

## Chair of Moses: Refuting James White's Claims of *sola Scriptura* in his book *The Roman Catholic Controversy*

Written by Dave Armstrong

Reformed Baptist apologist and expert on *sola Scriptura*, Dr. James White, offered a two-page response to the Catholic apologetic use of Matthew 23:1-3 and Moses' seat. I shall quote the heart of his subtle but thoroughly fallacious argument:

“Some Roman Catholics present this passage as proof that a source of extrabiblical authority received the blessing of the Lord Jesus. It has been alleged that the concept of ‘Moses’ seat’ is in fact a refutation of *sola scriptura*, for not only is this concept not found in the Old Testament, but Jesus seemingly gives His approbation to this extrascriptural tradition . . .

“The ‘Moses’ seat’ refers to a seat in the front of the synagogue on which the teacher of the Law sat while reading from the Scriptures. Synagogue worship, of course, came into being long after Moses’ day, so those who attempt to make this an oral tradition going back to Moses are engaging in wishful thinking” (White, 100).

James White agrees that the notion is not found in the Old Testament but maintains that it cannot be traced back to Moses. That may be correct (though we are told that Moses took his seat or sat among the people to judge them in Exodus 18:13), yet the Catholic argument here does not rest on whether it literally can be traced historically to Moses, but on the fact that it is not found in the Old Testament. Thus, White from the outset concedes a fundamental point of the Catholic argument concerning authority and *sola Scriptura*.

White then cites Bible scholar Robert Gundry in agreement, to the effect that Jesus was binding Christians to the Pharisaical law, but not “their interpretative traditions.” This passage concerned only “the law itself” with the “antinomians” in mind. How Gundry arrives at such a conclusion remains to be seen. White’s query about the Catholic interpretation, “is this sound exegesis?” can just as easily be applied to Gundry’s fine-tuned distinctions which help him avoid any implication of a binding extrabiblical tradition. White continues:

There was nothing in the tradition of having someone read from the Scriptures while sitting on Moses’ seat that was in conflict with the Scriptures . . . It is quite proper to listen and obey the words of the one who reads from the Law or the Prophets, for one is not hearing a man speaking in such a situation, but is listening to the very words of God (White, 101).

This is true as far as it goes, but it is essentially a non sequitur and amounts to eisegesis of the passage (which is ironic, because now *White* plays the role of “a man speaking” and distorting “the very words of God”). Jesus said:

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice” (Mt 23:2–3).

First, it should be noted that nowhere in the actual text is the notion that the Pharisees are *only* reading the Old Testament Scripture when sitting on Moses’ seat. It’s an assumption gratuitously smuggled in from a presupposed position of *sola Scriptura*.

Secondly, White’s assumption that Jesus is referring literally to Pharisees sitting on a seat in the synagogue and reading (the Old Testament only) and that alone—is more forced and woodenly literalistic than the far more plausible interpretation that this was simply a term denoting received authority.

It reminds one of the old silly Protestant tale that the popes speak infallibly and *ex cathedra* (*cathedra* is the Greek word for seat in Matthew 23:2) only when sitting in a certain chair in the Vatican (because the phrase means literally, “from the bishop’s chair”; whereas it was a *figurative* and idiomatic usage).

Jesus says that they sat “on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you.” In other words: because they had the authority (based on the position of occupying Moses’ seat), therefore they were to be obeyed. It is like referring to a “chairman” of a company or committee. He occupies the “chair,” therefore he has authority. No one thinks he has the authority only when he sits in a certain chair reading the corporation charter or the Constitution or some other official document.

Yet this is how White would exclusively interpret Jesus’ words. *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, in its article, “Seat”, allows White’s reading as a secondary interpretation, but seems to regard the primary meaning of this term in the manner I have described:

References to seating in the Bible are almost all to such as a representation of honor and authority . . .

According to Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees occupy “Moses’ seat” (Matt. 23:2), having the authority and ability to interpret the law of Moses correctly; here “seat” is both a metaphor for judicial authority and also a reference to a literal stone seat in the front of many synagogues that would be occupied by an authoritative teacher of the law (Myers, 919-920).

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (article, “Seat”) takes the same position, commenting specifically on our verse:

It is used also of the exalted position occupied by men of marked rank or influence, either in good or evil (Mt 23:2; Ps 1:1) (Orr, IV, 2710).

White makes no mention of these considerations, but it is difficult to believe that he is not aware of them (since he is a Bible scholar well-acquainted with the nuances of biblical meanings). They don’t fit in very well with the case he is trying to make, so he omits them. But the reader is thereby left with an incomplete picture.

Thirdly, because they had the authority and no indication is given that Jesus thought they had it only when simply reading Scripture, it would follow that Christians were, therefore, bound to elements of Pharisaical teaching that were not only non-scriptural, but based on oral tradition, for this is what Pharisees believed. They fully accepted the binding authority of oral tradition (the *Sadducees* were the ones who were the Jewish *sola scripturists* and liberals of the time). *The New Bible Dictionary* describes their beliefs in this respect, in its article, “Pharisees”:

. . . the Torah was not merely ‘law’ but also ‘instruction’, i.e., it consisted not merely of fixed commandments but was adaptable to changing conditions . . . This adaptation or inference was the task of those who had made a special study of the Torah, and a majority decision was binding on all . . .

The commandments were further applied by analogy to situations not directly covered by the Torah. All these developments together with thirty-one customs of ‘immemorial usage’ formed the ‘oral law’ . . . the full development of which is later than the New Testament. Being convinced that they had the right interpretation of the Torah, they claimed that these ‘traditions of the elders’ (Mk 7:3) came from Moses on Sinai (Douglas, 981-982).

Likewise, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* notes in its article on the Pharisees:

Unlike the Sadducees, who tried to apply Mosaic Law precisely as it was given, the Pharisees allowed some interpretation of it to make it more applicable to different situations, and they regarded these oral interpretations as of the same level of importance as the Law itself (Cross, 1077).

Fourthly, it was precisely the extrabiblical (especially apocalyptic) elements of Pharisaical Judaism that New Testament Christianity adopted and developed for its own: doctrines such as: resurrection, the soul, the afterlife, eternal reward or damnation, and angelology and demonology (all of which the Sadducees rejected). The Old Testament had relatively little to say about these things, and what it did assert was in a primitive, kernel form. But the postbiblical literature of the Jews (led by the mainstream Pharisaical tradition) had plenty to say about them. Therefore, this was another instance of Christianity utilizing non-biblical literature and traditions in its own doctrinal development.

Fifth, Paul shows the high priest, Ananias, respect, even when the latter had him struck on the mouth, and was not dealing with matters strictly of the Old Testament and the Law, but with the question of whether Paul was teaching wrongly and should be stopped (Acts 23:1-5). A few verses later Paul states, “I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (23:6) and it is noted that the Pharisees and Sadducees in the assembly were divided and that the Sadducees “say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all” (23:7-8). Some Pharisees defended Paul (23:9).

Next, White mentions (presumably as a parallel to the Pharisees and Moses’ seat) Nehemiah 8: a passage I dealt with previously:

Indeed, when Ezra read the Law to the people in Nehemiah, chapter 8, the people listened attentively and cried “Amen! Amen!” at the hearing of God’s Word (White, 101).

He conveniently neglects to mention, however, that Ezra's Levite assistants, as recorded in the next two verses after the evangelical-sounding "Amen," "helped the people to *understand* the law" (8:7) and "gave the sense, so that the people *understood* the reading" (8:8).

So this supposedly analogous example (that is, if presented in its *entirety*; not selectively for polemical purposes) does not support White's and Dr. Gundry's position that the authority of the Pharisees applied only insofar as they sat and *read* the Old Testament to the people (functioning as a sort of ancient collective Alexander Scourby, reading the Bible onto a cassette tape for mass consumption), not when they also *interpreted* (which was part and parcel of the Pharisaical outlook and approach).

One doesn't find in the Old Testament individual Hebrews questioning teaching authority. *Sola Scriptura* simply is not there. No matter how hard White and other Protestants try to read it into the Old Testament, it cannot be done. Nor can it be read into the New Testament, once all the facts are in. James White, however, writes:

And who can forget the result of Josiah's discovery of the Book of the Covenant in 2 Chronicles 34? (White, 101).

Indeed, this was a momentous occasion (Dr. White probably thinks it is similar in substance and import to the myth and legend of Martin Luther supposedly "rescuing" or "initiating" the Bible in the vernacular, when in fact there had been fourteen German editions of the Bible in the 70 years preceding his own).

But if the implication is that the Law was self-evident simply upon being *read*, per *sola Scriptura*, this is untrue to the Old Testament, for, again, we are informed in the same book that priests and Levites "taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the LORD with them; they went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people" (2 Chron 17:9), and that the Levites "taught all Israel" (2 Chron 35:3). They didn't just *read*, they *taught*, and that involved *interpretation*. And the people had no right of *private judgment*, to dissent from what was taught.

James White and all Protestants believe that any individual Christian has the right and duty to rebuke their pastors if what they are teaching is "unbiblical" (that is, according to the lone individual). This is an elegant, quaint *theory* indeed, on *paper*, but it doesn't quite work the same way in *practice*. I know this from my own experience as a former Protestant, for when I rebuked my Assemblies of God pastor in a private letter (because he had preached from the pulpit, "keep your pastors honest"), I was publicly renounced and rebuked from the pulpit (in a most paranoid, alarmist manner) as a theologically-inexperienced rabble-rouser trying to cause division.

Dr. Kim Riddlebarger, an expert in historical theology, in dealing with the same passage, assumes what he is trying to prove (what is known in logic as "begging the question" or a "circular argument"):

The biblical case for *sola scriptura* becomes even stronger when one looks to the words of our Lord on the subject . . . Jesus instructs us to obey the Old Testament (Matthew 23:3) . . . Is the Old Testament incomplete in this regard, requiring a "sacred" tradition to complement it? On the contrary, Jesus declares that the Old Testament alone is authoritative in matters of doctrine . . . There is no hint, therefore, in any of these texts, that the biblical writers viewed anything other than the written Word of God (the Old Testament) as the only infallible guide or authoritative source for the faith and practice of the church (in Armstrong, 237-238).

This perspective is quite interesting, seeing that what Jesus did in that verse was to encourage submission to the teaching of the *Pharisees* (not the Old Testament), and on the basis of their sitting on *Moses' seat*: a phrase not even *found* in the Old Testament, as Dr. James White admitted above.

White also asserts that "we are only speaking of a position that existed at this time in the synagogue worship of the day" (White, 100). That is hardly "Old Testament alone." White's and Riddlebarger's positions here mutually exclude each other. Such confusion is one of the hallmarks of an incoherent, weakly-supported position.

Moreover, the Pharisees themselves can only be dated to the 2nd century B.C. at the earliest (see Douglas, 981) long after the completion of the Old Testament. And they accepted the full authority of oral tradition, as mentioned above.

Riddlebarger's "argument," therefore, collapses on all points. He cites Jesus' injunction to obey a group which began in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. one which believes in oral tradition—and on the basis of an institution of authority (Moses' seat) which cannot be found in the Old Testament, as somehow the same as obeying the letter of the Old Testament, which alone Jesus supposedly regarded as authoritative. The internal inconsistency and incoherence of this position is surely evident.