

Should Christians Observe the Israelite Festivals?

The Relationship of Biblical Judaism and Christianity...

At Sinai God organized the Israelites into a nation through which He would reveal to the world the provisions of His grace. He entrusted to them the written Scriptures (Rom 3:1-2), the Ten Commandments, and a large body of instruction based on that Decalogue. Israel inherited the religious faith of the patriarchs, a faith that included the cherished hope of the Messiah who would come through their nation. God also enlarged the ancient ritual system and centered it now in a tabernacle temple sanctuary (Rom 9:4-5).

It was Israel's privilege to preserve the knowledge of the true God and to uphold before the surrounding nations the truth regarding the advent of the Messiah and the blessings that would flow from that event. "In thy seed," God promised Abraham, "shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen 22:18). Little wonder then that Jesus could affirm to the woman of Samaria, "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

Although an obvious distinction exists between the religion of Israel and that of Christianity, the biblical faith of Israel forms a rich heritage for the Christian religion. The same God, the same moral law of the Ten Commandments, the same Messiah (hoped for by Israel; believed to have come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth by Christians), and the same saving truths and moral guidelines clearly indicate their spiritual unity. The biblical faith of Hebrew and Christian is the same (Heb 1:1-2).

Christians do not offer sacrifices, but it is incorrect to conclude that all the instructions given by Moses ceased at the cross and have no validity for Christian faith and practice. In addition to the Ten Commandments much of the counsel entrusted to this people is of permanent worth. For example, dietary matters regarding clean/unclean flesh food were not ceremonial directives.

These instructions were part of Israel's spiritual inheritance from the patriarchs. These distinctions were known before the Flood (Gen 7:3). The custom of tithing is another practice preserved by Israel from the patriarchal faith that is still valid in the Christian church. And Christians continue to follow the guidelines God gave to Moses regarding sexual morality such as the laws of incest and the prohibitions against various forms of illicit sex. Furthermore, although Christians do not form a theocracy nor are confined to a Palestinian environment, much instruction related to those circumstances is still valuable in principle.

But while the Bible speaks of the continuity of religious faith, it also underscores a certain clear-cut discontinuity between the two religions. Specifically, the ritual aspect of Israelite worship has ceased in the Christian faith. "In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away" (Heb 8:13).

The rites and ceremonies of the typical system of animal sacrifices with their accompanying festivals and new moon feasts were intended by their very nature to be only temporary. "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Heb 10:4).

The typical system was designed and instituted by God to point the faith of both patriarch and Israelite forward – by symbol and type – to the coming Redeemer, to His atoning death, and to His priestly ministry of intercession (Isa 53:12). When He came – giving His life for the expiation of sin and entering in upon His priestly office – type met Antitype. The rendering of the inner veil of the Temple at the moment of His death clearly signified the cessation of all ceremonial aspects of Israelite worship (Matt 27:50-51; Luke 23:45). The Substance of the shadow-types had come, the "Sun of righteousness." Naturally, the shadow-types were intended to fade away before the Reality.

Action of the Apostolic Council...

From time to time, however, there have been Christians who have argued for the continuing validity of the Israelite festivals (Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread; Pentecost; Blowing of Trumpets; Day of Atonement; Feast of Tabernacles; and new moon feasts).

The question whether Christians should continue with the typical festivals of the Israelite faith is an old one. The apostles themselves addressed it in the first years of the Christian church and settled the issue.

The first Christians were Jews. A “great company of the priests” had joined (Acts 6:7) as well as many from the “sect of the Pharisees” (Acts 15:5). As these, and other Jewish Christians, began to see Gentile converts filling the ranks of the church without adopting the rituals of Judaism, they became disturbed. The new Gentile Christians rejoiced in their salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, but the Jewish Christians insisted: “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). The term “circumcision” as used here stood for the whole of the religious practices of Israel: the sacrificial system with its various rituals and festivals. This is seen clearly from the further remark by these same Jewish Christians: “It [is] needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5).

Thus the first Apostolic Council (A.D. 49) assembled in Jerusalem to ascertain the mind of God in respect to Jewish rituals and the Christian faith. After much discussion the apostle Peter observed that the Holy Spirit Himself had already decided the question (Acts 15:7-11). The very fact that the Holy Spirit had come in a full manifestation upon the Gentile Cornelius and his household and friends – even though they did not practice the rites of Judaism – was clear evidence that one could be saved by faith in Jesus Christ without participation in the sacrificial system. He said:

“[God] put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. . . . But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (vs. 9-11).

Because of this action of the Holy Spirit, the apostles took the position that Gentile Christians would not be required to observe any of the religious rites and festivals of Judaism. As chairman of the meeting, James declared, “my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which among the Gentiles are turned to God” (vs. 19).

However, in order to facilitate the bonding of these two diverse groups in the Christian church (Jews and Gentiles), they requested Gentile Christians to abstain from food offered to idols, to avoid sexual immorality, and to abstain from eating animal blood or the flesh of a strangled animal. Two of the items related to idolatry and immorality – both violations of the Ten Commandments but so widespread in the culture that the Gentile Christians needed to be cautioned lest they sin in these matters unwittingly. Both of the other two prohibitions probably related to the eating of animal blood, a prohibition that God gave all humankind at the close of the Flood when flesh was first permitted to be eaten (Gen 9:3-4). This was part of the legacy of the patriarchal faith. No Jewish Christian could have had table-fellowship with a Gentile Christian who lived in violation of these fundamental instructions.

It is important to note just what the apostles wrote to the Gentile Christians with respect to these four stipulations and the ceremonial system as a whole: “For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.” (v 28)

Observe two things:

1. It was the Holy Spirit who actively canceled the observation of the ceremonial system which included its festivals and other feast days.
2. The apostles concurred with the Spirit’s action and released Gentile Christians from all obligation to participate in the rituals and festivals.

We must recognize, however, that this was a transition period. The issue under discussion was restricted at this time to Gentile Christians – what the church required of them with regard to the ceremonial system. Nothing was said about Jewish Christians. It would not have been easy for a life-long observer of the rituals to have withdrawn immediately from all participation. However, eventually it would be reasoned that if a Gentile Christian could be saved without

observing the rites, so could a Jewish Christian. Consequently, in this transition period, we find some continuing observation by the apostle Paul and other Jewish Christian brethren.

Unfortunately there was also some unnecessary arguing among Christians where the congregations were mixed. The apostle was constrained to write the Roman church the following counsel regarding the festivals and other feasts:

“One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it.” (Rom 14:5-6)

Then the apostle strongly appealed to the congregation to cease from the internal criticism on this and similar points that produced so much unrest and weakened their fellowship (vss. 10-13). With the destruction of the Temple any lingering observance of the rites and festivals by Jewish Christians ceased.

Pauline Statements...

While the majority of members in the early Christian church came into agreement with the decision of the Council, there remained a Judaizing faction who continued to agitate the question. As a result we have two further statements by the apostle Paul which underscore the position the apostolic Council took in A.D. 49.

Ephesians 2:15. The New Testament not only views the Israelite ritual system of shadow-types as aging and worn out (Heb 8:13). It also recognizes that it became corrupted by many accretions of rabbinical devising (cf. Mark 7:3-4, 7-8). Furthermore, the system degenerated into a salvation-by-works program. These were the conditions that led the apostle Peter to ask at the Council: “Why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we are able to bear?” (Acts 15:10).

Not only had the typical system of worship developed into a galling “yoke,” but it had also, in its corrupted state, formed a “middle wall of partition” between the practicing Jew and the inquiring Gentile. It is in this setting that the apostle Paul declares that Christ “abolished” the ritual system:

“For he is our peace, who hath made both one [believing Jew and Gentile], and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace.” (Eph 2:14-15)

“The law of commandments contained in ordinances” is generally understood to refer to the ritual or ceremonial precepts that regulated sanctuary-temple worship. The Pulpit Commentary on Ephesians 2:15 states: The law abolished or superseded by Christ was the law of positive requirements embodied in the things decreed, evidently the ceremonial law of the Jews, certainly not the moral law (see Rom 3.31). By removing this, Jesus removed that which had become the occasion of bitter feelings between Jews and Gentiles; the Jew looking down proudly on the Gentile, and the Gentile despising what he deemed the fantastic rites of the Jews.

Colossians 2:14-17. It has been observed that there are many similarities between the apostle Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. The passage in the latter which parallels Ephesians 2:15 is recorded in Colossians 2:14-17. Here again Paul plainly states that Christ “[Blotted] out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way,” and “[nailed] it to his cross” (v 14). In view of Christ’s abolishing/blotting out of the ceremonial institution, the apostle Paul summarizes, in effect, the implications for Christians:

“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday [Greek, *heorte* = feast day/festival], or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”(v.16-17)

Verse 17 is the key to the passage inasmuch as it identifies the nature of “the handwriting of ordinances.” According to this verse “the handwriting of ordinances” dealt with the ceremonial system – with the shadow-types (“a shadow of things to come”). See a similar statement by the apostle in Hebrews 10:1-4. In other words the apostle Paul is speaking of typical eating/ drinking – such as the Passover meal, the typical feasts/festivals and new moon feasts, and of the seven annual

ceremonial sabbaths (see Lev 23). All these items had their part in the system to foreshadow the coming Messiah and aspects of His death and priesthood.

These two Pauline passages (Eph 2:15; Col 2:14-17) plainly teach that the ceremonial system of Israel (which included all the rituals, festivals and feasts that centered in the Temple sanctuary) was abolished and blotted out by the atoning death of Jesus Christ. The apostle's

statements are in full harmony with the decision of the Apostolic Council in A.D. 49. Consequently, the apostle appealed to his fellow Christians to cease from judging – from criticizing those who did not observe the festivals and other practices of the ritual system (vs. 16; cf. Rom.14:5-6).

How long is 'forever'?

A major reason why some Christians are led to believe that the typical festivals of the Temple should be observed permanently as part of the Christian religion is because Israel was instructed to keep them "forever." For example:

"And this day [Passover] shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever [Hebrew, 'olam]." (Exod. 12:14)

"And ye shall observe the feast of unleavened bread; for in this selfsame day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt: therefore shall ye observe this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever [Hebrew, 'olam]." (Exodus 12:17)

To Western minds the expression "forever" means "endlessness." However, this is not the meaning to the Eastern mind-set when either the Hebrew or Greek is used. While these terms may be translated "forever" or "everlasting/eternal" in English, both the Hebrew and Greek words derive their length from the nature of the object described.

For example, if we say, "God lives forever" (in Hebrew/Greek terms), we do, indeed, mean "endless," because by nature the Deity is immortal or eternal. But if we were to say, "King Darius, live for ever" (Dan 6:6), it would simply mean, Live a long life. The phrase would not mean "endlessness" at all, because man is mortal and subject to death (Job 4:17). For another example, see 2 Samuel 7:16, 19. Although God promised David a dynastic throne that would last "for ever," David understood the promise to mean "for a great while to come." It actually ended with Zedekiah in 586 B.C. The emphasis of the Hebrew and Greek terms translated "for ever" in the Bible is on duration. A thing or person exists continuously without break – endlessly or until it comes to an end – according to its nature.

Thus, when God called for the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread to be observed "for ever" (or more accurately, that the ordinance governing these should be an "everlasting/eternal" ordinance), He simply meant that these typical festivals were intended to be observed regularly for as long as He intended the typical system to last. In this case, it meant a regular, annual observance of these festivals until the Messiah – the Antitype to their symbolism – should come and die for the sins of the world. "Christ our passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Cor 5:7). By its very nature no typical rite or observance was ever intended to be permanent.

Conclusion...

The action of the apostles at the Jerusalem Council (A.D. 49) and the teachings of the apostle Paul clearly indicate that the Holy Spirit led the early believers to terminate participation in the ceremonial system of Israel. There was a brief transition period for Jewish Christians, but Gentile Christians were immediately relieved from any obligation. The supernatural tearing of the inner veil – exposing the Most Holy Place – at the time of Christ's death had already signified the end of the system of shadow-types.

Christians can now rejoice now in the historical facts of Christ's death, resurrection, and priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. No longer must believers trace the promise of God's salvation from sin in the dim shadows of the type. The Reality towards which the whole ceremonial system pointed has now come, and the worn out shadow forms have receded.