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Tradition and the Ways of Man

There are two seasons throughout the year during which people in the Hebrew Roots Movement seem to be at odds not only with mainstream Christianity, Judaism, Catholicism, etc., but also amongst themselves. These seasons are that of Passover with Easter and Christmas. For any number of reasons, there is typically much squabbling, name calling, and derision that occurs in discussions involving these topics; even moreso when those specific seasons approach. We could go into a long diatribe about how we need to stop the division and fracturing of the body, but we’re not going to at this time.

No, today we want to take a brief look at the idea that we can take something that is not of or from the Creator and then use it to honor or worship Him. For more on the topic of unity, please see our teaching, [Echad: The Necessity for Unity](#).

There is a belief that exists stating that we can take something secular, or in some cases even practices from false gods and idol worship, and convert it into something for YHWH. In mainstream Christianity this is referred to as “Christianizing” or “claiming XYZ for Jesus”. Christianity isn’t the only religion that does this, but it may have the most well-known reputation for doing it, especially with things pertaining to Christmas and Easter.

While this isn’t as common within Hebrew Roots, there seems to be the propensity for many to fall into one of two categories. They either believe that everything manmade, in other words “tradition”, is bad; or if it’s a Jewish tradition then it’s automatically good. In truth, we would disagree with both stances.

It is true that there are many manmade traditions that we should not follow; however, there are some traditions that are perfectly fine. For example, traditionally many churches have a praise and worship service using music before the sermon. There is nothing wrong with singing songs to worship the Creator and then to go into a teaching. Maybe your family has the tradition of naming their firstborn son or daughter after a grandparent. Again, there’s nothing wrong or against the Torah in having and following that tradition.

The Jewish faith has a tradition of lighting candles on Shabbat (the Sabbath). There is nothing wrong with that tradition, at all. However, during their tradition they state this in a prayer:

"Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light Shabbat candle[s]."

Do you see at the end where it states we are commanded by the Creator to light Shabbat candles? There is actually no command in the Torah that says to light Shabbat candles. This is a manmade commandment; we would not support stating that YHWH commanded us to light the candles, and honestly, the fact that this isn't a Torah commandment is known by at least some in the Jewish faith. Some traditions of the Jews are good, and others, not so good.

For more on the instructions of lighting Shabbat candles, please see this article on Chabad.org. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/87131/jewish/Shabbat-Candles-Instructions.htm

So there are examples of both good and bad traditions, but what about claiming things not of YHWH and using them to worship YHWH? If you are familiar with common Hebrew Roots teachings concerning Christmas and Easter, then you are likely very familiar with the following verses. Pay special attention to verses 4 and 31 of Deuteronomy 12.

Deuteronomy 12:1-4 (ESV)

“These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord (YHWH), the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. **You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the Lord (YHWH) your God in that way.**

Deuteronomy 12:29-31 (ESV)

“When the Lord (YHWH) your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.’ **You shall not worship the Lord (YHWH) your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord (YHWH) hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.**

That is enough for many to see that they should not follow the traditions of other nations who worship other gods, nor use them to worship the Creator. But can we “Christianize” them? Is there a difference between worshipping YHWH in the same way that other nations worship their gods and us dedicating those same, or maybe slightly changed, traditions and directing them to YHWH?

No, there isn't. We should not be taking something from another religion and incorporating it into our worship of the Creator. He was very clear about such practices in Deuteronomy 12. Yet some may also want to argue that what matters is their heart, or their intentions. For instance you may have heard someone say “It's okay, God knows my heart.” They aren't wrong in that, He does. But does that mean our heart and our intentions make everything okay?

The Talmud, or rabbinic laws and traditions of the Jewish faith, is full of laws and regulations intended to help God's people follow His Torah; they created a myriad of traditions of the elders that they taught as being equal to or even above the Torah. Their intentions were good, they wanted to make sure they were obedient to the Torah, but the results were pretty disastrous. For just one example, let's take a look at Mark 7:1-13.

Mark 7:1-13 (ESV)

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, **holding to the tradition of the elders**, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) 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.”

And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God) — then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, **thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.**”

The traditions the Pharisees followed may have been well intentioned, but Messiah wasn’t happy with what they were doing, at all. We know from elsewhere in Scripture that the Pharisees also had a heart problem, but we’re discussing the traditions at this time. Since some may question that one, let’s take a look at what Josephus had to say concerning another sect of the Jews in his writing: Wars of the Jews 2.147.

*147They also avoid spitting in the midst of them, or on the right side. Moreover, **they are stricter than any other of the Jews in resting from their labors on the seventh day**; for they not only get their food ready the day before, that they may not be obliged to kindle a fire on that day, but they will not remove any vessel out of its place, **nor go to stool thereon.***

Did you catch that? This sect forbid bowel movements on the Sabbath just to make sure that they were not doing any work and breaking the Sabbath. That sounds a bit ridiculous, doesn’t it? Their intentions were good, they wanted to serve the Creator so they set up a “fence” to prevent themselves from breaking the commandment to rest on the Sabbath. Yet in doing so, they were really adding to the Torah, not a good idea.

So “what’s your point?”, you may be asking. Our point is this, sometimes wrong things are done even with the best intentions, but our intentions still do not make them right. The same is true of traditions or other practices. Sometimes traditions or practices may be good, while others...not so much.

King Saul and his people are recorded doing something similar. YHWH gave a specific instructions (just as he forbids us to worship him in the same way as the nations with their gods) and when that action is carried out with the intention to worship Him; well, things don’t go so well.

Let's read through most of the story found in 1 Samuel 15.

1 Samuel 15:1-25(ESV)

And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord (YHWH) sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord (YHWH). Thus says the Lord (YHWH) of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah. And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. Then Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

The word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord (YHWH) all night. And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal." And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the Lord (YHWH). I have performed the commandment of the Lord (YHWH)." And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord (YHWH) your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction." Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the Lord (YHWH) said to me this night." And he said to him, "Speak."

And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord (YHWH) anointed you king over Israel. And the Lord (YHWH) sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord (YHWH)? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord (YHWH)?" And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord (YHWH). I have gone on the mission on which the Lord (YHWH) sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord (YHWH) your God in Gilgal." And Samuel said,

"Has the Lord (YHWH) as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the Lord (YHWH)?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.

Because you have rejected the word of the Lord (YHWH),

he has also rejected you from being king.”

Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord (YHWH) and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the Lord (YHWH).”

Note the instruction, the Torah, given by YHWH to Saul in verses 2 and 3.

1 Samuel 15:2-3 (ESV)

Thus says the Lord (YHWH) of hosts, ‘I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. **Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.**”

Now read verse 15.

1 Samuel 15:15 (ESV)

Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord (YHWH) your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction.”

Do you see how YHWH commanded one thing, but Saul allowed the people (and thus himself) to disobey YHWH? While the people may have believed they were doing good in devoting the best of the sheep and oxen for sacrificing to YHWH, the Creator disagreed. Just look at what happens to Saul because he took something commanded to be destroyed (just as the idols and ways of false god worship are to be destroyed) and devoted it to YHWH (or today we’d say he “Christianized” it). Again, verses 21-23

1 Samuel 15:21-23 (ESV)

And Samuel said,
“Has the Lord (YHWH) as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.
**Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
he has also rejected you from being king.**”

Saul was rejected from being king of Israel because he took what was devoted for destruction by YHWH in verse 3 and instead intended to use it in sacrifices for YHWH in verse 15.

You see, while Saul and the people’s intentions may have been to honor the Creator, they were doing what He specifically told them not to do. They rebelled against the Word of God. We cannot take what YHWH says to remove, destroy, or stay away from and then turn and offer or use it to bring honor to Him. Whether it be a tradition, a prayer, or even animals for sacrifices, we simply cannot do things in our own way even if our desire is only to honor Him.

When we do what is right in our own eyes, when we ignore instructions from our Creator and do things He commands us not to, it is rebellion to Him.

Sometimes we do things that are tradition and they're perfectly okay. Other times we follow traditions that are not okay. Deuteronomy 12:4 and 12:31 tell us not to worship YHWH in the same way that the nations worship their gods. So when we choose to do something that YHWH says not to do, we are rebelling. Whatever we are choosing to do doesn't even have to be a tradition, it could even be an act of worship to YHWH.

It isn't that we are only allowed to do what Scripture specifically outlines for us. There are many things that the Torah does not forbid specifically or even in principles or as a heart issue, it doesn't mean that we cannot do those things. If you want to light candles on Shabbat every week, by all means, please do so. There is nothing in Scripture forbidding it. Do you want to read a bedtime story to your children every night, then please do so within reason!

However, before you go out and teach manmade traditions as being the instructions of YHWH, or before you find a tradition that is from false god idol worship and choose to begin doing it to worship YHWH, take a moment and think about Saul in 1 Samuel 15. Study the Word and what YHWH says about using traditions for other false god idol worship to worship Him, and spend time in prayer.

Our Creator is the same yesterday, today, and forever. If He told Israel in Deuteronomy 12 not to worship Him the way the nations worshiped their Gods, then He doesn't want us to do it today. If he stripped the kingship from Saul and stated that choosing to offer as sacrifices that which YHWH had devoted to destruction was rebellion, then that same principle is true today. We should not be taking something that the Creator said to avoid and destroy and use it to worship Him.

We hope that this teaching has blessed you.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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