



Torah Observance -

Are Christians restored to the Sinai Covenant?

Some people, having discovered the joy of the Jewish roots of their faith, want to take it to the “next level” by becoming “Torah observant,” by which they mean obligated to follow the commandments found in the writings of Moses and interpreted by certain Rabbinical authorities as *halakhah*, or the “way to walk” the Jewish life. This position I would call “neo-Ebionism,” so named after the sect of the **Ebionites** who, though they apparently accepted Yeshua as the Messiah, rejected the teachings of Paul and insisted that the writings of Moses should be strictly observed for the true follower of Jesus.



Today’s neo-Ebionites will say that since Jesus and his first followers were “Torah observant,” we should be likewise. They will point out that the only reference in the Tanakh for the new covenant (*brit chadashah*) is in Jeremiah 31:31-34, where it is clearly stated that God would write his *Torah* within our inward parts and write in upon our hearts:

נָתַתִּי אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי בְּקִרְבָּם וְעַל־לִבָּם אֶכְתָּבֶנָּה

natati et-torati b'kirbam, v'al-libam ekhtavenah

*I will put my torah into their inward parts
and I will write it in their hearts...*

Matthew 5:17-20 is then often cited as a proof-text that Jesus explicitly taught His followers to observe the commandments of Moses (i.e., the Torah):

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law (i.e., *Torah*) or the Prophets (i.e., *Nevi'im*); I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota (i.e. *Yod*), not a dot (i.e., *tag*), will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes (*soferim*) and Pharisees (*perushim*), you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (*malkhut hashamayim*).



Immediately after saying these things, Jesus goes on to explain what He meant by saying that our righteousness was to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. “You have heard that it was said to those of old... but I say to you...” (Matt 5:21-48). But note that in each case Jesus takes the *p’shat* (outward meaning) of the commandment and moves it *inward*, to the “inward parts,” by “writing it upon our hearts”:

Old (written upon tablets)

New (written upon the heart)

No Murder (Ex. 20:13; Deut 5:17)

No Anger / resentment (Matt 5:21-4)

No Adultery (Ex. 20:14; Deut 5:18)

No Lust (Matt 5:22-32)

No False Witness (Ex. 20:16; Deut 5:20)

Simple Honesty (Matt 5:33-7)

Eye for Eye Justice (Ex. 21:24)

Forgiveness (Matt 5:38-42)

Love friends; hate enemies (Lev 19:18)

Love all people (Matt 5:43-48)

Outer Righteousness

Inner Righteousness (Matt 6:1-4)

Formulaic prayer

Secret Prayer (Matt 6:5-6)

Ostentatious Religiosity

Secret Fasting (Matt 6:16-18)

Outwardness

Inwardness (Matt 7:12)

The Inner is not the Outer

It should be evident that Jesus’ *midrash* regarding these commandments is intended to move the focus away from an outward appearance of righteousness (as was affected by certain Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day) toward the inward motivation of the heart. In *this* sense is our righteousness to exceed the scrupulous forms of observance as practiced by the scribes and Pharisees. *Jesus is putting the Torah into the inward parts and writing it upon the heart.*

Indeed, Jesus had some fierce words for those Jews who hold to the “traditions of the elders” but who “make void the word of God” for the sake of Jewish traditions:

Then Pharisees (*perushim*) and scribes (*soferim*) came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" (Matt 15:1-9)



Matthew 23:2-3 is another supposed proof-text that neo-Ebionites will cite to support the view that followers of Jesus should observe the teachings of the rabbinics:

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.

Prima facie it seems that Jesus is saying that His followers are *to practice and observe* the Jewish traditions as expounded by the scribes and Pharisees. However, when we closely read the context of this passage we note that these words undoubtedly indicate irony and scorn for outward their shows of righteousness (*see* Matt 23:13-36). If Jesus had *seriously* meant for His followers to practice and observe what the scribes and Pharisees had taught, why would He go on to berate them as hypocrites who “shut up the kingdom of heaven against men,” making a “pretense” of their prayers and going out of their way to make one convert who is “twice the child of hell” than themselves? Would Jesus have you and I *practice and observe* these sorts of things? On the contrary, the overall context of this passage indicates that the follower of Jesus should *not* become subject to their authority. This interpretation is further made evident by Jesus’ statement that we are to be subject to Him *alone* as Teacher and are to call no one “rabbi,” the traditional appellation of the Jewish leaders of the day (Matt 23:8).

Covenant and Torah

What is Torah about, anyway? As is well known, the word itself derives from a root meaning “direction,” or “aim,” or “instruction.” But are not all these terms relative to something else, something more fundamental as the goal or “end” of such instruction? Indeed, what would it mean to instruct or direct someone without a destination? Would you attend a class if there was no impartation of knowledge as its justification? Would you read a map that had directions that led to nowhere?

So what, then, is the goal of *torah*? Is it not - in the end - to be reconciled to God, to be in vital relationship with Him, in short, to be in loving communion with Him? But how is that to be effected? Is it through “rule-following” behaviors, or is there something else that needs to be provided in order to accomplish this end?

Is not “torah” essentially man’s response to this “something else,” and is not this more basic thing God’s *covenant*?

Torah is a *function of* covenant -- as man’s responsibility -- and therefore torah has changed in light of God’s different covenants. For example, the earliest of the patriarchs - from Adam to Noah to Abraham - all observed torah in the sense that they related to God through covenant. Consider that Noah, Abraham, and even Moses himself offered blood sacrifices to God *before* additional torah was given at Sinai (Exodus 5:3).



In light of this distinction, we need to restrict the topic and ask the question as to whether we are bound to keep the terms of the covenant made with Israel *at Sinai* or whether there is indeed a *new covenant* that has been effected by means of which we may now draw near to God. In other words, is the life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of Jesus merely a means to a *renewed* Sinaitic covenant relationship with God, or does it constitute a genuinely new way of being in relationship with Him?

How we answer *this* question will determine what we mean by “torah” and our covenantal responsibilities before the LORD.

Now what did Jesus teach us about the new covenant with God? Did He focus on ritual, obligatory prayer or the traditions of the elders as the means of observing torah? No, He said that torah is observed by our inward response to His sacrificial death and resurrection for us and is demonstrated by loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and by loving our neighbor as ourself. “On these two commandments,” He said, “hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:35-40; see also John 15:12-14).

In other words, *the love of God and others* is the goal or purpose of torah, and, as Paul wrote in Romans 13:10, “*Love is the fulfilling of the law*” (see also Gal 5:14).

הָאֱהָבָה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה רָע לְרֵעַ עַל־כֵּן הָאֱהָבָה הִיא קִיּוּם הַתּוֹרָה

ha’ahava lo ta’aseh ra lare’a al-ken ha’ahavah hi kiyum ha-Torah

*Love does no wrong to a neighbor;
therefore love is the fulfilling of the law* (Rom 13:10)

The Torah of Jesus (*Torat Yeshua*) is **love**. When we truly love God and our neighbor, we *ipso facto* fulfill the intent of the various rules, ordinances, and statutes as found in the writings of Moses. In this sense, then, and based on the new covenant promises we have in Jesus, we indeed have direction, aim, and instruction for the walk of life. The *halakhah* of Jesus is the walk of love, and this love entirely transcends the role of rule-following behaviors as our way to truly commune with God and with our fellow man.



For additional information about Torah and its role in the life of the follower of Jesus the Mashiach, please see:

- http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Olam_Hatorah/olam_hatorah.html
- http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Torah_Observance/Mitzvot/mitzvot.html
- <http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Taryag/taryag.html>