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UNMASKING THE CHALDEAN SPIRIT

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## A Rabbi—To Be or Not To Be

**B**efore we go farther down the road of our exploration, let me address an important consideration. Every now and then, someone will ask why I use the title “rabbi.”

Many refer to Matthew 23 as their point of biblical concern. Their argument is that “Jesus said His followers shouldn’t call themselves ‘rabbi.’” At first glance, this apprehension seems justified.

Let’s have a look at that admonition by Yeshua Himself.

[Jesus said to them,] “But you are **not to be called ‘Rabbi,’** for you have one **Teacher**, and you are all brothers. And **do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’** for you have one Father, And he is in heaven. **Nor are you to be called instructors,** for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.”(Matthew 23:8–10; emphasis added)

As with all Scripture, we must examine this verse in its proper context. What was the purpose of Yeshua’s pronouncement? Who was He talking *to*, and why? What do the rest of the Scriptures have to say about this? How do biblical scholars and language experts understand the passage?

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When we study these matters in their proper context, we find our answer. In Matthew 23, Yeshua had been admonishing the Pharisees regarding their pride and their impious desire to be addressed as though they were worthy of the highest prestige among the “lowly” people around them. However, the word “rabbi” in Hebrew simply means “teacher of the Scriptures.”(1)

Of course, we know teaching is a biblically specific ministry gift. **So Christ himself gave** the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors **and teachers** [rabbis]. (Ephesians 4:11; emphasis added)

If that passage was written in Hebrew, it would say: So Christ Himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and **rabbis**.

Jesus’ point in Matthew 23 was an effort to redirect His disciples towards *humility* in God’s service. The idea of people seeking titles in order to elevate themselves above others is ungodly. However, there is a difference between seeking a title and *receiving* one for the practical purposes of opening legitimate ministry opportunities with specific groups. And that is the consensus among scholars who understand Hebrew customs, as well as the original language nuances. (2)

While I’ve never actively sought the title of “rabbi,” that designation is still upon me within the Jewish culture, because I am a Jewish teacher of the Word of God. If I say I’m a rabbi, the Jews will listen to my teaching. If I say I’m a pastor or a preacher, they won’t; they will completely shut me down. This is the Jewish way.

I do not use the title “rabbi” for prideful purposes. The moniker is simply a tool to help me spread the message of salvation, especially in Israel, and even within the Jewish community outside of Israel.

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The title, when used to speak of me or introduce me, accommodates the culture without violating anything Jesus commanded in order to keep the doors open to the preaching of the gospel. This was the same heart the Apostle Paul had:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. ...To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. **I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.** (1 Corinthians 9:20–22; emphasis added)

I'm very careful how I teach and preach. I don't purposely implant rabbinical/legalistic Jewish cultural teachings into my faith, life, or biblical message. Nor do I mix into my teaching the interpretations or practices of the unbelieving Orthodox Jewish rabbis or the writings of their ancient forefathers, unless I use those sources to give context to Hebrew thought and cultural practices, or to the intricacies of ancient Jewish history. My only desire is to teach and preach the entire Word of God in its proper context. That perspective is centered on everything that has been and will be fulfilled in the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and return of Yeshua.

Sometimes I find that I upset those who are deeply entrenched in the Hebrew Roots movement. At other times, I offend those in the highly westernized, "Gentile-roots" Christian church. But, I cannot be concerned about those things. When one stands on the Word of God, centered in and interpreted through Jesus Christ, that person is going to offend somebody, somewhere—*always*. Such is my life.

Rabbi Paul of Tarsus is the one who told us: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17). I try to walk in that same God-given liberty and deliver others from the bondage of unbelief—or even misbelief.

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Paul was talking about liberty from man-made laws, rituals, rules, and regulations, as well as freedom from a life that is in bondage to empty religiosity and the vainglorious interpretations of Scripture crafted only to meet ambitions or long-held traditions. These characteristics basically defined the Yeshua-denying Judaism of Paul's day, and they define ours as well.

Even before Paul, Jesus had also sternly rebuked the Pharisees for their culture-driven religious customs and rules, especially those that nullified the genuine Word of the Lord and took it out of context.

And Jesus continued, **“You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions. ... Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”** (Mark 7:9–13; emphasis added)

Why would I want to copy the “many things” that they did, and that some are even still doing in our day?

We have to make a decision: Are we following Yeshua and His fulfillment of the Word or are we following man's customs, rules, and self-serving regulations? I've made my decision, regardless of the persecution that I might suffer for doing so.

I pray you have as well.

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## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> *HELPS Word-studies*: 4461 rhabbí—a rabbi; a teacher-scholar recognized by the Jewish public for accumulating a great number of Bible facts, i.e. respected for his accumulation of knowledge. “Rabbi.” **Explained by Jesus himself as** (1320 /*didáskalos*), “**teacher**” (Mt 23:8), Used by the Jews in addressing their teachers. (Emphasis added) NT #4461. “Rhabbi,” <https://biblehub.com/greek/4461.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> *Meyer’s New Testament Commentary*: The prohibitions, Matthew 23:8 ff., have reference to the **hierarchical** meaning and usage which were **at that time associated** with the titles in question. The teacher’s titles in themselves **are as legitimate and necessary** as his functions; but **the hierarchy, in the form which it assumed...was contrary to the spirit and mind of Jesus**. (Emphasis added). <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/23-8.htm>.

*Benson Commentary*: The Jewish [expositors] were called rabbis, fathers, and masters, by their...disciples, whom **they required both to believe implicitly what they affirmed, without asking** any further reason, and **to obey unreservedly** what they enjoined, **without seeking for any further authority**.

The things forbidden here are, 1st, **a vain-glorious affectation of such titles** as these, **the ambitious seeking of them**, and **glorying in them**. (Emphasis added). <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/23-8.htm>.

*Expositor’s Greek Testament*: **Do not seek** [for the purpose of prominence over others] **to be called** [rabbi], **if others call you this** it will **not be your fault**. (Emphasis added). <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/23-8.htm>.

*Pulpit Commentary:* After stating the customs of the Pharisees, Christ proceeds to give his own disciples **a lesson in humility**... They are **not to be eager** for such distinctions, indicative of spiritual superiority. The prohibition must be understood in the spirit, and not in the letter (comp. 1 Corinthians 11:1; 1 Timothy 1:2). Our **Lord does not forbid respect** for teachers or

different grades in his Church (see 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-13); **that which he censures is the inordinate grasping at such personal distinctions, the greedy ambition** which loves the empty title, and **takes any means** to obtain it. (Emphasis added).

<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/23-8.htm>.

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