

Do Christians Have to Keep the Torah? The Cases of Matthew and Luke-Acts by Isaac W. Oliver

If in the past many supposed that any substantial attachment by Christians to the observance of Jewish customs essentially vanished after the first generation of Jewish followers of Jesus passed away, it is now conceivable that many Christians remained open and even committed to observing the Torah after 70 CE—the year when the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans.

Ever wonder why most Christians today do not keep kosher, observe the Sabbath, or practice circumcision on the eighth day as many Jews traditionally do? Didn't Christianity, after all, start out as a *Jewish movement* and emerge from within Jewish society? Weren't Jesus and all of his first disciples Jewish?

For a long time it was not uncommon to posit that Jesus was responsible for the dispensation of such practices. Jesus was the first "Christian," who had come to announce the end of the Torah and Judaism. Draining Jesus of his Jewishness reached its unfortunate peak with the rise of Nazism when Jesus was even cast by some as an Aryan! However, ever since the end of World War II, the Jewishness of Jesus has been gradually resurfacing. "Blame" for the Christian distancing from Jewish practice has shifted instead to Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. Traditionally, Paul has been viewed as an "apostate" from Judaism who founded a new religion, Christianity. Yet even Paul's relationship to his Jewish heritage, including the complex question of his attitude toward the Torah, is being revisited and intensely debated among scholars of early Judaism and Christianity. It is also

becoming clearer that many early Christians continued to conceive of their faith in Jewish terms and even identify themselves with the Jewish people and story for longer than previously thought. Social scientific analysis of early Christianity and Judaism further reminds us that the social reality on the ground was always more complicated than the idealist and often polemical depictions found in some of the early Christian literature that has survived history. Many of the early Christian works that have been preserved were written by Christian intellectuals—often opposed to Judaism and the observance of Jewish custom—who tried to assert their theological ideals and norms upon other Christians. The average Christian on the street, however, might have cared little about what some of these church fathers wrote or preached from the pulpit. As late as the fourth century of the Common Era, John Chrysostom, was vociferously (and in some ways helplessly) trying to convince his Christian parishioners in Antioch not to attend services at synagogues and observe Jewish festivals (see his work, *Against the Jews*). Certainly, the surviving literature does not tell us the whole story about the complex history of Jewish-Christian relations.

We should be open to the possibility, therefore, that other Christians, including some of the writers of the documents now contained in the New Testament, were more favorable toward their Jewish heritage and surroundings than previously thought, Jewish practice included. If in the past many supposed that any substantial attachment by Christians to the observance of Jewish customs essentially vanished after the first generation of Jewish followers of Jesus passed away, it is now conceivable that many Christians remained open and even committed to observing the Torah after 70 CE—the year when the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. The Gospel of Matthew is one of the principal witnesses for making such an inference, since it was written after 70 CE (a number of allusions to the

destruction of the temple are embedded in this gospel: 22:7; 23:37–38; 24:15–19; 27:25). Quite striking is the statement on the Jewish Law made by Jesus in Matthew 5:17–18: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”* Although one could take this statement to mean that Jesus simply came to fulfill messianic prophecies contained in the Jewish scriptures, there seems to be more at stake in this statement than mere prophecy. The declaration in vv. 17–18 is accompanied by an important statement that clearly addresses matters related to *observance*: “Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (5:19).

What do the words “these commandments” refer to? According to Matthew 5:1, Jesus has been sitting on a mountain teaching his disciples. This imagery recalls Moses on Mt. Sinai who delivered the Torah to the people of Israel. Furthermore, the Greek word for “commandment” (*envtolē*), which appears in 5:19, is often used in early Jewish and Christian literature written in Greek to translate the Hebrew word *mitzvah*. Till this very day the word *mitzvah* is used in Jewish circles to refer to the commandments of the Mosaic Torah, a total of 613 according to rabbinic tradition. It is likely, therefore, that commandments from the Torah are envisaged in 5:19. After all, in the next verses of the same chapter (5:21–48), Jesus discusses the observance of specific laws from the Torah, elaborating on what it truly means to refrain from committing murder, adultery, and the like. In these verses, Jesus does not dismiss the importance of observing the Torah. Rather, he provides his own interpretation on its meaning that in many ways amplifies its application. For example, to commit

adultery means no longer simply to have sexual relations with another married woman; even looking at and desiring another married woman constitutes adultery!

Some scholars such as David Sim have even taken the declaration in 5:19 as an anti-Pauline statement. In other words, the Gospel of Matthew would be rejecting antinomian views held or perceived to be held by Paul positing that certain laws of the Torah (circumcision, Sabbath, etc.) were no longer in effect since the advent of Jesus. Although this is one possible reading of the verse, the immediate literary context points the reader's attention to *Pharisees*:

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). Elsewhere, Matthew stresses the importance of keeping the "moral" or "ethical" requirements of the Torah over the "ritual" commandments of the Jewish Law. The moral or ethical laws dictate how humans should relate to one another. Ritual commandments, on the other hand, refer to those laws that are meant to set the Jews aside as a people chosen to serve their particular deity; they include such things as the observance of the Sabbath, festivals, circumcision, as well as certain purity and dietary laws. Matthew's Jesus accuses the Pharisees for neglecting the practice of ethics by focusing on the ritual: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the *weightier matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others" (23:23).

Here, Matthew uses the term "weightier matters of the law" to describe the moral commandments of keeping justice, mercy, and faith. The Pharisees allegedly focus on fulfilling "lighter," ritual commandments such as tithing herbs (whether Pharisees actually behaved this way is an entirely different question). Nevertheless, Matthew's Jesus

does not completely dismiss the necessity of observing the rituals laws. He states that the Pharisees should observe the weightier commandments *without neglecting the other ritual laws*. The problem concerns prioritization. The ritual cannot override the maintenance of high ethical standards.

This principle helps us understand the approach to the question of ritual observance elsewhere in the gospel of Matthew. For example, nowhere in Matthew does Jesus announce the abrogation of the Sabbath. Matthew's discussion focuses always *on the manner* in which the Sabbath should be observed. When the ritual observance clashes with ethical considerations, the former cannot lead to the neglect of the latter. Ethical considerations must enjoy priority and may even momentarily suspend the fulfillment of ritual commandments. Thus, Jesus' hungry and itinerant disciples are entitled to pluck and eat grain on the Sabbath, for this relieves a basic human need and fulfills the ethical principle of showing mercy to those in need (12:7). The same applies to the question of whether one may heal the sick on the Sabbath. It is lawful, indeed ethically necessary, to attend on the Sabbath day to the physical needs of those suffering from various diseases (12:10–12).

Jews during the Second Temple period and beyond debated in which circumstances one could momentarily suspend the Sabbath. Some Jews took a very stringent attitude: they refused to fight on the Sabbath, preferring to forsake their own lives. However, the clan of the Maccabees, who rebelled against the Seleucids, concluded that fighting on the Sabbath was necessary. Otherwise, their Jewish kindred would perish in combat (1 Maccabees 1:31–41). It was a matter of life or death. Nevertheless, some Jews continued to abstain from profaning the Sabbath, even when human life was at stake. We see this reticence expressed in certain texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls that prohibit Jews from carrying and using certain implements (e.g., a ladder or rope) on the

Sabbath in order to help a fellow human who has fallen into a body of water (Damascus Document 11:15–17). Instead, one should use one's garment to help the person at risk (4Q265 6:6–8). By contrast, the rabbinic literature presents a far more lenient position on this matter, allowing one to suspend the Sabbath whenever human life is at stake (Tosefta, tractate *Shabbat* 15[16]:17). This concept is known in rabbinic jargon as *piquah nefesh* ("saving a soul"). The Mishnah at one point even states: "Whenever there is doubt whether life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath" (Yoma 8:6). This accommodating position is more akin to the perspective we find in Matthew as well as in Luke, as we shall see below: in Matthew, Jesus heals a man suffering from a "withered hand" (12:10), hardly the most imminent threat to one's life. The boundaries of *piquah nefesh* seem to have been pushed further by Matthew to include even the treatment of non-life threatening conditions on the Sabbath.

Concerning Jewish dietary laws, Matthew nowhere announces that Jesus' Jewish followers are free to eat pork, lobster, or any other animal forbidden for Jewish consumption by the Mosaic Torah (Leviticus 11/Deuteronomy 14). Jewish Dietary laws, also known as kosher laws, should not be entirely confused with Jewish ritual purity laws, even though similar terminology is used to describe both systems. Creatures such as pigs are *permanently* impure according to the Mosaic Torah. Immersing a pig in water will not purify that animal. Once a pig, always a pig! Ritual impurity, on the other hand, refers to a *temporary* form of impurity, one that can be removed through the proper procedures. Thus, a Jewish woman who has her period is ritually impure only for a limited amount of time after which she becomes ritually pure again (Leviticus 15:19–30). The same applies to a Jewish male who ejaculates or a person who comes into contact with a human corpse (Lev 15:16; Numbers 19:11). In Matthew 15, Jesus differs with the Pharisees over a matter related to ritual impurity. The discussion has nothing to do with

whether one should keep kosher. The Pharisees object with Jesus because his disciples do not *wash their hands* before eating *kosher* food such as bread (15:2). Jesus, once again, accuses the Pharisees for neglecting the moral commandments. The Pharisees should be worried about maintaining their “moral purity” and not get lost in the ritual details. The statement in 15:11, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles,” should be understood within its context: Jesus denies that *ritually* impure hands can defile the kosher food one eats; rather, the immoral thoughts that come from the heart and are then pronounced by the mouth render one impure. The moral of the story is not that one can now eat pepperoni pizza. This might have been the application made by Mark in his version of the controversy: Mark 7:19b contains an interpolation stating that Jesus made *all* foods clean. Matthew, however, does not contain this encompassing application but concludes with a very restricted statement: “to eat with unwashed hands does not defile” (15:20).

Many of the aforementioned statements made on behalf of Matthew also apply to the books of Luke and Acts. These two works, which in their final form are commonly taken to be written by the same author sometime after 70 CE, make similar pronouncements about the Torah. Thus Luke 16:17 states: “it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.” It is possible that this statement was added by a Lukan redactor to correct the previous statement made in 16:16: “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force.” This verse is ambiguous. The New Revised Standard Version adds the English words “were in effect” to its translation but, in fact, the Greek does not contain such wording. The saying seems to indicate that the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God marks in some way a new phase in history.

But this new development need not be understood in radical disjuncture with what preceded it. Luke 16:17 makes that clear, and a holistic reading that takes all of the narrative of Luke-Acts into account resists antinomian applications: Jesus and his Jewish followers continue to observe the Torah faithfully even after Jesus' departure to heaven. The kingdom of God is not proclaimed in Luke-Acts at the expense of the Torah and the Prophets.

With respect to the Sabbath, Luke even shows more interest in the question of its observance than Matthew does. The gospel of Luke includes no less than four controversy stories on Jesus' manner of keeping the Sabbath (6:1–11; 13:10–17; 14:1–6); Matthew only contains two. In all of these passages, Luke does not try to revoke the observance of the Sabbath, but to exalt Jesus' authority, making a case for Jesus' intervention on the Sabbath on behalf of those who are in need, weary, sick, or oppressed by evil spirits. Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus and other Jewish protagonists are portrayed in favorable terms as pious Torah observant Jews. Luke 4:16, Jesus "went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom" and 23:56, which states that some of Jesus' followers rested on the Sabbath "according to the commandment," stand out as two examples among many that depict Torah observance in favorable terms.

There are no statements in the gospel of Luke that abrogate the observance of dietary laws for Jews. During an incident in which Jesus and the Pharisees clash over the question of ritual purity, Luke contains a similar statement we find in Matthew: "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, *without neglecting the others* (11:42). This statement is not dismissing the relevance of keeping ritual laws any more than Matthew, and does not even directly address the issue of keeping kosher, which is never raised in Luke.

Acts chs. 10–11, rather, is the nexus where many readers of Luke-Acts gather to proclaim the end of Jewish dietary laws. However, this pericope does not discuss Jewish dietary laws. It focuses on the conversion of a Gentile Roman centurion to the Jesus movement. Many ancient Jews viewed Gentiles as morally impure because they worshiped idols and engaged in other practices that were deemed immoral by Jewish standards. Some Jews also worried that extensive interaction with Gentiles could lead Jews away from observing the Torah. Accordingly, they avoided Gentiles for these reasons and others. Acts chs. 10–11 makes the point that not all Gentiles are morally impure. Cornelius, for example, is a Gentile who fears the God of Israel and practices charity on behalf of the people of Israel (10:2). He is not your average Gentile and should, therefore, be treated differently. Peter, one of the main disciples of Jesus and protagonists in Acts, learns this lesson through a vision in which he sees all kinds of “four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air” lowered from the sky on a sheet (10:11–12). Three times a heavenly voice commands him to slaughter and eat the animals in front of him, but Peter adamantly refuses, claiming that he has “never eaten anything that is profane or unclean” (10:14). The heavenly voice responds that “what God has made clean, you must not call profane” (10:15).

Many take this statement literally to announce what they believe to be the obvious application of the vision, namely, that all animals are now kosher and permissible for consumption. Nevertheless, the moral of the vision is not so simple and obvious to its immediate recipient, Peter, who, remains “greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision” (Act 10:17). A vision, after all, is a vision, with all of its symbolic markers that invite allegorical association. A Jewish reader from the time, who would be familiar with prophetic and apocalyptic texts that contained visions (often with animals), would look for an application that

looked beyond the literal horizon. Indeed, an application of the vision does appear later on in the same pericope. When Peter visits Cornelius, he comes to the realization that God has purified and sanctified certain Gentiles, those who have forsaken their immorality and joined the Jesus movement (10:28, 35). The vision is about “men, not the menu.” As a Torah abiding Jew, Peter should not hesitate to eat and even reside with those Gentiles who fear the God of Israel and have been morally purified. Peter stays at Cornelius’ house for several days (10:48), but nothing is said about him eating bacon with cheese for breakfast.

One of the reasons why the perspective on Torah observance in Luke-Acts and, to a lesser extent, Matthew has been misunderstood stems from the failure of appreciating the *ethnic* distinctions with regard to this question. It is clear in Luke-Acts that Gentile Christians are not expected to observe the Torah in its entirety. Acts makes this point clear by decreeing that Gentile (male) followers of Jesus do not need to be circumcised but need to “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (15:20). It is assumed, however, that Jews—even those who are followers of Jesus—continue to engage in Torah practice in its totality. No Jewish person in Acts embraces more the perpetuation of Torah observance than Paul. Paul faithfully attends the synagogue on the Sabbath (13:14–15; 14:1, etc.), keeps Jewish festivals such as Shavuot/Pentecost (20:16) and Yom Kippur (27:9), goes to the temple in Jerusalem and partakes in its rituals (21:24), affirms his fidelity to the Torah and Jewish customs (28:17), and even circumcises Timothy (16:3)!

This type of ethnic distinguishing, in so far as Torah requirements are concerned, was quite common in early Judaism. As far as we know, many Second Temple Jews did not expect or look forward to the day when Gentiles would

convert in masses to Judaism by embracing the entirety of the Jewish Law. Later on, the rabbis would continue this trajectory, developing the concept known as the Noahide Laws. This rabbinic teaching posits that Gentiles need not observe the 613 commandments of the Torah but only abide by seven universal, ethical laws (see, for example, the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sanhedrin* 56a–b). This does not mean that in Luke’s eyes Jews are better than Gentiles. “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34–35). Salvation, at least for Gentiles, can be achieved without observing the precepts of the Torah that exclusively apply to the Jewish people. Yet Luke-Acts does not preach a message of uniformity in which every student of Jesus must show up to class dressed in the same uniform. The body of believers of Jesus, according to the Lukan ideal, is composed of two branches, a Gentile Christian branch and a Jewish Christian branch. Neither need forsake its distinctive identity and assimilate into the other. Gentile Christians observe only certain parts of the Torah; Jewish Christians all the others. Mark Kinzer has coined the term “bilateral ecclesiology” to speak of this ecclesiological distinction that is clearly made in Luke-Acts.

It is possible, on the other hand, that Matthew did not embrace this kind of ethnic distinction and even expected Gentile Christians to be circumcised. David Sim has energetically argued this case. Much hinges on how one interprets the final commission in Matthew 28:19–20, which appears only in Matthew: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything* that I have commanded you.” Does the command to obey everything Jesus has taught include circumcision? If so, why doesn’t the commission explicitly command Jesus’ disciples to have new recruits circumcised? Why does the commission only explicitly mention baptism as a rite of

integration into the circle of Jesus' followers? Sim maintains that baptism, rather than circumcision, is mentioned here because it functions as a common denominator for the integration of both Jews and Gentiles into the Jesus movement: Jews joining the Jesus movement would have already been circumcised; they would only need to be baptized in order to become full members of the community of Jesus followers. Gentiles (in the case of males) would need to perform both rites. The silence of the passage leaves the question open to various interpretations.

Some might wonder what the function of the Torah might be, if, according to Matthew and Luke-Acts, salvation is made possible for both Jews and Gentiles through Jesus' death and resurrection. We should note, first of all, that at least Luke does not stress the expiatory function of Jesus' death on the cross. The proclamation of the Christ-event provides an opportunity for all to repent and receive forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:46–47; Acts 13:38). A clean slate is offered, in other words, to the Jewish people, as a whole, who have fallen short of their corporate calling (Acts 13:39; 15:10), as well as to the Gentiles who until Jesus' arrival have been living in times of ignorance (Acts 17:30). This does not mean that concrete engagement with the Torah completely loses its relevance. There are pious individuals who do live up to the requirements of the Jewish Law, and Luke recognizes at an individual level the righteousness of such persons (Luke 2:25; Acts 5:34; 22:12). In any case, we should be careful not to reduce the Torah to soteriological functions. The Torah provides other services as well. It can offer a distinctive calling and vocation to those who study and observe its words. Through Torah observance, teachings and values can be conveyed to believers and subsequent generations of followers. Accordingly, many followers of Jesus could have continued to believe in the relevance of studying and observing its rituals, which they would have also understood christologically in light of Jesus' death,

resurrection, and future coming. Paul seems to be doing something along these lines when he reinterprets the Jewish festival of Passover in 1 Corinthians 5:8 (“let us celebrate the festival. . .”).

Matthew has frequently been called the “most Jewish” gospel of the New Testament, while Luke-Acts is often viewed as a Gentile Christian text, less Jewish in other words. In reality, this is a false dichotomy, especially when the question of Torah observance in Matthew and Luke-Acts is investigated in concrete terms in its original Jewish matrix. Both texts agree that Jews should continue to observe the Torah even after embracing Jesus as their messiah. The book of Acts though maintains that Gentiles need not keep circumcision, that the Sabbath and most dietary laws (save for eating blood and strangled meat) are optional for Gentiles but mandatory for Jews. Perhaps, Matthew agrees with Acts on this latter point as well. In any case, Matthew and Luke-Acts remind us that Jewish followers of Jesus continued to play a prominent role in early Christian history, even after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, when Gentile Christians were gradually becoming the dominant force and voice within formative Christianity.

*All translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

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