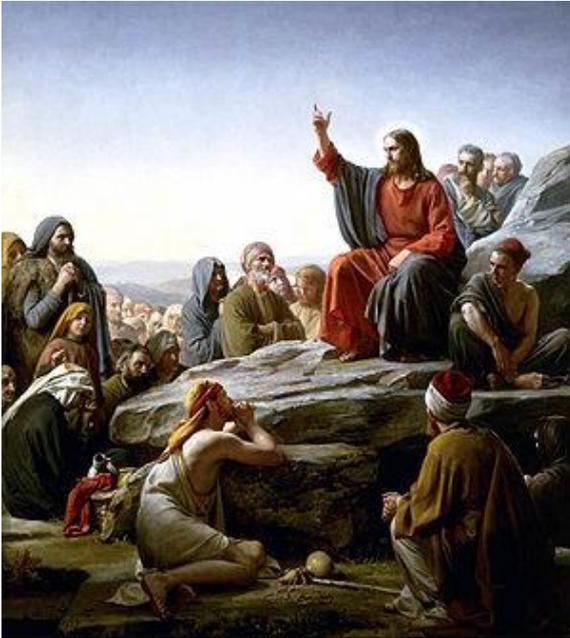


SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE TORAH OBSERVANT?

WHAT DOES CHRISTIAN FREEDOM MEAN?

Gerrie Malan



I have been confronted at various times – in both negative and friendly terms – by people who are classified as Torah Observant. In the process there has regularly been absolute insistence on a number of matters, including:

- Keeping the Sabbath on Saturdays.
- Obedience to the Law of Moses, and therefore
- Keeping the seven biblical feasts.
- Correct use of the name of God and Jesus. The name “Jesus” is alleged to be a derivative of Zeus, the chief god of Greek mythology.

They also allege that Christians abuse Paul’s letter to the Galatians as proof that the Law no longer applies. Apart from an argument of additions that were not part of the original letter, they state that Paul nowhere wrote in the letter that they were no longer to keep the Law.

Let us briefly look at the most important aspects at the base of the different viewpoints. I will not be arguing everything in detail, because the simple mention of a fact from the Bible should in some cases be sufficient.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE LAW

The founding of the nation that became known as Israel flowed forth from God’s covenant (and accompanying covenant promises) to Abraham, and which was repeated to his son, Isaac and grandson Jacob. Jacob’s twelve sons became the patriarchs of the tribes that eventually formed the nation of Israel. The known world was to know God through this nation who was described as the least of all nations (Deut 7:7).

God took this nation to a small land area in the Mid-East that, according to the economical and constitutional history, formed the geographical, economic, and political crossroads of the known world of the time. The nation exercising control of that part would have been able to influence the whole world – and reveal the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to them.

In their exodus from Egypt on their way to the land of Canaan, they received the Law of God (which we know as the Ten Commandments) at Mount Zion. This law was extended by what became known as the Law of Moses. Apart from extensive directives for community life, this Mosaic law also included various punishments, including death by stoning, for certain transgressions. It is obvious to what measure the Law of Moses dealt with protecting the nation’s purity – and therefore the protection of the Messianic bloodline from the descendants of Noah’s son Shem.

In simple terms, we can say that the purpose of the Mosaic dispensation was to reveal the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the world and to maintain the pure Messianic bloodline until the fullness of time (the appointed time) came (Gal 4:4).

From the aforementioned, three aspects are important:

- The law and the prophets were until John (Luke 16:16). Since that time the kingdom of God became manifest in the Messiah.
- In the Hebraic understanding the fall of the Mosaic dispensation was regarded as the passing of the heavens and the earth. When the beloved apostle John wrote of a new heaven and new earth in the Revelation, he was writing of the end of the Mosaic dispensation. A new dispensation had been set in place – therefore a new heaven and new earth.
- **The Law of Moses and the whole of the Mosaic dispensation was given unto Israel.** There is no directive that other nations were to be taught to implement and keep the Mosaic rituals.

Consider the fact that what we have here, is a period (*a kairos*) in which the law was given from generation to generation by oral tradition (see Jos. 1:8, for example). One does not have to philosophise about the important place that physical rituals played in such an environment. In their community it would time and again bring them back to or remind them of very specific events on their road to becoming a nation, and their relationship with *elohei Avraham, elohei Yitzak, velohei Ya'acov*, amidst all the temptations and threats. History, as recorded in the Book of the Judges, confirms this (e.g. 3:4). Yet, we still read in Judges how they often departed from the Godly ways and did was wrong in the eyes of the Lord.

Despite all the Mosaic directives and accompanying festivals/rituals, we find God saying through the prophet Isaiah (29:13): *“Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men (...)”* (KJV).

The whole law had to be observed

Everywhere in the Pentateuch (the Books of the Law) it is accentuated that Israel had to observe or keep the whole law, e.g.:

- Deuteronomy 4:2 specifically declares that were not to add anything to the law or take away anything from it.
- In Deuteronomy 28 a number of blessings which would follow obedience are announced, followed by curses should they not obey all of God’s commandments and statutes.

I do not for the purpose of this discussion intend to quote the various directives of the law, but simply mention that several were to be executed by stoning. Bear in mind as well, that important sections of the law dealt with first the Tabernacle in the desert, and then transferred to the physical Temple in Jerusalem. This temple was completely destroyed in 70 AD and not one stone was left upon another.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE LAW

Jesus

References to the Law in the New Testament usually refer to the whole Mosaic collection of statutes. This not only includes the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic statutes, but also the 613 ordinances of Israeli religious leaders through the centuries. These ordinances are additions – also called hedges or fences – by the religious leaders, allegedly to protect the people against transgressions. It was these “hedges” that Jesus addressed in Matthew 15:6-8, *“Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.”* (KJV)

Jesus makes an important statement in Luke 16:16, 17: *“The law and the prophets were until John [the Baptist]: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail.”*

This portion of Scripture is regularly used by the so-called Torah Observant groups to show that the law would never be terminated. Their understanding is unfortunately rooted therein that they do not see that little sentence within the context of the whole. Within that whole section (which starts with chapter 15) Jesus was taking the religious leaders to task that they were so attached to their own, manmade additions (traditions) to the original law, that they would rather see the Messianic kingdom pass them by than to relinquish even one tittle of their ordinances. See, for example, Matthew 15:6. It only goes to show again how important it is to rightly divide the Word.

- Bear in mind that Jesus was simply addressing the religious leaders in all His parables.

In Matthew 22:34-40 Jesus caught the Pharisees in their own trap about what the great commandment in the law was. He answered their question with, *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. **On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.**”*

In John 15:12, the portion about the true vine in whom they should abide, the Master extended the aforementioned by stating, *“This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have love you.”* Earlier (verse 8) He encouraged them to bear much fruit, as the Father would be glorified by it. This commandment is clearly on a higher level than loving your neighbour as you love yourself.

Paul and the Galatians

There are two important things to bear in mind here:

- While there are differences of opinion, credible evidence shows that the letter to the Galatians was Paul’s very first epistle (±49 AD).
- Paul was writing to mainly Christian converts from a non-Jewish background. In other words, the larger portion of his readers/audience had never been part of the Mosaic dispensation and therefore also never under the Law.

From the letter to the Galatians it clearly shows Paul had taught them that the law had been the protector and disciplinarian of the biological descendants of Abraham on their route to the prophetic Messiah. (3:24). This law was not based on faith, but on works (3:12). He pointed out that someone who did not observe and do all things written in the book of the law was cursed (3:10). To be circumcised as required by the law would profit them nothing, except to make them debtors to do the whole law (5:2, 3). Christ would be of no effect to them. In Philippians 3:2 Paul also referred to the circumcision as meaningless (actually calling it concision or mutilation). In Romans 2:29 he accentuates the circumcision of the heart, in the spirit.

In his discussion of the works of the flesh compared to the fruit of the Spirit (5:16-22), Paul was teaching them anew that the law of Christ was fulfilled by bearing one another's burdens. This they could only do by living and walking in the Spirit. Works by the law would not make any man righteous before God, but faith in Christ manifesting in good deeds (fruit of the Spirit) would do so.

The fact that they allow themselves to be misled by the Judaizers to observe special days, months, seasons and years, leaves Paul with the distraught feeling that he had wasted his time on them (4:11).

Paul and the letter to the Romans

Romans 13:8-10: *"Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."*

The letter to the Hebrews

We can consider Hebrews 9:11, 12 too, without the necessity of a complete analysis:

*"But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, **but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.**"*

To participate in festival rituals requiring the slaughter of animals today, is to declare that the blood of the Lamb of God was not sufficient.

The Acts of the Apostles

In this portion of the Scriptures we read of Paul's meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem. Following the discussions the record of the message that Paul and Barnabas were asked to convey to the Gentile converts reads as follows (Acts 15:24-29):

"Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well."

THE CHRISTIAN'S FREEDOM

Christ, as the reconciliation offering, has brought those among humanity who believed in Him as the prophetic Messiah everlasting reconciliation with God. Reconciliation means that a broken relationship has been restored. In the Mosaic dispensation a priest needed to stand before God as mediator between Him and the people. Now everyone has access to the Throne of Grace in Christ. We are not required to go up to Jerusalem to seek God's presence, but we worship God in spirit and in truth. Christ is the Way and the Truth and the Life.

The law of God was not destroyed or made null and void, but the law of Moses and the religious leaders' manmade traditions/hedges were. God's law is no longer written on stone tablets but in the heart of humans. The law requires humankind:

To love the Lord God with all that is within us; and

To love our neighbour as Christ loves us.

Our lives should show the fruit of the Spirit. Just as works without faith in Christ has no meaning (Gal 5:6), faith in Christ without works is also only lip-service (Jas 2:14) with a heart far removed from Him.

In his letter to the twelve tribes in the dispersion (the oldest work in the New Testament, c. 45 AD) James accentuates the true Christian life and freedom (3:13-18):

"Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace."

The foundation of it all is found in the Kingdom Constitution that is recorded in Matthew 5-7.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

From the bird's eye view in the previous pages, it seems to me that those who are allegedly Torah Observant, are only partly so and may try to philosophise themselves out of that corner. Also, I have found that some who faithfully observe the Sabbath on Saturdays do not even get that right, because the Hebraic Sabbath runs from Friday evening 18h00 to Saturday evening 18h00. The Hebrews base that on Genesis 1:5: *"(...) And the evening and the morning were the first day."*

The Sabbath concept comes down to "take a deep breath." The human's body needs a day of rest. We do not worship God one day per week only. Nonetheless, it is good if one's day of rest also means rest from the world around you and affords you more time to sit boldly at the Throne of Grace. In the same way God's food directives are praised and promoted by modern dieticians, God knew the body needs rest. In His wisdom He also prescribed times of rest for the arable land.

In His Great Commission, Jesus sent out His apostles to make disciples of all nations and to teach them all He had taught them. Jesus did not send them to teach observance of the Mosaic law. The Father wants people who worship

Him in spirit and in truth, not people who remain true to man-made traditions, however commendable they might be. It has to do with what lies in a person's heart.

And as far as true rest is concerned: The late John van der Berg, a South African radio broadcaster, stated in his weekly program on the former Springbok Radio: *"Rest is not elsewhere; it is on your threshold. It comes as a gift of grace from the inside, not from outside. It is not given through material things; you carve it into your life every moment with every broadening of faith in Him who said: 'Come to Me all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'"*

Painting of the Sermon on the Mount: Carl Heinrich Bloch [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons