

DO AND KEEP WHAT MOSES SAYS (MATTHEW 23:2–7)

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No other text in Matthew's Gospel has resisted assimilation into proposed interpretive frameworks for the book as a whole as stubbornly as 23:2–7. These few verses appear to present ideas that flagrantly contradict what is said elsewhere in the Gospel, and, despite numerous attempts at resolution, many scholars have come to regard this passage as a vagrant pericope that simply cannot be reconciled with the theology of the overall work.¹ If that is the case, so be it! Perhaps the deconstructing of what Wolfgang Iser calls “consistency building”² is necessary for scholarship to continue with integrity in a postmodern age. But let us not give up too soon. In this article I beg the patience of my colleagues to receive yet one more possible solution to the *crux interpretum* of Matt 23:2–7.

First, I shall describe what I call the “apparent reading” for this text, that is, the pervasive interpretation that most modern readers seem to be inclined to give the passage. Next, I will describe two problems with this reading—the main problem that has prompted many scholars to interpret the text differently and an additional problem that, while largely unnoticed, makes the apparent reading even less acceptable. Then I will describe the major proposals that have been offered to resolve this exegetical dilemma and will indicate why none of these has managed to do so. Finally, I will propose a new solution, one that is remarkably simple and yet has the potential for resolving the interpretive problems more satisfactorily than any other alternative reading.

¹ Jack Dean Kingsbury says, “To date, no scholarly proposal for resolving these apparent contradictions has proved entirely satisfactory” (*Matthew as Story* [2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988] 67). Cf. Edward P. Blair, *Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960) 114; Ernst Haenchen, “Matthäus 23,” *NTK* 48 (1951) 38–63, esp. 38–40; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (trans. D. Green; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 430; Sjeff van Tilborg, *The Jewish Leaders in Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 134–37.

² That is, the process by which the implied reader tries to fit everything in a narrative into a coherent picture. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 283.

I. Apparent Reading

In Matt 23:2–7, Jesus tells his disciples that “the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat.” Therefore, the disciples should do (ποιέω) and keep (τηρέω) whatever these religious leaders say (λέγω) to them, but the disciples should not do (ποιέω) according to the works (ἔργα) of these leaders. Why? Because the scribes and Pharisees speak (λέγω) but do not do (ποιέω), burden people whom they are unwilling to help, and do (ποιέω) all their deeds (ἔργα) to be seen by others.

The essence of what I call the apparent reading for this text was stated a generation ago by Günther Bornkamm:

Matt. 23:2 grants to the scribes and Pharisees that they sit on the *kathēdra* of Moses; their teaching is not attacked but declared to be binding (23:3). What is attacked is the discrepancy between what they teach and what they do, their hypocrisy.³

It has been restated recently by Graham Stanton:

These two verses (23:2–3) seem to indicate that the scribes and Pharisees are the true heirs and guardians of the teaching of Moses; while their hypocritical behavior is to be shunned, their teaching is to be followed.⁴

This apparent reading takes the passage as affirming three things. First, by saying that the scribes and Pharisees “sit on Moses’ seat,” Jesus grants that they have authority to teach.⁵ Second, by telling his disciples to do and keep whatever the scribes and Pharisees say, Jesus commends adherence to the teaching of these religious leaders.⁶ Jesus’ followers ought to respect the authority of

³ Günther Bornkamm, “End Expectation and Church in Matthew,” in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (trans. P. Scott; NTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 24.

⁴ Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1992) 140. Note that for Stanton this is only what the verses “seem to indicate.” See n. 31 below.

⁵ W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (AB 26; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 278; Gerhard Barth, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law,” in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 58–164, esp. 86; Stephenson H. Brooks, *Matthew’s Community: The Evidence of His Special Sayings Material* (JSNTSup 16; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 116–17; M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: S.P.C.K., 1974) 422–23; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 309; Reinhardt Hummel, *Die Auseinandersetzung Zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium* (BEvT 33; Munich: Kaiser, 1966) 31; John P. Meier, *Matthew* (NTM 3; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980) 262; David E. Orton, *The Understanding Scribe: Matthew and the Apocalyptic Ordeal* (JSNTSup 25; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989) 34–35; Schweizer, *Good News*, 437; M. Jack Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and the Law in Matthew’s Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970) 106–7; van Tilborg, *Jewish Leaders*, 134–35; Hans-Friedrich Weiss, “Pharisaioi: The Pharisees in the New Testament,” *TDNT* 9. 43; Stephen Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (ConBNT 10; Lund: Gleerup, 1978) 126–27.

⁶ Brooks, *Matthew’s Community*, 116–17; Schuyler Brown, “The Matthean Community and the Gentile Mission,” *NovT* 22 (1980) 216; Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of*

these teachers and live in accordance with their interpretations of scripture. Third, by telling his disciples not to do “according to their works,” Jesus indicates that the real flaw these religious leaders exhibit is that they do not live in accord with their own teaching.⁷ Thus, by following the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus’ disciples will fulfill the will of God to a degree that the scribes and Pharisees themselves do not.

II. Description of the Problem(s)

The main problem with this interpretation is that it holds only when Matt 23:2–7 is considered as an isolated pericope, apart from its context within Matthew as a whole. If the sense of these verses were extended to a consideration of the entire narrative, we would be left with a bizarre picture indeed. We would have to assume that Jesus regards the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees concerning such matters as the sabbath (12:1–14), ritual hand washings (15:1–2, 10–20), offerings (15:3–9), and divorce (19:3–9) as correct. Hence, Jesus’ disciples ought to refrain from plucking grain or healing on the sabbath; they ought to wash their hands ritually before eating; they ought to feel free to give as a religious offering money that would have been spent caring for their parents; and they ought to feel free to divorce their wives simply by writing out the required certificates of divorce. Besides this, we would also have to assume that the great failing of the scribes and Pharisees in these instances is that they do not follow their own (correct) teaching. Apparently, they do pluck grain and perform healings on the sabbath; they fail to wash their hands properly; they hold back for their parents what might have been given as a religious offering; and they neglect to write certificates of divorce. But no sustained reading of Matthew would support these conclusions. Obviously, in every instance cited, the problem is not that the religious leaders do not follow their own teaching. The problem is that the teaching itself is wrong.

Most scholars recognize that these verses may derive from a pre-Matthean source,⁸ but this observation alone does not solve the problem. The question

Nazareth (AGSU 4; Leiden: Brill, 1964) 141 n. 1; Goulder, *Midrash*, 151, 422–23; Amy-Jill Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Social History* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 14; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988) 181, 233; John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew’s Gospel* (AnBib 71; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976) 119; Orton, *Understanding Scribe*, 34; Schweizer, *Good News*, 437; Weiss, “Pharisaos,” 43.

⁷ W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964) 106; Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968) 435; Haenchen, “Matthäus 23,” 41; Hill, *Matthew*, 309; Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew’s Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 321–22; Alexander Sand, *Das Gesetz und die Propheten: Untersuchungen zur Theologie des Evangeliums nach Matthäus* (BU 2; Regensburg: Pustet, 1974) 89; Josef Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (2d ed.; RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1952) 249; Schweizer, *Good News*, 437–38; van Tilborg, *Jewish Leaders*, 136; Weiss, “Pharisaos,” 43.

⁸ David E. Garland concludes, “Certainly, all are agreed that vv. 2–3, 5b–7a, 8–10 comprise

then becomes not, Why did Matthew write this? but, Why did he incorporate into his Gospel material that contradicts the perspective he apparently wants to convey elsewhere? We are not nit-picking here. Matthew is certainly capable of including minor contradictions and little gaffes that become apparent when his narrative is subjected to scrutiny more intense than anything he is likely to have imagined.⁹ The phrase “children of the kingdom” refers to the faithless in Israel who will be thrown into outer darkness in 8:12, but in 13:38 the same phrase is used to refer to the righteous, who will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father (13:43). Jesus predicts in 12:40 that the Son of Man will spend three nights in the heart of the earth, but in the narrative of his burial where this prediction is supposedly fulfilled he spends at most two nights in the tomb (27:57–28:6). But the apparent contradictions presented by Matt 23:2–7 concern not minor details but major themes. Jack Dean Kingsbury describes the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in Matthew as the central story line that determines the plot of this narrative.¹⁰ The magnitude of these inconsistencies is what is most troubling.

In fact, this apparent reading of Matt 23:2–7 contradicts what is presented elsewhere in Matthew at every point. First, Matthew’s Gospel is not likely to present Jesus here as affirming the scribes’ authority to teach when it has said elsewhere that they do not have this authority (7:29).¹¹ Second, Matthew’s Gospel is not likely to present Jesus here as commending adherence to the teaching of the Pharisees when elsewhere it presents Jesus as warning his disciples to beware of their teaching (16:12; see also 15:14; 23:15). And, finally, Matthew’s Gospel is not likely to present Jesus here as claiming that the religious leaders’ flaw is simply that they do not follow their own teaching when elsewhere it portrays Jesus as regarding them as godless agents of the devil

pre-Matthean Jewish-Christian material” (*The Intention of Matthew* 23 [NovTSup 52; Leiden: Brill, 1979] 19 n. 29). For an impressive list of scholars who think this, see *ibid.*, 52 n. 69; Brooks, *Matthew’s Community*, 144 n. 3.

⁹ On contradiction in Matthew, see Francis W. Beare, “The Sayings of Jesus in the Gospel According to Saint Matthew,” *StEv* 4 (1968) 146–56; Garland, *Intention*, 52–55; C. F. D. Moule, “St. Matthew’s Gospel: Some Neglected Features,” *StEv* 2 (1964) 91–99.

¹⁰ Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Developing Conflict Between Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew’s Gospel: A Literary-Critical Study,” *CBQ* 49 (1987) 57.

¹¹ A number of commentators take this passage (7:29) as merely expressing a contrast between the unique teaching style of Jesus and the traditional methods of the rabbis. See Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 88–89; Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 200; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 137; Hill, *Matthew*, 155–56. Such an interpretation takes the participial phrase ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων circumstantially to mean “authoritatively.” While grammatically possible, this reading fails to note that 7:29 describes the point of view of the narrator, not the crowds. From the narrator’s perspective, the authority of Jesus is not only apparent but real. The crowds have been astonished at Jesus’ teaching (7:28). Why? Because, the narrator explains, his teaching comes from one who has authority, whereas the teaching that they are accustomed to hearing—that of their scribes—comes from people who do not have authority.

(15:13; compare 13:37–39; 23:15) whose very thoughts and motives are evil (9:4; 12:39, 45; 16:4; 22:18) and whose words reflect this evil as clearly as their deeds (12:34).

The apparent reading of Matt 23:2–7 is pervasive, even though it cannot be reconciled with the perspective of Matthew's Gospel as a whole. It is reflected in many English translations, where λέγω may curiously be translated “preach” (JB, NIV, NJB, RSV, TEV) or “teach” (NRSV). Such translations have contributed to a widespread notion of the Pharisees in Matthew as hypocrites who do not “practice what they preach.” But Matthew's Gospel does not portray the Pharisees or other religious leaders as failing to live according to their own teaching. Furthermore, Matthew's Gospel does not present hypocrisy as a discrepancy between word and deed but rather as a discrepancy between the inward nature observed by God and the outward appearance observed by others (23:25–28).¹² Words (22:15–18) and deeds (6:2) alike may present this false image, which apparently may be the product either of conscious pretense or unwitting self-deception.¹³ Thus, a hypocrite may be one who does ostensibly good things with wrong motives (6:2, 5, 16), or who worships with lips but not with the heart (15:7–8), or who does good in trivial matters while neglecting important ones (23:23), or who presumes to minister to others without first correcting one's own failings (7:4–5; 23:13–15, 29–30). Also, in Matthew (15:7–9) and elsewhere (Gal 2:13; 1 Tim 4:1–2) hypocrisy is specifically related to false teaching.¹⁴ But the popular notion of a hypocrite as someone who says one thing and does another has no support in Matthew's Gospel even though, ironically, it probably derives from mistranslations and misrepresentations of this Matthean text (23:2–3).

If we look at the passage closely, we find that in Matt 23:2–3 Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees do two things, one of which he commends and one of which he denounces. The commendable activity is referred to twice by the word λέγω (“speak”) and is connected to their sitting on the seat of Moses. The activity that is denounced is referred to once by the phrase τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν (“their works”) and once by the word ποιέω (“do”). Interpretations of this passage have typically identified the first activity with teaching or interpretation of Mosaic law and the second activity with the life-style of those who teach or interpret the law. Herein lies a second problem, for such identifications assume a modern dichotomy that would be unlikely in a first-century Semitic document. In the world that produced Matthew's Gospel, teaching was never considered to be an activity that could be identified with speaking as opposed to doing. This world made no clear distinction between theory and praxis. The

¹² See van Tilborg, *Jewish Leaders*, 8–26; Garland, *Intention*, 91–123; Dan O. Via, Jr., *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 92–98.

¹³ Van Tilborg stresses pretense and Via, self-deception. Garland correctly notes the presence of both.

¹⁴ Garland, *Intention*, 112–15.

rabbis (including Jesus) taught their interpretations of Moses not merely by articulating their understanding of the law verbally but, above all, by living in ways that modeled this understanding. Thus, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus contests the interpretations of the law offered by the scribes and Pharisees not simply by arguing with them, but primarily by doing things (such as healing on the sabbath) that challenge their interpretation of Moses and endorse his own. In short, identification of "speaking" with teaching and "doing" with life-style in this passage violates not only the literary context of Matthew's narrative but also the dynamics of the social milieu in which this Gospel was produced.

III. Survey of Critical Response

Scholars have attempted to deal with the first of the two problems noted above by offering proposals that would either resolve, reduce, or explain the tensions between Matt 23:2–7 and the rest of the Gospel.

1. Appeal is made to the aorist form of καθίζειν in 23:2 to claim that the authority Jesus attributes to the scribes and Pharisees is *past rather than present*.¹⁵ They *used to sit* on the seat of Moses. This reading is contested grammatically¹⁶ and, even if accepted, resolves only the contradictions related to the first of the three points that constitute the apparent reading described above. Indeed, the mandate for the disciples to do and keep whatever the scribes and Pharisees say (23:3) becomes even more incomprehensible if the authority of these leaders is not current.

2. The verses may be taken as implying a presumption on the part of the scribes and Pharisees that, as in the NASV translation, "the scribes and Pharisees *have seated themselves* in the chair of Moses" (emphasis added).¹⁷ But again, such a reading only addresses the unlikelihood of Jesus' attributing authority to these religious leaders and leaves unanswered (or increases) the unlikelihood of Jesus' endorsing their teaching. If the point is that the scribes and Pharisees do not occupy the seat of Moses legitimately but have usurped this authority, then we would expect Jesus to counsel resistance rather than compliance.¹⁸

¹⁵ W. C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (3d ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1912) 244; Ferdinand Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity* (trans. H. Knight and G. Ogg; New York: World, 1969) 402 n. 1; Alan H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1915) 329.

¹⁶ Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (3d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 483; Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament: Style* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1967) 33. See Garland, *Intention*, 47 n. 43.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Beilner, *Christus und die Pharisäer: Exegetische Untersuchung über Grund und Verlauf der Auseinandersetzungen* (Vienna: Herder, 1959) 202 n. 13; J. H. Moulton and W. H. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Accidence and Word Formation* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1929) 458; Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1903) 641.

¹⁸ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (New York: Scribner, 1910) 314; Garland, *Intention*, 48.

3. Jesus' instruction to do and keep whatever the scribes and Pharisees say (23:3) may be taken as *hyperbole*¹⁹ or *ironic exaggeration*.²⁰ Robert Stein sees both Matt 23:2–3 and contradictory passages such as Matt 16:11–12 as “exaggerated, unqualified teachings concerning certain aspects of the Pharisees’ doctrines and practices.”²¹ Thus, disciples are not literally expected either to reject or to practice everything these religious leaders say but rather are to follow some of their interpretations with caution. This claim that contradictory radical statements cancel each other out to produce a moderate view seems illogical, and, at any rate, the assertion that Matthew records hyperbolic statements of Jesus that express mutually exclusive views merely describes the problem without resolving it. Even if Jesus is exaggerating, the question remains as to why he exaggerates in favor of following the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees here and against doing so elsewhere. To say that disciples are to sometimes do the one and sometimes the other simply calls attention to the sort of tensions that this passage produces for Matthew’s readers.

4. The apparent endorsement of the scribes and Pharisees’ authority may be read as *concessive*.²² Anthony Saldarini calls it an introductory acknowledgment of their de facto power, which is then undercut by attacks on the conduct of their office.²³ Here we have an important insight, overlooked by most interpreters: acknowledgment does not necessarily imply endorsement (cf. Matt 20:21). Still, if the seat of Moses is understood to be a symbol of teaching authority, then the contradictions remain. Elsewhere, Matthew’s Gospel is unwilling to concede that the scribes have such authority (7:28–29), much less conclude that if they did they would need to be obeyed.

5. Jesus’ initial words may be taken as a *rhetorical ploy* intended to heighten the culpability of the scribes and Pharisees for having failed at their appointed task.²⁴ Thus, Douglas Hare thinks that to say that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat “merely establishes the level of accountability to which the Pharisaic teachers must be held,” and Michael Cook insists that “23:2 does not serve to affirm the validity of either Torah or scribal authority but to

¹⁹ Klyne Snodgrass, “Matthew and the Law,” in *SBL 1988 Seminar Papers* (ed. Eugene H. Lovering; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 549, 553; Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels: Jesus’ Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 163–64. Patte says the saying is not literal (*Matthew*, 321).

²⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1971) 210.

²¹ Stein, *Difficult Sayings*, 163.

²² Anthony J. Saldarini, “Delegitimation of Leaders in Matthew 23,” *CBQ* 54 (1992) 659–80; idem, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 47–48; Westerholm, *Jesus*, 126–27.

²³ Saldarini, *Community*, 47–48.

²⁴ Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSMS 28; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 176; Beare, *Matthew*, 448; Garland, *Intention*, 54–55; Kingsbury, *Story*, 155 n. 23. Also Hare and Cook (see n. 25 below).

introduce their supersession.”²⁵ This theory is unable to account for v. 3a.²⁶ If Jesus recognizes the authority of the scribes and Pharisees only to lambast them for incompetence, why does he tell his disciples to do and keep whatever they say?

6. The words of Jesus in this passage may be interpreted within a scheme of salvation history that regards them as *relevant only for the sacred past*.²⁷ This is the view of John Meier, who thinks that Matthew distinguishes sharply between the historical time of the earthly Jesus and the era of the church.²⁸ Thus, the instruction to do and keep whatever the scribes and Pharisees say is analogous to other statements in Matthew where Jesus declares that every detail of the law is binding (5:18) or that mission is to be limited to Israel (10:5–6). Matthew’s readers are to regard such words as time-bound. After the resurrection, all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus, and disciples are enjoined to keep his commands (28:20). Meier’s construal of salvation history can be contested,²⁹ for it seems to many that Matthew does the opposite of what he envisions. By emphasizing the continuing presence of Jesus in the church (10:40; 18:5, 20; 25:31–46; 28:20) and referring to the church as a reality during the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry (18:17), Matthew’s Gospel blurs the distinctions between these two epochs. At any rate, Meier’s scheme does not resolve any of the tensions here, for both 23:2–7 and the contradictory passages (15:14; 16:5–12) present the words of the earthly Jesus to his disciples. Even if Matthew’s readers decide that some of these words do not apply to them, they will still be left to wonder why Matthew portrays Jesus as giving his disciples contradictory advice on what appears to have been a very important issue.

7. Another theory that attempts to limit the impact of Jesus’ words temporally is the suggestion by Christine Hueböld that Matt 23:2–3 describes *emergency measures* to be followed during a difficult time.³⁰ As long as the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, superficial obedience to their words will be necessary, but when they no longer occupy this position, disciples will be freed

²⁵ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (IBC; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 265; Michael C. Cook, “Interpreting Pro-Jewish Passages in Matthew,” *HUCA* 54 (1983) 135–46.

²⁶ Beare, for example, dismisses the first half of 23:3 as “no more than a foil” for what follows (*Matthew*, 448).

²⁷ Meier, *Law*, 30 n. 13, 156; idem, *Matthew*, 262–63; Joel Marcus, “The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:18–19),” *CBQ* 50 (1988) 453–54; Herman C. Waetjen, *The Origin and Destiny of Humanness. An Interpretation of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Corte Madera, CA: Omega Books, 1976) 216–19.

²⁸ Meier, *Law*, 25–40; idem, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel* (Theological Inquiries; New York: Paulist, 1979) 26–39.

²⁹ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 25–36; David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (JSNTSup 31; Sheffield: Almond, 1988).

³⁰ Christine Hueböld, “Mt 5:17–20: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des Evangelisten Matthäus,” *ZNW* 71 (1980) 147–48.

from any such commitment. The innovative aspect of this proposal is its reconceptualization of “the seat of Moses” as a reference to civil authority rather than as a reference to the teaching office. This allows some of the contradictions described above to be resolved. The point made elsewhere in Matthew is that the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees is wrong. According to Huebül’s scheme, Matt 23:2–3 does not contravene this but merely enjoins civil obedience to leaders whose teaching Jesus’ disciples need not accept. The problem with this idea is that such token compliance seems to be at odds with the uncompromising demands of Jesus presented elsewhere (10:32–39; 16:24–25). For Matthew, persecution is inevitable (10:17–22; 24:9) and, rather than being feared (10:26–28), is to be regarded as a sign of blessedness (5:11–12).

8. Attempts are also made to limit the range of application for Jesus’ words in 23:2–3 through insistence that they apply only to the scribes and Pharisees’ *exposition of the law of Moses* and not to their so-called tradition of the elders.³¹ This would remove some inconsistency. The Pharisaic teaching that Jesus says “makes void the word of God” is identified in Matt 15:6 as their tradition. Presumably, then, Jesus might have been willing to endorse the Pharisees’ teaching when they limited their exposition to the Mosaic law. The argument that Matthew’s use of *πάντα* in v. 3 precludes such limitations is not fair.³² No one would claim that Jesus is presented here as enjoining slavery, requiring absolute obedience to the scribes and Pharisees even with regard to matters that have nothing to do with religion. Rather, the injunction in v. 3 is implicitly limited by its connection (*οὖν*) to the declaration in v. 2: the disciples are to do and keep everything that the scribes and Pharisees say when they speak as persons who sit in the seat of Moses. More to the point, perhaps, is the observation that this view presumes an artificial distinction.³³ For the Pharisees, the tradition of the elders *was* exposition of Torah. Thus, the range of application would have to be limited still further and the sense of Jesus’ words taken to mean, “Do and keep everything the scribes and Pharisees say when they *faithfully* expound the law of Moses.” But, as Garland points out, this “leaves unanswered the question of just who is to decide when the scribes and Pharisees are faithful in the interpretation of the law and what criteria are to be used.”³⁴ If the assump-

³¹ Pierre Bonnard, *L’Évangile selon saint Matthieu* (CNT; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1963) 334; Gundry, *Matthew*, 454–55; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 572–73; Orton, *Understanding Scribe*, 34; Patte, *Matthew*, 321; Plummer, *Matthew*, 314; Stanton, *Gospel*, 141.

³² Garland, *Intention*, 48.

³³ Van Tilborg, *Jewish Leaders*, 135. But it is not accurate to say that a distinction between written and oral Torah was not known in this period. The story van Tilborg cites in which Hillel corrects a disciple who wishes to learn the written but not the oral Torah actually contravenes this contention rather than supporting it. Matt 15:6 also implies some such distinction. The point is not that such a distinction would have been impossible or unknown, but that if a distinction was made it would have been between the written Torah of Moses and Pharisaic interpretation of it rather than between the Pharisees’ interpretation of Moses and their teaching on other things.

³⁴ Garland, *Intention*, 49.

tion is that the disciples themselves will be able to tell what is or is not a faithful exposition, then Jesus' words become simply meaningless. There would be no need to listen to the scribes and Pharisees at all.

In any case, the main problem with this view is that it does not address the numerous instances in which Jesus' conflicts with religious leaders in Matthew do concern interpretations of Mosaic law. The sabbath controversies (12:1–14) and the question about divorce (19:3–9) are prime examples. As Jack Kingsbury has noted, the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders reaches a new level of intensity in Matthew's narrative when the controversy comes to focus on matters related to the Mosaic law, for not until then do the Pharisees begin their plot to kill Jesus (12:14).³⁵ If anything, then, Matthew's Gospel presents disputes over interpretation of Mosaic law as the most serious of all Jesus' conflicts with the religious leaders. Furthermore, Matthew never records any instance in which the scribes or Pharisees are represented as interpreting Moses in a way that Jesus finds acceptable. Thus, limitation of Jesus' words in 23:2–3 to imply endorsement only of the scribes and Pharisees' exposition of Moses does not resolve the inherent tensions between this passage and the rest of the Gospel. Elsewhere in Matthew, their exposition of Mosaic law is precisely what Jesus rejects.

9. The seemingly positive words of Jesus regarding the scribes and Pharisees in Matt 23:2–3 may be read as *affirming a partial or token allegiance to Judaism*.³⁶ Reinhardt Hummel thinks that Matthew's community still considers itself to be within the walls of Judaism and that the acknowledgment of Jewish authority here represents a last ditch attempt by Matthew to stave off the definitive break.³⁷ For Benedict Viviano, the point is more to create opportunity for dialogue with Judaism, to afford "a real interchange between Matthew's community and the rabbinic Judaism that was organizing itself in the wake of the destruction of the temple."³⁸ M. D. Goulder believes Matthew wants to present his church as exemplary of true Judaism insofar as Christians obey the teachings of the Pharisees even better than the Pharisees themselves.³⁹ These arguments, however, all seem to work best when these verses are considered apart from their literary context. Matthean allegiance to Pharisaic Judaism is difficult to maintain for any consideration of the whole of chap. 23, much less

³⁵ Kingsbury, "Developing Conflict," 68–69.

³⁶ In addition to those listed in the next three notes, see Davies, *Setting*, 414; Grundmann, *Evangelium*, 484; G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946) 121; Helmut Merkel, "Jesus und die Pharisäer," *NTS* 14 (1967–68) 198–99; H. J. Schoeps, "Jésus et la Loi juive," *RHPR* 33 (1953) 1–20.

³⁷ Hummel, *Auseinandersetzung*, 31–32, 47, 157.

³⁸ Benedict T. Viviano, "Social World and Community Leadership: The Case of Matthew 23.1–12, 34," *JSNT* 39 (1990) 3–21 (quotation from p. 15); idem, *Study as Worship: Abboth and the New Testament* (SJLA 26; Leiden: Brill, 1978) 158–95.

³⁹ Goulder, *Midrash*, 178.

for the entire Gospel.⁴⁰ One cannot help but wonder why, if Matthew wanted to preserve or improve relations between his community and Jewish neighbors, he did not tone down some of the harsher elements elsewhere. According to the dominant theory of redaction criticism, he not only failed to tone these down, but intensified them (cf. Mark 12:28–34 and Matt 22:34–40; Mark 7:14–15, and Matt 15:10–14). In short, the inherent contradictions between what is said here and elsewhere remain unexplained.

10. The passage may also be interpreted as serving a *pedagogical function*.⁴¹ This is the central thesis of David Garland's insightful study, which holds that all of chap. 23 is to be "read not only as a denunciation of Pharisaic Judaism but also as a warning to the Christian community—particularly its leaders who are charged with special responsibilities."⁴² Matthew tips his hand in vv. 8–12, which reveal that the real concern of this chapter is to teach about the nature of leadership in the Christian community. Matthew's readers are expected to compare themselves to the scribes and Pharisees and to realize that true leaders are not merely those who are authorized to lead but, more importantly, those who practice what they preach, help the burdened, and so on. This analysis of the *Sitz im Leben* for Matthew 23 seems reasonable, and Garland's construal of the evangelist's redactional intent could be correct. Still, these insights contribute little toward resolving the inconsistencies that occur within Matthew's Gospel at the narrative level. What Jesus says about the scribes and Pharisees here appears to contradict what he says about them elsewhere, and these apparent contradictions are in no way lessened by the realization that Matthew intended the text to serve a pedagogical function within the community. The inconsistencies do not enhance the intended effect. If anything, Matthew could have rendered the text more effective by making a few alterations (such as omission of v. 3a) that would have rendered the text less confusing for his readers. But he didn't, and we are left with an apparent reading that, whatever its purpose, still contradicts the perspective of the rest of the Gospel in significant ways.

Conclusion. None of the critical responses that we have surveyed resolves the apparent inconsistencies between Matt 23:2–7 and the Gospel as a whole. Several of the proposals deal with only one aspect of the contradictions, and in doing so they create new problems. Other proposals attempt to explain Matthew's particular interest in this pericope without addressing the internal tensions it creates for the narrative. None of the proposals even recognizes or

⁴⁰ Garland, *Intention*, 53–54; Stanton, *Gospel*, 113–255; van Tilborg, *Jewish Leaders*.

⁴¹ Garland, *Intention*; Hubert Frankemölle, *Biblische Handlungsanweisungen: Beispiele pragmatischer Exegese* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1983) 133–90; J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 142; William Pesch, "Theologische Aussagen der Redaktion von Matthäus 23," in *Orientierung an Jesus* (ed. P. Hoffman et al.; Freiburg: Herder, 1973) 268–99.

⁴² Garland, *Intention*, 63.

attempts to deal with the second problem we identified for the apparent reading—namely, that it presumes an anachronistic understanding that allows teaching to be equated with speaking and contrasted with life-style. The unlikeliness of such anachronism, coupled with the magnitude of inconsistency the apparent reading produces, leads me to suspect that we may have missed something.

The potential for such misunderstanding arises early, when Jesus says, “the scribes and the Pharisees sit on the *seat of Moses* . . .” (23:2). These words (Μωϋσέως καθέδρας) are unique to Matthew’s Gospel. They do not appear elsewhere until the fourth or fifth century, in references that may be dependent on this passage.⁴³ We do not know what they mean. Yet they occur here without definition in a manner that seems to assume that the reader does know what they mean. Any interpretation of this text, then, must begin with the recognition that we are expected to know something that we do not know. This acknowledgment makes the possibility that our interpretations have missed something—that the inconsistencies and anachronism are of our own making rather than Matthew’s—seem very likely indeed.

Research on the seat of Moses has focused primarily on the question of whether the reference is to be taken literally or symbolically. Cecil Roth and Kenneth Newport present arguments for regarding the seat of Moses as an actual piece of synagogue furniture.⁴⁴ Others regard the expression as a metaphor.⁴⁵ What is most interesting for our purposes is that adherents to both positions agree or assume that to say that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat is to recognize their authority as teachers of Torah. If the seat of Moses was an actual piece of synagogue furniture, then it is assumed that the occupant of such a seat would teach—interpret and expound the Torah. If the expression is a metaphor, then it is assumed that it must be a metaphor for teaching authority.⁴⁶ In either case, assumptions are being made.

The hypothesis that understands sitting on the seat of Moses as a reference to teaching is a guess, a guess accepted by virtually all of the interpreters

⁴³ The earliest reference aside from Matt 23:2 is in *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*. On the date and tradition history for this document, see *EncJud* 13. 333–34.

⁴⁴ Cecil Roth, “The Chair of Moses and Its Survivals,” *PEQ* 81 (1949) 100–111; Kenneth G. C. Newport, “A Note on the ‘Seat of Moses,’” *AUSS* 28 (1990) 53–58. Compare Wilhelm Bacher, “Le Siège de Moïse,” *REJ* 34 (1897) 229–301; E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (London: British Academy, 1934) 57–61; M. Sulzberger, “Encore le Siège de Moïse,” *REJ* 35 (1897) 110–11.

⁴⁵ M. Ginsburger, “La ‘Chaire de Moïse,’” *REJ* 90 (1931) 161–65; I. Renou, “The Seat of Moses,” *IEJ* 5 (1955) 262–67; Viviano, “Social World,” 10–11.

⁴⁶ The much-cited article by Renou is revealing in this regard. Renou states that his thesis is to show “that the ‘seat of Moses’ was a symbol of Jewish legal authority conferred upon teachers of Jewish law” (“Seat of Moses,” 262). But in actuality he provides arguments only for why the phrase ought to be taken symbolically rather than literally. Apparently he believes that if he can prove that the phrase is a metaphor then he will have proved it is a metaphor for teaching authority. The meaning of the metaphor is regarded as self-evident.

discussed above⁴⁷ though rarely acknowledged by them as such. It is, admittedly, a good guess, based perhaps on the following propositions: teaching was typically conducted from a seated position (cf. Matt 5:1–2); Moses was known as a teacher; the scribes and Pharisees were also known as teachers. Still, we must admit that our understanding of this very significant phrase is a guess, and, since it has not allowed us to find a satisfactory interpretation of the only text in which it occurs, we might be advised to reconsider and to guess again.

IV. A New Idea

When Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses, he might not be referring to their role as teachers at all, but to their social position as people who control accessibility to Torah. They are the ones who possess copies of the Torah and are able to read them. They are the ones who know and are able to tell others what Moses said.

Such an identification is possible regardless of whether the expression “seat of Moses” is taken literally or figuratively. If there really was a piece of furniture in first-century synagogues that was so designated, then it almost certainly would have been used for the public reading of the scriptures as well as for their exposition.⁴⁸ If this were the case, then the identification of the scribes and Pharisees as ones who sit in the seat of Moses could be intended to summon images of them as synagogue leaders who read from the Torah rather than images of them as expounders or interpreters of Torah. Or, again, if the phrase is simply a metaphor, it might just as well refer to the task of preserving and recalling Moses’ words as to the task of interpreting them. Those who (metaphorically) sit on Moses’ seat could be those who continue to bring Moses’ words to the present generation. They may be envisioned as doing this primarily by reading Moses’ words from the scrolls or by citing his words from memory.⁴⁹ The task of exposition might be regarded as secondary and, though significant, might not be the initial referent associated with the metaphor “seat of Moses.”

In saying that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, Jesus may be simply acknowledging the powerful social and religious position that they occupy in a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah are

⁴⁷ Huebül is the sole exception. All others take the expression as a reference to either the legitimate succession to the teaching office or to actual conduct of that office in the present day. Viviano sees it as a specific “veiled allusion to the early rabbinic session at Jamnia” (“Social World,” 11).

⁴⁸ Roth believed that the seat of Moses was actually a Torah receptacle, a chair with holes where the scrolls were kept when not in use. But this theory is based on his observations of the present Great Synagogue in Rome and on a Jesuit priest’s observations of eighteenth-century Jews in China. The oldest such chair found is dated 1549. Most scholars who think the seat of Moses was an actual piece of furniture liken it to a reading desk. Cf. Newport, “Note,” 55–57.

⁴⁹ The use of λέγω rather than ἀναγινώσκω in 23:3 suggests that speaking from the seat of Moses includes informal modes of citation in addition to the public reading of scripture. In Matthew’s Gospel, religious leaders often show themselves to be adept as citing Moses from memory (2:4–6; 19:7; 22:24).

not plentiful.⁵⁰ Since Jesus' disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribes and the Pharisees to know what Moses said on any given subject. In light of such dependence, Jesus advises his disciples to heed the words that the scribes and Pharisees speak when they sit on the seat of Moses, that is, when they pass on the words of the Torah itself. The first activity of the scribes and Pharisees, the one that Jesus commends, refers not to teaching or interpretation of Moses but simply to citation of Moses.⁵¹

The second activity of the scribes and Pharisees, the one that Jesus denounces, refers to their interpretation of Moses both through verbal teaching and practiced life-style. Their works (τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν) include the work of interpreting Moses. Jesus does not denounce them for acting in ways that contravene their own correct understanding of Torah, but for acting in ways that reveal a perverted understanding of Torah. That this is the case is clear from the remainder of the passage. What the scribes and Pharisees do (ποιέω) is interpret Moses in ways that are burdensome for others (23:4) and in ways that bring glory to themselves (23:5–7). Matthew's readers should not imagine, for instance, that the Pharisees correctly teach that phylacteries ought to be modest and then contradict their own teaching by wearing ostentatious phylacteries themselves (23:5). Rather, the scribes and the Pharisees demonstrate by their wearing of ostentatious phylacteries that they do not interpret the Mosaic injunction properly.

A major strength of this interpretation is that it allows the dichotomy between λέγω and ποιέω in 23:3 to be understood in a way that is not anachronistic. When Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees "speak" (λέγω) but do not "do" (ποιέω), the implication is that they "speak Torah but do not do Torah." To "speak Torah" means to cite accurately what the scriptures say. To "do Torah" means to demonstrate understanding of Torah through word and deed (5:19). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus claims that the scribes and Pharisees do cite the Torah accurately but he maintains that their words and their deeds reveal them to be "blind guides" who do not understand the Torah they cite (15:14; 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26).

This interpretation of 23:2–7 not only respects the dynamics of the social milieu in which this Gospel was produced but also provides a reading consistent with the perspective of Matthew's narrative as a whole. Throughout this Gospel, the only thing that the religious leaders⁵² ever do right is quote scrip-

⁵⁰ Saldarini suggests that "Matthew is acknowledging either the official position of his opponents in the Jewish community or their influence on those in power" ("Delegitimation," 670). My suggestion is compatible with this proposal, but more specific.

⁵¹ Plummer hints at an understanding of the text similar to this when he says, "Their statement of the Law was to be accepted and obeyed, even though they did not obey it themselves and often gave monstrous misinterpretations of it" (*Matthew*, 314). He believed 23:2–3 might be an abbreviation of an original saying that might have read, "The scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses' seat when they taught you to observe the Law; all things, therefore, whatsoever are contained in the Law, do and observe" (p. 314).

⁵² What Matthew says of religious leaders other than scribes and Pharisees may be relevant

ture. The chief priests and the scribes know that the prophets identify Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Christ (2:4–6; see Mic 5:1–3), though they err in giving this information to Herod, who seeks the child's life (2:16–18). The Pharisees know that Moses commanded the giving of divorce certificates (19:7; see Deut 24:1–4) but do not understand that this was due only to the hardness of their hearts (19:8–9). The Sadducees know that Moses said when a man dies childless his brother should marry the widow and raise up children for his brother (22:24; see Deut 25:5), but they do not “know the scriptures” in the broader sense of realizing that they teach a resurrection from the dead (22:29–32). The Pharisees know that the scriptures say the Christ is the son of David (22:42), but they do not understand that the Christ is also David's lord (22:43–45). The chief priests know that it is unlawful to place blood money into the Temple treasury (27:6; see Deut 23:18), but they have clearly missed the big picture by paying out blood money in the first place. On this point, Matthew's Gospel is consistent: the scribes, Pharisees, and all of Israel's religious leaders may be commended only for knowing what scripture says, not for understanding what it means. We may note in this regard that Matthew also presents Satan as one who quotes scripture accurately, albeit with perverse intent (4:6; see Ps 91:11).

The idea that Jesus would tell his disciples to do and keep everything that Moses says is consistent also with the overall perspective of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is presented as interpreting the Mosaic law at numerous points, sometimes by relaxing its demands (12:1–8, 9–14) and sometimes by intensifying them (5:21–48; 19:3–9), but such interpretations are always to be read as instances in which the law is fulfilled rather than abolished (5:17).⁵³ Matthew presents Jesus as fulfilling the law by interpreting it according to its true intent. Specifically, he does this by insisting that every detail of the Mosaic law remains valid (5:18) but that every detail must be considered in light of the two greatest Mosaic commands, love for God and love for neighbor (22:34–40; cf. 7:12).

For our purposes the essential point is that two things are necessary for teachers to fulfill the law. First, they must know the word of Moses, which may also be designated the “word of God” (15:4–6) and which will remain authoritative until heaven and earth pass away (5:18). Second, they must be able to inter-

here if Kingsbury is right in affirming that Matthew lumps all of the different types of religious leaders together and treats them as a “unified character group” (Kingsbury, “Developing Conflict,” 58). Cf. Hummel, *Auseinandersetzung*, 12–22; van Tilborg, *Jewish Leaders*, 1–6.

⁵³ Scholars disagree as to whether Matthew does not in fact present Jesus as abrogating the law, especially in the Antitheses (5:21–48). Cf., e.g., Meier, *Law*, 159; Schweizer, *Good News*, 110; Suggs, *Wisdom*, 113, with W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1988) 504–71; Brice Martin, “Matthew on Christ and the Law,” *TS* 44 (1983) 54–70; Snodgrass, “Matthew,” 549–53. But in light of 5:17–20, we must affirm that Matthew's readers are expected to perceive Jesus' adjustments to the Mosaic law not as outright abrogations but rather as clarifications of the will of God to which that law attests.

pret the words of Moses for the present day. This is probably what Matthew has in mind by his references to “binding and loosing” (16:19; 18:18).⁵⁴

The story that Matthew tells presents Jesus as fulfilling the law (and the prophets) perfectly because he is able to do both of these things. He always knows exactly what the scriptures say and is able to quote them at will (e.g., 4:4, 7, 10; 9:13; 12:7; 15:4, 7–8; 19:5; 21:16; 22:32, 37, 39, 44). He is also able to bind and to loose laws in ways that bring out their true intent. An example of binding a commandment would be his declaration that the law prohibiting adultery applies even to lustful thoughts (5:27–28). An example of loosing a commandment would be his decision that the law forbidding work on the sabbath does not apply to picking grain to satisfy one’s hunger (12:1–7).

Matthew’s Gospel also presents the expectation that the church Jesus builds (16:18) and sustains by his continuing presence (18:20) will continue this task. But here a small problem arises. Although Matthew’s Gospel makes clear that the church, like Jesus, is authorized to interpret the law (16:19; 18:18), it presents no expectation that the church, like Jesus, will know the law. Jesus’ disciples are never once presented as possessing any knowledge of scripture. The one instance where they come close is especially telling. In response to Jesus’ reference to the resurrection of the Son of Man, the disciples do not ask, “Why do the scriptures say Elijah must first come?” (cf. Mal 4:5), but rather, “Why do the *scribes* say Elijah must first come?” (17:10). Apparently, their only knowledge of scripture is what they have heard from the scribes. What is also noteworthy is that Matthew’s Gospel offers no redress for the disciples’ ignorance of scripture. Jesus never enjoins his disciples to study the scriptures or to learn the law. Furthermore, unlike Luke, Matthew never describes Jesus as opening his

⁵⁴ Günther Bornkamm, “The Authority to ‘Bind’ and ‘Loose’ in the Church in Matthew’s Gospel: The Problem of Sources in Matthew’s Gospel,” in *The Interpretation of Matthew* (ed. Graham Stanton; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 85–97; J. D. M. Derrett, “Binding and Loosing: (Matt 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23),” *JBL* 102 (1983) 112–17; Marcus, “Gates.” Dennis C. Duling lists six different interpretations that have been given to this phrase in “Binding and Loosing: Matthew 16:19; Matthew 18:18; John 20:23,” *Forum* 3,4 (1987) 3–32, esp. 6–11. To these may be added a seventh recently proposed by Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel*, 104–6. But usage of the terms δέω (“bind”) and λύω (“loose”) in Josephus, in targumic material, and as the likely translations for the Aramaic equivalents of Hebrew terms in rabbinic writings confirms the majority view that they refer to determination of what the law allows and forbids. See StrB 1. 732–38; and the excellent article by Raymond C. Collins in *ABD* 1. 743–45. Many scholars who recognize that “binding and loosing” refers to determination of what is allowed or forbidden in Matt 16:19 think that the phrase has acquired a different sense in 18:18, namely, that of expelling from and admitting to the community. See David L. Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 71–76; Beare, *Matthew*, 355–56, 380; Meier, *Vision*, 113–14, 132; Schweizer, *Good News*, 371–72. But the proposal that Matthew uses these technical terms in two different ways is as unnecessary as it is unlikely. The references to binding and loosing in 18:18 do not refer to excommunication procedures per se, but to the determination of acceptable conduct, which will form the basis for decisions regarding expulsion and admission. Both 16:19 and 18:18 envision the binding and loosing of laws, not of people, though as 18:18 makes clear, determination of the extent to which certain laws are binding for the community inevitably affects determination of membership in the community.

disciples' minds to the scripture (Luke 24:45) or as teaching the scriptures to his followers (Luke 24:27). The teaching of Jesus concerning the law in Matthew focuses almost exclusively on examples of how the law is to be interpreted rather than on the content of the law itself. Could this be because the former is something the disciples must learn from Jesus while the latter is something they may learn from the scribes and Pharisees?

The picture we are left with is this: Jesus' followers are authorized to interpret the law even though they give no evidence of knowing the law. The religious leaders of Israel are denied authority to interpret the law even though they repeatedly give evidence that they know what the law says. Matt 23:2–7 may be intended to address this ironic paradox. Those who are authorized to interpret the law are dependent on those who lack this authority but who know what the law itself says. Therefore, Jesus' disciples must listen to the scribes and Pharisees when they speak the words of Moses, but in their work of interpreting the law the disciples are not to do as the scribes and Pharisees do.

Such a scenario appears to assume a historical setting in which the community of Christian interpreters is *intra muros*, within the walls of Judaism. Whether this was still the case for Matthew's own community, however, we cannot say. At the very least, we could affirm that Matthew's community remembers how things were in the early days when Jesus' followers were dependent on Jewish leaders. Such memories could be considered significant for the current life of the community even if times were changing and the dependency had been reduced.

Our conclusion, then, is that Jesus' statement that the scribes and the Pharisees "sit on Moses' seat" is not intended as an endorsement of their authority to teach or interpret the law. Indeed, Jesus does not say that the scribes and Pharisees *ought* to sit on Moses' seat or imply that their occupation of this position is a good thing. Rather, his statement merely acknowledges the reality of the situation in which his disciples must live and conduct their ministry. If they are to "do" (ποιέω) and "teach" (διδάσκω) the commandments (5:19) they must obviously know what Moses says. Since the scribes and Pharisees are currently the keepers of the Torah in the social and religious environment where these disciples live, Jesus' followers must be careful to do (ποιέω) and keep (τηρέω) all the words of Moses that they hear these leaders speak (λέγω). But in no case are they to copy what the scribes and Pharisees do (ποιέω) with Moses, for what the scribes and Pharisees do (ποιέω) and teach (διδάσκω) does not produce a righteousness that qualifies one for entrance to the kingdom of heaven (5:19–20). Why not? Because, in spite of the power of controlling accessibility to Torah that the scribes and Pharisees now exercise, they do not in fact have authority to *teach* (7:29). Their understanding of the law and their actions that derive from and demonstrate this understanding are wrong, and must be wrong, for the authority they presume to possess has been given to another (7:28–29; 9:6–8; 12:8; 21:23–27; 28:18).