

The Torah Jesus Taught

In Judaism, the first five books of our Christian Bible are called The Torah. Torah is Hebrew for teaching, and came to be used for “The Law”. Therefore in English it is usually translated “The Law”. It contains the founding legal/religious texts of Israel and Judaism. Between 200 and 300 BC, it was translated into Greek since the Greeks ruled the Middle East, and the Torah was called in Greek “The Pentateuch” which means “five books”. The tradition of Judaism divides The Torah into 613 commandments consisting of 365 restrictions and 248 positive commandments. In Jesus’ day (7 BC to 30 AD), oral traditions were considered part of the Torah by the Pharisees, but the oral traditions were not written down until much later. At the time of Jesus’ ministry, no one doubted the authorship of Moses, so The Torah was often called the writings of Moses, or just the Law of Moses.

Try to put yourself in first century Israel with Jesus. Every town had a local synagogue where the people would meet on the Sabbath. In the synagogue scrolls of the Torah were kept in a box. A section of the Torah would be read so that all five of the writings of Moses would be read in a year’s time.

After the return from the Babylonian captivity beginning in 538 BC, the returning Jews were most fearful of the sins of their forefathers concerning idolatry. Therefore the keeping of the Law, especially the first command of “You shall have no other gods before Me”, was all important. Certain parts of the Law were not explicit, and so the teachers found it necessary to develop interpretations, especially concerning the kosher eating and the Sabbath. The penalty for breaking the Sabbath was death, so they took it very serious, needing to know exactly what you could and could not do. During the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were respected by the people as the interpreters of the Law, and they had developed oral tradition that was passed down from generation to generation. In time, Pharisaic Judaism developed into Rabbinic Judaism which was responsible for writing the oral tradition down into the Mishnah and Talmud.

Jesus’ Conflict with the Pharisees

Jesus’ interpretation of the Torah, that we have in our Christian Gospels, was radically different than that of the Pharisees. This comes through clearly in all of His confrontations with the Pharisees. Jesus’ emphasis on the heart, the importance of belief and faith, love, humility, and the need of repentance was all new to first century Judaism. The Jewish interpretation of prophecy was also different from Jesus. He was able to show how all the prophets beginning with Moses spoke of the humble suffering servant who would give His life as a ransom for sinners, but they were looking only for a conquering king to free them from Gentile domination and return to Israel’s former glory. This comes through clearly in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:21. Even Jesus’ own disciples were still believing the common teaching that the Messiah “was He who would redeem Israel.” The resurrected Christ then took the time in Luke 24:27 to explain to them “the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.” The

Pharisees claimed that Jesus was disregarding the Law, but He made it clear that He was not, but they had reinterpreted the Law wrongly. This comes through clearly in His first recorded major sermon called “The Sermon on the Mount” found in Matthew 5. This sermon was a powerful assault on the self righteousness of the Pharisees. In Matt.5:20, Jesus made the convicting statement that “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Then Jesus proceeded to give six illustrations contrasting the false righteousness of the Pharisees with the true righteousness that God intended with His Law. Whether it concerned murder, adultery, or lies, Jesus reinterpreted their teachings. We can read that this was His intent because He continued to say, “You have heard it said (or taught), but I say to you...” In all of these examples Jesus was reinterpreting the Law as opposed to what they were teaching.

The key issue between Jesus’ teachings and that of the Jewish religious leaders of the first century would center around whether obedience to the letter of the Law was the necessary and sufficient condition for entering the kingdom of heaven— or what is the basis and means of salvation? Is it law or grace? What is the condition to which God’s mercy is attached—law or grace? Many of the stories reveal that the Pharisees, and anyone who holds themselves up as self righteous, fall way short. Jesus made this clear in His story about the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14, “He told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt”. In the story, a self righteous Pharisee believes that since he keeps the law, fasts twice a week, and tithes, that he was justified before God. Jesus corrects this view with the contrasting explanation of the tax collector who was considered a sinner. Because the sinner was humbly confessing his sin in all contrition and asking God to be merciful, he left justified before God and not the Pharisee. The conclusion to the story is that “everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” Therefore, the religious leaders who were teaching salvation by works were being corrected by Jesus. The Law that was given by Moses was good and right and holy, but all were coming up way short of the standard of God, and therefore the basis and means of salvation would have to be the grace and mercy of God.

The Only Bible Jesus Had—The Old Testament

The O.T. portrays the world we live in just as it is—evil, violent, hatred, war, and great lust of every kind. The laws that Moses gave them at Mt. Sinai, with the death penalty so prevalent, seem harsh to people now, but they actually represent an attempt to bring reform to the cultures at the time. The Mosaic Law established basic rules of warfare, laws for the poor, care for the environment, limits on revenge, no slavery, and no adultery. The laws made them the cleanest nation on earth, and thus probably the healthiest. Each book of the O.T had its own scroll—the codex or book was not invented until the end of the first century. During Jesus’ time, a Jew entering a synagogue would see stacks of scrolls, not a book. All the different scrolls were written over about a thousand years, yet they had a remarkable continuity and unity with a single story emerging. The scrolls were kept together in three categories—The Torah, The Writings, and The Prophets. Most people today think of the Old Testament in terms of all the wild stories, many of them in Genesis.

Wild and Crazy Stories

When I was a kid dragged to Sunday School, the volunteer teacher usually would tell us all the wild stories about Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his coat of many colors, Moses and parting the Red Sea, talking donkeys, David and Goliath and on and on. They would present them in cartoon form that we got to color in. I remember thinking of them as fictitious like the cartoons I saw on TV. Now I find myself teaching all these stories as actual historical events that are in the Bible for great purpose and meaning. In these stories we find that God is a personal God fully involved with man. God is a caring parent who works with and through individual men and women. We learn great teaching concerning the nature of man, which is necessary for us to understand how great our need is for a Savior. Evil ambition, greed, and sexual lust are all common to the biblical characters, but in every story we see the love of God and His mercy combined with His holiness and justice. God does not just overlook sin, there are consequences in every story, but God's mercy and grace shine through. We see God as both a disciplinarian but also a sacrificial lamb, an eagle who sees all but also a protective mother hen, and a judge but also a deliverer.

One thing for sure, we see that God cannot be pinned down, controlled or measured by man. Think of it—a guy who wrestles with Jacob, speaks through a donkey, and uses a whale as a delivery system? He leads the Israelites into a cul-de-sac of a trap at the Red Sea where there is no way out, then parts the Red Sea so they can walk across on dry land. I feel like saying, “Lord there was a perfectly nice highway on the coast”, but afterward I can see how wise His way really was. In every story we learn that a rebellious, scheming, manipulative mankind receives the message that this world does not revolve around us, it revolves around God whose presence with us is a reality.

Genesis and Exodus

In Genesis 1-11, we read through a series of human failures. In Genesis 12, God's plan of redemption begins with one undeserving man—Abraham, who is told he will be the father of a great nation, yet three straight generations of infertile women does not seem like a good start. God gave Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an eternal possession, but he lived in a tent the whole time he was there, and his descendants had to take a detour into Egypt for 400 years. Through all the stories, Abraham pimped, Jacob cheated and lied, Moses murdered, but God's love emerges. The O.T. gives us a sense of destiny that we live in a meaningful world ordained by a personal God who cares about flawed people. After 400 years in Egypt, the nation of Israel emerges as a new nation delivered out of slavery, and given God's perfect laws to govern them at Sinai in order that they be governed as a theocracy (God ruled). Their failure to live up to God's standard proved mankind's great need for a Savior, and therefore the O.T. is essential to understanding the New. The New completed the Old, but Jesus came in the context of and in the completion of the Old Testament---It is the Bible Jesus Read.

CHARLIE TAYLOR