

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 56, Chapter 16

Who is Yeshua? What is Yeshua? This is a question that has yet to be fully answered to this point in Matthew, and even though most 21st century Christians think it is an answered and settled matter in The Church, it is far from it. Matthew chapter 16 adds a new wrinkle into who and what Jesus is. Up to now He has said and demonstrated that He is a number of things. We'll go fairly deep into this topic during our study of this chapter mainly because this is the time to do it. The first thing that must be noticed is that Christ has been presented by the Gospel writer Matthew as a complexity of attributes and roles and He cannot be defined by a simplistic faith doctrine. The second thing to notice is that to this point Yeshua is, to the Jews He has encountered in so many different settings, primarily a **Tzadik**, a Jewish Holy Man...even though they had some suspicions that He was some other things, too. A **Tzadik** is a remarkable Jew who comes along only rarely that has the divinely-given ability to do miracle healings. It seems that Jesus was not the only Jewish miracle healer that had come along by His day, and after His time there would be others.

Let's begin our study by reading all of Matthew chapter 16.

READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 16 all

To better understand the scene that unfolds to open this chapter, we have to go back to the ending of chapter 15. There it reads:

^{CJB} **Matthew 15:37-39** ³⁷ *Everyone ate his fill, and they took seven large baskets full of the leftover pieces.* ³⁸ *Those eating numbered four thousand men, plus women and children.* ³⁹ *After sending the crowd away, he got in*

the boat and went off to the region of Magadan.

So after the miraculous feeding of the 4,000, and then sending the crowds away, Yeshua got into a boat and went to a place called Magadan (there is no settled conclusion about where exactly that is, except that it is on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee). Now, still in Magadan, Yeshua is approached by some Pharisees and Sadducees that have come to ask Him (demand is more like it) to show them a sign from heaven as some kind of unspecified validation not so much of who He is, but rather from what source does He get His power. Since the accusation has been made to Him before that His abilities came from Satan, I imagine they wanted Him to somehow prove to their liking that these powers came from above... from God... if He could. As with only the opening verse of this chapter, there is so much to unpack throughout it that we're going to spend a lot of time with it because it is here that we see an important milestone occur in Christ's earthly ministry. And, because this incident of yet another confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders is also recorded in the Book of Mark, we're going to take a couple of minutes to read it because it rounds out the information we have about it.

READ MARK CHAPTER 8:11 - 22

Notice that Mark says some Pharisees came to Yeshua but makes no mention of Sadducees. It is hard to know why except perhaps Mark didn't think it that important to mention them. Remembering that Mark's intended audience were gentile Romans while Matthew's were Jews, the lack of mention of the Sadducees by Mark might have to do with his gentile readership not really understanding or needing to know the Jewish cultural nuances between Pharisees and Sadducees; nuances that every Jew would readily pick up on and understand the significance of this piece of information. Jews knew that the Pharisees were the faction who dominated the synagogue system leadership while the Sadducees were the faction that dominated the Temple system leadership. That is, while both of these are essentially political/social factions and are not the name of some kind of religious or political office or position, nonetheless each faction represented the dominant one within their particular sphere of influence; the Pharisees were the favored leadership of the synagogue while the Sadducees were the party favored by the chief priests and the High Priest. So an ominous corner has been turned. Up to this point Yeshua has been targeted as a threat only to the synagogue leadership (as we know from His several testy encounters with them); however that sense of threat has now

crossed over to include the Temple authorities and priesthood. In other words, starting now the entire Jewish religious leadership complex was gunning for Him.

What we see is that the Jewish religious leadership of both the systems were all too aware of Yeshua's accomplishments and claims but even more how much the people flocked to Him. These 2 factions that were essentially rivals had little love for one another but here they are banding together to try to blunt the trajectory of this rising star of the common people (the enemy of my enemy is my friend). We learned in Matthew chapter 5 of the tremendous crowd Jesus drew at His Sermon on the Mount. Then in chapter 14 we read of Him drawing about 10,000 people (people He not only miraculously healed but also miraculously fed), and in chapter 15 He drew yet another crowd of about 8,000 for whom He did the same. No one could establish that immense of a following in the Holy Land and it go unnoticed by a perpetually suspicious religious or political leadership because it was occurring outside their oversight and their structure, and therefore outside their control. Jesus was not accepted by the Pharisees or Sadducees as a fellow servant of God and minister to the people, but rather as an unwelcome competitor... a pest... that they were afraid would upset the apple cart and ruin especially the Sadducees' cozy relationship with their Roman occupiers.

I think it is hard for a Bible student that is paying attention as he or she reads through Matthew to understand how after the barrel-full of miracles and exorcisms Christ had done that these men could then demand yet another one. The reality is that such a request for a sign is absurd on its face and merely exposes these leaders as the false prophets, blind guides, and wolves in sheep's clothing that Jesus had openly declared them on numerous occasions. There was nothing Yeshua could ever do to convince them of His divine position and authority because they had hardened hearts. They were here to protect their turf and nothing else.

As for the miraculous sign in heaven that they wanted; this is speaking about a sign in the sky above the firmament of the ground, and it's not about the spiritual Heaven where God lives (and in the ancient belief of that day, God's Heaven sat above the sky). So, exactly what kind of a sign in the sky might they have been seeking? Making the sun stand still? The moon to come out during the day? It's not stated and no doubt it doesn't matter because their request for a sign was sarcastic and not literal and was only meant to try to cast Yeshua as a fraud in order to discourage His many followers and would-be followers.

Yeshua refuses their request and in reply speaks a proverb of sorts that most people even in the modern West know. To paraphrase: red sky in the morning, sailor take warning; red sky at night, sailor's delight. That is, the red sky is a sign in heaven (the heaven where the birds fly and the clouds float) that the typical Jew (and gentile for that matter) would understand its significance. Just like today, weather mattered for people and they paid attention to signs that would tell them what to expect. In the red sky proverb the people of course understood that the time of day that the red sky occurred was decisive because the same sign at one time of the day was a good omen, but at another time it was a bad omen. So says Christ, these religious leaders seem to know how to look up into the sky and see these signs that tells them about the weather, and yet they can't read the even more important and obvious signs about the era of redemption history they are in and thus the accompanying events. The implication is heavy that Yeshua is one of those signs...the chief sign... of the times.

There is a principle that simply oozes out of what we are reading, and yet it is one that can be easily overlooked. It is that despite the well-worn expression to the contrary, seeing is NOT necessarily believing. It wasn't only the religious leaders but also the thousands of common Jews that had personally seen Yeshua's incomparable acts of compassion and miracles, and heard His many sermons so full of wisdom and truth, yet that still didn't bring them to a belief that extended beyond His mysterious ability to heal. Yeshua proved (even though it frustrated Him deeply) that doing miracle healings for unbelievers is not what brings them to faith, and this reality is no different in the 21st century. Or as W.D. Davies puts it: "whereas miracles do not create faith, faith does in fact work miracles".

In verse 4, giving as the reason for His refusal to produce a sign in the sky (something He was clearly capable of doing), Jesus says it is because these religious leaders are representative of those being in league with Satan; adulterous means to be unfaithful to the God whom they purport to be in union with and serve. Marriage terms like adultery are used because human marriage is the illustration that is regularly applied in the Bible to explain the kind of relationship we are to have with God. Marriage unions consist either of faithful partners or unfaithful (adulterous) ones. Yeshua's claim against these religious leaders is deeply offensive to them and quite embarrassing to have happened in front of an audience of onlookers. Both Matthew and Mark report that Yeshua abruptly ended the confrontation and left the leaders standing there as He got into a boat and went back to an undisclosed location on the east side of the Lake.

I have little doubt it was to escape being arrested.

The scene now changes to the boat as it is crossing over the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and His disciples are apparently some distance from the shore when one of them notices that they had forgotten to bring food... bread... with them. Bread...**lechem** in Hebrew... was a term that doubled as one time meaning actual dough that rose and was baked, but another time as simply meaning food in general. Bread was the staple food of the times, especially for the common folk. It was not only part of every meal, it was the primary food eaten... often with nothing to supplement it. So the disciples were likely a little upset when they discover they've somehow left their bread behind. Yeshua uses the mistake as an opportunity to teach.

Mark disagrees with Matthew on one small point; Matthew says they had no bread while Mark says there was one loaf between them all (hardly enough to go around). Yeshua uses the important ingredient of leaven in bread-making to illustrate a point. In verse 6 He says that the disciples need to be very careful and to guard themselves against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Leaven is often used biblically as a metaphor for sin. And yet, it was at times (like here) also used as a metaphor for teaching. Very likely what we have here is a word play. In Aramaic the word for leaven is **hamira** and the word for teaching is **amira**. Hebrew and Aramaic are cousin languages, and it was common that both languages were spoken by Holy Land Jews in Yeshua's day. We know for sure because of His final utterance on the cross that Yeshua could speak Aramaic. So leaven was known to be used as a term describing teaching that was neither positive nor negative. It was the context of a conversation that determined in what light to take the meaning. Here because Yeshua says to beware, clearly He means the term leaven as a negative. So the idea is that while the instruction of the Pharisees and Sadducees may not always be wrong, all too often it is. This wrong instruction can be a corrupting influence that clouds or even replaces God's truth and leads people astray. We've already seen Christ excoriate the Pharisees for just this reason.

In the previous chapter of Matthew we read of Yeshua saying this:

CJB **Matthew 15:4-6** ⁴ *For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'* ⁵ *But you say, 'If anyone says to his father or mother, "I have promised to give to God what I might have used to help you,"* ⁶ *then he is rid of his duty to honor his*

father or mother.' Thus by your tradition you make null and void the word of God!

So what Yeshua is saying to His disciples and against the Pharisees has now been extended to actions and edicts set down by the chief priests and the High Priest; those who control the Temple and belong to the Sadducee party. While the leaven metaphor is not a Parable in which only 1 single moral point is being made, at the same time we should resist the urge to find a flurry of allegorical uses of the term leaven in this verse that can send us away from the simple message Christ was establishing. And that message is this: it is the human tendency to automatically place our trust in our religious leaders, but we should always do that with a strong sense of caution. Their instruction to us could very well be in error and have a hidden agenda behind it. It's all too easy to assume that these leaders are especially holy; and that what they do and what they say must be biblical in its source and proper before God, because they are the experts, the religious office holders, and the role models. While Yeshua is of course referring directly to those particular Pharisees and Sadducees that put their manmade doctrines above God's Word, it equally applies to all Judeo-Christian religious leaders in every era, whatever their title might be or office they hold.

It really is only in recent times that the layperson within Judaism or Christianity has the means to fact-check what our religious leaders are telling us. Bible ownership, even after the invention of the printing press, was still something that only the more well-to-do could afford. Later as the costs went down a Bible was still so expensive that it was considered a prized family possession that was usually handed down as an inheritance to the next generation. Today Bibles are exceptionally cheap, available in scores of languages and translations, and given away by the hundreds of thousands to people who don't even have a few dollars to buy one. So the 21st century Believer has the means at our fingertips to see if what is being taught to us agrees with the Bible. Therefore we are without excuse when we allow our Rabbis and Pastors to get away with, at times, taking great liberties with God's Word and teaching manmade doctrines as though it was holy truth. We don't necessarily have to confront them about it; but we can apply a filter to our eyes and ears about what they say.

What is truly remarkable is the resources we now have available online. I have no doubt that this is a fulfillment... or at least part of the fulfillment... of the strange prophecy from Daniel chapter 12:

^{CJB} **Daniel 12:4** ⁴ *"But you, Dani'el, keep these words secret, and seal up the book until the time of the end. Many will rush here and there as knowledge increases."*

"As knowledge increases". Little more than 25 years ago the knowledge and materials that were the sole province of Theological schools were locked up and available only for those few worthy students that attended and handed out within whatever doctrinal framework that school adhered to. The average synagogue or church member had little to no access. But because of the Internet, these libraries and their scholarly content have become opened to the public, and far more in depth Bible teaching has become available to the average God worshiper, for little cost. On the other hand we must understand that in Christ's era personal access by the common man even to the tiniest portion of Holy Scripture was not possible. Scripture scrolls were few, and they were held mostly by the wealthy and the religious authorities. The elite among the Jews (like Paul) did have an opportunity to go to one of the great religious academies of the day, if they had the funds and the influence to gain a seat in one of them. Yeshua knew that indeed those Jews who came to hear Him teach were helpless sheep before the ravenous wolves of the religious leadership that had their own personal interests in mind, and not the welfare of God's people.

And yet there is another item in the background of Yeshua's warning to His disciples to watch out and guard themselves against the teachings (the leaven) of the Jewish religious leadership. As we have seen, Christ's disciples still held the Jewish religious leadership in high regard, respected them as pious men, and believed what they taught. In their minds Yeshua's teachings were a kind of supplement, but not a challenge to the accepted leadership and customs. So far they didn't seem to grasp that much of what Jesus taught conflicted with the Tradition-based teachings that were typical of the synagogue. It's not unlike warning your child for the hundredth time not to cross the street before looking both ways for traffic. Crossing a street is not a bad or wrong thing. But the hope is that someday that child will subordinate his or her instincts to just dart into the road assuming all is well, and instead approach it with the due caution you have been telling them to do.

Verse 7 reveals that the disciples thought that when Jesus spoke about the **hametz**, the leaven, that He meant it literally because the disciples' focus was that they had forgotten to bring bread to eat. Their focus and mindset was still earthbound while Yeshua's teaching was Heavenly and spiritual-based. So once

again Yeshua accuses them all, as a group, of having little trust. Not NO trust, but small trust. Hidden just under the surface is an important principle that is among the most difficult to communicate and to internalize. It is that trust in Christ is what opens our minds so that we can learn and act upon what it is that He, and all of God's Word, is telling us. Without that firm trust (not just in anything...not faith for the sake of faith... but trust in Him) we will find ourselves exactly as these disciples are. They have been sitting at the feet of Jesus, receiving personalized instruction, for several months and yet their trust in Him is still so small that they can't discern the more profound things He has been trying to teach them. So the inalterable principle is this: the more we trust in Yeshua, the more we'll understand His words. The less we trust in Yeshua, the less we'll understand His words. In some ways the disciples still place Yeshua lower in the religious pecking order of the Jewish faith than the synagogue and Temple leadership.

Verses 9 and 10 that begin "Don't you understand, yet?" expresses an obvious level of frustration within Jesus towards the seeming inability of His disciples to comprehend the meaning of all that has been happening. He blames this inability on their lack of trust, and then goes on to remind them of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and later the 4,000 for which they were present and were the ones who distributed the multiplied food, with the idea that such a thing should have been instructive to them... but it wasn't. The word usually translated into English as "remember" is not meant to be some passive intellectual activity of merely recalling the specifics of an event. Rather... because Matthew was a Jew and wrote his Gospel in Hebrew... no doubt the Hebrew word he was thinking of and used was **zakar**. **Zakar** means to remember in the sense of paying heed to something; taking further action, or giving something more and deeper thought because of what is called to mind.

Yeshua goes on in verse 11 to say (and I paraphrase) "how in the world can you think I was talking about leaven that is used to make bread?" Rather Christ's disciples are to guard themselves against the **hametz**, the leaven (the corrupted teaching) of the Pharisees and Sadducees. We're not told the response of the disciples but in a few verses we find at least one disciple that had a true spiritual breakthrough. It is rather mysterious that in Mark's account in chapter 8, verse 15 says that the disciples are to guard themselves against the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. What has Herod got to do with it? I have heard a few different explanations for this but none of them bear up to scrutiny. For one thing, which Herod is Mark talking about? Herod the Great or his son Herod Antipas? And why would any Jew ever look to either of them for spiritual food? Perhaps

the closest to an explanation that might work is if this was referring to Herod the Great because the Priesthood (represented by the Sadducees).... especially the High Priest... had been in Herod's pocket (although by Christ's adult life Herod was dead). But other than that, one has to wonder if the addition of "Herod" to this verse wasn't actually Mark's but rather can be attributed to a later copyist error (and I think this is what happened).

This episode in Magadan by the Sea of Galilee ends with Matthew telling us that Yeshua next appeared with His disciples in Caesarea Philippi also known as Baniyas home to the worship of the god Pan. This is a fascinating site in Israel that most times I take a tour group to Israel we try to stop here to take in its beauty, its history, and to have a Bible lesson. It is located on the southern slope of Mount Hermon in the north of Israel, and it is one of the sources of water for the Jordan River. It is here that Christ's mission and the question of who and what Yeshua is turns a corner. It is here that Yeshua makes the leap in His identity from **Tzadik** to **Mashiach**; from Jewish Holy Man to Israel's Messiah.

In verse 13 Jesus asks His disciples: "Who are people saying the Son of Man is?" Pandora's Box has just been opened and a question has been asked that despite what the average Believer might think, has not been fully settled even to this day. Matthew's Gospel has the disciples saying that some people say He is John the Baptist, others that He is Elijah, and still others that He is the Prophet Jeremiah or another of the revered prophets of old. This ought to be sufficient evidence to prove that Jesus has, to this point, not made a firm mention of who He is such that people could quote Him or have some kind of definitive description of Him. I spoke to you in an earlier lesson about how Herod Antipas was concerned that Jesus might be a resurrected John the Baptist, and that this idea came to him not from his own mind but from others around him. Such superstitions had much popularity among the Jewish people in those days. Yeshua as a reappearance of Elijah had some merit in that Elijah went to Heaven having never died and He was prophesied to return at the End of Days (something which many Jews believed they were currently living out). And then finally there was the thought that Christ could be a reappearance of the Prophet Jeremiah. Biblically speaking no such thing was contemplated for Israel's prophets however it was the subject of folklore and Jewish tradition that some of Israel's ancient prophets would reappear in the Latter Days. The thing is that the people were guessing about Jesus because they were uncertain just how to label Him. Interestingly the one thought of the people that never seemed to enter their minds as a possibility was that Yeshua could be the Messiah. Why might that be?

This leads to a subject all its own: in the minds of 1st century Jews what was a Messiah thought to be and what would He do? This is important because it goes a long way to explain the challenge Yeshua had in explaining His true and fullest identity over and against the expectations about a Messiah that had been taught to the people by the synagogue leadership.

Yeshua's person and purpose were misunderstood by the very people He came to save. As one example of this we read in the Book of John:

CJB John 6:14-15 ¹⁴ *When the people saw the miracle he had performed, they said, "This has to be 'the prophet' who is supposed to come into the world."* ¹⁵ *Yeshua knew that they were on the point of coming and seizing him, in order to make him king; so he went back to the hills again. This time he went by himself.*

This probably represents the most widely taught and accepted mindset and firm belief among the Jews of what the hope-for Messiah was to be. He would come not as a religious leader but rather as a political figure. The Romans seemed to be quite aware of this belief among the Jews that their Messiah was going to be a king. They took this as a threat and it took it quite seriously. The Messiah would be the first Jewish king Israel had had in hundreds of years. And of course this belief came from a firm biblical foundation.

CJB 2 Sam. 7:4-16 ⁴ *But that same night the word of ADONAI came to Natan:* ⁵ *"Go and tell my servant David that this is what ADONAI says: 'You are going to build me a house to live in?'* ⁶ *Since the day I brought the people of Isra'el out of Egypt until today, I never lived in a house; rather, I traveled in a tent and a tabernacle.* ⁷ *Everywhere I traveled with all the people of Isra'el, did I ever speak a word to any of the tribes of Isra'el, whom I ordered to shepherd my people Isra'el, asking, "Why haven't you built me a cedar-wood house?"'* ⁸ *"Therefore say this to my servant David that this is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: 'I took you from the sheep-yards, from following the sheep, to make you chief over my people, over Isra'el.* ⁹ *I have been with you wherever you went; I have destroyed all your enemies ahead of you; and I am making your reputation great, like the reputations of the greatest people on earth.* ¹⁰ *I will assign a place to my people Isra'el; I will plant them there, so that they can live in their own place without being disturbed any more. The wicked will no longer oppress them, as they did at the beginning,* ¹¹ *and as they did from the time I ordered judges to be over*

my people Isra'el; instead, I will give you rest from all your enemies. "Moreover, ADONAI tells you that ADONAI will make you a house. ¹² When your days come to an end and you sleep with your ancestors, I will establish one of your descendants to succeed you, one of your own flesh and blood; and I will set up his rulership. ¹³ He will build a house for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. ¹⁴ I will be a father for him, and he will be a son for me. If he does something wrong, I will punish him with a rod and blows, just as everyone gets punished; ¹⁵ nevertheless, my grace will not leave him, as I took it away from Sha'ul, whom I removed from before you. ¹⁶ Thus your house and your kingdom will be made secure forever before you; your throne will be set up forever.'

The reality is that Jesus would be executed by the Romans primarily because He was mistakenly seen as a political revolutionary that challenged Roman rule. When we read of the sign tacked onto the cross, above Yeshua's head, it said "King of the Jews". This was intended to publicly mock Him but certainly not in the spiritual or religious sense. Rather it was a demonstration by Pilate to the Jewish people with the message that they should abandon any hope that a Jewish Messiah could ever come along, lead a successful rebellion against Rome, and install himself as king. Nonetheless, the expectation of the Jewish people was that the Messiah would be a warrior leader and a king like David and successfully vanquish their Roman occupiers.

Of course as we have been reading, Yeshua wanted no part of being a political figure. He had no intention of trying to break the cruel yoke of Rome off the necks of His fellow countrymen. Despite the broad expectation among the Jewish public that their Messiah would be a political deliverer, there wasn't anything near to what we might call a unanimity of thought among the Jewish religious authorities or people regarding the attributes and works of the expected anointed-one.

It does us well to recall that ***mashiach*** means anointed-one and not Savior or Deliverer. It is a rather broad term that, as used in the Bible, was applied to every one of Israel's kings. That is, from a purely grammatical and biblical standpoint every Israelite king was a Messiah... an anointed-one (not metaphorically or allegorically, but actually). The title of ***mashiach*** meant to communicate 2 things: 1) That this person was spiritually anointed by God as His divine choice to lead His people, and 2) the king was literally ceremonially anointed by having olive oil poured over his head in an inauguration usually officiated by the High Priest. So

the most predominant view of Jesus by the Jewish people, as we find it in the New Testament, was in a nationalistic tone and not in a religious one. If Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, it would be as a typical sitting king over a newly re-established independent nation of Israel. The religious component was secondary to the political component. And the religious component existed primarily because there were prophecies that this new king Messiah would arise and rule, and because secular life and religious life were not separated or compartmentalized like they are today.

I dare to say that my reading of the Gospels decisively shows that the messianic expectations of the Jewish people in that era are nothing like the gentile Christian view. And perhaps that is because the Gospel accounts are based almost entirely on the recorded history and life of Christ **prior** to His death and resurrection. His death, burial, resurrection and ascension are told only in the final 1 1/2 of the 28 chapters of Matthew. In 1 1/2 of the 16 chapters of Mark. And in less than 2 of the 24 chapters of Luke. Thus the Christian views of who the historical Yeshua was and how to understand what His words and actions meant, are based almost entirely on what happened **after** His death. By no means am I suggesting this is wrong. Rather I'm suggesting that when Christianity reads back into the bulk of the Gospel accounts the things that happened before Yeshua's execution... interpretations and doctrines that are formed based only in the last few paragraphs of each Gospel book... this is how "The Church" can misunderstand so much of what happened in the many acts of Jesus and what it meant to the minds of the Jewish people of His era. The Jews had been conditioned through centuries of teaching and Traditions to understand the expected Jewish Messiah in certain ways; Yeshua didn't fit that mold because the mold makers were wrong.

One other backdrop matter also tends to escape Christian view... especially the modern Christian view. It is that within the Jewish culture the expectation of the arrival of a Messiah coincided with the End Times and the Apocalypse. This expectation was not lost on Yeshua nor did He ever deny it. He saw His own advent as a Latter Days event, and all the Apostles who followed Him (including Paul) were certain they were living in the Latter Days not only because of the things Yeshua said, but because the culturally accepted notions of the Jews had it woven in to their thinking.

Jesus, therefore, was not some odd figure who operated outside the cultural norms and lifestyle of typical Jewish society. He would not have stood out in a

Jewish crowd from His appearance; rather He would have blended because He was, indeed, one of them. So it is with this conceptualization of Jesus in the minds of the Jews among whom He spoke and lived and performed miracles that we need to understand all that comes next in Christ's life as presented in the Gospels.

We'll continue next week in Matthew chapter 16.