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Is the Adventist Faith Legalistic?

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Introduction

The Adventist church is often accused of legalism, mainly because of its emphasis on the observance of the Decalogue. The seriousness of this accusation derives from Paul's criticism of Judaism as a legalistic way to salvation. Adventists usually respond by placing the Pauline statements within the total perspective of the biblical doctrine on the Law since the Scriptures clearly establish the value of obedience. It is not necessary, however, to consign Paul to a minor place within that doctrine. It is preferable to understand in depth his thought on legalism. In so doing Paul becomes the best ally of the Adventist position.

In addition we should at the outset avoid false conceptions about Jewish legalism. Jewish legalism was not merely strict obedience to the Law. Such is not the charge made by the New Testament, rather just the opposite (Matt 5:17-20, Rom 2:17-24). In fact, you cannot be too obedient, according to the Bible.

Nor was Jewish legalism an effort to keep a multitude of minute commandments, as some Adventists have suggested. Each of the 613 commandments of the Pentateuch was meant to be obeyed. Neither

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can we attribute their error to human commandments added to those 613 precepts. Those additions existed, but the objection Paul makes to Judaism is not over human innovation but over an incorrect understanding of the biblical doctrine of the Law.

It is also insufficient to decry Jewish legalism as an effort to keep ceremonial laws outdated by the cross of Jesus. Paul, an Israelite Christian, kept the yearly Jewish feasts and obtained circumcision for his part-Jewish assistant Timothy (Acts 16:3, 20:16, 21:26). He did oppose the adoption of these practices by Gentile converts. But this in itself does not explain in what way Jewish legalism was wrong.

We are on more solid ground to say that their mistake was in trying to obtain salvation through obedience to the Law. But here, again, we should tread carefully, since by all means a Christian should avoid disobedience. Every sin threatens eternal perdition. Since obedience to the Law definitely has to do with salvation, we should thoroughly analyze the Jewish doctrine of the Law to see in what sense its effort to obtain salvation by Law-keeping is erroneous.

Judaism and the Law

By Jewish doctrine we mean, not the Old Testament, but the rabbinical teachings which originated in the last centuries before Christ. The New Testament calls it Pharisaism, which the present-day Synagogue acknowledges as a direct ancestor.

Some scholars have lately held that Paul does not really describe Pharisaism, since the latter supposedly emphasized the importance of the Covenant over work-righteousness. If this were true, Adventists, who also emphasize the New Covenant in the blood of Christ and keep the Decalogue, could be considered just as legalistic as the ancient Pharisees.

These revisionists admit that legalistic rabbinical writings are extant, but consider them medieval innovations. Undeniably, however, traditional Judaism in our days looks upon righteousness in the sight of God as a status obtained through good works. An advertisement

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for the Jewish community published in Argentinian newspapers in 1994, at a time when a beloved Rabbi was sick, made the following appeal:

We must each perform as many good deeds and Mitzwoth [“commandments”] as possible in order to obtain the piety of Heaven and aid his immediate recovery and Messianic redemption.¹

The phrase, “the piety of Heaven,” is the linguistic equivalent of the New Testament’s “the righteousness of God,” so what Paul objects to is alive and well in the synagogue of our day. This makes listening to Judaism very important, in order to understand precisely what Paul criticizes. If we overhear a man scolding another person on the phone, we would be able to ascertain accurately the scope of the reprimand by listening to the other side of the conversation.

Good deeds and mitzwoth mentioned in the advertisement are considered to have atoning value according to Talmudic doctrine. The Talmud is an extensive work with a rather complicated history. A typical page contains a central portion, the Mishnah, surrounded by a commentary, the Gemarah. The Mishnah, committed to writing about A.D. 200, contains teachings orally transmitted from before the Christian era. Its contents are mainly rules and standards for religious practice formulated by Rabbis and followed by the Jews in the times of Jesus and Paul. The Gemarah developed later, during the fourth to the sixth centuries.

Since the Mishnah is not theological but practical in character, it does not address the issue of salvation as such. But what little it does state, taken together with the Gemarah, exhibits a religious thought remarkably similar to the one refuted by Paul. Its main tenets may be summarized in the following:

1. Man establishes his own righteousness through especially deserving deeds. According to the Mishnah, in God’s judgment “everything is according to the reckoning” (Ab 4.22).² The Talmud, accordingly, employs a pair of scales as a figure of speech to describe

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God's judgment. The status of man in the sight of God depends on the relative weight of merits over transgressions:

As to the world to come, if the man has a larger measure of merits, he inherits the Garden of Eden, and if he has a larger measure of transgressions, he inherits Gehenna. (p Qidd 61d ff;³ cf. b Peah 16b).

On the same topic, another early Rabbinical teaching states:

Because the individual is judged by the majority [of deeds], the world is judged by its majority. And if one did one mitzvah, happy is he for he has inclined the balance for himself and for the world to the side of merit. If he committed one transgression, woe is he, for he has inclined the balance for himself and for the world to the side of guilt (T. Qidd 1.14).⁴

Those good deeds do not consist merely in refraining from transgression (p Qidd 1:9), since abstaining from sin is required, and, therefore, is not meritorious. *Atoning* mitzwoth are deeds beyond the call of duty, like deeds of mercy, hospitality, peace-making, etc. (Mishnah in b Qidd 38b; the Gemarah adds that such deeds "incline the scales"

2. In the case of exceptionally righteous people, such accumulated merit can be transferred to posterity, a principle called "the righteousness (or piety) of the fathers." This may be compared to the Catholic conception of a "hoard of merits" accumulated by the saints and dispensed by the Church, as in the practice of granting indulgences. A well-known Rabbi of our day utilizes such a comparison when describing the attitude of ancient Rabbinical works regarding the deeds recorded in the patriarchal narratives:

It is through those acts of supererogatory grace they perform that the[y] gain God's special love, for both themselves and their descendants.⁵

3. Merit is always rewarded with prosperity, and guilt with

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suffering, whether in this world or in the next. God acts like a gardener who cuts off the branches of a tree projecting into an unclean place: so He “brings suffering upon the righteous in this world in order to enable them to inherit the world to come,” and conversely, “causes the unrighteous to prosper in this world to destroy them. . . in the world to come” (b Qidd 40b).

4. Suffering has a purifying effect.

The school of Shammai say: There are three classes; one for “everlasting life,” another for “shame and everlasting contempt,” (Daniel 12:2; these are the wholly wicked) and a third class which is evenly balanced. These go down to Gehenna, where they scream and again go up and receive healing.

The school of Hillel say: He is “great in mercy” (Exod 34:6), that is, he leans in the direction of mercy. (T. Sanh 13.3).

5. The grace of God towards the sinner and the blessings of the covenant are real, but are dependent on human merits. This can be seen in the case of a person with merits and transgressions closely balanced:

If they are equally balanced? R. Yose b. Haninah said, “forgiving sin” (Mic 7:18). R. Abbahu said, “It is written, ‘forgiving.’ what does the Holy One, blessed be he, do? He snatches one of his bad deeds, so that good deeds outweigh the balance” (p Qidd 61d).

But it is also apparent in the case of common Jews, who by belonging to the covenant circle, enjoy the “righteousness of the fathers” transferred to them. In both cases God’s mercy adds merit to those the Jew has on his own, without which He could not reach salvation.

Since the history of the Talmud is somewhat complicated, the revisionists hold that this doctrine of salvation through mitzwoth belongs to medieval thinking rather than to doctrines from the days of Paul. However, the same ideas appear in Rabbinic works of

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undisputable antiquity.

For instance, the suffering imposed on the righteous so as to purify them from guilt appears in the Midrash, or traditional interpretation of the Bible. The oldest Bible version is the Targum, a translation into the Aramaic language of everyday use in the days of Jesus. Targum Onkelos is considered to be strictly literal, but at certain points some interpretation has crept in. This is the way Onkelos translates Deuteronomy 7:10:⁶

[God] pays those who hate Him a reward for their good deeds, in order to take vengeance from them in the world to come; He does not delay rewarding with good things those who hate Him; while they are living in this world He rewards them for the small mitzwoth they have in their hands.

Another midrashic work, the Palestinian Targum, has an explanatory introduction to the story of Abraham in Genesis 15:1.⁷

After these things, after . . . he had killed four kings and surrounded nine encampments, Abram thought in his heart and said: Woe is me now! Perhaps I have received the reward of my commandment-keeping (mitzwoth) in this world and there is no part for me in the world to come. . . or perhaps there were a few meritorious deeds (mitzwoth) in my hand the first time they fell before me and they may prevail against me. . . For this reason there was a word of prophecy from before the Lord upon Abram the just, saying: Do not fear, Abram. . . although I delivered up your enemies before you in this world, the reward of your good works (mitzwoth) are prepared for you for the world to come.

An easily dated author, Josephus (a contemporary of Paul) describes the same account of the battle, assuring the patriarch that he would not lose his heavenly reward:⁸

God commended his virtue and said “Nay, thou shalt not lose the rewards that are they due for such good deeds” (Antiquities of the Jews, I, x. 3).

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We can also find the scales of judgment to weigh merits and transgressions in midrashic narratives of the same age. In the “Testament of Abraham,” (written in 1st or 2nd century A.D.),⁹ the patriarch is taken for a ride through the heavens in a chariot driven by the archangel Michael. He sees, at the gates of heaven, a judgment presided over by “the just Abel” with the help of an angel who weighs deeds in a scale and another who tries them on fire. At that instant a soul arrives who is in danger of damnation for lack of “one righteous deed more than its sins,” but thanks to the intercession of Abraham is saved (12-14).

Viewpoints Contrasted

The presence of these ideas in ancient Rabbinic works implies that Pharisaism in the days of Paul, based the hope of salvation on human merits established through special good deeds. The “works of the law” questioned by Paul are, therefore, the mitzwoth of Pharisaism. They are not obtained simply by not sinning, but by performing certain commandments far beyond strict duty, and they are able to atone for sins.

This is why Paul could not arrive at a compromise with Judaizers who wanted to circumcise Gentile converts. The Judaizers understood salvation to be dependent on mitzwoth, which could be accessed by entering the Covenant. The gate of the Covenant was circumcision. They did not deny the blessings of the Covenant nor the efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ, but the latter was effective only in the way in which Isaac’s sacrifice was efficacious. That is to say, Calvary added weight to the pan of mitzwoth in the scales of the judgment.

Paul, instead, thinks that a Hebrew Christian might want to circumcise to obey God’s law for his nation and to avoid unnecessary trouble as in the case of Timothy, but the circumcision of a Gentile Christian entails yielding to the false salvation doctrine of Judaizers. The latter presupposes that in the dress of Christ’s righteousness there are threads of human making, the mitzwoth, and that Christ’s sacrifice

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is not all-sufficient. Such a Christian, as he warns Galatians, has fallen from grace (Gal 5:1-4).

Ironically, by placing the Law in a saving role, Rabbinism at the same time betrays it as Law. According to their view, it is only through mitzwoth, obedience beyond the call of duty, that we atone for our sins. In the Law, then, there must be two areas: (1) a required part, the transgression of which threatens us with death, but also (2) an “air space” of options we can take advantage of for merits.

Rabbinism designates the Law with names such as the Tree of Life, the Way, the Truth, Water of Life, Light of the World, etc. in virtue of this saving role. But Jesus took this false theology apart in his preaching. Looking at this almost worshipful attitude towards the Law—or the Will of God revealed in Scripture—Jesus applied all these names to Himself without trepidation, and confronted the Pharisees: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, but you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39, NIV).

Jesus’ teaching on the Law, by contrast, is that there are no commandments of lesser importance (Matt 5:19), nor is the fulfillment of the letter of the Law sufficient. The Sermon on the Mount holds that what the Law really demands is both internal and external perfection: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder. . .’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry. . .” (Matt 5:21-22). Jesus understood his mission to include “completing” the Law (5:17). With a Law “completed” by such elevated requirements there is no hope of going “beyond duty” and obtaining credit before God. The “air space” in the Law disappears, and for fallen man, a sinner by nature, Law means invariably death. Works of mercy and the like are not means to atone for sins, but a requirement of the Kingdom (cf. Matt 25:31-46). After fulfilling them we are just “unworthy servants; we have only done our duty” (Luke 17:10, NIV).

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The Adventist Task

We Adventists know that an important part of Christ's mission was "to magnify the law and make it honourable" (Isa 42:21, KJV). But we have not always realized the relationship between this "magnifying" the Law and righteousness by faith. Some have even felt a tension between these ideas. Actually, one opens the way for the other. If we leave salvation entirely to the Messiah, then the Law is free to exercise its ministry of condemning sin and guiding us to Christ. To preach the high norm of the Law is an integral part of preaching Christ. It falls to our task, as Adventists, to explain why the true friends of the Law are Bible Christians, not Rabbinical Judaism.

This task is an urgent one. Some churches try to open a dialogue with the man on the street by proclaiming "Christ is the answer." More often that not, the puzzled man asks: "What is the question?" The great question, of course, is What must I do to be saved? But the man on the street may not sense this, because he has no idea of the depth of his predicament. He does not feel lost, because the Law has not been preached to him, or only in a diluted way. He may think, for instance, that those who do more good than evil will enter heaven—a popular version of the Talmudic scales.

Paul comes to our aid for this urgent task. He admits there is such a thing as righteousness by law, since Law is indeed holy, and just, and good. There certainly is a law-righteousness by which "the man who does these things will live by them" (Rom 10:5, NIV: cf. 3:31; 7:12). But such is not the righteousness of God, the righteousness that God offers.

The reason is that the Law, in contrast to Christ, cannot give life. No matter what Rabbinism thinks, *the Law lacks an integrated atoning mechanism by which we can redeem our guilt*. "If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (Gal 3:21, 10, NIV; Deut 27:26). Paul himself was once "faultless" as far as legalistic righteousness was concerned, but later decided that such righteousness was "rubbish" and came to

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God “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ” (Phil 3:4-9, NIV; cf. Titus 3:5; Rom 3:20; 4:5; 10:3).

As far as the Law is concerned, we can only have guilt, never merits, for, being a transcript of God’s character, we will never be able to overreach it. Therefore this holy, just and good law signifies “death” for fallen man when he tries to fulfill it and fails (Rom 7:7-13). That righteousness we receive from God by faith is an act of pure, undeserved grace on His part, and as such drags into dust human pride (Rom 3:22-26; 5:9; 2Cor 5:18; Gal 3:13). Our obedience to God’s Law will always be a loving response to that unfathomable grace, but never a meritorious step towards heaven.

All this means that the Adventist church has never been legalistic in the sense condemned by Paul. True, many Adventist sermons by 1888 needed a corrective, being as dry as the hills of Gilboa. But on the other hand our movement never preached Sabbath-keeping or any other commandment-keeping as a way to redeem sins. We have always understood obedience as something we owe God, not something that establishes our credit before Him. The apostle certainly does not include us in his criticism, but instead contributes the clearest presentation of the way of salvation to share with a perishing world. Let us, therefore, magnify Law; let us magnify Christ and His grace. These are sister ideas, and integral parts of our Adventist heritage and privilege.

Endnotes

1 Paid by Jabad Lubavitch, Buenos Aires.

2 Citations from the *Babylonian Talmud* are taken from I. Epstein, ed. (London: Soncino, 1948-52).

3 Citations from the *Palestinian Talmud* are from J. Neusner, tr., *The Talmud of the Land of Israel* (Chicago: Univ. Press, 1984).

4 *Tosefta* citations are taken from the translation by J. Neusner (New York: Ktav, 1979).

5 Jacob Neusner, *Genesis and Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), p. 23.

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6 *The Bible in Aramaic*, A. Sperber, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1959-73).

7 *Neophyti*, A. Diez Macho, ed. (Madrid: CSIC, 1968-78).

8 H. Thackeray, tr. (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1930).

9 G. E. Ladd, "Pseudepigrapha," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 3:1042.