



The Bible and the Traditions of Men

And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

"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."

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

I've thought on this for a while. What were the "commandments of men" Isaiah spoke of, the "tradition of men?" I believe it was nothing less than the oral tradition handed down by the scribes and rabbis of the day. This oral tradition was quite involved and complex. Finally rabbis wrote it down, sometime in the fourth century.

I picked up an English translation of the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud for the Nook from Barnes and Noble a while back. They're both a horribly dry read, page after page of this rabbi says this, but that rabbi says something else with long convoluted arguments over the meaning of words.

CHAPTER 1

MISHNAH. FROM WHAT TIME MAY ONE RECITE THE SHEMA' IN THE EVENING?

FROM THE TIME THAT THE PRIESTS ENTER [THEIR HOUSES] IN ORDER TO EAT THEIR TERUMAH UNTIL THE END OF THE FIRST WATCH. THESE ARE THE WORDS OF R. ELIEZER. THE SAGES SAY: UNTIL MIDNIGHT. R. GAMALIEL SAYS: UNTIL THE DAWN COMES UP...

It goes on like this, with literally dozens of pages of argument and counter argument in the Gemara. At one point in that discussion we find this question and answer.

Furthermore why does he deal first with the evening [Shema']? Let him begin with the

morning [Shema']! - The Tanna bases himself on the Scripture, where it is written [And thou shalt recite them] ... when thou list down and when thou rises to up, and he states [the oral law] thus: When does the time of the recital of the Shema' of lying down begin? When the priests enter to eat their terumah. And if you like, I can answer: He learns [the precedence of the evening] from the account of the creation of the world, where it is written, And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

The writer then goes on to argue about apparent inconsistencies in the Tanna's order of presentation elsewhere, and possible reasons for it, and to further elaborate on various things. For example on when priests go in to eat their terumah (at the rising of the stars) and whether priests and the poor men share the same time, as well as why the Tanna didn't say "from the time of the appearance of the stars."

Now I'm not knocking Judaism, and I'm not about to pretend to have studied the Talmud. I'm simply presenting my first impressions about the little of it I've read as an introduction to the rest of this post.

So what is the Shema' the rabbis argue about here? According to the notes I found in the Talmud, it's found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. - Deuteronomy 6:4-9

And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full. Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; And then the Lord's wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord giveth you. Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt write them upon the door

posts of thine house, and upon thy gates: That your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which the Lord swore unto your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon the earth. - Deuteronomy 11:13-21

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue: And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring: That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God. I am the Lord your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God. - Numbers 15:37-41

Does any of that mention the time of the appearance of the stars? Does any of it mention the eating of the terumah? Does it say anything about when, if you haven't recited this that it's too late to do so? And what about when you sit in your house or walk along the way? For that matter, why is it that the Shema' must be recited this way? These passages of Scripture are separated by many more passages, and appear (at least in the Christian bible) in different books and even out-of-order.

I could be wrong, but the impression I get from reading this is that the Lord wanted Israel to remember who he is, to remember his words and commands. To think on these things continually and to teach their children. The ritual clothing, the writing of them on the door posts of their houses, and the regular and frequent discussion of these things were for Israel's benefit as a way to help them remember the grace, mercy, and holiness of God and not merely some rigid ritual that you must do "just so".

And yet here we find disputes over obligatory times when these things must be "recited" instead of discussed and taught. The emphasis has turned from remembering God's grace and mercy to a rigid, formal procedure to be followed precisely, and arguments over what lapses in this ritual are acceptable.

Yes, I know I've gone far afield from the Pharisees' complaint about eating with unwashed hands and Jesus' rebuke. But look at it from this perspective: There were about 1,500 years from the time Moses wrote Numbers and Deuteronomy and the time Jesus and the Pharisees argued about unwashed hands. The Talmud was committed to parchment about another 350 or so years after that. Meanwhile close to the same amount of time as passed between the writing of Deuteronomy and the Talmud has separated us from the events of Mark 7:5-8.

The Talmud consists of commentary and "oral law" that goes beyond the scriptures. The oral law and the commentaries on it grew over thousands of years, as discussions and exposition of the law and the prophets.

Today we have thousands of years of traditions, hundreds of years of commentary and exposition of the New Testament available to us. Much of this tradition is extra-biblical, such as the rituals and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, or the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the Mormons. Much more of it has led to the many schisms between the protestant churches.

The words of Isaiah and of Jesus make it clear that we should focus on the Word of God, and not the traditions of men. Remember the Bereans described in Acts 17:10-12. We should eagerly listen to hear the word preached, but we should also always test what we hear and read against what Scripture actually says (and not just what we want it to say).

Commentaries are useful to help us to understand Scripture and its context. Even so, they are no substitute for prayerful study of the Bible led by the Holy Spirit. After all, it's for our benefit.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. - 2 Timothy 3:14-17