

### III. Epilogue: Response to the King and His Gospel (7:28-29)

The Sermon on the Mount is just that – an uninterrupted discourse in which Jesus addressed the gathered multitude and they stood listening. Clearly Matthew’s desire was to focus on the flow and development of Christ’s thought, for he recorded the entire sermon without a single interjection of personal commentary or observation regarding the crowd’s impression of what they were hearing. And yet, he didn’t leave his readers to speculate on how Jesus’ audience received His words; he merely reserved that observation until the Lord had finished speaking. And what he noted is that the multitude was astounded – not primarily because of what Jesus had said, but because of the way He had spoken: *He spoke as one having authority*.

The idea expressed by Matthew’s terminology is that of absolute amazement. The verb literally means to be driven out of one’s senses, and carries the connotation of being utterly dumbfounded. Jesus’ Jewish audience was being confronted with a new perspective on the kingdom of God and its relation to them and the Scriptures that revealed and promised it, and they were left struggling to process and come to grips with what they had just heard and experienced there on that hillside. And though the content of Jesus’ teaching was doubtless one reason for their astonishment, Matthew focused on a different reason, namely the fact that these Jews had never before witnessed a teacher who claimed for Himself unqualified authority.

1. At that time in Israel, the scribes served as the recognized teachers of the people. Earlier in the history of the theocracy, the priests had been Israel’s scholars and ministers of the Law to the people, while the scribes were responsible for copying the holy writings. In addition, scribes would act as royal secretaries for Israel’s kings, preparing and issuing edicts as well as transcribing old records and setting oral traditions into writing (2 Samuel 8:17, 20:25; 1 Kings 4:3; 1 Chronicles 18:16; etc.). Scribes – at least within the lower ranks – were often drawn from the Levites (cf. 1 Chronicles 24:6; 2 Chronicles 34:13).

But during the second temple period, study of the Torah became a life profession as Jewish scholarship increased and the work of biblical interpretation and commentary expanded. This situation saw the emergence of the scribes as a class of scholars whose work in copying the Scriptures lent itself to assiduous study of the Torah, and hence their eventual role as Israel’s teachers. By the time of Jesus’ birth, these individuals were associated with the sect of the Pharisees and were the recognized authorities on the Law. (In the New Testament, the term *lawyer* refers to a scribe; ref. Luke 7:30, 11:45-54.)

*“At 30 the presiding rabbi admitted the probationer [scribal candidate] to the chair of the scribe by laying on of hands, giving him tablets whereon to write sayings of the wise, and ‘the key of knowledge’ (Luke 11:52) wherewith to open or shut the treasures of wisdom. He was then a **chaber**, or of the fraternity, no longer of ‘the ignorant and unlearned’ (Acts 4:13), but, separated from the common herd, ‘people of the earth,’ ‘cursed’ as not knowing the law (John 7:15, 49)... Their titles, **rab**, **rabbi**, **rabban**, formed an ascending series in dignity. Salutations, the designation father, chief seats in synagogues and feasts, the long robes with broad blue zizith or fringes, the hems or borders, the phylacteries, contrasted with Jesus’ simple inner vesture and outer garment, were all affected by them (Mt. 23:5, 6; Luke 14:7).”* (Fausset’s Bible Dictionary)

2. Though the teachers of the Law carried an official and undeniable authority, it was the authority of a messenger and ambassador.
  - a. In the first place, they merely expounded the Law and Prophets. One could argue that the scribes obscured and so ultimately eclipsed the Scripture by their complex interpretation and doctrine, but they would have never claimed authority over it.
  - b. But more than expositors, the scribes were mouthpieces of Jewish tradition. They interacted with the Scriptures, but always through the lens of the rabbinical traditions and interpretations. In both instances, the authority in their teaching was not their own; in one sense, it resided with Moses and the Prophets, but, more practically, the scribes' authority belonged to their particular rabbinical heritage.

*“...at once erudite and foolish, at once contemptuous and mean; never passing a hair’s breadth beyond the carefully watched boundary line of commentary and precedent; full of balanced inference, and orthodox hesitancy, and impossible literalism; intricate with legal pettiness and labyrinthine system; elevating mere memory above genius, and repetitions above originality; concerned only about priests and Pharisees, in Temple and synagogue, or school, or Sanhedrin, and mostly occupied with things infinitely little. It was not, indeed, wholly devoid of moral significance, nor is it impossible to find here and there among the debris of it a noble thought; but it was occupied a thousand fold more with Levitical minutiae about mint, and anise, and cummin, and the length of fringes, and the breadth of phylacteries, and the washing of cups and platters, and the particular quarter of a second when the new moons and Sabbaths began.” (Farrar)*

3. But here was a man openly claiming and speaking in His own authority, not saying, “Moses commanded...,” or “the prophets declare...,” or “the rabbis have taught...,” but “You have heard, but *I* say to you...” and “Whoever does not act upon *My* words...”
  - a. The way Jesus interacted with the Law and confronted the Jewish conception of the kingdom would have startled His hearers, and He knew many of them would conclude that He was setting Himself against Moses and the Scriptures (5:17).
  - b. His instruction alone was shocking and outrageous, but all the more so in view of His claim to have authority over the Scriptures and their interpretation. Whether in relaying rabbinical interpretation or instructing directly from the Torah, no scribe would have dared to assume for himself such authority. Doubtless, many of those gathered that day on the Galilean hillside were outraged by Jesus’ audacity; Matthew made it clear that all of them were astounded at Him.
  - c. Jesus’ claim of authority over the Scriptures arrested His hearers, but their shock was heightened by their misunderstanding of them; what they heard contradicted what they had been taught. Jesus seemed to be opposing the Law and Prophets, but if the multitude had correctly understood them, His words would have instead confirmed to them the truth of what He asserted at the outset: He – in His person, words, and works – had come, not to abrogate the Scriptures, but to fulfill them.

4. And so Matthew's commentary on the Jews' response reveals the vast chasm between Israel's teachers and the true Teacher sent from God.

- a. The scribes interacted with and sought to understand Yahweh's revealed truth through their natural minds. Even if they had been isolated from the influences of traditional thought and accepted scholarship, they would still have brought to their inquiry and study a natural frame of reference and set of presuppositions.

But Jesus understood and interacted with the Scriptures with a mind free of the corruptions of the sin nature. More than that, He read and interpreted them with a mind in perfect conformity to His Father's mind and the leading of the Spirit. This Teacher understood the Scriptures in truth, and so recognized that, in every way and to every extent, they testified of Him. His very presence in the world was proof positive that "*not a jot or tittle would pass away from the law until all was accomplished.*" Israel would know the Scriptures when they came to know Him.

- b. The scribes' instruction was tainted and misleading even when they confined their teaching to the Scripture itself, but, as indicated by Farrar above, their labors were primarily directed toward studying and expounding rabbinical and legal minutiae. The effect of their teaching was to bind up heavy loads of unbearable and impossible demands and then lay them on men's shoulders without so much as lifting a finger to help alleviate them (Matthew 23:1-4).

But the Father's Teacher had come, not to weigh men down with crushing burdens, but to set them free from them. True, His way imposes a yoke and a burden of sorts, but His yoke is easy and His burden is light. He calls men to the servitude of single-minded devotion and discipleship, but that servitude brings the true freedom that all so desperately seek (cf. Matthew 11:28-30; John 8:31-36).

However sincere some may have been, Israel's scribes were not true shepherds, but blind guides of the blind. They, like those whose teaching and practice they followed and promoted, were seeking to climb into the sheepfold through another way. For this reason alone, they were thieves and robbers whose leadership of the sheep could only bring them to destruction (John 9:39-10:10). In the end, they presented and taught the people to expect a kingdom and a king that were the product of their own self-righteous musings. This was the world into which Jesus entered, and, taking up the forerunner's mantle, He sought to build on his foundation by proclaiming the gospel of the true kingdom and calling Israel to embrace in liberating faith her long-awaited King, Shepherd and Teacher.

*"The Lord longs to be gracious to you, and He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him. O people in Zion, inhabitant in Jerusalem, you will weep no longer. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you. Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, He, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher. And your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left."* (Isaiah 30:18-21).