

Biblical Cults 3: The Cult of Tradition
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Readings

Torah: Exodus 18:13-26; Deuteronomy 6:1-2

Haftarah: Joshua 21:43 – 22:6; Isaiah 29:10-16

Apostolic: Matthew 22:34 – 23:3; Mark 7:1-13;

2 Thessalonians 2:1-14; Romans 3:19-31; Acts 15:1-12

This is part three of a four-part series called “Biblical Cults.” The idea is that there are certain cultic behaviors that have developed among Believers based on latching on to specific verses in the Bible and taking them out of context. The four “Biblical Cults” I’m looking at over these four weeks are what I call The Cult of Grace, The Cult of Law, The Cult of Tradition, and The Cult of Karaism or The Cult of Anti-Tradition. In the past two weeks, we covered The Cults of Grace and Law, and today we’re going to tackle the Cult of Tradition.

First, let’s define what we mean by “cult.” The word itself comes from the Latin *cultus* care, adoration, from *colere* to cultivate. In other words, a cult is a formal religious group with identifiable followers that seeks to cultivate a specific set of beliefs that might be considered not quite kosher.

Now, let’s look at the word “tradition.” In our English translation, the first appearance of the word “tradition” – the only appearance of the word in the Tanakh – is in Isaiah 29:13, where we read, “Then the Lord said, “Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote...”

What does that mean, “tradition learned by rote”? Let’s examine the Hebrew behind these words. The first one will probably surprise you; it surprised me:

Tradition = Mitsvah

Strong's Number: 4687

Definition: commandment, commandment (of man), the commandment (of God), commandment (of code of wisdom)

NAS Word Usage - Total: 186

command 15, commanded 7, commandment 34, commandments 118, commands 2, obligation 1, prescribed 2, terms 1, things 4, tradition* 1, what 1

Learned = Lamad

Strong's Number: 3925

Definition: to learn. teach, exercise in, (Qal) to learn, (Piel) to teach, (Pual) to be taught, be trained

NAS Word Usage - Total: 84

accept 1, expert 1, instruct 1, instructors 1, learn 15, learned 5, really learn 1, skillful 1, taught 15, teach 30, teachers 1, teaches 3, teaching 1, teaching and again 1, train 1, trained 2, trains 3, untrained* 1

“Rote” has been added. Now, that is the New American Standard translation. In the King James Version, that phrase is “precepts of men” or, in the Hebrew, “mitzvot enosh” or the commandments of mortal men. We read that “their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.” Not by the Word of God, but by the precept or commandment of men!

This is what I mean by The Cult of Tradition. The Cult of Tradition is made up of people for whom their reverence for God is based not on their understanding and obedience to the Word of God, but to the commandment of men. There are two wings to The Cult of Tradition: The Cult of Rabbinic Tradition and The Cult of Church Tradition. The cult of Rabbinic Tradition has its roots in two Scriptures. First, we read in:

Exodus 18:13-26

It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening. Now when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?” Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.” Moses' father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. “Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.” So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. They judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge.

We've discussed this passage many times. This is the establishment of the Torah Court system which, eventually, gave us the rabbis, who made oral rulings that were, eventually, written down in the Talmud, the codification of the oral traditions, which they called Oral Torah or Oral Law. The Believers who are a part of The Cult of Rabbinic Tradition tie this in with:

Matthew 22:34 – 23:3

But when the Pharisees heard that Yeshua had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Torah?”

And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Yeshua asked them a question: “What do you think about the Messiah, whose son is He?” They said to Him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying, ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I PUT YOUR ENEMIES BENEATH YOUR FEET"’? If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question. Then Yeshua spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the Seat of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.”

Adherents to The Cult of Rabbinic Tradition say that this passage contains a divine mandate to follow as religious law the traditions handed down from the Pharisees to us today... in other words, that we should live according to the traditions and customs of Orthodox Judaism, because they are those whom Yeshua said sit in the Seat of Moses and should be followed.

So, that defines The Cult of Rabbinic Tradition. Much like the adherents to The Cult of Grace, The Cult of Church Tradition points to passages like:

Titus 1:13-16

This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.

To those who adhere to The Cult of Church Tradition, this means not only that “The Law” has been done away with, but that anything that is traditionally Jewish is a myth and if you follow it you are following the commandments of men and have turned away from the truth. Nevermind that we read in Romans 3:1-2, “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.” We cannot be involving ourselves in anything like Judaism. Afterall, our great church leaders had those who were coming into the faith make this oath:

I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews, and all the other feasts of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspersions, purifications, sanctifications and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths, and superstitions, and hymns and chants and observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom, and above all I renounce Antichrist, whom all the Jews await in the figure and form of Christ; and I join myself to the true Christ and God.

And I believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Holy, Consubstantial and Indivisible Trinity, and the dispensation in the flesh and the descent to men of the Word of God, of the one person of the Holy Trinity, and I confess that he was truly made man, and I believe and proclaim that after the flesh in very truth the Blessed Virgin Mary bore him the son of God. and I believe in, receive, venerate and embrace the adorable Cross of Christ, and the holy images; and thus, with my whole heart, and soul, and with a true faith I come to the Christian Faith. But if it be with deceit and with hypocrisy, and not with a sincere and perfect faith and a genuine love of Christ, but with a pretence to a be Christian that I come, and if afterwards I shall wish to deny and return to Jewish superstition, or shall be found eating with Jews, or feasting with them, or secretly conversing and condemning the Christian religion instead of openly confuting them and condemning their vain faith, then let the trembling of Cain and the leprosy of Gehazi cleave to me, as well as the legal punishments to which I acknowledge myself liable. And may I be anathema in the world to come, and may my soul be set down with Satan and the devils.'

We'll talk more about this oath on Yom Kippur. However, this should clue you in more to what Yeshua was talking about in:

Mark 7:6-13

And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'. "But you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that."

The Rabbinic Tradition Cultists tell us we have to live a "frum" or Orthodox lifestyle. Many forsake fellowshiping with other Believers who don't meet the traditional standards in order to pursue the tradition. Many of them even seek to undergo Orthodox or Conservative conversion to Judaism! They say that they will not denounce Yeshua to do so, and that they have been told they don't have to... but what happens if they are? Remember, these people believe that these Jewish leaders sit in the Seat of Moses and thus, according to Yeshua, we should do as they say!

The Church Tradition Cultists say forget all of that Jewish stuff, including the Commandments found in the Bible. It's all Jewish myths. Renounce the customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews! Come join us on Sunday for Church and then come over afterwards to my place for Sunday Dinner. The missus is making her famous honey-glazed ham; you don't want to miss that!

The Cult of Tradition is not an organized religious group. It is people who ignore what is written and replace those commandments with the commandments of men, whether they be rabbis or pastors. They may pay some lip service to these traditions having their roots in the Scripture, but when you get right down to it, they are more likely to quote from the Talmud or the writings of the Church than they are from God's Word.

There is a serious line that can be crossed here. This attitude is just a step away from open rejection of the Acts 15 ruling that rejected the mandate of taking on the yoke of the Jewish traditions as a requirement of salvation. They may be using Church traditions or Rabbinic traditions, but the Circumcision Faction is still with us today, pushing traditions on us as the only way to walk out God's Word... and if you don't do it their way, you're not saved. Even if they don't actually say that, people with this attitude are adherents to The Cult of Tradition.