

Scripture, Mishnah, and Confessions

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Abstract

“Scripture, Mishnah, and the Confessions” examines the rabbinic sayings of the Pharisees at the time of Christ, the “oral law of Moses” that ultimately was written down in A.D. 200. These Mishnaic interpretations thought to apply the Old Testament to their new culture. The author notes that church leaders, wittingly or unwittingly, elevate their formal documents to the same level of authority in seeking to adjust to changing cultures. This tendency is observed in the history of the church, whether Romanism or liberalism, fundamentalism or evangelicalism, and sometimes in confessional church circles.

Good intentions sometimes lead to unintended consequences. This article seeks to show how the Mishnah, though it aimed at addressing how Jews were to apply some teachings from Moses and the Prophets while under the Greek and Roman empires, not only went beyond the Scriptures but even misinterpreted God’s rule for faith and practice. Worse yet, the “tradition of the elders” as expounded in the Mishnah eventually replaced Moses and the Prophets as the authoritative expression of God’s revelation. Are there lessons for us in the Reformed tradition who subscribe in our ordination vows to one or another standard expression of the Reformed faith? First, the questions that must be asked are: Who were the Pharisees? and What was the Mishnah?

I. *Origins and Background of the Mishnah*

Following the division of Alexander the Great's empire among his four generals, the Jews in Judea were under pressure from the Seleucids in Syria and/or the Ptolemies in Egypt to become assimilated to Hellenistic culture. Then, after gaining their independence under the Maccabees, they had to adjust to the cultural changes that led to rethinking their religious practices required by the Mosaic documents. Various parties emerged. Among these the Pharisees and Sadducees became the leading religious leaders of the Jews, although not all Jews were strict followers. The Pharisees as a party were a very small minority, as we are told by Josephus.¹ The Sadducees were the more conservative party, claiming descent from Zadok, the priest. They were identified as the religious leaders centered in the temple in Jerusalem. With the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the priestly party disappeared and the influence of the Pharisees was firmed up. They were more open to accommodation to Hellenistic culture, but sought to keep their roots in the Mosaic tradition.

Some Second Temple literature gives evidence of a measure of godliness among some Jews of the period, many of whom were looking for the coming of Messiah.² There were many Jews who, "as [Jesus] spoke these words, ... believed in Him,"³ including some of the Pharisees such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Indeed, the great majority of those who became Christians in the early church were Jews and many Gentile proselytes to Judaism. In the last year or so of Christ's ministry, he concentrated on teaching his disciples, while at the same time there were increasing clashes with the Pharisees. He faced their opposition firmly. Further on, there was a growing problem in the early church with "some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed" (Acts 15:5). In short, they still had not shed all the baggage of their past.

The earliest stage of interpretation by the Pharisees was the system of Midrash, whereby they interpreted the Scriptures and *augmented them with expansions of their own* in their controversies with the more conservative Sadducees as exponents of the Torah. This, however, posed somewhat of

¹ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.2.42.

² However, Second Temple literature also reveals some erroneous teachings. *Reading Romans in Context: Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), is an excellent compendium of articles on various passages of Romans that compares and contrasts the theology of Second Temple literature and that of Paul.

³ John 8:30 (NKJV). Unless indicated all quotations hereafter are from the NKJV.

a threat to the Pharisees, since it assumed that the Scriptures were the authoritative Torah of Moses and the Prophets. As some of the Pharisaic positions could not be defended from the Scriptures, *they soon moved to the Mishnaic system of teaching*. This oral tradition of the rabbis from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D. was eventually put down in written form at the end of the second century by Rabbi Judah-ha-Nasi and called the Mishnah. Herbert Danby, editor for the Oxford University Press tome, states,

The Mishnah ... maintains that the authority of those rules, customs, and interpretations which had accumulated around the Jewish system of life and religion is equal to the authority of the *Written Law itself*, even though they found no place in the Written Law. ... Inevitably the inference follows that the living tradition (the Oral Law) is *more important than the Written Law*,⁴ since the ‘tradition of the elders’, besides claiming an authority and continuity equal to that of the Written Law, claims also to be *its authentic and living interpretation* and its essential complement. (Emphasis added)⁵

It is to be noted that although the Mishnah taught Jews to repeat daily the Shema (Deut 6:4–6) and the eighteen *Berakoth* (blessings or benedictions), they became no more than empty phrases and vain repetitions, devoid of a heartfelt relationship with a personal God. Thus, the Oral Law became the “doctrines and commandments of men.” *Appeal was made to the Mishnah, the work of the sages, both for doctrinal and judicial matters.*⁶

The focus of this paper is on the rabbinic teachings in the Mishnah, with additional light shed by the Targumim, since these teachings represent the religious establishment in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee in the time of Christ. Second Temple literature is a much larger body of literature; it includes the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran. We hope to show that the Mishnah to a very large degree reinterpreted the Old Testament teaching, resulting in legalism; in contrast to this reinterpretation, Jesus and the apostles provide a direct spiritual continuum with Moses and the Prophets in theology and worship, law and ethics.

⁴ Danby footnotes here: “See Sanh. 11³: ‘Greater stringency applies to the observance of the words of the Scribes [namely, the authorized exponents of the law] than to the observance of the [Written] Law.’”

⁵ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), xvii.

⁶ The Mishnah was put into writing about A.D. 200. Later rabbis and sages made additional decisions and expansions, so that in the fourth century A.D. the Jerusalem Talmud came into being and the Babylonian Talmud was written in the fifth century A.D.

II. *Jesus and Old Testament Scriptures*

The gospel narratives open their accounts connecting the life of Jesus with the Scriptures of the Old Testament. All four gospels immediately identify their writings as a continuation of the Old Testament. In all cases, the evangelists are careful to cite passages from the Old Testament that identify the promises, prophecies, and types that were fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus shows that he is solidly grounded in Moses and the Prophets, underscoring their authority with “It is written.” Indeed, when Jesus does quote or allude to the “tradition” (i.e., “the oral tradition of Moses” later written down in the Mishnah), he often contrasts it with something from the Old Testament with “But I say unto you ...” (e.g., Matt 5:22). This contrast should not be lost on us: when Jesus was saying, “You have heard that it was said to those of old ...” (e.g., Matt 5:21), he was clearly referring to the difference between the “oral tradition of the elders” and the authoritative written Word of God. The source of his strength is founded upon the authority of the written Scriptures, and more specifically in Yahweh, the great I Am, who reveals himself in the Old Testament.

Beginning with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7, one begins to see some interaction between Christ and the rabbinic teachings of the Mishnaic oral tradition. When read in their own context, the rabbinic teachings are found to have a different meaning than that given in the Sermon on the Mount. Alfred Edersheim mentions two areas that exhibit the contrast between New Testament and rabbinic teaching: humility and perfectness. “New Testament humility, as opposed to Jewish (the latter being really pride, as only the consciousness of failure, or rather, of inadequate perfectness, while New Testament humility is really despair of self); and again, Jewish as opposed to New Testament perfectness (the former being an attempt by means of external or internal to strive up to God; the latter a new life, springing from God, and in God).”⁷

A. There are several passages in the Gospels where Jesus Christ expresses his high view of the inspiration and authority of the Law of Moses and the Prophets.

1. *Matthew 5:17–20*. “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (v. 17).

⁷ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (New York: Longmans, Green, 1886), 1:528. Edersheim, born in Vienna in 1825 into a Jewish family, studied the Torah and the Talmud at a gymnasium attached to a synagogue. He was converted to Christianity under the preaching of “Rabbi” John Duncan, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary.

The Sermon on the Mount marks how the righteousness of the kingdom of God “goes deeper than the mere letter of even the Old Testament Law.”⁸ The Beatitudes correspond to the old covenant blessings. Here Christ points to the real continuity between Old Testament and New Testament, showing the relation of each to the other. Matthew 5:17–20 (especially v. 20) clearly shows a grand climax and transition to the “criticism of the Old Testament-Law in its merely literal application, such as the Scribes and Pharisees made.”⁹

It must be observed that when Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old” (v. 21),¹⁰ he was not referring to Moses or the Prophets, for whom he held a very high esteem. Rather, he was referring to “the Rabbinic appeal to those that preceded, the *Zegenim* or *Rishonim*.”¹¹ “Those of old” thus were the authors of the “oral tradition,” which the scribes and Pharisees were promulgating as though it had come down orally since the times of Moses. This oral tradition of the Pharisees, as noted earlier, was what finally became codified in the Mishnah by the end of the second century A.D.

Some have argued that Jesus was laying down a general principle that his own statements are more stringent than those of the scribes and Pharisees.¹² However, as David Jones writes,

Jesus’ interpretation of the Law is not invariably more stringent than that of the Pharisees. Indeed, sometimes the opposite is the case. Responding to the Pharisees’ stringent interpretation of the fourth commandment, Jesus twice reproves them for failure to incorporate into their hermeneutic the principle of Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Mt 9:13, 12:7). . . . Standards are not righteous for being rigorous; it is not godly to be more strict than God.¹³

⁸ Ibid., 1:529

⁹ Ibid., 1:530

¹⁰ Some older manuscripts omit “to those of old,” but that does not detract from the question of to whom he is referring: is it to the scribes and Pharisees or to Moses and the Prophets? From the contrasts and the correctives which Christ provides, it is clear that it is to the authors of the “oral tradition” that began during the Second Temple period and the pre-Mishnaic oral tradition of the Jews.

¹¹ Edersheim, *Life and Times*, 1:538.

¹² J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth: A Biblical Examination of Divorce and Remarriage* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1981), 67–68. Laney applies this concept to the matter of remarriage after divorce for adultery (Matt 5:29–30), arguing that if Jesus would allow remarriage in such cases, then he “would be siding with the conservative school of Shammai, which allowed divorce only in the case of adultery,” and if so, then “Jesus’ teaching did not rise above that of Shammai and the Pharisees, contrary to His usual pattern . . . [as] Christ customarily rebuked the superficiality of the Pharisees with His own more stringent interpretation of the Law.” Thus, Jesus was more stringent by prohibiting remarriage.

¹³ David C. Jones, “The Westminster Confession on Divorce and Remarriage,” in *Minutes of the Eighteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Atlanta, GA: Stated Clark of the General Assembly, 1990), 157.

John Murray further amplifies this discussion when he writes,

What Jesus is saying is that the righteousness of the scribes, notwithstanding its meticulous adherence to the minutiae, does not begin to qualify for the kingdom of heaven; it has no affinity with the demands of the kingdom of heaven. This is so not because the kingdom of heaven does not demand righteousness, nor because it is indifferent to the minutiae of divine prescription, but because the demands of the kingdom of heaven are far greater than anything that ever enters into the conception of the scribes and Pharisees. They have not begun to reckon with the demands of the kingdom of heaven. Paradoxically, it was their concern for detail that led them to miss the whole genius of kingdom righteousness; the detail was not the detail of divine prescription. They made void the law of God by their own traditions.¹⁴

2. *Luke 24:25–32 and 24:44–45*. In the postresurrection appearance to the two on the road to Emmaus, Jesus reaffirmed the authority and veracity of the Law and the Prophets. Responding to their discouragement concerning the previous few days, Jesus gently rebuked them by saying, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” (vv. 25–26). Then the account continues: “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (v. 27).

Later that first Sunday night after his resurrection, he appeared to his disciples. After eating with them, he said, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which are written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44). Luke goes on to say, “And He opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (v. 45).

One must notice that the inspired Gospel writer calls “Scriptures” what Christ referred to as “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.” Thus, the authority that Jesus was quoting and explaining was not only the written Law of Moses, but the Prophets and the Psalms—the Psalms being the first book of the third section of the Scriptures, known by the Jews as the Ketuvim, i.e., the Writings.¹⁵ Thus, Christ gave to the written Law, the Prophets, and the Writings the highest authority. This stood in contrast to the “oral tradition,” which the Pharisees considered to have come down by word of mouth from Moses; they considered this oral Law to be of higher

¹⁴ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 155.

¹⁵ The Jews referred to the three parts of what we designate the Old Testament as the Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim, i.e., the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, later shortened to the acronym Tanak.

authority than the written Pentateuch. Not only so, but they gave less authority to the Prophets, and placed the Writings at an even lower level of inspiration and authority.

3. *John 13:34–35*. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love another; as I have loved you” (v. 34).

As they left that celebration of the Passover Feast, Jesus gave them this most significant “new commandment,” which is that they should love one another, just as Christ himself had exhibited by personal example. The question is this: Is this commandment to be understood as a contrast to the Old Testament commandments, or is it more a renewal of the central positive teaching of the commandments of the Old Testament, i.e., to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as ourselves?¹⁶

It might be helpful to note two things: First, he refers to the commandment as “new” (Gk. *kainos*). This word is used in contradistinction to the Greek *neos*, which means something “brand new.” *Kainos* is used of something being “renewed.” This word is used of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21:1), of the new covenant (Luke 22:20), and of a new person in Christ (2 Cor 5:17)—in each case the renewal is in view.¹⁷

Second, we go back to our Lord’s response to the question asked by a Pharisee lawyer in Matthew 22:34–40 as to which is the “great and foremost commandment.” Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 (love for God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love for neighbor). When Christ gave this new commandment in John 13:34, does it really differ from the “great and foremost commandment(s)” of the Old Testament? Further, the Lord added a clear hermeneutical principle: this “great and foremost commandment” must be applied to all of the Law and the Prophets, the Scriptures. John 13:34 seems to be a particularized application for his disciples, adding that he himself has personally exemplified this in his relationship with them. Not only so, but this “love for one another” will be the foremost badge before a watching world that they truly are disciples of Christ.¹⁸

¹⁶ Cf. Matt 22:37–40, which quotes Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18.

¹⁷ Consider the difference between buying a brand new car in contradistinction to a fully refurbished car restored to mint condition.

¹⁸ Francis Schaeffer defined orthodoxy in terms of correct belief and observable love. James M. Boice identified six marks of the church in *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 576 and 584–85, including “a loving people,” citing John 13:34–35 and 17:26.

B. There are numerous times in the Gospels when Jesus interacts with the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees and contrasts their rabbinical interpretations with his own perspective.

Matthew 5 clearly exhibits a contrast between the righteousness of the kingdom and that set forth by the rabbis of Israel. The similarity of language between rabbinic teachings and that of the Sermon on the Mount should not be confused with sameness of spirit. Edersheim correctly points out that

in teaching addressed to His contemporaries, Jesus would naturally use the forms with which they were familiar. Many of these Rabbinic quotations are, however, entirely inapt, the similarity lying in an expression or turn of words. Occasionally, the misleading error goes even further, and that is quoted in illustration of Jesus' sayings which, either by itself or in the context, implies quite the opposite.¹⁹

A similar position is expressed by Martin McNamara regarding some of the Targumim:

In seeking to determine the position of the Targums on any particular point, it is important to examine the Targums as translation, to see how faithful they are to the message and teaching of the original biblical text. It may be that certain emphases within later Jewish tradition run counter, and depart from the biblical text. On some occasions the Targum clearly rewrites the biblical text through what are known as "converse translations," which say the opposite of what the text itself says.²⁰

1. *Matthew 5:21–22*. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever calls his brother 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire."

It should be noted that the second part of the quotation, namely, "and whoever murders shall be in danger of the judgment" is not to be found in Moses or the Prophets. This underscores the point made above, that Jesus was countering or correcting the accretions or minutiae in the interpretation of the teachers of the law.

Also not found in the Old Testament are the additional phrases in verse 31, "let him give her a certificate of divorce," and verse 43, "and hate your enemy." Neither is "and hate your enemy" found in the Mishnah, but it is

¹⁹ Edersheim, *Life and Times*, 1:531.

²⁰ Martin McNamara, "Some Targum Themes," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 1, The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 324.

part of the Qumran Community Rule (IQS). The Qumran sect noted that the instructions in Leviticus 19:17–18 are directed toward “your brother,” “the sons of your people,” and “your neighbor.” Community members were not to correct or rebuke outsiders, including fellow Jews whom they saw as apostate. Harboring hatred in one’s heart toward outsiders was permitted. Chapter 9 of the Community Rule specifies that the leader of the community “shall not rebuke the men of the Pit nor dispute with them.”²¹ Later in the chapter comes the declaration, “Everlasting hatred in a spirit of secrecy for the men of perdition!” The sectarians arrived at their narrow interpretation of Leviticus 19:17–18 by comparing these verses with Nahum 1:2, which states that “the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies” (ESV). While it is wrong to hate or practice revenge against a brother, they reasoned, hatred against an enemy is endorsed by God’s example, which they were called to follow (Lev 19:2). On the contrary, if anything this is the very opposite of what Moses said in Exodus 23:4–5: “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring him back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it.” Consider also Deuteronomy 23:7, where the principle is expressed in the negative: “You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land.” Thus, instead of “hate your enemy,” Christ provided a corrective to this Qumran quote by stating “love your enemies,” he was expressing a spiritual and moral principle already found in the Old Testament.

Christ was underscoring the breadth and depth of the application of the Law by showing that the Law addressed not mere outward behavior but inner attitudes that stem from the heart. The Lord took into account what was considered the sum of the first and second commandments, namely, “to love the Lord your God with all your heart” and “to love your neighbor as yourself.” He understood and applied what he later said explicitly: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”²² Apart from these two foundational principles, the Scriptures will be misconstrued and distorted.

2. *Matthew 11:28–30*. “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

²¹ Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 83.

²² Matt 22:37–40.

There was nothing light and easy in the teachings of the Pharisees; indeed, they put “heavy burdens” that were grievous to be carried and laid them on men’s shoulders (cf. Matt 23:4). Alfred Plummer writes that “heavy laden’ (πεφορτισμένοι [*pephortismenoi*]) does not refer primarily to the load of sin, but to the burdens which Pharisaic interpretations of the Law imposed, and which, after all, gave no relief to men’s consciences.”²³ He then adds that from Christ we can “learn the nature of the righteousness ... a meek and lowly heart, not of external observances.” He further notes that *kopiōntes* (laboring) implies toil, referring to a weary search for truth and for relief of a troubled conscience, while *pephortismenoi* (heavy laden) implies endurance, referring to the heavy load of observances that give no relief. Konrad Weiss agrees: “In the NT φορτίζω [*phortizō*] means the burdening of men (Lk. 11:46) ... with the legal demands of the rabbis without any directions or help in their observance.” He adds, “The ref. is to those who sigh under Rabbinic legal practice.”²⁴ Luke 11:46 underscores this by adding to these burdens *dusbastakta* (hard to bear). So, when Christ said, “Take My yoke upon you,” he was contrasting his “light teaching” with the “heavy teaching” of the Pharisees. He alluded to the metaphorical use of “yoke” in the Old Testament, where it has the sense of servitude.²⁵ Jeremiah 5:5 referred to the great men (i.e., leaders) of Judah and Israel who betrayed their call to high office and had “broken the yoke and burst the bonds,” a figure for the law of God and his covenant. This figure was commonly used by the Jews in Second Temple Judaism. In the Psalms of Solomon, it seems to be used in a positive way: “We are beneath your yoke for evermore, and beneath the rod of chastening” (7:8); “He shall possess the peoples of the heathen to serve Him beneath His yoke” (17:32). It was used as a metaphor for obligation, especially to the service of the Law. For example, “For behold, I see many of Your people who have withdrawn from Your covenant, and cast from the yoke of Your Law.”²⁶ Edersheim makes the point that the Pharisees “had weighted ‘the yoke of the Kingdom’ to a heavy burden, and made the Will of God to them labour, weary and unaccomplishable.”²⁷

In the Mishnah one reads that R. Nehunya ben Ha-Kanah (ca. A.D. 70–130) says,

²³ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 170.

²⁴ Konrad Weiss, “φορτίζω,” *TDNT* 9:86–87.

²⁵ E.g., in Jer 27 and 28.

²⁶ 2 Baruch 41:3. Cf. also Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 51:26; *Pirqe Aboth* 3:8.

²⁷ Edersheim, *Life and Times*, 1:562.

He that takes upon himself the yoke of the Law, from him shall be taken away the yoke of the kingdom [i.e., the troubles suffered at the hands of those in power] and the yoke of worldly care; but he that throws off the yoke of the Law, upon him shall be laid the yoke of the kingdom and the yoke of worldly care.²⁸

Further on, R. Eleazar of Modiim says,

If a man profanes the Hallowed Things [i.e., the offerings, some texts read ‘the sabbaths’] and despises the set feasts and puts his fellow to shame publicly and makes void the covenant [i.e., to render himself uncircumcised] of Abraham our father, and discloses meanings in the Law [i.e., those who ignore or dispute the ‘traditions of the elders’; or a secondary sense, ‘behave impudently against the Law’] which are not according to the *Halakah*, even though a knowledge of the Law and good works are his, he has no share in the world to come.²⁹

Edersheim comments that

practically, ‘the yoke of the Kingdom’ was none other than that ‘of the Law’ and ‘of the commandments;’ one of laborious performances and of impossible self-righteousness. It was ‘unbearable,’ not ‘the easy’ and lightsome yoke of Christ, in which the Kingdom of God was of faith, not of works. And, as if themselves to bear witness to this, we have this saying of theirs, terribly significant in this connection: ‘Not like those formerly (the first), who made for themselves the yoke of the Law easy and light; but like those after them (those afterwards), who made the yoke of the Law upon them heavy!’³⁰ And, indeed, this voluntary making of the yoke as heavy as possible, the taking on themselves as many obligations as possible, was the ideal of Rabbinic piety.³¹

The heavy yoke of the oral tradition was reflected by Peter in his speech against “some of the sect of the Pharisees” at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:10, when he said: “why do you test God by *putting a yoke on the neck* of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” Paul’s argument for the Christian’s liberty in Christ was contrasted to the yoke of the oral tradition in Galatians 5:1: “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be *entangled again with a yoke of bondage*” (emphasis added).³² Thus, Peter and Paul agreed with Jesus Christ regarding the “heavy yoke” of the oral Law, which had crept into the early church through “some Pharisees who believed.”

²⁸ *ʿAbot* 3.5 (Danby, *The Mishnah*, 450).

²⁹ *ʿAbot* 3.12 (Danby, *The Mishnah*, 451).

³⁰ *Sanh.* 94 b, middle.

³¹ Edersheim, *Life and Times*, 2:143–44.

³² See discussion below on Acts 15:12 regarding the absence of summary of Paul’s speech.

3. *Matthew 12:1–8*. There were differences between Christ’s teaching on the Sabbath and that of the Pharisees. Their antagonism with increasing vehemence was culminated with their charge that he was working in league with Beelzebub. That the disciples plucked the rye or barley grain was not a problem, since this was permitted according to Deuteronomy 23:25. They were not accused of stealing but of working on the Sabbath by plucking and rubbing the grain in their hands. The scribes and Pharisees considered reaping, threshing, and winnowing as working on the Sabbath and thus forbidden.

Jesus responded with two illustrations from the Old Testament, thus pointing to the fact that every rule has its limitations and that ceremonial laws sometimes must yield to the higher claims of love and necessity. First, Jesus responded, “Have you not read ...?” (v. 3), significantly referring to the Former Prophets,³³ which the Pharisees considered to have less authority than the Law of Moses. David and his outlaw followers ate from the showbread in the tabernacle, which only the priests were permitted to eat. Further, the priests’ heaviest workday was on the Sabbath in the Temple as they administered the Sabbath sacrifices. Second, Jesus then quotes Hosea 6:6 for the second time: “I desire mercy [Heb. *hesed*], not sacrifice” (Matt 9:13).³⁴

One needs to read the tractate on the Shabbath in the Mishnah (in the Second Division, *Moed* [‘Set Feasts’]) to get a feel for the minutiae imposed upon the Jews. There are twenty-four sections in the tractate on Shabbath, each with some four to eleven paragraphs of detailed regulations. Several examples may be quoted that are apropos to what the Lord was addressing. Shabbath 7.1 states,

A great general rule have they laid down concerning the Sabbath: whosoever, forgetful of the principle of the Sabbath, committed many acts of work on many Sabbaths, is liable only to one Sin-offering; but if, mindful of the principle of the Sabbath, he yet committed many acts of work on many Sabbaths, he is liable for every Sabbath [which he profaned]. If he knew that it was the Sabbath and he yet committed many acts of work on many Sabbaths, he is liable for every main class of work [which he performed]; if he committed many acts of work of one main class, he is liable only to one Sin-offering.³⁵

³³ In our Bibles we call them the Historical books.

³⁴ Laird Harris identifies *hesed* both as an attribute of God in attitude and action of love apart from its relation to covenants. See *TWOT* 1:305–7. God’s people are to reflect this attribute individually and corporately even as Christ explicitly stated: “By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

³⁵ Danby, *The Mishnah*, 106.

Shabbath 7.2 continues with a list of classes of work: “The main classes of work are forty save one: sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading ...”³⁶ Again, in Shabbath 10.6, “If a man plucked aught from a holed plant-pot he is culpable; but if from an unholed plant-pot he is not culpable.”³⁷

Edersheim makes an interesting observation: “Holding views like these, the Pharisees, who witnessed the conduct of the disciples, would naturally harshly condemn, what they must have regarded as gross desecration of the Sabbath. Yet it was clearly not a breach of the Biblical, but of the Rabbinical Law.”³⁸

4. *Other passages.* Space does not permit examining additional passages. Suffice it to list the following and suggest these would yield further insights: Matt 5:27–29; 12:9–14; 15:1–20 and Mark 7:1–23; Matt 19:3–10; 22:34–40; note especially Matt 23:2–36; et al.

III. *Paul’s Confrontations with Judaizers in Acts*

The Book of Acts gives us a helpful insight into Paul’s view of the Torah and his confrontations with Jews. In Acts 14 we read of Paul in the synagogue at Iconium. The result of the preaching was that “a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks [Gk. *hellēnoi*] believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles [Gk. *ethnē*] and poisoned their minds against the brethren” (vv. 1–2). The opposition resulted in persecution and Paul’s being expelled from the region.

In Acts 15 we see for the first time a disagreement over doctrine and practice among believing Jews and Gentiles.³⁹ This was initiated after “certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the *custom of Moses*, you cannot be saved” (v. 1). Paul and Barnabas and other leaders appealed the matter to the Synod at Jerusalem. There they met with the “apostles and the elders” (v. 4), reporting all that God had been doing among the Gentiles through their ministry. But those who held a different view, referred to as “*some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed*,” “rose up” (v. 3) in opposition, claiming, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.” Circumcision reflected a most visible and important issue, but at the heart of the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 110.

³⁸ Edersheim, *Life and Times*, 2:56.

³⁹ Not to be confused with the disagreement in polity and social concern seen in Acts 6.

matter was how Gentile believers should observe the Mosaic Law. Note: Moses never intended the Old Testament Law as a means of justification.

At the Jerusalem Synod (or Council), Peter was the first to speak. His brief is presented in Acts 15:7–11, and this is his conclusion: “Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they” (v. 11). This perhaps clarifies what he was talking about when he said just before that, “Why do you test God by putting *a yoke on the neck* of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (v. 10). This seems to be a clear allusion to Jesus’s statement, contrasting the heavy “yoke of the scribes and Pharisees” with his own yoke, which “is easy.”⁴⁰

In Acts 15:12, Luke records that Paul and Barnabas gave their report of God’s working among the Gentiles through their ministry. One must ask in light of the summary of Peter’s remarks and of James’s remarks in Acts 15:13–21, Why is Paul’s presentation not summarized and recorded? This is especially an important question, considering that Luke summarizes Paul’s sermons and testimony in many instances. I would suggest that the reason is that Paul had written his epistle to the Galatians addressing this very issue, seeking to resolve the problem in the churches he had established on his first missionary journey. This epistle was written, then, just before the Jerusalem Synod, and he used it as his brief before the court in Jerusalem. This would explain why Luke does not summarize his views at the council of Jerusalem: he knew that there was already a written document that served as Paul’s brief.

Acts 15:13–21 summarizes the speech by James, the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴¹ James recommends a letter be sent to the brethren in Antioch area with these solutions. This is agreed upon by the apostles and elders (Gk. *presbuteroi*) with the consent of the church as a whole. The letter (vv. 23–29) further dissociates the apostles and elders from the legalism of those who “came from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to *the custom* of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (v. 1) and the “Pharisees who believed,” who felt that Gentile believers should be commanded “to keep the Law of Moses” (v. 5). To require observance of such things as circumcision as prerequisite to salvation is to “add to the Scriptures” a teaching that goes beyond Moses and the Prophets.⁴²

It will be helpful to briefly review several recurring statements regarding the Mishnaic rabbinic writings:

⁴⁰ See notes above sub Matt 14:28–30.

⁴¹ James the brother of John and son of Zebedee was beheaded by Herod (Acts 12:2).

⁴² Cf. Deut 4:2; 12:32.

- The Mishnah was *equal to the authority of the Written Law itself*, even though Mishnaic teachings found no place in the Written Law.
- Inevitably the living tradition (the Oral Law) *is more important than the Written Law*.
- The “tradition of the elders” claims also to be *its authentic and living interpretation*.
- *Appeal was made to the Mishnah, the work of the Sages, both for doctrinal and judicial matters*.
- Greater stringency applies to the observance of the words of the Scribes than to the observance of the [Written] Law (See Sanh. 11.3).
- The focus in the Targumim has shifted from Yahweh God to instruction in the Torah of the Lord.

IV. *What of Our Confessions and Catechisms?*

As inheritors of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, we concur with the great Reformers who pointed out the accretions and distortions in doctrines, worship, and governance that like barnacles had become part and parcel of Romanism. For example, Brennan Manning references Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which the Grand Inquisitor, defending the church’s taking away of the people’s freedom “for their own good,” says to Jesus,

“They will be amazed at us, and will think of us as gods ... because we are ready to rule over them. ... But we shall say that we are obeying you and ruling only in your name. ... [W]e shall not let you have anything to do with us anymore.” Indeed, “Why have you [Jesus] come to disturb us?”

Manning comments,

After fifteen hundred years the institutional Church, *instead of proclaiming Jesus, had supplanted Him*. Ecclesiastical traditions and man-made laws had usurped Jesus, and the Church was living off the success of its ingenuity. ... The question had become not “What does Jesus say?” but “What does the Church say?” (Emphasis added)⁴³

Dostoyevsky captures the problem, and with him we readily acknowledge the many deviations from Scripture exhibited in such things as pelagianism, monasticism, celibacy, indulgences, and later the supremacy of the papacy and *ex-cathedra* authority, and Mariolatry.

⁴³ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2005/1990), 145–46. I am indebted for this to my son, Daniel S. Gilchrist.

Voices of protest emerged. Jan Hus, who was encouraged by the writings of John Wycliffe, whose books were publicly burned in 1410 in Prague, preached that all human rules and institutions should be evaluated in light of the Scriptures, emphasizing freedom from the burden of human rules not in accord with the Scriptures.⁴⁴ And we remember well Martin Luther's stand at the Diet of Worms in 1519: "It is impossible for me to recant unless I am proved to be wrong by the testimony of Scripture or by evident reasoning. ... My conscience is bound to the Word of God."

Protestant churches further responded by developing confessions and/or catechisms that essentially reflected their Reformed beliefs based on the Scriptures.⁴⁵

When the Puritan refugees established the Massachusetts colony, they went a bridge too far in seeking to have "a Puritan experiment." The most famous expressions of legalism were their strict observance of doctrines and judicial procedures. We remember the trials of witches and adultery cases, often going way beyond the guidelines presented in the Scriptures.

With the rise at the end of the nineteenth century of Modernism, which denied five essential doctrines, Evangelicals countered with the Five Fundamentals, which were to a large degree promoted by the rising Dispensationalism, which eroded the authority of the Old Testament. Unfortunately, many other important doctrines of Scripture were neglected, and a new system for moral living arose; consider the five rules for Christian living: no smoking, no drinking, no dancing, no movies, no card playing [and, some may add, no lipstick]. The solid confessional standards of the Reformation period were silenced, and shallow theological thinking followed. In the 1920s and 1930s, a diminished and weakened Christianity emerged in the churches.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Reformed churches emerged, reasserting the doctrines and practices of the Reformation. New denominations were formed, some dividing but a few uniting with others. In the early 1980s, during the time of the joining and receiving of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), I was invited to participate in a committee discussing a proposed Directory of Worship. I presented some arguments from the Scriptures. A PCA member presented a counter argument based on the Westminster Standards. I asked how these arguments could be understood from

⁴⁴ John Huss, *The Church* (New York: Scribner's, 1915), 149.

⁴⁵ The World Reformed Fellowship affirms the following historic expressions of the Reformed Faith: The Gallican Confession, The Belgic Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, The Thirty Nine Articles, The Second Helvetic Confession, The Canons of Dort, The Westminster Confession of Faith, the London Confession of 1689, and the Savoy Declaration.

Scripture. He responded, “But our Confession and Catechisms are *the authorized interpretation of the Scripture*.” I wondered then if this wasn’t putting the Standards on the same level of authority with the Scriptures. A few years later, I read John Vance’s doctoral dissertation on “The Ecclesiology of Thornwell,” where he quotes Thornwell from his *Collected Writings* (IV:313):

“Whatever the Bible condemns our Confession of Faith condemns ...” Further, he stated: “They are the *same authority*; the Confession is nothing except as the Bible speaks in it and through it; and in adopting, we have averred it to be an honest and faithful interpretation of God’s teaching.”⁴⁶

Later Thornwell wrote, “[They are] *the accredited interpretation of the Word of God*. It is not an inference from it, nor an addition to it, but the very systems of the Bible.”⁴⁷

Yet it is these very Standards that declare their subordination to the Scriptures:

The supreme judge by which *all controversies* of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, *doctrines of men*, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, *can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture*. (WCF 1.10, emphasis added)

It behooves we who are confessional to recognize the danger of elevating our confessional documents to a *de facto* ultimate authority over the Scriptures even with good intentions. It is more work to argue from a solid exegetical study of Scripture than to merely quote a line from a confession or catechism. In this postmodern age, it is incumbent upon us to begin with the authoritative Scriptures as Christ and the apostles did, using the confessional documents only as supporting and corroborating evidence.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ John Lloyd Vance, “The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell: An Old South Presbyterian Theologian” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1990), 266.

⁴⁷ Ibid. (Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 367; emphasis added).

⁴⁸ I am indebted to my friend Dr. Rick Perrin for some of these concluding thoughts.