

The Scribes: Γραμματεῖς

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Introduction

The twenty-third chapter of Matthew is completely devoted to Jesus's denunciation of the scribes and the Pharisees. Most Latter-day Saints, if pressed, could come up with a reasonable approximation of what a Pharisee or a Sadducee believed. But why does Jesus spend an entire chapter condemning scribes?

What Scribes Are Not

Pharisees and Sadducees follow certain dogmas, it might therefore stand to reason that the scribes followed some sort of dogma. Thus New Testament scholars claim that the scribes “were the accepted teachers and interpreters of the Torah,”¹ without providing evidence for the assertion.² One might see some support for this in the Dead Sea Scrolls where Enoch and David are both seen as scribes,³ but those are historic not contemporary individuals. That the scribes were a separate sect is unlikely as they are not listed among the Jewish sects by Josephus.⁴ The Mishnah notes that the Pharisees and the Sadducees opposed each other and took opposite positions particularly on fine points concerning purity,⁵ particularly when it came to food.⁶ Apparently picky eating was seen as a virtue, but unfortunately the Mishnah does tell us whether they were gluten-free, casein-free, or vegan. The Pharisees thought of themselves as purer than thou, but to those serving in the temple, Sadducees, the Pharisees were unclean.⁷ While Latter-day Saints tend to view rabbinic Judaism as the direct descendant of the Pharisees, the Mishnah distances itself from them, claiming that the humiliations caused by the Pharisees weary the world.⁸ The Mishnah also notes that the Pharisees took a different position from the Galilean heretic (presumably Jesus) on divorce.⁹ We might think, then, that the scribes were the antecedents of the Rabbis. This might be possible, but I am not convinced that we should

¹ F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 70 n. 3.

² A feeble attempt is Michael P. Knowles, “Serpents, Scribes, and Pharisees,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133/1 (2014), 165-178.

³ 4QEnGiants-a 8:4; 4QEnGiants-f 2:2; 4QEnGiants-g 1 ii:22; 4QEnGiants-b 2ii+6+7i+8-11+12(?):14; 7 ii:9; 11Q5 (11QPs-a) 27:2.

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.171-73; 18.11-25. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.119-166.

⁵ Mishnah Yadaim 4:6-7.

⁶ Mishnah Tohorot 4:12.

⁷ Mishnah Hagigah 2:7.

⁸ Mishnah Sotah 3:3 (3:4).

⁹ Mishnah Yadaim 4:8.

follow the argument down that Rabbi hole. Besides we know that some scribes belonged to the Pharisees (τινὲς τῶν γραμματέων τοῦ μέρους τῶν Φαρισαίων),¹⁰ so it is not a separate dogma, nor are the two synonymous.¹¹

What Did Scribes Do?

Instead of asking what scribes believed, we might understand Jesus's comments better by following his injunction "by their fruits we shall know them" (Matthew 7:20) and paying more attention to what scribes did. We tend to think that scribes copied books. They did, but that was only a small portion of what they actually did. We also seem to think that they were some sort of experts in the Law of Moses. Some may have been such but many were probably not. For understanding scribes, the New Testament gives us very little help even though it uses the term for scribe 67 times, all but six of them in the synoptic gospels. Evidence, however, is plentiful because almost every written document from the ancient world was written by a scribe. If we limit ourselves to Jesus's day, the first half of the first century, we find scribes doing a number of things just by looking at the documents that they wrote. Limiting ourselves to papyrus documents written at that time, we find that there are a mere 7304 relevant papyrus documents. This gives us some idea of what scribes wrote.

Let's take a sample of six hundred of these documents. We find the following:

287 (48%) documentary texts,

56 (9%) receipts,

52 (9%) letters,

42 (7%) accounts,

25 (4%) lists,

22 (4%) contracts,

9 (2%) notices,

6 (1%) literary texts (two Iliad, one Odyssey, three others),

6 (1%) declarations,

5 (1%) gifts,

4 (1%) loans,

¹⁰ Acts 23:9.

¹¹ As argued by Ellis Rivkin, "Scribes, Pharisees, Lawyers, Hypocrites: 'A Study in Synonymity,'" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 49 (1978): 135-142.

4 (1%) sales,
4 (1%) fragments,
3 (1%) marriage documents,
3 (1%) reports,
2 disputes,
2 loan repayments,
2 petitions,
2 toll receipts,
1 court record,
1 dedication,
1 division of inheritance,
1 divorce,
1 inventory list,
1 legal complaint,
1 order,
1 painting,
1 penthemeros certificate,
1 register,
1 religious text,
1 scribal exercise,
1 sitologos receipt,
1 summons,
1 tax list,
1 tax receipt,
1 blank,
44 (7%) unclassified,

Copying literary texts is only one percent of the output of scribes. The vast majority of the time was spent making documentary texts, drawing up business documents.

It might be argued, however, that those are documents from Egypt, not Judea. From Judea we have the following three-hundred texts written in Hebrew or Aramaic:¹²

111 (37%) funerary inscriptions

28 (9%) letters

21 (7%) deeds of sale

15 (5%) labels

6 (2%) lease contracts

6 (2%) delivery reports

5 (2%) accounts

4 (1%) debt contracts

4 (1%) marriage contracts

4 (1%) inventories

4 (1%) lists

3 (1%) receipts

2 (1%) deeds

1 divorce document

1 deed of deposit

1 loan

1 deed of gift

1 waiver of claims

1 purchase report

1 scribal exercise (alphabet)

6 (2%) miscellaneous texts

74 (25%) unclassified fragments

The specific mixture of texts is a bit different, but the general types of texts that a scribe writes are essentially the same.

¹² Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabatean Documentary Texts from the Judean Desert and Related Material*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2000).

Bureaucrats

One can better understand the role of scribes in the ancient world by noting some observations made by archaeologists. Writing usually appears in association with the rise of the state. This is true in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, and rather well known. It is also true in Anatolia, with the Hittites, but also true in the Luwian and Aramaic kingdoms, and also in Israel. Not every state needs scribes, but scribes can make large states work more efficiently. Writing may not originate with the state, but the chances of finding writing before the rise of states is virtually nil. Over time most writing is destroyed. To illustrate: Every year in ancient Egypt, in every nome, there were tax summaries for government officials. With forty-two nomes, over three thousand years, there should have been about a quarter of a million of these summaries. We have one that has survived. To find writing archaeologically, there must be lots of writing. This means lots of scribes. Perhaps there is only one scribe per village including its many associated hamlets. Those seven-thousand papyrus documents from Jesus's day that have survived indicate an army of scribes at work.

The Roman Empire included 50-80 million inhabitants.¹³ There were about a thousand cities with 5000 to 10,000 people living in them.¹⁴ The student body attending BYU is three times the size of a large Roman city. Around 90 percent of Roman subjects lived in rural rather than urban settings, in villages and hamlets, farming the local land, and paying taxes. Every village had a scribe handling government affairs which also concerned taxes. So at least once a year, every adult in the Roman Empire is going to have at least one encounter with a government scribe. For many of them, such encounters will have come more often. If you wanted to write a letter, you would need a scribe. If you wanted to read a letter, you would need a scribe. If you needed to file a petition to the government to right an injustice, you would need a scribe. If you wanted to buy or sell property, you would need a scribe. If you wanted to borrow or lend money, you would need a scribe. Does this sound all that farfetched? When Herod wanted to consult about what is written in the Hebrew scriptures—which it seems unlikely that he had ever read, or had any desire to read, and may not have been able to read—he consulted scribes (Matthew 2:4). After all, they could read, and therefore knew some things (Matthew 17:10; Mark 9:11; 12:34). Scribes are also more likely to own books, simply because they could use them.¹⁵ Other councils and deliberative bodies also had scribes to read the documents.¹⁶

In addition to this, the first governmental official that most individuals would encounter would be the local government scribe.¹⁷ The scribes were the administrators and

¹³ Hans Kloft, *Die Wirtschaft der griechisch-römischen Welt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992), 198.

¹⁴ Kloft, *Wirtschaft der griechisch-römischen Welt*, 198.

¹⁵ BGU 4 1096.

¹⁶ P. Mich. 5 226; Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.532.

¹⁷ Sherman L. Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt from Augustus to Diocletian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938), 344.

bureaucrats of the ancient world. As such, a scribe was seen as a very prestigious occupation.¹⁸ It was well paid too. It is estimated that in Roman Egypt, the government collected 40,000,000 sesterces a year that were paid in money.¹⁹ In turn they paid an estimated 11,300,000 sesterces a year to fund the army of bureaucrats and soldiers to collect it.²⁰ Though some seem to have had other occupations on the side.²¹

In Roman times (actually we are limiting our discussion to evidence from the first half of the first century AD) there was a scribal hierarchy. At the village level there was the κωμογραμματεὺς, literally the *village scribe*. There is the regional scribe, the τοπογραμματεὺς, who worked at a slightly higher level.²² Above that on the hierarchy was ὁ βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς, or *imperial scribe*, who was the official scribe for an entire region.²³ Individual officials might have their own scribes, such as the general's scribe,²⁴ or priest's scribe.²⁵ Tax collectors had their own scribes. Josephus distinguishes a separate type of sacred scribe (τοῖς δὲ ἱερογραμματεῦσι) among the Jews and the Egyptians which interpreted portents.²⁶ To understand what the different scribes in the hierarchy did, we will start from the top.

The duties of the imperial scribe were many.²⁷ The imperial scribe wrote official correspondence.²⁸ He kept the fiscal accounts.²⁹ He was in charge of registering the cultivated land each year,³⁰ as well as distributing the seed corn for those farmers who were cultivating imperial land.³¹ He was in charge of the censuses,³² and concomitant taxes,³³ including removal of deceased taxpayers from the rolls.³⁴ He was allowed to impose requirements on imperial subjects.³⁵ He took oaths,³⁶ sat in judgment,³⁷ and could

¹⁸ Mishnah Nedarim 9:2.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt*, 342.

²⁰ Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt*, 344. Van Minnen ("Agriculture and the 'Taxes-and-Trade' Model in Roman Egypt," 209) estimates 22 million drachmas.

²¹ P. Lond. 3 604 B (= BM EA 10822 recto) 244-245. Curiously, this document has a famous Demotic literary text on the other side.

²² P.Oxy. 4 833.

²³ BGU 2 583; BGU 3 915 15-16, 24-25; BGU 15 2466 7; P. XV. Congr. 13 4-5; P. Oxy. 9 1210; P. Oxy. 67 4583.

²⁴ SB 14 12143.

²⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.142.

²⁶ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 6.291; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 2.209, 234, 243.

²⁷ The following mentions of imperial scribes from the first half of the first century AD are from broken contexts: CPR 15 5.

²⁸ BGU 15 2466; Chrest. Mitt. 68; P. Lips. 2 134; Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 1.529. This is also the case in Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.272 although the account describes Persian times.

²⁹ P. Fouad 67; P. Lips. 2 134; P. Oxy. 9 1188; P. Oxy. 20 2277; SB 1 5230.

³⁰ BGU 3 915 9-10.

³¹ P. Lond. 2 256 e 1-2; P. Lond. 2 256.

³² BGU 11 2087; P. Oxy. 2 255; SB 6 9120.

³³ P. Oxy. 9 1210.

³⁴ SB 14 11586.

³⁵ BGU 3 915 11-12, 24-25.

³⁶ P. Oxy. 67 4583.

³⁷ P. XV. Congr. 13 1-5; P. Lond. 2 276 a; SB 1 5239; SB 1 5954; SB 10 10308.

settle disputes, or at least interfere in them.³⁸ But where much is given, much is required: Herod's royal scribe Diophantus was put to death for supposedly be involved in impropriety in his work.³⁹

The regional scribe worked in connection with the village scribe.⁴⁰ He registered people for the census,⁴¹ kept up lists of occupations,⁴² and those out of town.⁴³ And he filed reports.⁴⁴

The village scribe had a number of known functions,⁴⁵ many of which mirrored those of the imperial scribe, although at a smaller level since they were only over a village,⁴⁶ and its surrounding hamlets.⁴⁷ He wrote letters, especially official letters,⁴⁸ and filled out reports.⁴⁹ He assisted the imperial scribe to register the land,⁵⁰ and distribute seed corn.⁵¹ He kept up the census lists,⁵² and the tax lists.⁵³ He registered deaths so that the families of the deceased were no longer liable for taxes,⁵⁴ as well as those who were out of town.⁵⁵ He also kept lists of who was in which occupation,⁵⁶ since trades paid different taxes than farmers. He was not, however, exempt from taxes himself.⁵⁷ He took sworn affidavits.⁵⁸ Like the imperial scribe, he had the ability to impose regulations on imperial subjects,⁵⁹ and could judge cases.⁶⁰ He was in charge of ensuring compliance with the law.⁶¹ Individuals might, for example have thirty days to present their evidence before the village scribes or the magistrate would carry out the provisions of the law.⁶² He had the power to release individuals from prison.⁶³ He could also delegate others to do things for people.⁶⁴

³⁸ Chrest. Mitt. 68.

³⁹ Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 1.529.

⁴⁰ P. Mich. 3 170; P. Mich. 10 580; P. Oxy. 2 251; P. Oxy. 2 252; P. Oxy. 2 254; P. Oxy. 2 255; P. Oxy. 9 1188; P. Oxy. 20 2277; P. Oxy. 33 2669; P. Oxy. 78 5171.

⁴¹ P. Oxy. 2 254; P. Oxy. 2 255; P. Oxy. 9 1210.

⁴² P. Mich. 3 170.

⁴³ P. Mich. 10 580; P. Oxy. 2 251; P. Oxy. 2 252; P. Oxy. 33 2669.

⁴⁴ P. Oxy. 78 5171.

⁴⁵ Although buying beer was probably not an official duty: P. Tebt. 2 401.

⁴⁶ P. Fay. 25; P. Haun. 2 28 12; P. Oxy. 9 1188; P. Oxy. 9 1210; P. Oxy. 10 1281; PSI 15 1517; P. Tebt. 2 299; SB 28 16834.

⁴⁷ P. Lond. 3 604 A 1-3.

⁴⁸ P. Oxy. 9 1188; P. Oxy. 20 2277; PSI 15 1517.

⁴⁹ BGU 16 2597; P. Oxy. 78 5171.

⁵⁰ BGU 3 915 9-12.

⁵¹ P. Lond. 2 256 e 1-4; P. Lond. 2 256r; P. Lond. 3 604 A.

⁵² P. Oxy. 2 254; P. Oxy. 2 255; SB 1 5661; SB 20 14440.

⁵³ P. Oxy. 2 288; P. Oxy. 9 1210.

⁵⁴ P. Fay. 29; SB 20 15037; SB 28 16834.

⁵⁵ P. Mich. 10 580; P. Oxy. 2 251; P. Oxy. 2 252; P. Oxy. 33 2669.

⁵⁶ P. Mich. 3 170; P. Tebt. 2 299.

⁵⁷ P. Tebt. 2 346.

⁵⁸ P. Oxy. 2 240.

⁵⁹ BGU 3 915 11-12.

⁶⁰ SB 20 14085.

⁶¹ P. Vind. Tand. 9 Ro.

⁶² BGU 3 915 7-9.

⁶³ P. Mich. 6 421.

⁶⁴ BGU 7 1669.

He issued travel permits that gave individuals permission to travel.⁶⁵ He drew up loans,⁶⁶ leases,⁶⁷ and land transfers.⁶⁸ If you had a problem you needed to talk with the village scribe (συμβάλης τῷ κωμογραμματεῖ),⁶⁹ he might do you a little favor (χάρ[ις]),⁷⁰ that is, if you could actually find him,⁷¹ and paid the scribe's fee⁷² (which might have been to cover the costs of materials).⁷³ Some scribes seem to have used their positions to take advantage of their neighbors.⁷⁴ The proposal to make Herod's sons village scribes was something of an insult.⁷⁵

These were not the only scribes. Paul notes when he personally added an appendix to a dictated letter,⁷⁶ and expresses some pride in writing a long letter with his own hand without the aid of a scribe,⁷⁷ but these were exceptions, normally scribes wrote letters.⁷⁸ And farmers were known to band together to hire their own scribes.⁷⁹

On top of all of this, most of the population was illiterate and thus completely at the mercy of the scribes who actually wrote the documents. They had no way to determine if what was written was correct, or if what was read later was correct. The public was totally at the mercy of scribes who might be completely corrupt. And if you wanted to register a complaint about them, it had to go through them. How widespread corruption was statistically we have no way of knowing at this far remove. Anecdotaly, however, we have the following story: "A certain rich man had a manager, and he accused him of mismanaging his property. So he called him and said to him: What is this I hear about you? Render an account of your management, for it is not possible for you to manage any more. The manager said to himself: What am I going to do, since my boss will take away the managerial job from me? I can't do manual labor and I am ashamed to ask for money. I know what I will do so that when I am fired from my management position others will accept me into their employ. So he invited each one who owed his own boss debts and said to the first: How much to you owe my boss? And he said: A hundred baths of oil. And he told him: Take the accounts and quickly sit down and write fifty. Then he said to the next: How much do you owe? And he said: A hundred sacks of wheat. And he said to him: Take the accounts and write eighty." (Luke 16:1-7). This is one of Jesus's parables and may not come from an actual incident. The potential for cheating, however, was all too real and

⁶⁵ P. Lips. 1 105 14-16.

⁶⁶ P. Oxy. 10 1281.

⁶⁷ P. Mich. 5 240 17.

⁶⁸ P. Mich. 5 267; cf. P. Oxy. 12 1480.

⁶⁹ P. Heid. Gr. 2 211 3-6.

⁷⁰ P. Mich. 2 123 20.25-26; cf. P. Strasb. Gr. 6 521; P. Wash. Univ. 1 1.

⁷¹ P. Haun. 2 28 11-14.

⁷² P. Mich. 2 128.

⁷³ A piece of papyrus cost 4 drachma; P. Mich. 2 123 verso 7 5.

⁷⁴ P. Tebt. 2 410.

⁷⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 16.203. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 1.479.

⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 16:21-24.

⁷⁷ Galatians 6:11.

⁷⁸ BGU 4 1096; BGU 7 1669. Implied also in P. Heid. Gr. 2 211.

⁷⁹ P. Mich. 5 313.

Jesus's audience knew it. At the center of the cheating is those who kept the books: the scribes.

The wronged could, of course, take the individual to court. But courts did not work in Jesus's day, the way that they work in our day, and, since the government was not controlled by Jews, Jewish law did not apply. If a man wanted to take someone to court—and we are talking men here because under Roman law women were property and had no legal standing while they had male relatives⁸⁰—he would approach the magisterium who would appoint an individual—who need not be and probably was not a government official—to be the judge of the case. The judge did not have to have any training in law, and if he needed help, the judge—not the litigants—would consult a lawyer.⁸¹ This sort of situation could also lend itself to injustice. We have another contemporary story: “There was this judge in a particular city, who had no regard for God, and was not afraid of men. There was a widow in that town, and she came before him saying: Vindicate me from my opponent! But for a while, he had no desire to.” (Luke 18:2–6) And that, as Jesus's audience knew, was quite possible and possibly familiar.

So while it is not wrong to translate γραμματεὺς as *scribe*, in the context of the life of Jesus, the translation does not convey the full reality of the position to a modern audience. I suggest the term *administrator*, or *bureaucrat*, although because of their literacy, they could be the equivalent of *intellectuals*. But the Greek term for intellectual is γνωστικός, which usually gets translated as *gnostic* and is not a major problem until the second century.

Scribal Opposition to Jesus

What did the administrators and bureaucrats in Jesus's day not like about Jesus? They did not like that his followers did not wash their hands before eating since that was proper etiquette (Matthew 15:1–2; Mark 7:1–5), and some of his followers were obviously a little rough around the edges. They did not like the people he hung around with: tax collectors, sinners, and others from the basket of deplorables (Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30; 15:1–2). This seems a little ironic as the bureaucrats were part of the tax collection racket, but they did not actually collect the taxes and they were also subject to them. They wanted Jesus to show them proof before they would believe him (Matthew 12:38; 27:41; Mark 15:1). That is what they did for a living, demanded documented proof from those who claimed anything, unless they decided to wave that requirement for friends. They claimed that Jesus was demonic (Mark 3:22). They thought he blasphemed, that is spoke ill of God, by suggesting that he could forgive sins (Matthew 9:2–3; Mark 2:6–7; Luke 5:21). Hiding sins

⁸⁰ See BGU 2 583; C. Pap. Gr. 2 14; P. Oxy. 2 251; SB 14 11586, where women initiating legal proceedings specify the male relative who is acting as their guardian or lord (κυρίου).

⁸¹ John Gee, “Jesus's Courtroom in John,” in *To Seek the Law of the Lord*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 135–50.

was something that bureaucrats did for their friends; otherwise they held people's sins over them to manipulate them. How dare Jesus forgive them! Above all, they did not like all the attention that he was getting; he disturbed their quiet little routines (Matthew 21:15–16). He did not follow their rules (Luke 6:7). They wanted to know where he got his authority (Mark 11:27-28; Luke 20:1-2), because they were in charge, not him.⁸² So Jesus correctly predicted that the administrators would try to kill him (Matthew 16:21; 20:18; Mark 8:31; 10:33; Luke 9:22). And so, “then the high priests and the administrators and the elders of the people gathered in the courtyard of the high priest who was named Caiapha and they began to plot together so that they might cunningly take and kill Jesus” (Matthew 26:3–4; cf. Matthew 26:57; 27; 27:41; Mark 11:18; 14:1, 43, 53; 15:1; Luke 19:47; 20:19; 22:6, 66; 23:10).

Not all administrators in Jesus's day rejected him: “When one administrator came unto him, he said: Master, I will follow you wherever you go. And Jesus said to him: The foxes have dens and the birds of heaven take shelter, but the son of man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:19–20). Recall that foxes did not have great reputations in Jesus's day. Jesus was telling this man that he would be an outcast, and lose all his perks. Was he willing to give that up? We don't know. Jesus held out hope for salvation for the scribes: “every scribe who becomes a disciple is like a landholder who brings new and old things from his storehouse.” (Matthew 13:52). At least one of the administrators agreed with Jesus's reasoning and was not far from being converted (Mark 12:28-34; Luke 20:39).

Jesus on Scribes

Now, let us consider what Jesus had to say about administrators and bureaucrats. Jesus reserved his harshest language for administrators. He called them “the offspring of vipers” (Matthew 23:33), “blind guides” (Matthew 23:16, 24), “stupid and blind” (Matthew 23:17, 19), literally “morons” (Matthew 23:17, 19), hidden tombs (Luke 11:44), “whited sepulchers” (Matthew 23:27). They were only concerned with outward appearances but actually were full of greed, entitlement, rapaciousness, and debauchery (Matthew 23:25-26). “Beware of administrators who desire to walk around in robes, and greetings in the marketplace, and seats at the front of the synagogue, and the seats of honor at banquets. Those who devour the houses of widows and make long prayers shall receive greater condemnation” (Mark 12:38–40; Matthew 23:14; Luke 20:46-47). Jesus compared administrators to hidden graves because you got in trouble without even knowing that you were doing so (Luke 11:44), getting stuck on the tiniest of details while overlooking gross crimes (Matthew 23:24). Predictably, their response was to try to catch Jesus at something that he said so they could accuse him of something and get rid of him (Luke 11:53-54). . . “You tithe the mint and anise and cumin [tiny spices, and it was bureaucrats who kept track of all of that] and you abandon the more important parts of the law, discernment and mercy

⁸² Abinadi has this problem too.

and faith; these things it was necessary to do without abandoning the other” (Matthew 23:23). So Jesus warned the people, “If your righteousness (or justice) does not exceed that of the administrators . . . you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). The implication is that administrators lead from behind on moral issues and can be morally inferior to those they think they are leading. No wonder Jesus “taught them as one who had authority and not like their administrators” (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22), who, as we have seen, thought they had authority. Jesus acknowledged their authority, saying that they sat in Moses’s place: “Whatever they tell you to observe, observe and do, but do not do according to their works, for they say and do not” (Matthew 23:3). They were hypocrites, a term Jesus applies to them seven times (Matthew 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). Their bad example encourages others to do likewise: “You traverse sea and dry land to make just one convert but when that happens make him twice the son of hell that you are” (Matthew 23:15). They “closed off the kingdom of heaven from men, for you will not enter neither will you let those would enter go in” (Matthew 23:13). They only appear to be righteous (Matthew 23:27). They build the tombs of the prophets whom they would kill were they alive (Matthew 23:29-33). Jesus also warned his disciples that they could not expect any better: “If they have called the householder Beelzebub, how much more those of his household?” (Matthew 10:25). “The time will come that everyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2).

Conclusions

It is worth paying attention to what Jesus had to say about scribes because, unlike the Pharisees, they are still with us.

The Pharisees were an intellectual fad, and like most intellectual fads had their fleeting moment in the sun before vanishing into the dust bins of history, just like the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Neo-Platonists, the Gnostics, the Manicheans, the Mu’tazilites, the euphuists, the phrenologists, the mesmerists, the positivists, the National Democratic Socialist Workers, the processual archaeologists, the Soviets, the New Mormon Historians, and Mormon Media studies.

Scribes, that is bureaucrats, are still with us, and since “it is the nature and disposition of almost all men,” and women, not merely most, to abuse their authority (D&C 121:39), we shall always need to heed Jesus’s words and warnings about them.