



Torah Observance Redux

Should Christians follow the Law of Moses?

by John J. Parsons
Hebrew for Christians

The other day someone asked me (yet again!) whether Christians are obligated to “follow the law” of Moses. After all, since Jesus was an observant Jew, and since we’re called to follow Him, shouldn’t we live as observant Jews as well?

This question is deceptively simple yet enormously complex, as most of you know. If it resolves to the question as to whether we should study and obey the Torah as Jesus did, then the answer is *yes*, though of course we must be clear *exactly* what this means, especially in light of the collective teaching of the New Testament. Jesus said he was the “goal” (τέλος) and focal point of the Law and Prophets: “Do not think that I have come to destroy (καταλύω) the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill (πληρώω) them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (πάντα γένηται).” Understanding exactly what Jesus meant by this statement (and therefore understanding his view of the Torah) defies simplistic answers, however, and that is part of the reason why his message was rejected by the Jewish sages of his day.

On the other hand, if the question resolves to whether a Christian should follow the interpretation of the law (i.e., *halakhah*) as developed by the rabbis of the post-Second Temple period, then it should be obvious that Christians are not subject to any authority that rejects the true King of Israel (i.e., Yeshua the Mashiach).



Indeed, despite the Council of Yavne and its legacy (i.e., Mishnah/Talmud), there simply is no Torah-based Judaism apart from the Holy Temple. Over 40% (247) of the 613 *mitzvot* (Torah commandments) concern the ceremonial and cultic laws of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). When the Second Temple was destroyed, the rabbis replaced the role of the priesthood with that of the sage (i.e., rabbi) and redefined central concepts of the written Torah. Therefore the “Oral Law” claimed that study, prayer, and good deeds replace the need for sacrifices at the Temple, regardless of the clear statements from the Torah itself. As a product of Pharisaic reasoning, it should be clear that the Oral Law (which is similar to the Catholic dogma of the “Magisterium”) holds no authority over the life the Christian.

Note that Rabbinical Judaism, not Christianity, has a problem here, since according to Yeshua, the true Temple of God is his body (הַיְכָל יְהוָה) offered up upon the cross at Moriah. Indeed, in every aspect of the written law’s requirements we see the surpassing glory of God in Yeshua: in the ceremonial law (as the ultimate High Priest, Sacrifice, and Temple), in social law (in promoting egalitarianism, transcending tribalism/racism, in the Kingship of Mashiach), in the moral law (in the ethic of sacrificial love), and especially in the power to transform the human heart. “You’ve heard that it was said to the ancients (Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις), **but I say to you...**” (Matt. 5:21-ff). This is the voice of Authority coming from a new mountain, *chaverim...*





Tragically, however, there are a large number of “Messianic Jewish” groups out there that will try to persuade you that Christians should “follow the law” as envisioned and interpreted by the rabbis.... “It’s great,” they say, “that you’re a ‘Christian’ (*ahem*), but NOW I am going to give you the ‘real story’ about following the Jewish Messiah... Now I am going to give you secret wisdom that will set you free from all the lies you’ve heard over the years in your Gentile ‘churches’... Look, if you really want to follow Jesus, you’ve got to follow the laws, regulations, and ordinances given in the Torah.... You’ve got to live as a Jew! Keep the Sabbath. Eat Kosher. Follow the *mitzvot* (commandments). You’ve got to drop your pagan ways and realize that ‘Torah observance’ is the next step after the conversion of the believer... *blah blah blah*...”

Often such groups (or teachers) are ill informed and love to get into high-sounding, even esoteric language about God and Jewish religion... “Don’t touch this; don’t do that...according to human precepts and teachings... These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:21-23). Note that there is indeed an “appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion,” but this is a vain exercise that’s unable to truly change the heart... Instead of the liberty and glory of the simple gospel message, we are told we have to add something “man-made” -- something offered by the sweat of Cain’s brow...

Though there was a “glory of the older covenant,” that glory was destined to fade away (*καταργέω*) in light of the greater glory of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:7). I urge you therefore to beware the obfuscation and deceit of those who teach that the Gospel of Yeshua is somehow “not enough” or needs to be supplemented. Beware of those who blaspheme by saying that Yeshua came to merely “renew” the covenant of Sinai rather than delivering us through the new covenant of Zion.... Beware of those who affect an outward show of spirituality and thereby imply that the weak, the foolish, and the ragamuffin are somehow excluded from God’s favor. Beware of those who traffic in spiritual pride, *chaverim*...



Invariably such “Torah observant” groups will attempt to impress you with their knowledge of Hebrew or with their talk about the “Jewish roots” of Christianity. Since you don’t know the “language game” as well as they do, you might feel overwhelmed listening to their jargon, perhaps even a bit intimidated. Don’t let them blow any smoke your way. Don’t get caught up in appearances or be “wowed” over sound bites. They might “dress up” as ultra-Orthodox Jews and “look the part.” They might blow really cool looking shofars or even chant Hebrew prayers fluently, but I appeal to you in the Name of the LORD God Almighty: Judge righteous judgment, chaverim...



Don’t settle for flash or special effects. Push them on the issues, especially regarding the clear teaching of the New Testament. Be relentless and seek the truth. Here are some questions you can use to “test the spirits,” chaverim. Ask them EXACTLY what they mean by the word “Torah” -- especially in light of the covenantal acts of God in the Person of Yeshua, our Savior... Ask them EXACTLY what “sanctification” means to them. Ask them whether they regard the writings of the Apostle Paul as having the same authority as the Law of Moses. Ask them EXACTLY what they mean by “new” in the term “New Covenant.” Ask them if they believe that Yeshua is none other than YHVH speaking in the flesh.... In short, if there’s any hint that “Torah observance” is a means of finding merit before the LORD God of Israel, the message of the Cross is being compromised...

Perhaps you are thinking that all I’ve been saying undermines the value of this ministry? Well, if I ever suggest that Christians should become Jews in the sense defined by the rabbis of Judaism, you should call me a false teacher and be done with me, chaverim... I am not here to scratch “itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3). **God forbid.** No, this ministry is entirely grace-based and focused on the glory of God revealed in the Person and work of



Yeshua the Messiah. We are saved by God's grace (alone) through faith (alone) in the finished work of Yeshua (alone). And as a pertinent reminder for any "Torah observant" visitors here -- this site is called "Hebrew for Christians" for a reason. I am unapologetically a Christian and I not ashamed of the simplicity of the gospel message. There is no "charade" going on here.

Anyway, since I get asked "whether a Christian should follow the law" fairly regularly, I thought it would be good for me to "go on record" once again and restate my view on this subject as clearly as possible. So, in answer to the question, "Should a Christian follow the law (as understood by rabbinical Judaism)?", my answer is simply: **NO**.

The Apostle Paul, surely the greatest Torah sage of his day, likened those who confused the terms of the covenant made at Sinai with the New Covenant made at Zion as being no less than spiritual adulterers. Trying to "mix the old and new wine" creates a witch's brew that leads to spiritual promiscuity before God:

Do you not know, brothers - for I am speaking to those who know the law - that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God (Romans 7:1-4).

We are therefore in no way obligated to follow the laws of rabbinical Judaism, especially in attempt to acquire spiritual merit that defines personal sanctity or holiness. Our righteousness and sanctification are imputed - by faith - through the gift of God in the Mashiach Yeshua: "...whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). Christians are made *tzaddikim* because of the *Tzaddik ha-Gadol* Yeshua...



Recall that when the covenant was given at Sinai, Moses took some blood from sacrificial animals, threw half upon the altar, and then read the terms of the covenant to the people. The people ratified the covenant with the words *kol asher diber Adonai na'aseh v'nishma*: “all that the LORD says we will do and obey” (Exod. 24:7). Upon hearing their ratification, Moses took the other half of the sacrificial blood and threw it on the people saying, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” The “match” was made and the bride had agreed to the Groom’s proposal... After this Moses and 70 of the elders of Israel ascended Sinai to eat a “covenant affirmation meal” between Israel and the LORD. It was there that the elders beheld the awesome glory of *Elohei Yisrael* (the God of Israel), under whose feet was “a pavement of sapphires, like the very heaven for clearness” (Exod. 24:9-10). The Sinai experience was a “marriage ceremony” between the newly redeemed Israelites and the LORD.

Now reconsider what Paul wrote when he said Christians were “married to another.” This harkens to when Yeshua told his disciples that His shed blood constituted the New Covenant (בְּרִית הַדָּשָׁה) with Israel. In the Upper Room after eating the Passover meal, Yeshua lifted the Cup of Redemption and said: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (Matt. 26:27-39; Luke 22:20). The Cup of Redemption signifies God’s promise to Israel just before the Exodus: “I will redeem you with a demonstration of my power.” This cup also symbolizes participation in the *ketubah* (marriage contract) of the New Covenant, in which the groom (*chatan*) signifies his pledge by sharing a cup of wine with His bride (*kallah*). Passover, therefore, was originally intended to be the model for the Christian practice of Communion (or the “Lord’s Supper”). The author of the Book of Hebrews calls this דָּם בְּרִית עוֹלָם / “the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb. 13:20). The covenant of Yeshua opens up Zion to us all... Sinai never brought us there.

As Paul also points out in the analogy of Hagar and Sarah, the Torah of Moses is far more extensive and glorious than the rabbis imagine. The heart of the Torah’s message is love, and love is the “law” of the Gospel... Often so-called “Messianic Jews” fall in step with rabbinical thinking, but they do not go back far enough. They do both too little and



too much in their theology. They have yet to clearly understand the radical nature of the Gospel message itself... They are scandalized by the idea of grace...

Recall Paul's words:

For you, brothers, became imitators of the *ekklesia* of God in the Messiah Yeshua that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved - so as always to fill up the measure of their sins (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

There is the law of Moses and the meritocracy of traditional Judaism, and there is the gospel of Messiah and the grace of His love. You must choose your authority regarding the meaning of Torah: Yeshua's or the rabbis.... You can't have it both ways, and any admixture of the two eventually leads to perversion and error.

So should we then abandon the study of the Jewish roots of Christianity? Should we forget Torah study? By no means! The problem never was with the Torah or the terms of Sinai, but with our *inability* to abide by the terms of the Covenant (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 3:10-13). The Torah is not sinful, but the human heart is desperately wicked and in need of salvation... All Scripture (including the Torah, of course) was given by God and is profitable for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Jesus Himself taught from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (Luke 24:27), so why would you want to a return to a Gentile-informed Christianity that has incorporated much Greek/Roman paganism into its theology? Why would you close your eyes to the essential Jewishness of Jesus and the importance of the Torah? But that said, it is IMPERATIVE to keep the distinction between "Torah" and "Covenant" in mind -- or else you will fall into the "Ebionite heresy" (which is essentially what many so-called "Torah Observant" messianic ministries do). Beware of the "concision" (κατατομήν, Phil. 3:2). Re-read the books of Galatians, Hebrews, and take the time to savor Yeshua's message called the "Sermon on the Mount."



As always we must find a balance. Yeshua was a Jew, born King of the Jews, but that doesn't mean He came and died to make us followers of the rabbis... The rabbis who rejected Yeshua had established "Judaism without the Temple" after its destruction in 70 AD. The authority of the rabbis was consolidated at that time and various dogmatic traditions were established among the Diaspora Jews... But none of that means that ancient "Judaism" -- and Torah study in particular -- isn't *essential* to properly reading and understanding the message of the New Testament. It is, and if we don't take the time and effort to clearly understand the Torah and the Prophets, we are liable to misinterpret the words of the New Testament...

Much more can be said about this subject, of course, and I don't want to repeat myself here. For some additional reading, please see the Hebrew4Christians web site (articles pages). There are also some interesting discussions on this subject on the Hebrew4Christians online discussion forum.

Shalom for now, Chaverim.