

RABBI...CALL NO MAN RABBI (Matt. 23:8-10)

There has been a lot of talk in the christian churches over the centuries against the use of the term rabbi. No doubt this arises from an unfounded legalistic and strictly literal interpretation of the words of Yeshua in Matthew chapter 23, where Yeshua criticizes some of the practices of some of the P'rushim (Pharisees).

In this teaching I will explain how it is proper to use the word "Rabbi" in reference to a teacher of Torah. Rabbi simply means "teacher". Anyone who teaches torah can be called a Rabbi. Rabbi is a "title". Whether a man is considered a good Rabbi or a not so good Rabbi, has no relevance, it is the title of a man who teaches torah.

As part of this teaching, I will explain the difference between literal, and hyperbole, in context, with regard to the words rabbi, and father.

Many have been misled with the unbiblical understanding of the verse in

Matt. 23:8-10 *"But you are not to be called Rabbi; for One is your Rabbi, and you are all brothers. And call no man on earth your father; for One is your Father,"* These verses at first glance, give the impression that Yeshua is the only that should be called "Rabbi", and the only that should be called "Father".

If we have a problem with those verses, what are we going to do about the fifth commandment:

Exod. 20:12 *"Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land which ADONAI your God is giving you."*

So let's take a closer look at the context of these verses and see what is revealed.

Let's have a quick look at the use of the Title "Rabbi" and "father", in a few verses of the Old and Renewed Testament.

2Kgs. 2:12 *"My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!"*

Here we see Elisha the Prophet speaking to Elijah the Prophet

2Kgs. 13:14 *"My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!"* Here we see King Jehoash of Israel speaking to Elisha the Prophet.

Matt. 23:8-10 *"But you are not to be called Rabbi; for One is your Rabbi, and you are all brothers. And call no man on earth your father; for One is your Father, who is in heaven. Nor are you to be called masters; for One is your Master, the Messiah."* Here we see Yeshua talking to his Talmidim (students).

1Cor. 4:14-15 *"I don't write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved sons. For though you have ten thousand tutors in Messiah, yet not many fathers."*

For in Messiah Yeshua, I became your father through the Gospel. This was the Apostle Paul speaking to the Corinthians

1Tim. 1:1-2 *"Paul, a Shliach (emissary/apostle) of Messiah Yeshua according to the commandment of Adonai our Savior, and Messiah Yeshua our hope; to Timothy, my own son in the faith..."* Here we see the Apostle Paul writing to Timothy.

John 1:38 *They said to him, "Rabbi" (which is to say, being interpreted, Teacher), "where are you staying?"* Here we see Yeshua talking to His disciples.

Now, let's take the words of Yeshua as he said them:

Matt. 23:8-10 *"But you are not to be called Rabbi; for One is your Rabbi, and you are all brothers. And call no man on earth your father; for One is your Father, who is in heaven. Nor are you to be called Masters; for One is your Master, the Messiah."*



The question at hand concerns those who take this extremely literally. Now let's look at some of the other things Yeshua said:

John 6:53-56 *"Verily, verily I say unto you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I in him."*

Are we to take this verse literally?

Neither Yeshua nor Moses condoned cannibalism or drinking blood, a sin condemned in the Torah and Renewed Testament.

Let's look at some more. **Matt. 5:30** *"If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. **If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.**"*

Did Yeshua truly mean that we should cut off our right hand if we stumble in our ways?

Again, very important not to take this command too literally. Yeshua did not condone mutilating your body, but rather we are to nourish and cherish it, the Temple of the Ruach hakodesh, Holy Spirit, (Eph. 5:29; 1Cor. 6:19).

Luke 14:26 *"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."*

Does Yeshua want us to hate our family, literally?

Didn't He command us to love our neighbor as ourself, love our brethren, and honor our parents? (Matt. 19:19; 1John 3:15)

Matt. 6:5-6 *"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. **But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**"*

Does this mean we cannot pray standing up or in a public place with others?

If so then we couldn't do street evangelism praying for unsaved people, or even have normal synagogue services where people pray standing up, lifting up holy hands. On the contrary, Yeshua here was rebuking a spirit of self-righteousness and vanity amongst religious people. The Tanakh actually condones and even commands us to praise Yahveh in public, standing up (Ps. 134:1-2; 135:1-2). Furthermore, several times in the Book of Acts we find the first believers having powerful group prayer meetings in public. (Acts 2:42; 3:1; 4:31; 12:12)

In short, Yeshua's words oftentimes have to be qualified and put in context. It must be recognized that Yeshua at times uses hyperbole to get his point across, in which case these verses are not to be understood as direct literal commands, but rather as extreme overstatements intended to make an underlying point.

Now let's go back to the verses in question:

Matt. 23:8-10 *"But you are not to be called Rabbi; for One is your Rabbi, and you are all brothers. And call no man on earth your father; for One is your Father, who is in heaven. Nor are you to be called Masters; for One is your Master, the Messiah."*

If we are to take the first part of this statement literally, then we have to take the second and third part literally also. Which means then, not only could we not call a clergyman "rabbi", we also wouldn't be able to call our own paternal parent "father" either. He said, "call no man on earth your father". That would include your biological father, if we are to take this passage literally. Children couldn't call their daddy, Daddy. Nor would we be able to call anyone, "master" or as we say today, "mister". School children wouldn't be able to call their teacher, "Mr. Jones"; nor employees their bosses, "Mr. Smith", etc. etc. Needless to say, that would be ludicrous. The only logical, reasonable, and hermeneutically correct understanding of this then, is that it is hyperbole. Like Yeshua's statement against standing, public prayer, it's referring to the spirit of the participant, and not to the literal act in and of itself.

It should be noted here also that the word rabbi in the above passage is equated to the Greek word "kathēgētēs" translated in the KJV as "Master". We don't have the original Hebrew to go from, so we must use the Greek to grasp what we can. Aside from this one passage (verses 8 and 10), this word is used nowhere else in the entire Renewed Testament. However, according to Rabbi David Neumark, PhD., (Professor of Jewish Philosophy, Hebrew Union College, "The Principles of Judaism" - Journal of Jewish Lore and Philosophy, Vol. 1, page 36) the Greek word Kathagetes is the equivalent to the Hebrew "Rabbenu", which is only ever applied to Moses, the Lawgiver, beginning with the early authors of the Talmud. **The sense that kathagetes conveys is not so much "rabbi", i.e. an ordinary teachers, but rather that of "rabbenu", a master lawgiver second only to God.** Therefore Yeshua's rebuke in this passage was really to warn against ever regarding a religious teacher, either by title or sentiment, as being equal with the giver of the Law—Moses—or author of the Word of God—God himself.

The next key to understanding this passage is the language itself used in the Renewed Testament. Although written in Greek, according to scholars, the Renewed Testament is a Jewish document, written in Jewish syntax, using Jewish terminology, to an originally Jewish audience (and later Gentiles), and written by Jews themselves. The Greek used is not pure, proper Koine Greek, but rather a pigeon mixing Koine Greek and Jewish nomenclature. Sort of like an ancient version of Spanglish. It's essentially Jewish language and very specific Hebraic terms from Judaism being conveyed in Koine Greek language, using "loan words". For example "apostle" is a loan word for the Jewish legal term "shaliach" meaning an emissary sent on behalf of another to transact a legal function. And "disciple" is a loan word for "talmid" or student protege who learns an entire lifestyle from his mentor teacher. Others would include "baptism" for "tevilah" (ritual immersion); "good works" for "ma'asim tovim" (good deeds) which is a term referring to obeying and keeping God's commandments; "redemption" for "geulah" which is referring to the fulfillment of all Messianic prophecy and the saving restoration of the Jewish people and all creation. And on and on. The Renewed Testament is full Jewish loan words transmitted in the Greek language for the Greek speaking Gentiles believers of the time. The same is true for "rabbi". In John 1:38 it says: **John 1:38** *They said to him, "Rabbi" (which is to say, being interpreted, Teacher), "where are you staying?"*

The word "rabbi" (my master) is Aramaic in origin, the possessive form of "rav" originally meaning master, chief, or great and was used as a prefix title. The Renewed Testament usage is probably the oldest recorded usage of the term and was in its very early stages of being used. According to American-Israeli author Hillel Halkin (whose father was a professor of Jewish literature, history and culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and father-in-law was Orthodox Talmud scholar Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan):

"The root meaning of the Hebrew word rav, "rabbi," is "large," "great" or "much," and in the Bible it can have to do with number, magnitude, age or other things. If we take number, for instance, rav means "many" in its plural form of rabim, as in yamim rabim, "many days," and batim rabim, "many houses." If we take magnitude, we have the Psalmist's "ma rav tuvcha," "How great is Your goodness." If age, rav means "older" or "senior," as when Isaac blesses Jacob by saying, "ve-rav ya'avod tsa'ir," "And the older [son, i.e., Esau] will obey the younger."

In the first and second of these cases rav is an adjective, while in the third it is a noun. But the word can be used other ways in biblical Hebrew, too, including as a prefix similar to the English "arch-" in the sense of "chief." Thus, we have such biblical combinations as rav-h.ovel, the "chief rigger" or captain of a ship; rav-mag, "chief magician"; rav-sarisim, "chief eunuch" (i.e., official in charge of the king's harem), and so forth. And in one place in the Bible we find, albeit in the genitive plural, rav standing by itself in this sense. This is in **Jer. 39:13**, where we read of *"all the chiefs of" — kol rabbei — the king of Babylon.*

The Greek word translated as "Master" in this verse (KJV) is "didaskalos", which is also translated as "teacher" in the rest of the Renewed Testament. According to the Strong's concordance it means "an instructor...doctor, master, teacher."

Here is where we let Scripture interpret Scripture. According to this verse.

John 1:38, at the time of the writing of the book of John the Aramaic "rabbi" meant the same thing as the Greek "didaskalos". Whatever didaskalos meant in Greek, rabbi meant the same exact thing in Aramaic. Throughout the Renewed Testament didaskalos is translated as simply "teacher". Which means, if we are to believe the Scripture as being an accurate historical document, then we must conclude that amongst first century Jews, the Aramaic/Hebrew term "rabbi" simply meant teacher.

Essentially, they both mean "master-teacher" (think Mr. Teacher) and can be used interchangeably, depending either on what language one spoke, or whether one preferred the Jewish term vs. the Hellenized Greek term. Simply put, if you spoke Aramaic you'd call your teacher "rabbi"; if you spoke Greek you'd say "didaskalos". Tomato, tomahto. It's like milk in English, leche in Spanish. They both mean the same thing. Furthermore, it is another case of a Greek loan word being used to communicate a Jewish term. Didaskalos was the Greek loan word for the Jewish term rabbi. According to Professor W. Harold Mare, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Covenant Theological **Summary:**

"In summary, it is to be observed that rabbi together with didaskalos began to be used for the idea of teacher-master at about the time of Messiah, as is evidenced by the Renewed Testament Gospels and some early archaeological evidence from inscriptions, and the corroborative evidence from Josephus and Philo in the use of equivalent terms. Then as the transition between the Jewish economy and Christian Church continued, the term rabbi no longer had a place in the latter as is evidenced by the lack of the use of the term rabbi in the Renewed Testament outside of the Gospels. Even didaskalos outside the Gospels is sparingly used in the Acts and the Epistles, this latter term seeming to be reserved basically for Jesus (compare also Ignatius; Mag. IX, Jesus Christ, our only didaskalos). This is corroborated in the Apostolic Fathers where rabbi doesn't occur at all and where didaskalos is used but relatively infrequently."

So rabbi and didaskalos were equivalent terms, both seldom used outside of the Renewed Testament, with the term rabbi slowly falling into disuse as the church became increasingly dominated

by Gentiles. So what does this mean for Renewed Testament church leadership offices? It means a whole lot, because Didaskalos is listed as one of the primary leadership positions in the church.

Paul gives us the titles of the leadership in the church:

“And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.”

1Cor. 12:28 “Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?”

1Cor. 12:29 “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.”

(Eph. 4:11)

In these passages Paul lists the Titles of the main leadership positions in the worldwide church, and in every one of these verses, the Greek word translated as teacher is didaskalos. Which means that in every one of these verses, the actual Aramaic word that would have been used is rabbi. Which means rabbi is the title of one of the three primary ministerial positions in the church government.

Remember, the term didaskalos in Scripture is a loan word. In fact, all of the leadership titles are loan words. Here’s a cheat sheet of some of them:

HEBREW	GREEK	ENGLISH
Shaliach	Apostolos	Apostle
Navi	Prophetes	Prophet
Rabbi	Didaskalos	Teacher
Zaken	Presbuteros	Elder

The word of Adonai does not prohibit the use of titles for true ministers, but actually gives us the Titles of the top three ministerial positions in the assembly of the people, which are: Shaliach (emissary/apostle), Navi (prophets), and Rabanim (Rabbi).

Now let’s try these verses again:

1Cor. 12:28 “And Adonai hath set some in the assembly of the people, first **shlichim**, secondarily **neviim**, thirdly **rabbanim**, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.”

1Cor. 12:29 “Are all **shlichim**? are all **nevi’im**? are all **rabbanim**? are all workers of miracles?”

Eph. 4:11 “And he gave some, **shlichim**; and some, **nevi’im**; and some, **evangelists**; and some, **pastors and rabbanim**.”

What this also means is that, since the Apostles are also teachers, they are all rabbis too. The Apostles and other early church leadership are all rabbis. Which means Renewed Testament religion is rabbinic.

Another instance of a rabbinic title being used in the Renewed Testament:

Acts 1:13 “onoma Gamaliel nomodidaskalos”, in KJV rendered “named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law”.

However, the words “a teacher of the Law” do not actually appear in the text, only the Greek word “nomodidaskalos”.

According to Chambers's Encyclopaedia: A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People, Vol. 8 “nomodidaskalos” is the Greek equivalent for the “Rabban”, a title first given to Hillel’s grandson, Gamaliel.

Therefore, Acts 1:13 should read:

Acts 1:13 “But a Pharisee in the council named Rabban Gamaliel, held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.” Again in Acts 22:3, Paul references Gamaliel and used the title “fathers” to refer to him and other Jewish sages. Apparently, according to the word of Adonai, respectful titles can and are to be applied to believers and unbelievers alike:

1Pet. 2:17 “Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear Elohim. Honour the king.”

Rom. 13:1 “Let every person be subject to the **governing authorities**. For there is no authority except from Adonai, and **those that exist have been instituted by Adonai**...”

Rom. 13:7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.”

Acts 23-3-5 “Then Paul said to him, ‘Adonai is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the Law, and yet contrary to the Law you order me to be struck? Those who stood by said, ‘Would you revile Adonai’s High Priest?’ And Paul said, ‘I did not know, brothers, that he was the High Priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”

So why would Yeshua tell his disciples not to call their teachers, teachers?

Because it has to do with a type relationship that existed between a teacher and his disciple i.e. rabbi and his talmidim (student), that goes all the way back at least to the prophets and the “sons of the prophets” (1Kgs. 20:35; 2Kgs. 2:3-7; 4:1,38;5:22;6:1). In this relationship, **the Prophets were the fathers, their disciples in training were the “sons”** who lived with the prophet in small, close-knit communities, sharing communal meals. Even the Kings of Israel called the prophets “father”, as in **2Kgs. 6:21**: “And the king of Israel said unto Elisha, when he saw them, ‘**My father, shall I smite them? shall I smite them?**’” Although kings were political authorities, they still revered the prophets as “fathers” or spiritual authorities.

Later, the rabbis applied this relationship model to the rabbi-talmud relationship. In this type of

relationship it was the goal of the student not to just learn information from the teacher (rabbi), as from a secular teacher, but to learn a lifestyle. The rabbi taught not just with his words but with his life and example, and by submission, observation, and emulation the talmidim's goal was to become like the rabbi:

There was a cliché in Hebrew (idiom) that said; **"they ate the dust of their Rabbi"**. This idiom meant that the talmidim of the rabbi listened so close and followed so close to the teaching of their Rabbis that they ate the dust stirred up by his feet as he taught. They were so anxious to learn that they hardly even gave him space to walk in front of them. Paul was referring to this in Acts 22:3. Christians today always ask each other: "where do you go to church?" In fact they are saying: "who are you yoked to?", "what religious organization are you yoked to?". They do this because they do not think (Matt. 5:17), they are too lazy to think. Shake the dust of these religious businesses off our feet, it is a very biblical thing to do.



Matt. 10:24-25 *"The disciple [talmid] is not above his teacher [didaskalos/rabbi], nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his teacher, and the servant as his lord."*

It is clear that Yeshua's rebuke was specifically directed at the then current practice of talmidim (disciples) addressing their rabbis as father, teacher, and master, which began with the Prophet—Son of Prophet relationship. What Yeshua is really saying is: That kind of relationship ends now! From now on that kind of subservient, intimate spiritual relationship is reserved for Yeshua and Yeshua alone. This is reflected in Paul's epistle:

1Cor. 1:12-14 *"Now this I say, that every one of you says, 'I am of Paul'; and 'I of Apollos'; and 'I of Cephas'; and 'I of Messiah'. Is Messiah divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank Adonai that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name."* Paul is clearly emphasizing Yeshua's admonition not to overly exalt church leadership to the point that it was with the Prophets and their proteges. That type of exaltation is reserved for Adonai alone.

Later, Paul asserts the father-son mentoring relationship with the entire Corinthian church (1Cor. 4:14-15), and with Timothy in his epistle to him (1Tim. 1:1,2), and even uses the titles father and son. However, in light of his rebuke above, it's clear Paul kept that type of relationship in check and tempered it so that it did not go to the level that Yeshua warned against.

So then ultimately, Yeshua's chastisement was not against the use of the term "rabbi" (it's one of the titles given under the inspiration of the Ruach for teachers in the assembly of the people) or in general titles for teachers in the body of Messiah, but rather to warn us against the over exaltation and idolization of these same ministers, and teachers.

I would like to thank Rabbi Isaac Soria for opening the door for me in regard to this understanding.

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