

Some Responses to Nehemia Gordon's Rejoinder

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In a rejoinder to my short essay on Nehemia Gordon's remarks pertaining to Matthew 23:3, he made the following points, to which I give a short reply here.

First, my essay was not a review of his book, *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus* (Hilkiah Press, 2005) as Gordon suggests. It was in response to his short article which appeared in *Petah Tikvah* (vol. 23.1, Jan-Mar 2005) as the essay's title clearly indicated. There I suggested that Gordon could have been more forthright in his article, by alerting the readers to the fact that the reading of Matthew 23:3, which he considered reflective of Matthew's original, was based upon scanty and late witnesses. He considers this charge absurd, because in a short article one is unable to give the level of detail necessary for such a disclosure. But such a disclosure does not require great detail—just the simple stating of the obvious facts. For instance, it would not have been difficult to include a single sentence to the effect that most other manuscripts, including those of the Hebrew Matthew to which he appealed, do not support the reading he believes to be original. Had he done so, the readers of his article would have been given a much greater basis from which to evaluate his claims.

Secondly, Gordon spends the majority of space in his rejoinder on the few examples I gave suggesting that Yeshua did not disregard all matters of tradition extant in His day, traditions which inevitably found their way into the compiled Oral Torah of the post-destruction rabbinic literature. But I attempted to make it clear in my short essay that I do not think Yeshua accepted all of the Pharisaic traditions. Clearly Yeshua is presented in the Gospels as teaching against specific traditions that had grown up in His day, traditions which in effect had set aside the very Torah of God that He came to establish. My point was that He did not simply discard them all, or think that when He followed man-made traditions, He was necessarily subordinating the Written Torah to the traditions of the elders. Moreover, the later rabbinic notion that the Oral Torah was all revealed at Sinai, or that the rabbis have the authority to overturn the Written Torah by their rulings, was surely not acceptable to our Master, and I have never said it was. Clearly Yeshua spoke against those who, through their traditions, had set aside the Torah of Moses (e.g., Mark 7:8–9). But teaching the primacy of the Written revelation of God does not necessitate the conclusion that all rabbinic traditions are wrong. Gordon seems to take the position that if one accepts any of the traditions of the Sages, they are obligated to accept them all. But this is clearly not the case. From ancient times until the present, *halachot* among the Sages and rabbis have been disputed and argued, and there never has been a time when a single, monolithic Judaism prevailed worldwide. For that, we await the return of our Messiah.

The title of Gordon's essay, "Was Yeshua a Pharisee?", would indicate that either he missed this point, or that I did not make it sufficiently clear. I never argued that Yeshua was a Pharisee. I do not believe that He discarded all traditions of the Pharisees, however, or that He aligned Himself with anti-Pharisaic sects, such as the Sadducees or the Dead Sea Scrolls community. On balance, the presentation of the Gospels would indicate that Yeshua Himself engaged in some of the traditions extant in His day which were not explicitly commanded in the Written Torah, but He did so only in a way to reinforce the Written Torah, which, it appears to me, He held as supreme, and as the judge for all matters of *halachah*. Additionally, from the manner of Yeshua's words and actions in the Gospels, it seems clear that He was closer to the Pharisaic manner of things than He was to any of the other sects of His day, at least as we know them through the extant sources. He appears to follow the majority calendar, and His manner of argumentation and dialog is more often than not in line with what we know to be characteristic of the Pharisees. Moreover, the fact that Paul emerged as Yeshua's apostle to the Gentiles, and that he clearly identified himself as a Pharisee (Acts 23:6), would indicate that the teachings of Yeshua were not such as to distance His disciples from Pharisaism in general.

In Gordon's critique of the examples given to suggest that Yeshua did, in fact, follow some of the rabbinic traditions, he makes the following points:

1) *m.Berchot 2.5* does not specifically talk of fasting. This is true, but my point in this reference is to the fact that in the rabbinic *halachah*, the bridegroom and attendants were exempt from some of the traditions enjoined upon all others. When Yeshua makes His argument regarding why His disciples do not fast, He makes the same point—the groom and his attendants are exempt from certain *halachah* which otherwise would be required. If Yeshua had held the view that fasting was not a requirement, He could surely have said this. Instead of dismissing fasting all together, He rather argues that the groom and attendants are exempt because of the joy that a wedding requires. In giving such an argument, it appears that Yeshua agrees that fasting is required, but that there are exceptions. The appeal to *m.Berchot 2.5* was simply to show a similar argument by the rabbis.

2) Gordon writes that the Greek verb used for reclining at a meal is *anekaito* or *anekaimai* (ἀνάκειμαι) which can mean either “to recline” or “to sit.” This is the verb used in Matthew 26:7. However, in Luke 22:14 and John 13:12, both of which describe the events at the Pesach celebration, the verb is *anapipto* (ἀναπίπτω), which has a basic meaning of “to fall back” or “to lay oneself back”¹ and which has a more specific sense of sitting in a low position, as on the ground (Matthew 15:25; Mark 8:6) or on the floor at a meal (Luke 11:37). In the Gospel of John we see “the disciple whom Yeshua loved” leaning back upon Yeshua's chest, a picture that surely suggests the reclining position. Was reclining a common posture at meals in the Ancient Near East? It may have been. But we know that tables and chairs (or stools) were also used for eating. The interchange between Yeshua and the Canaanite women (Matthew 15:22f) has the woman saying, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.” This, presumably, speaks of a table that is elevated above the ground, at which people would sit to eat.² So while reclining was not uncommon, it was not the only posture for eating. But my point in bringing up the reclining at the Pesach meal was simply to show that Yeshua was not opposed to the traditional posture enjoined upon the people by the rabbinic traditions. That is, He did not consider traditions wrong simply because they were traditions.

3) The traditional *halachah* regarding a “Sabbath day's journey” were derived from the rabbinic interpretations of אַל-יֵצֵא אִישׁ מִמְּקוֹמוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, “a person must not go out from his place on the seventh day” (Exodus 16:29). Gordon notes that the Qumran society, as well as the Pharisees, had their interpretation of this passage, based upon “zones” or regions pertaining to a city, which the term “place” represented. He references CD 10:21 which puts a Sabbath day's journey at 1000 cubits. In the *Zadokite Fragments* (11:5–7), this is increased to 2000 cubits in reference to following an animal that has strayed away. In *m.Eruvin* 4:3ff, however, the distance of 4000 cubits is allowed under certain circumstances, since 2000 cubits in any direction would require a retracing of the same 2000 cubits to return to “his place,” totaling 4000 cubits in all. The Qumran *halachah* appears to limit Sabbath travel to a total of 2000 cubits, i.e., 1000 cubits in any direction, and a retracing of that 1000 cubits for a total of 2000. Thus while the *halachot* of the two groups are similar, they are, nonetheless, not identical.

But the fact that both groups appear to have specific *halachah* regarding the distance one may travel on the Sabbath is the point: the Written Torah does not give a specific distance, so in any case, this was a matter of *halachah* based upon traditions of the various sects. Nor was it the case that all towns and villages were laid out in a uniform fashion, so that city limits, pasture lands, and beyond would have had uniform distances. A Sabbath day's journey was therefore not a matter of common sense, but of specific *halachah* derived from received interpretations of the biblical text (Exodus 16:29; Numbers 35:5). My point was that Yeshua appears to conform to such *halachah* in spite of the fact that it is not specifically detailed in the Written Torah, and that He presumes this when He teaches in Matthew 24:20

1. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, “ἀναπίπτω.”

2. See the remarks of Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, “שִׁלְחָן.”

“pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.” [The Even Bohan leaves the sentence of Matthew 24:20 incomplete. Howard supplies the finished sentence from other manuscripts.] And the fact that His disciples, immediately following the ascension, adhered to the restrictions of a Sabbath day’s journey (Acts 1:12) would strongly indicate that this was the practice while Yeshua was with them.

4) In regard to Yeshua’s statement (Matthew 12:5) that the Torah absolves the Priests from breaking the Sabbath when they do arduous work in preparing and offering sacrifices on the Sabbath, Gordon centers on the fact that Yeshua says, “Or have you not *read* in the Torah...,” and concludes that this could not be a reference to the Oral Torah of the Sages, which at this point had not yet been written. But as Daube has shown,³ from the perspective of the rabbis, the *reading* of the Torah had to be joined with the accepted interpretations of it in order to derive its intended meaning. In other words, the Oral Torah was considered linked to the Written Torah, and when one *read* the Torah, the oral interpretations offered by the Sages were also discussed. The midrashim are the final product of this phenomenon. Note carefully the words of Yeshua in Matthew 12:5, “Or have you not read in the Torah, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?” The Written Torah surely specifies that the Priests are to offer sacrifices on the Sabbath, as Gordon points out. But the problem confronting the rabbis was that this law appeared to contradict the Sabbath laws prohibiting arduous work, yet the Written Torah gives no hint of this conflict. However, Yeshua’s words certainly do. He notes that the priests do, in fact, “break the Sabbath,” yet are innocent. Thus, He is referencing the well-known dialog of the rabbis that inevitably accompanied this Torah text whenever it was read, and He uses their argument as one of the bases of His own teaching.

5) In regard to the *berachot* prescribed by the Sages before eating, Gordon notes that Melchizedek likewise made a similar blessing, and thus he reasons that Yeshua’s practice of pronouncing a blessing before the meal may equally derive from the Written Torah as from the *halachah* of the rabbis. However, the blessing of Melchizedek is specifically stated in the Torah to be for Abraham, not for the wine and the bread: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand” (Gen 14:18–20). This is not a blessing of God for the bread and wine, but a blessing specifically for Abraham directed to God Most High for giving him the victory over his enemies. Moreover, there is no indication that Abraham partook of the bread and wine, and his words, to the effect that he would take nothing from Melchizedek, might reinforce this. Furthermore, the author of Hebrews bases his argument for the superiority of Melchizedek over the Levitical priests on the fact that Melchizedek’s blessing had Abraham as its focus, not the bread and wine (Hebrews 7:1 ff).

While the Written Torah specifically commands a blessing after one has eaten and is satisfied (Deuteronomy 8:10, as a safeguard against ungratefulness and idolatry, cp. 8:12; 31:20), it nowhere commands a blessing before the meal. The fact that Yeshua engages in such a blessing is best traced to the traditions of the Sages.

6) In regard to healing on the Sabbath: my point in referencing m.*Shabbat* 22.5f (I failed to note that the passage in question should include 22.6) was that the text ends with “and if he is healed, he is healed.” Clearly the rabbis tried to prohibit healing measures on the Sabbath, and Yeshua specifically engaged in such healing as a way of showing His disagreement (and even disdain) for such a ruling. Doing good on the Sabbath was clearly what He was teaching, and specifically doing good for those in greatest need. But Yeshua was never convicted of breaking the Sabbath when He performed miraculous healing on it, even though His detractors wanted such a conviction. And my point was that even the Sages conceded that healing that came about on the Sabbath apart from the work of a doctor (or someone acting as a doctor) could not be considered a breaking of the Sabbath commandment: “if he is healed, he is healed.” In His miraculous healings on the Sabbath, Yeshua was showing that the Almighty

3. David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (Univ of London, 1956), pp. 422ff.

Himself healed on the Sabbath, because such miracles of healing were surely by His power.

7) In Yeshua's dialog with the Pharisees, and His pointing out the hypocrisy that developed within their traditions, He describes them as "like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it" (Luke 11:44). Gordon's insight is good, that the primary point of Yeshua is that some of the Pharisees were, indeed, "concealed tombs," by which people could be inadvertently made unclean. And he is also right to point out Numbers 19:16 which teaches that touching a grave renders a person ceremonially unclean. However, the parallel to Luke 11:44 in Matthew 23:27 includes a fuller description of Yeshua's words: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." Here, we discover, that Yeshua did not speak of the Pharisees as "hidden" or "concealed" tombs, but as "whitewashed." Whitewashing the tombs was done in order to make them evident (as well as aesthetically more acceptable?)⁴ so pilgrims coming to the Feasts could avoid them, and thus avoid becoming unclean. Moreover, Yeshua uses the word "tomb" (μνημεῖον, *mnemeion*), which, in the environs of Jerusalem, were most often burial chambers hewn in rock,⁵ with many having memorial structures standing next to or above the burial chamber (note Luke 11:48, "So you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers; because it was they who killed them, and you build [*their tombs*]"). In other words, it was not that one would "walk over" a grave, but that one would come too close to it, and maybe even touch it, being unaware that it was, in fact, a grave. In the Numbers 19:16 passage, touching a grave is in the context of an open field, and taking the immediate context into consideration, even a battle field, in which a fallen soldier remained or was buried. Touching a human bone, or engaging in burying someone slain in the field, including touching the grave, rendered a person unclean. Yeshua's words in Luke 11:44, however, appear to be referencing the graves within the context of Jerusalem which were structures over which a person could not walk. In context, the better explanation is that He accepts the *halachic* ruling that coming too close to the grave also renders a person unclean.

8) My point in alluding to John 7:51 was that the words of Nicodemus, to the effect that "Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him..." was simply that in the context of defending Yeshua, one of the "rulers of the Jews" (John 3:1) appeals to the Oral Torah in a matter of jurisprudence. Moreover, it does not appear in Yeshua's teaching that He spoke against such jurisprudence. Again, my emphasis was that we do not find Yeshua disregarding all traditions, or speaking against all traditions as wrong simply because they are not specifically mentioned in the Written Torah.

9) The idea that James (4:8) referred to hand washing as "a common-sense experience founded on human experience" does not seem warranted. "Cleanse your hands" is parallel with "purify your hearts," and this would seem to be based upon the idea that one's hands easily contracted impurities, which metaphorically is used by James of sin and the need for repentance. Pilate's washing has to do with blood guilt: "I am innocent of this Man's blood" (Matthew 27:24). The idea of "clean hands," however, became a metaphor for a life of obedience, as Paul writes: "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension" (1Timothy 2:8). These metaphoric uses of clean hands found in the Apostolic Scriptures seem best founded upon the disputes over purities extant in the 1st Century.

So, in summary, the single paragraph in which I suggested some examples of traditions that Yeshua accepted was simply to say that one could not so easily identify Him as a member of a sect (like the Karaites of the later centuries) that dismissed the traditions of the Sages. Furthermore, we all must

4. e.g., m.*Mo'ed Qatan* 1.2; b.*Bava Metzia* 85b.

5. See Rachel Hachlili, "Burials/Ancient Israelite" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols (Doubleday, 1992), 1:789–94. Note also the comments of Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3 vols. (T&T Clark, 1997), 3.301 and n. 107, who admit that ὡραῖοι "beautiful" is said in reference to tombs and not trench graves, still caution that graves of the poor perished in antiquity, and therefore current archaeological evidence is indecisive as to how such graves may have been marked in ancient times.

realize that every sect of Judaism had some traditions which informed and identified the sect itself as distinct from other sects. Even the attempt to dismiss tradition is, in itself, a tradition.⁶

But the specific intent of my short essay was to point out the methods employed by Gordon in regard to the text critical issues of Matthew 23:3. When one engages in the task of seeking to know what reading in a particular text should be received, he or she must weigh the data with as much objectivity as possible. Many factors must be taken into consideration in such an investigation. One cannot simply begin with the idea that a certain tradition based upon a given family of manuscripts is wrong. So when Gordon dismisses other copies of the Even Bohan because they appear to conform to the Greek witnesses, he has engaged in circular reasoning, for he begins by depreciating the Greek witnesses, and then dismisses the other manuscripts of the Even Bohan because they align with the Greek.

Furthermore, there is every possibility that the singular verb in 23:3 (“he says”) is the result of a scribal error, namely, that the *vav* of **יאמר** was dropped or skipped. This is why I mentioned the fact that the singular **יאמר** is an imperfect where we might expect the perfect.

Gordon suggests that the imperfect is used to denote something as customary or “continuous action.”⁷ Of course, the imperfect can have this sense,⁸ but it by no means always connotes continuous action. But my question is how the syntax of the imperfect at Matthew 23:3 is to be understood. It should be noted that in this very verse, the “continuous action” of teaching by the scribes and Pharisees is portrayed by participles: **אל תעשו שהם אומרים והם אינם עושים**, “...do not do, for they say (participle) and they do not do (participle).” Note these other examples: in Matthew 18:3, “He said, ‘I say to you...,’” (continuous action) the Even Bohan has the participle (**אומר**) where the Greek has the present tense. The same is true of 5:22ff, 19:28, 24:2, 25:12, and 26:21. In 26:18, the phrase “Thus says the teacher,” the Greek text has the present tense (**λέγει**) while the Even Bohan appears to have the perfect (**אמר**).⁹ Here, when the disciples repeat what the Master has already said, Even Bohan puts the verb in the perfect. Moreover, in the book of Matthew, when Moses is referred to as commanding or speaking, the Even Bohan puts the verb in the perfect: Matthew 8:4, “Then Yeshua said to him: ‘Be careful lest you tell any man, but go to the priest to offer your gifts as Moses commanded (**צוה**) in your Torah”; Matthew 19:7, “Why then did Moses command (**צוה**)...?”; Matthew 22:24, “saying, ‘Rabbi, Moses surely said to us...’” (**לאמר ר’ אמור לנו אמר משה**), where the infinitive absolute plus the finite verb [in this case the perfect] is given for emphasis, following the syntax of Biblical Hebrew). Every time in the Even Bohan Matthew that the words of Moses are brought into the current situation, the verb of speaking is put in the perfect. As far as I can see, if the imperfect form in 23:3 is to be taken as habitual, it is the only time the verb **אמר** is so construed in the Even Bohan. Thus, if we take the normal style of the Even Bohan, we would

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6. The notion that the Karaites only follow the strict letter of the Written Torah is simply not historically accurate. Like the rabbinate from which they separated, the Karaite sages formulated many of their own interpretations and rulings, which resulted in numerous Karaite sects, so much so that Kirkisani is quoted as stating that it became impossible to find two Karaites who held the same opinions on all religious issues. For an overview of the history of the Karaites, see Moshe Hofman, “Karaites” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 10.761–86.
 7. Gordon’s example of Genesis 31:8 is not a valid example of the continuative force of the imperfect. Here, the clause begins with **אם־כה**, “If thus” and therefore the following imperfect **יאמר** takes on a subjunctive sense (expressing a real condition in the future): “If he would say....” The example of Genesis 31:8 is even more interesting for the issue at hand, for the Greek text of Matt 23:3 uses a similar construction: **πάντα οὐν ὅσα ἐὰν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν** literally, “all which they might say to you...,” using the aorist subjunctive with **ἐὰν**. This is precisely how the Lxx translates the imperfect **יאמר** in Gen 31:8, **ἐὰν οὕτως εἴπη!** If the Hebrew text of Matt 23:3 in the Even Bohan follows this same syntax, the force is subjunctive, describing what might be said in the future. This would fit the plural verb far better than the singular, unless, as I noted in the original essay, the singular verb references the Seat of Moses by way of metonymy. Regardless, if the imperfect is functioning in a subjunctive sense, this hardly fits the words of Moses which had already been spoken and recognized as the unchangeable revelation of God.
 8. There are many good examples of the “habitual non-perfective” (to use Walke’s terminology, see Walke/O’Conner, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Eisenbrauns, 1990], p. 506).
 9. The form could also be a participle, defectively written: **אמר**.

expect a perfect form here, not an imperfect.

One of the things that one must do when dealing in text critical investigation is seek to understand how a variant could have arisen. One factor in deciding whether to accept or reject a given reading is if there is a reasonable explanation for how the variant could have occurred. In this case, if the original reading were the plural (יאמר), the singular could have come about by the scribe leaving off the last letter, something that is not uncommon in scribal errors. This would also help explain why the singular remained as an imperfect, when the context would favor a perfect (אמר) if the singular were, in fact, the original reading.

Another factor presented to the text critic, when seeking to know how a variant may have arisen, is to ask which reading is more difficult. It is well known that the tendency of scribes is to “make sense” of a text that seems awkward or difficult, or even to change the text to fit current beliefs or dogma. Therefore a more difficult reading often represents a text less encumbered by scribal emendation. If, in fact, the extant Greek texts of Matthew were the product of the 3rd and 4th Century Christian Church, then the plural (“whatever they say”) of Matthew 23 would have presented theological difficulties, since clearly the Church did not want to accept any aspect of Synagogal authoritative. Indeed, by the 3rd and 4th Centuries, we see the Christian Church engaging in an increasing anti-Semitism. It would be understandable, then, why scribes might have changed a plural to a singular (“what he [i.e., Moses] says”), for doing so could have placed authority upon Moses rather than upon the Jewish Sages. For this same reason, then, it is unlikely that Christian scribes would have changed an original singular into a plural, for to have done so would have reinforced the authority of the Jewish Sages, something from which the emerging Christian Church was seeking to distance herself. When looking at the text from this perspective, the plural is clearly the more difficult reading, and thus has greater text critical weight.¹⁰

A second factor in the text critical method is to take the larger context into consideration. When we do that here, it seems clear that Yeshua’s primary critique of the scribes and Pharisees is not in regard to what they *say*, but in regard to their failure *to live out* what they teach. In other words, Yeshua’s strong words are directed toward *doing* rather than *saying*. Note the following:

- v. 4: the man-made traditions cause burdens upon people. If the Torah is summed up in loving God and loving one’s neighbor, then helping someone with a burden is fulfilling the Torah. This, the scribes and Pharisees fail to do.
- vv. 5–7: the scribes and Pharisees have the wrong motivation for doing the *mitzvot*. Their “religion” is for the eyes of men rather than for God.
- vv. 8–12: Yeshua’s disciples are not to follow this pattern of the scribes and Pharisees, but are to engage in the *mitzvot* as an expression of honoring God (not one’s earthly teacher) and loving one’s neighbor (be a servant to all).
- v. 13: striving to enter the Kingdom (=demonstrating the rule and reign of God upon the earth) is the goal. Instead, the man-pleasing hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees not only keep them from the Kingdom, but also hinder others from entering it. The Kingdom is about “doing,” not merely about “saying.”
- v. 15: the “missionary” activity of the Pharisees has as its goal to make another Pharisee, not to bring a

10. In light of this canon of textual criticism, it is interesting to note that not one Greek manuscript has the singular “he says,” which we might expect to have arisen in the centuries of anti-Semitic polemic against the Jews. Gordon suggests (*Hebrew Yeshua*, p. 48) that the change to the plural came about by a Greek translator misreading the Hebrew *Vorlage*, adding a *vav* to the original singular. But why would this happen? The normal tendency of scribes to leave off letters rather than add them, especially if, as Gordon postulates, the Greek scribe was less than conversant in Hebrew. Moreover, Gordon’s theory of how the plural could have arisen presumes a single Greek exemplar from which all other Greek manuscripts arose, which is itself dubious. From a text critical standpoint, it is far easier to explain the singular as deriving from the plural than *visa versa*.

person into the Kingdom. Once again, the motivation for their attempting to make more Pharisees is not to expand the Kingdom of God, but to honor themselves.

- vv. 16–22: in the matter of oaths: the scribes and Pharisees have developed “back doors” in order to give a way out of keeping one’s oath. But one’s oath should be understood as made in the very presence of the Almighty, not merely before men. Therefore one’s “yes” should be “yes,” and one’s “no,” “no” (cf. Matthew 5:37). In other words, one should do what one promises to do because he lives in the presence of the Almighty.
- vv. 23–24: the scribes and Pharisees are fastidious about tithing, even tithing herbs that may have sprouted as volunteer plants, from which technically the Written Torah does not require a tithe (since tithes are required of that which is planted in one’s field: “You shall surely tithe all the produce from what you sow.” (Deuteronomy 14:22, cf. Leviticus 27:30-33; Numbers 18:21-23; Deuteronomy 26:12–15; 2Chronicles 31:5–12; Nehemiah 10:37–38; 12:44; 13:5, 12; Malachai 3:6–12). Yet while being careful about even the smallest aspect of the tithing laws, they neglect the “weightier” matters, such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness (cf. Micah 6:8). But Yeshua’s admonition is insightful: “these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” He does not negate the fastidious tithing of even herbs which are not specifically mentioned in the tithing laws of Written Torah. Rather, He commends the doing of these traditions while at the same time enforcing the need to fulfill “weightier” matters as well.
- vv. 25–26: the scribes and Pharisees make sure that what can be seen of men is “polished,” but the hidden aspects of the hearts retain all manner of spiritual refuse. Once again, the rebuke of Yeshua is directed toward the improper motivation for obedience of the scribes and Pharisees. Their actions are for the praise of men rather than for the praise of God.
- vv, 27–31: the scribes and Pharisees are like hidden tombs that defile those who come near. In other words, their intricate laws appear to be very pious, but instead they breed hypocrisy, or the defiling of one’s soul, because they neglect to emphasize the ruling principles of loving God as well as loving one’s neighbor in the *doing* of the *mitzvot*.

Thus, the context of Matthew 23 shows clearly that Yeshua’s words condemned the actions (or lack thereof) of the scribes and Pharisees, not their teachings. Our Master’s emphasis was upon the overarching rule of love for God as well as for one’s neighbor, summed upon in the terms “justice, mercy, and faithfulness.”

Given this consistent emphasis upon the hypocritical actions of the scribes and Pharisees throughout the remainder of the passage, the plural reading in v. 3 (“they say,” יאמרו) is not out of place at all. Since those who speak from the Seat of Moses are entrusted with teaching the words of Moses, what they say is worthy. It is their desire for the applause of men that is egregious, and thus they are not worthy examples to be followed.

A third factor in this issue of textual criticism is the very manuscript of the Even Bohan itself, which Gordon appears to take as representative of Matthew’s original words.¹¹ The text as found in

11. The evident changes which occurred in the 1995 publication of Howard’s work when compared to the earlier edition (1987) are significant in this regard. The original 1987 title was: *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text*. The title of the 1995 edition was changed to *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*. Indeed, all references to a “primitive text” have been removed from the later edition. This is because the scholarly reviews of his original work showed conclusively that Howard’s original claims, to the effect that the Even Bohan clearly manifested a “primitive Hebrew text of Matthew,” were not sufficiently supported by the data. (See the original review of Howard’s work, William L. Petersen, “Book Reviews,” *JBL* 108:4 (1989), 722–26.) When Gordon introduces Howard’s work, however, he uses the 1987 title rather than the updated 1995 title (p. 37). In fact, throughout Gordon’s book, the reader is given the impression that the Even Bohan is, in fact, a representation of the primitive Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, even though in a footnote (p. 44–5, n. 54), Gordon admits that Howard himself “scaled back” that bold claim. Why then does he quote the conclusion from the 1987 edition (p. 44) and only put the concession in a footnote? It appears

Howard's work is a contiguous text of Matthew which is not found in the original Even Bohan. In the original manuscript, the text of Matthew's Gospel is interspersed with polemical and explanatory comments of the manuscript's author himself, Ibn Shaprut. As Howard notes in his preface, he extracted these comments in order to give an uninterrupted text of Matthew's Gospel. While such an enterprise may help give the reader a broad sense of Even Bohan's Matthew, it nonetheless renders Howard's text far less valuable for matters of textual criticism. That is because the tendency of scribes is to make mistakes based upon dittography (repeating of words or phrases), metathesis (transposition of letters), haplography (omission of letters/words because of similar forms), homoioteleuton (skipping letters/words because of similar endings of words), and so on. Therefore, in order to ascertain how mistakes may have entered into the Even Bohan, it would require that one see the manuscript *with all of the inserted comments*. Howard himself emphasizes that the text he gives in his book is not strictly a critical or eclectic text, meaning that he is not suggesting that one could do valid textual criticism based upon the text he supplies. One ought to be very cautious, then, in making dogmatic statements about specific readings in the Even Bohan, particularly when such readings have no supporting evidence in the wider body of manuscripts.

It is clear to anyone who studies the Even Bohan text as supplied by Howard that it is replete with textual problems and biased insertions.¹² For instance, an entire section (corresponding to Mark 9:20–28) is inserted following Matthew 17:17 in order to expand the single verse summary of the pericope given in Matthew's version (17:18). In other words, Matthew 17:18 is replaced by nine verses from Mark in a revised form. In other places, words and phrases are clearly missing. For example, 18:2 breaks mid-sentence: "He called a lad..." leaving out an entire section which Howard supplies from other manuscripts for his translation. Another example is 22:6, "And others [] and abused them and killed them." Obviously, the phrase "took his servants" is missing from the Even Bohan. Other anomalies occur in the Even Bohan text as well. In 16:16, Peter's reply to Yeshua's inquiry of "what do you say about me?" is: "You are the Messiah, that is, Kristo (קְרִיסְטוֹ), the Son of the living God, who has come into this world." Here, it appears that the Even Bohan is transliterating the Greek word Χριστός, *Christos* as a gloss, perhaps to alert the readers to the fact that Hebrew *mashiach* is called *Christos* by the Christians. But why is the final "s" omitted? In 24:14, the word "antichrist" is correctly transliterated. It appears that in this instance, a scribe has dropped off the final letter of *christos*.

Anti-Christian bias is found throughout the manuscript.¹³ One example is 24:14–15, "And this gospel, that is, evungili, will be preached in all the earth for a witness concerning me to all the nations and then the end will come. This is the Anti-Christ, and this is the abomination which desolates which was spoken of by Daniel [as] standing in the holy place. Let the one who reads understand."¹⁴ Gordon

that Gordon wants to give his readers the impression that the Even Bohan is, in fact, representative of a primitive Hebrew Matthew, even though the vast majority of scholars, including Howard, admit that the data do not support such a claim. For further reviews of Howard's work and studies on the Shem-Tov Matthew, see: William Petersen, "The Vorlage of Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew," *NTS* 44 (1998), 490–512; George Howard, "A Note on the Short Ending of Mathew," *HTR* 81 (1988), 117–20; George Howard, "A Note on Codex Sinaiticus and Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew," *NovTest* 34 (1992), 46–7; George Howard, "A Note on Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew and the Gospel of John," *JSNT* 47(1992), 117–26; George Howard, "The Pseudo-Clementine Writings and Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew," *NTS* 40 (1994), 622–28; George Howard, "Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew and Early Jewish Christianity," *JSNT* 70 (1998), 3–20; William Horbury, "The Hebrew Text of Matthew in Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut's Even Bohan" in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), pp. 729–38; R. F. Shedinger, "The Textual Relationship between P45 and Shem-Tob's Matthew," *NTS* 43 (1997), 58–71; R. F. Shedinger, "A Further Consideration of the Textual Nature of Shem Tob's Hebrew," *CBQ* 61.4 (1999), 686–94.

12. Howard himself admits that the text "contains a number of later scribal revisions" (Howard, 1995, p. 234).
13. For instance, Yeshua is never identified as the Messiah and John the Baptizer is given an exalted role, even taking on messianic traits. See the comments of Howard, 1995, p. 234.
14. One wonders why the "gospel" (בְּשׂוּרָה) was in need of clarification by the addition of "evungili" (אורי נגילי), cf. also

himself senses the problem, and suggests that the gloss was inadvertently put in the wrong place—it should have come after the “abomination of desolation” clause. It is convenient that when the manuscript fits Gordon’s expectations, it is deemed accurate, but when it does not, he postulates an error. It would be just as reasonable to suggest that the text of 23:3 also contains an error: a dropped *vav* that turned an original plural verb into a singular.

More could be added to these few examples, but they suffice to show that the Even Bohan text does not uniformly represent Matthew’s *Vorlage*, and that to use it as though it does is to disregard the obvious textual problems it represents. This does not mean that the Even Bohan is without value. Surely a text such as this offers much for the study of the history of the Matthew text. But my point is that, like all witnesses to the biblical text, it must be scrutinized in accordance with acceptable text critical methods in order to ascertain what readings reflect a more genuine witness to Matthew’s gospel, and those which are the result of scribal errors, revisions, and even sectarian polemic.

Fourthly, Gordon dismisses the other witnesses to the Hebrew Matthew (Münster, du Tillet) because he considers them greatly influenced by the Greek or Latin texts of Matthew. He further suggests that the du Tillet is not a “manuscript” but a *printed* book “made by Catholic priests.”¹⁵ Actually, the du Tillet, like the Even Bohan, was originally produced as a polemical tool vis-a-vis Christianity, seen by the fact that following the Hebrew text of Matthew, some twenty-three “Jewish objections to the Gospel” were appended. But once again, the fact that the du Tillet aligns more closely to the Greek text of Matthew does not discount it out of hand. This would only be the case if one had already determined that the Greek witnesses to Matthew were less accurate or further removed from the Matthew’s “original.” But Gordon simply presumes the Greek witnesses are unworthy, and then similarly dismisses the Münster and du Tillet because they often align with the Greek. This circular manner of assessing the value of textual witnesses is not acceptable in the science of textual criticism.

Gordon ends his rejoinder this way: “At the end of the day, the question is what makes more sense....” Herein lies the real issue. Do we pick and choose between manuscripts and readings based upon what makes sense to us, or do we allow the preponderance of evidence to determine what constitutes the biblical text to which we submit? Clearly, for Gordon, his theology drives his textual criticism. Since the reading of the Even Bohan at Matthew 23:3 supports his Karaite stance against the teachings of the Sages, for him it “makes sense,” and therefore he proclaims it to be the correct reading. But the criteria for what constitutes the Scriptures are not determined by what makes sense to man. We recognize that often in the Scriptures we are confronted with apparent antinomies. But our duty is not to change the text so that it conforms to what we think it should say, or selectively to choose those readings that best fit our pre-determined theology. We are called to receive the ancient witness of the Scriptures as the divine authority to which we then conform our own thinking and perspective.

Therefore, we believe that the Scriptures, all of them, are the result of divine revelation and inspiration, and that in the sovereign providence of the Almighty, these Scriptures have been preserved in such a manner that, through the preponderance of evidence, the sacred text has been preserved. Our duty is to receive all of the evidence that witnesses to the text of Scripture, and through careful and objective scholarship, to accept the Scriptures as given to us, to which we then submit. In the final analysis, our primary concern is not “what makes sense to me,” but “what do the Scriptures say?” Once this is determined, we confess that what they say is the truth, even if at times this truth is shrouded in the mystery of the divine One.

26:13). Interestingly, the Koran consistently refers to the “gospel” as the “Injeel” (5:46-47, 66, 68, 110; 57:27).

15. Emphasis mine. The term “printed” is usually reserved for works reproduced with moveable type. The du Tillet exists as a handwritten document, the reproduction of which may be seen in James Trimm’s first publication of the text (*B’Sorot Matti* [Hebrew/Aramaic New Testament Research Institute, 1990]).