

TORAH: mishpatim, edot and chukim

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H E THAT TURNETH AWAY HIS EAR FROM HEARING THE LAW, EVEN HIS PRAYER SHALL BE ABOMINATION

-Proverb 28- 9~

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TORAH, usually translated into English as "Law," is a subject of vital importance for those who would worship the God of the Bible, as the above-quoted verse from Proverbs so strongly points out. Unfortunately, most Christians have only a superficial understanding of what Torah is, and a lack of appreciation for this God-given gift.

David Stern, in his book *Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, refers to the study and understanding of Torah as "Christian theology's greatest deficiency." To demonstrate his point, Stern compares the amount of pages that various Jewish and Christian writers give to the subject of God's Law in their books of systematic theology. The three Jewish commentators Stern checked devoted 15%, 20%, and 22% of their pages to explaining the meaning of Torah, while the Christian commentators devoted only 3%, one-half of 1 %, and one-fourth of 1 % of their space to the subject.

Stern admits that these figures provide only "a rough measure," but my own 20-plus years of study and experience tells me that Stern is quite accurate in his conclusion when he writes, "One is forced to the conclusion that the topic interests Jews and not Christians."¹

I happen to be a Christian who does have an interest in the topic. I do not consider myself an expert on the Torah, but I have given the subject a considerable amount of study, prayer, and thought over the years. The purpose of this article is to give readers a general understanding of the basic elements of the Torah, and thereby help in a small way to remedy "Christian theology's greatest deficiency."

When trying to understand a broad subject like Torah, it often helps to first break the subject down into its major components. Fortunately, the Bible does this for us very clearly in Deuteronomy 4:44f: "And this is the Law (*torah*) which Moses set before the children of Israel. These are the testimonies (*edot*) and the statutes (*chukim*) and the judg-

ments (*mishpatim*) which Moses spake unto the children of Israel, after they came forth out of Egypt."

From this we can see that the commandments of the Torah fall into three major categories: *edot* (nTtJJ), *chukim* (D^pH), and *mishpatim* GTBBtFD).

The commandments referred to as *mishpatim* are the moral, ethical commandments called "judgments." These laws require no explanation or justification - the need for laws against murder, rape, robbery, etc. is self-evident to anyone with good "judgment." The Septuagint uses the Greek word *krimata* (Kpmccta) in Deuteronomy 4:45, a word which carries with it the idea of condemnation and punishment. Disobeying the *mishpatim* usually results in some form of condemnation and punishment, either by a human court or by Divine retribution.

The *edot* are feast days and other rituals that testify to some important spiritual truth or historical event. The word *edot* can be translated "testimonies" or "witnesses," as the Septuagint demonstrates by using the Greek word *marturia* (fiapTupux). Readers of the KJV can see the word used in its singular form in Joshua 22:34: "And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar *Ed*: for it shall be a witness between us that the LORD is God." The *edot* are important because they remind us of God's presence, God's faithfulness, God's holiness, and the privileges and duties we have as His children. Obeying the *edot* reinforces the spiritual realities which they represent.

The reasons for the *edot* are always stated; the reasons for the *mishpatim* are always obvious. The reasons for the commandments known as *chukim*, however, are neither stated nor obvious. The *chukim* are commandments such as "Thou shalt not plow with an ox and a donkey together" or "Thou shalt not wear a material mixed of wool and linen together" (Deut. 22:1 Of).

Why these acts are forbidden is not stated; the commandments are simply given with no explanation. God, for reasons known only to Himself, decided to require His people to follow certain regulations. This is evident in the Septuagint's translation of *chukim* as *dikaionata* (SiKcueonara, "decision, requirement, regulation"). The *chukim* are commandments that are "prescribed" or "appointed" for reasons known only to the Lord.

Some people speculate about why the Lord gave certain *chukim*. For example, many believe that the dietary laws were given for reasons of health, and this may very well be true. However, when the Bible does not state the reason for a commandment (as it does for the *edot*) and the reason is not obvious (as it is for the *mishpatim*), we must accept such laws as *chukim*.

Most decent people accept the *mishpatim* as good laws that ought to be obeyed by everyone. Most religious Jews and Christians see the importance of the *edot* for believers (although the only *edot* practiced by most Christians are baptism and the Lord's Supper). But both Jews and Chris-

tians stumble over the *chukim*. Aryeh Kaplan, a Jewish writer, admits that even for Jews, the *chukim* are "the most difficult to keep." Kaplan gives a good explanation of why this is so:

"If we do not understand the reason for something, it is tempting to find excuses not to do it. When we try to explain our religion to non-Jews, the laws that do not have an obvious reason are the most difficult to justify. If a person is unsure of himself or is wavering in his Judaism, these laws will be the first to be abandoned."²

The terms "non-Christian/Christianity" can be substituted for "non-Jews/Judaism" to make the above paragraph relevant to Christians.

How often have we heard people respond to the *chukim*, or even to the *edot*, with remarks like "Why would God care about this?" or "Why doesn't He want us to do that?" or "This doesn't seem important to me. Surely the Lord doesn't care about it!"

Christians often dismiss the *chukim* by saying, "Only the moral laws are important now. Now that we have the Holy Spirit, we don't need to do those other things anymore." Ironically, the Bible says that one reason for the giving of the Holy Spirit is to enable God's people to keep the *chukim* as well as the *mishpatim*. "And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes (*chukim*), and you shall keep My judgments (*mishpatim*), and do them" (Ezk.36:27). And again it is written: "And I will put a new spirit within them...that they may walk in My statutes (*chukim*) and keep My ordinances (*mishpatim*), and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God" (Ezk. 11:19f).

Pentecostals often speak about having the Holy Spirit "with evidence of speaking in other tongues." Maybe it's time to start talking about having the Holy Spirit "with evidence of walking in the *chukim*."

For centuries Christian theologians have used Christianity's rejection of the *chukim* and *edot* to justify the Church's changing of the Biblical seventh-day Sabbath to Sunday observance. The need for a regular day for rest and worship was viewed by Christians as a *mishpat*. The part of the commandment that specifies the seventh day as the Sabbath, however, was viewed as a "ceremonial law" which could be abandoned or altered.

Chrysostom, from whose pen flowed both sweet praises to God and bitter curses against the Jews, said that the Sabbath commandment teaches that "among the days of the week one must be singled out and wholly devoted to the service of spiritual things."³ It is no longer "the seventh day," but any day of the week. According to Chrysostom, then, man can single out a day for rest and worship other than the day written on the tablets with the finger of God.

In the 13th Century, Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, wrote that "the precept of the Sabbath observance is moral... in so far as it commands man to give some time to the things of God ... but it is a ceremonial precept... as to the fixing of the time."⁴

For Aquinas, the laws of God that he believed could be discovered by human reason are moral and binding; the laws that require Divine revelation are not. Hebraically speaking, we could say that Aquinas accepted the *mishpatim*

but rejected the *edot* and *chukim*. The moral laws, Aquinas said, are grounded on "natural law," i.e., they can be discovered by natural human reason without any Divine revelation. The flaw in Aquinas' theology lies in the fact that human nature is fallen and sinful, and the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). The Torah does not have its origin in natural human reason; it comes by Divine revelation.

The influence of Aquinas' unscriptural elevation of natural law above the *chukim* and *edot* can be seen in the theology of later Christians. Luther rejected the seventh-day Sabbath because "it is not supported by the natural law."⁵ Melancthon insisted on a day to replace the seventh-day Sabbath because it is "moral and natural" to have a fixed day for worship.⁶ The Catechism of the Council of Trent (1566) dismisses the seventh-day Sabbath because it is not "a principle of the natural law," but accepts the other nine of the Ten Commandments because the Nine Commandments "belong to the natural law, and are perpetual and unalterable ... because they agree with the law of nature."⁷

By whose authority do we use "natural law" to determine whether or not a command in the Bible should be obeyed? Do we obey the commandments because they "make sense" to the natural man without the aid of Divine revelation? Or do we obey them because they were commanded by our Heavenly Father, who happens to be the Supreme Ruler of the universe? Both Christians and Jews should hearken to Kaplan's comments about the *chukim*:

The fact that a commandment does not have an obvious reason makes its observance all the more an act of faith. It indicates that we are ready and willing to obey God's commandments, even when we cannot justify them with logic. It shows that we are placing God above our own intellect... We do not observe the commandments because logic demands it, but simply because they were given by God. The required basis is the relationship between the commandments and their Giver. This is higher than any human wisdom.⁸

Yes, some of God's commandments seem foolish, but "the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Cor. 1:25). Let us manifest the wisdom of God to the world by our obedience to the *mishpatim*, the *edot*, and the *chukim*, and show the world that we believe our Heavenly Father knew what He was doing when He gave the Torah.

NOTES

1 David H. Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* (Jerusalem: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1988), 125f.

2 Aryeh Kaplan, *Waters of Eden* (New York: National Conference of Synagogue Youth/Orthodox Union, 1982), 8.

3 Chrysostom, *Homila 10, 7 In Genesim*, PG 53, 89.

4 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part III, Q.122, 4.

5 Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets, Luther's Works*, 1958, 40:93.

6 Melancthon, *On Christian Doctrine, Loci Communes 1555*, Clyde L. Manschreck, ed. and trans., 1965, 96f.

7 *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, J. Donovan, trans., 1908, 342.

8 Kaplan, 8f.