



Chosen by God

The Jewish Roots of Christianity

Tradition!

"...we have traditions for everything....how to eat, how to sleep, even, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl... This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you—I don't know. But it's a tradition....Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof

If you have ever transplanted a tree, you know the challenge of preserving the roots as much as possible for the sake of the future health of the tree. The challenge that we have in unearthing the life giving Jewish roots of the Christian tree is that many other stray roots have gotten tangled in as well. As Fiddler on the Roof's character Tevye points out, traditions seem to define every aspect of Jewish life. For the Jews, these traditions provide stability in a crazy world, but for outsiders looking in, and trying to decipher their value, it can be quite overwhelming. At the risk of over-simplifying, I aim to place these traditions into three categories:

1. God ordained traditions
2. man-made traditions with a biblical basis
3. man-made traditions with little or no biblical basis

Before I go any further, I would like to point out that the traditions of any group of believers you visit are also going to fall into these same categories. Even evangelical Christian churches, who have a tradition of rejecting tradition, have practices that can be defined in each of these three ways.

Traditions established by God warrant, of course, our greatest attention. God designed and crafted the Jewish nation as a picture of what was to come, as a type of Christ and image of heaven. Those things that God instructed His people in the Old Testament, are still of great relevancy today. They have reason and purpose as the shape of the cup filled by Christ, the roots of the same vine of Christ that Gentiles have been grafted into.

The second type of tradition gets a little more tricky. A tradition not carried out according to specific instructions of God, but with a biblical basis, can still carry valid truths. For example, I doubt that our church's communion service bears much outward resemblance to that last supper of Christ with His disciples, or even with the custom of its observance in the earliest church. As we practice it, it carries with it a lot of man-made customs, but also still carries the value of its biblical basis. Roger E. Olson, in an article called "The Tradition Temptation", compares this sort of tradition to past Supreme Court decisions of how the Constitution should be upheld. Case law sets a precedent for future decisions, but the Constitution is still the ultimate authority. Past history of courtroom decisions has valuable merit, but as a secondary authority. Honestly, the bulk of what we do, and perhaps of Jewish custom as well, falls into this category. We have to carefully weigh when these secondary authorities are a help, and when they are a harm.

Then there is the last category of tradition that has very little, or no, connection to God's Word. Once identified as such, these will be tossed aside, as imposters that have no life to give.

Tradition in the Bible



We struggle with how we should view tradition. On the one hand, it has value in lending the insights and examples of those gone before to strengthen our own faith and give it a framework that makes us less susceptible to cultural fads and the whims of persuasive and charismatic leaders. The traditions can lend the accountability of “a great cloud of witnesses”.

On the other hand, tradition itself can be elevated above Scripture and the working of the Holy Spirit. We can become reliant on tradition in a way that makes us too lazy to search the Words of God, or to know Him in a personal way. We can come to trust more in laws for our salvation, than in our Lord.

It is no surprise that we feel this tension about tradition, because we see it even in Scripture. Sometimes it is presented as a positive, other times as a negative. The Greek word for tradition (*paradosis*), is used 13 times in the New Testament. While it is translated tradition in the King James version, and in the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version translates it differently according to whether it is helpful or harmful.

Look at each of these passages, and mark whether tradition is reported by Scripture in a good light, or a bad light:

| Reference | description | Helpful | Harmful |
|--------------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|
| Matt. 15:2,3,6 | | | |
| Mark 7:3,5,8,9,13 | | | |
| 1 Cor. 11:2 | | | |
| Gal. 1:14-17 | | | |
| Col. 2:8 | | | |
| 2 Thess. 2 :15 2 Thess. 3:6 | | | |

What makes the difference whether the tradition is presented as a positive, or a negative? _____

What is the tradition to be followed according to 2 Peter 1:16-21? _____

What does Peter warn about Paul’s God given wisdom, along with other Scripture in 2 Peter 3:14-18? _____

What “traditions” was Jesus supportive of in Matt. 5:17-20? _____

While the Greek word for abolish (*katalyo*) means to dissolve, demolish, or disunite, the word for fulfill (*pleroo*) means to fully satisfy, fill to the brim, or cause to abound. What did Jesus say to the Sadducees in Matt. 22:32 to reinforce this? _____

The **shema** is repeated by an observant Jew twice daily. It is a recitation of the words of Deut. 6:4-5. These would have, therefore, been very familiar words to any Jew. What is significant about Jesus’ use of the Jewish shema with the Pharisee in Matt. 22:34-40? _____

Jesus, our divine example of living in relationship with God, shows us the balance. He did not throw out the traditions in which He was raised, **unless** they were of the man-made sort that was harmful to the true worship of God.

What did Jesus criticize the Pharisees for in Matt. 23? _____

Jesus fulfilled the essence of Jewish tradition, or the heart of the Law, but opposed anything contrary to it. What is the heart of the matter for Christians? _____

The Broken Link

Much of our confusion about Jewish tradition in particular stems from the fact that while many thousands of Jews accepted Christ as the Messiah, there was another group of Jews who took a sharp detour from God's original intention for them. After the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., there was a surge of growth among the still largely Jewish "cult" that followed Yeshua (Jesus). But, there were also a group of Jewish rabbis who had rejected Jesus and were faced with the challenge of preserving a nation of people that had been devastated, and a religion whose central system of sacrifice and worship had been destroyed with the temple. Instead of being driven to see their need for the once and for all atoning sacrifice of Christ, this errant group just redefined their religion, severing their link to the most important aspects of their heritage.

Under the leadership of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, (a Pharisee who trained under the Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus) a deal was struck with the Roman emperor Vespian to spare the city of Yabneh where a group of rabbis gathered to create a new center for Judaism. There they founded a school, and a new set of requirements for salvation. (Bernis, 166) What was born was what is now called Rabbinic Judaism, where the words of the rabbis have become more important than the words of God. The new definition of salvation for this new sort of Jew has three parts:

1. **teshuva** - repentance
2. **tefillah** - prayer
3. **mitzvoth** - good deeds

While these are all very good things, and have their place in our relationship with God, they leave out the essential blood sacrifice initiated by God after the sin of Adam and Eve, carried through in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, and ultimately fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. This began a tradition very contrary to the essence of the Old Testament, as well as the New.

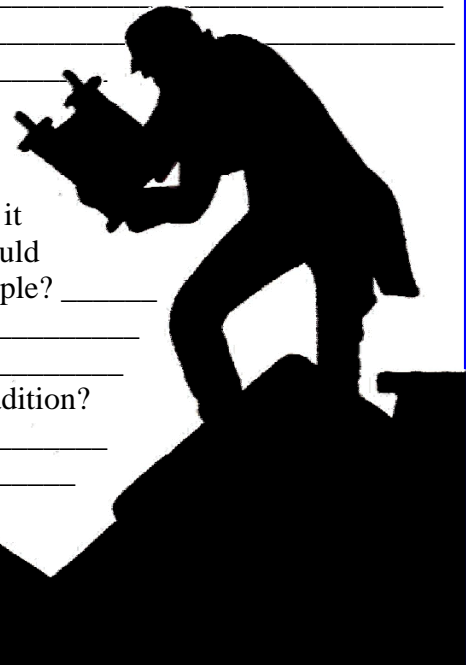
According to Jonathan Bernis, a messianic Jew, and author of "A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth", it is this Rabbinic form of Judaism to which most of the today's 13.3 million Jews belong. This is a vastly different Judaism than we find at the time of Christ. Some of the traditions of today's Jew still herald back to their biblical roots, and others do not. Our task is to sort out what is meaningful to us as Christians, from what is a departure from God's purposes.

What advice does 1 Thess. 5:19-22 give us in this matter? _____

What is our standard for determining what is good? _____

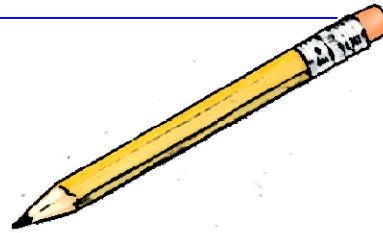
The post temple rabbis were determined to halt the spread of Christianity. One of the ways they tried to do this was by banning the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, because it was what most of the followers of Christ were using. Most Jews could read Greek, but not Hebrew. What did this step cost the Jewish people? _____

What caution should we exercise when we consider a break with tradition? _____



WORDSEARCH

WORDS TO KNOW



Find these words:

HALAKHAH—the totality of Jewish law. Consists of the Torah, the Talmud, and other Jewish writings.

MISHNA—the oral law. Thought to be given to Moses on Mt. Sinai along with the Torah.

TORAH—The first 5 books of the Old Testament, also called the Book of Moses, or the Pentateuch

PARADOSIS—Greek word for “tradition” in the New Testament.

MITZVOT—good deeds. The 613 commandments that Jews must follow.

RABBI—title for a Jewish teacher

SHEMA—the twice daily recitation of Deut. 6:4-5

TALMUD—the collected teachings of ancient Jewish rabbis that form the centerpiece of modern rabbinic Judaism. Includes the Mishna, and the Gemara (a commentary)

TANAKH—the Old Testament

TEFILLA—prayer

TESHUVA—repentance

YESHUA—Jewish name for Jesus



Can you name the Jewish elements in our theme artwork, and its significance to both the Jew and the Christian? Keep a watch for these in our lessons!

scroll

cup

shofar

olive branch

star of David

dove

grapes

wheat

menorah

SOURCES:

Watch a video of the song Traditions from The Fiddler on the Roof : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRdfX7ut8gw>

Bernis, Jonathan. *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth*. Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2011. 163-178. Print.

Olson, Roger E. *The Tradition Temptation*. CurrentIssuesBibleStudy.com 2003. Web document.



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