to wash their hands before eating (Mat 15), they nevertheless did this. The proof that the disciples of Yeshua washed their hands before meals is James 4:8,

“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.”

The argument goes that even though James is using a metaphor in this verse, the metaphor would only make sense if the disciples regularly partook in the ritual of washing the hands. One person I discussed this issue with remarked jokingly that based on the same logic Pontius Pilate must have also practiced the Pharisee ritual of washing the hands, because in Matthew 27:24 he symbolically washed his hands before the multitude to show them he was not guilty. What this actually proves is that even a pagan Roman, who knows nothing about Torah, oral or written, knows that washing the hands represents innocence and purity of action. This is another common-sense metaphor founded on human experience. Even the pagan Philistine king Abimelech used this metaphor in Genesis 20:5 to express his innocence. The key issue here is that washing one's hands when they are physically dirty is a universal

human action done in every culture in the world. This is however completely different from the Pharisee ritual washing of the hands which derives from the Pharisee concept of hand impurity. The early Pharisees believed that if a person touched food with ritually impure hands, the food would become ritually impure and hence unfit for consumption. This is a doctrine with no basis in the written Torah and this is why Yeshua opposed it in Matthew 15.

The recent review of my book presents a long list of instances in which Yeshua did something or preached something, which happens to also be in the Oral Law. As we have seen, this does not prove Yeshua upheld the Oral Law, only that he read Torah (Sabbath day's journey) and had good common sense (don't cry at a wedding celebration).

The recent review of my book also talks about the unique reading of Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew 23:3 which differs from Greek Matthew. In the Greek, Jesus commands his disciples to obey the Pharisees, "all that they say", while in the Hebrew he commands them to obey Moses, "all that he [Moses] says". The review of my book points out that the reading "he says" only appears in some of the Shem-Tov manuscripts while others have "they say". I actually mention this in my book and explain that some of the Shem-Tov manuscripts have been "assimilated" to match the Greek. What happened is some Hebrew copyists of Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew were familiar with the Greek version of Matthew and thought they were "correcting" the Hebrew by adapting it to the Greek. The most reliable parts of Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew are those sections, which differ from the Greek while those that are identical to the Greek may simply have been assimilated to the Greek. As mentioned in my book, this process of "assimilation" to the Greek was discovered by George Howard nearly 2 decades ago.

The review of my book goes on to mention that the Munster and Du Tillet versions of Hebrew Matthew also agree with the Greek as do all Greek Manuscripts and Syriac Aramaic versions. From what I have seen so far, it appears to me that the Munster and Du Tillet versions of Matthew are simply translations from Greek or Latin. By the way, Munster and Du Tillet are not "manuscripts" as claimed in the review; they are printed books made by Catholic priests who claim to be basing their books on manuscripts confiscated from Jews by the inquisition. The original manuscripts are not known to have survived. The Munster version is especially problematic because the Catholic priest who printed it explains that it was missing some sections so he translated them himself from the Latin. However, he does not tell us specifically which portions come from the confiscated Jewish

manuscript and which sections are his own translation. The importance of the Munster and DuTillet versions of Matthew is that they are great examples of what Matthew would look like if it were translated from Greek or Latin and the profound differences between these two versions and Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew just serve to confirm the importance of Shem-Tov's Hebrew Matthew as a witness to the original Hebrew Gospel written by Matthew himself. I will discuss the Aramaic versions of Matthew in a future book on the Aramaic question.

Another objection that has been raised to the reading "he says" in Matthew 23:3 is that if Yeshua were speaking about Moses he would have said "he said" in the past tense because obviously Moses was already dead. Furthermore, the argument is made that the Hebrew word translated by me as "he says" is yomar which is "future" and therefore should be translated as "he will say". This "he will say" could not be Moses because, again, Moses is already dead. The problem with this explanation is that yomar is a "future" form, also called "imperfect", and in Biblical Hebrew this form often has a meaning of a "continuous action". For example, when the Creator says about himself Ehyeh asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14) this should be properly translated as "I am that which I am" (not "I will be that which I will be"). The "I am" is expressed by this "imperfect" form which means "I continually am on an ongoing basis that which I am". The word yomar in biblical Hebrew has the meaning "he says" which refers to a continuing action. Moses' commandments are received on a continuing basis, every time a person reads from the Torah. By the way, the same exact word and form (yomar "he says"), also appears in the future/ imperfect in Genesis 31:8 and there it is usually translated as "he said" referring to the past speaking of Laban, so if one insisted on translating Hebrew Matthew 23:3 as "he said" it would not be linguistically incorrect. However, the idea in both Gen 31:8 and Hebrew Matthew 23:3 is a continuing action (Laban kept continually changing the deal by saying different things).

It is important to point out that the reading of Matthew 23:3 in which Yeshua instructs his disciples to do "all that he [Moses] says" does not exist in a vacuum. The second half of Mat 23:3 in which Yeshua warns his disciples not to do according to the Taknot, the man-made laws and decrees of the Pharisees, confirms this reading in the beginning of the verse. This reading is also confirmed by Hebrew Matthew 15 and Hebrew Matthew 23:16.

At the end of the day, the question is what makes more sense, that Yeshua commanded his disciples to obey Moses or that Yeshua recognized the

Pharisees as having some type of god-given Mosaic authority and commanded his disciples to obey them. Ultimately this is a decision that those who believe in Yeshua must make for themselves. They must decide whether they believe in Jesus the Pharisee seemingly presented in Greek Matthew 23:3 or whether they believe in Yeshua the Torah-keeper who warns his disciples against the man-made religion of the Pharisees as preserved in Hebrew Matthew 23:3, Hebrew Matthew 15, and even Greek Matthew 15.

For more information, read the full study, The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus available from:

<http://www.HebrewYeshua.com/>