

A YOKE OF BONDAGE

The Law without the Spirit of Christ

Compiled by Rachel Cory-Kuehl, April 6, 2014

Scripture is from New King James Version unless otherwise noted

Acts 15:10 [Peter speaking about converts from the Gentiles] “Now therefore, 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?”

Galatians 5:1 [Paul] “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”

Who were “our fathers”? And what was this “yoke of bondage” ?

To whom was Peter speaking?

What was the issue at this council meeting?

1. Who were “our fathers”?

Answer: our male ancestors (*Acts 7:52, Acts 28:17*)

Answer: older male authority figures (*Acts 22:1*)

Answer: those who heard Isaiah the prophet (*Acts 28:25*)

Answer: those who came out of Egypt (*Acts 3:22, Acts 7:44, Acts 13:17, 1Cor 10:1*)

Answer: the 12 Sons of Jacob (*Acts 7:12 & 15*)

Answer: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (*Acts 3:13*)

My point here is that “our fathers” in Acts 15:10, cannot refer simply to those who came under the burden of the Oral Torah - the law of the Pharisees. That law was something acquired during the captivity in Babylon. We do not hear of it until after the return from that captivity. “Our fathers” (all of them) were under this “yoke of bondage”.

2. Peter was speaking to believers in Yeshua - some of them converted Pharisees contending for required circumcision. Others like Paul and Barnabas argued that physical circumcision should not be required for converts from the Gentiles. The story is found in Acts Chapter 15.

There is a separate study on the issue of “[Circumcision](#)”.

3. The issue being debated at the Jerusalem Council was physical circumcision - whether the uncircumcised who were turning to God, should be required to accept physical circumcision and to take a vow of obedience to keep the “whole” law, including the offering of animal sacrifices through the Aaronic priesthood at the Temple.

THE LAW OF THE PHARISEES - WAS THIS THE YOKE ?

Peter said “we” were not “able to bear it” - this yoke of bondage. Whatever the yoke, Peter and those present at the Jerusalem Council felt its weight. This would apply particularly to the Law of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees taught that the LORD gave to Moses an expansion of - an addition to - the written law. This was called “the oral law” because it was given to Moses orally, and was never written down. It was supposedly passed down orally to each successive generation. The “Oral Torah” was also called “the traditions of the elders”. To preserve these traditions during the dispersion, the Oral Torah was finally written down as the Talmud some years after the destruction of the Temple in 70CE. (Picture all of the volumes containing the judicial rulings of the Supreme Court.)

The critical factor was the weight given to this “oral law”. The Rabbis still today teach that the Oral Torah superceded the written law. It was above - and of greater authority than the written law. I think you can grasp the potential for abuse. The ruling authorities could add laws for the people, and make laws to exempt themselves from the greater part of the burden.

For more information look up “Oral Torah” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*.

Matthew 23:1-4 “Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples saying: ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat [ruling the people] For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.’”

Mark 7:8-9 [Jesus] “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” He said to them, ‘All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.’”

Matthew 15:3 “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?”

Matthew 16:12 “Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

The “doctrine of the Pharisees” was the teaching that justification could be earned thru Torah observance. The moral leaven of this class was hypocrisy (Lk 12:1).

It was a yoke. Yes! But is THIS the “yoke” referenced by Peter and Paul, or are we missing the larger picture?

Why did the Pharisees add rule upon rule upon rule? Was it because they had no respect for the original Covenant of Ten Commandments. No! It was because they wanted to make very sure the people were keeping the law.

Failure to keep the Law would mean destruction, captivity, and dispersion. It would mean death for Judah and what was left of Israel. The Pharisees piled rule upon rule to prevent infractions of the law. But - think about it. If the law is written on the heart by the Spirit, then you don't need to force anyone. They will keep the law because it has become their nature to do so, because it is written on the heart.

And of course, as years went by an upper class evolved who exempted themselves from many of the rules they invented for everyone else.

Think about the banking industry today. If everyone involved in the banking industry had the law of unselfish love written on his or her heart, we would not NEED regulation upon regulation. Right? All the regulations are to prevent selfish and greedy behavior. The Oral Torah of the Pharisees came about because they did NOT have the Spirit within. **Those Pharisaic rules were the result of law without the Spirit.**

Consider socialism - the enforced redistribution of wealth by the state. Where obedience is forced - that system will ultimately fail. Compare this to the early believers, who "held all things in common" and no man considered ought of his property his own (*Acts 2:44-45*). All this because the law of love was written on their hearts.

Like a marriage without love, so the law without the Spirit becomes a "yoke of bondage". Without the Spirit of Christ within, no human being can keep the Law of God perfectly. It is like pushing a huge boulder uphill. When you get tired, it will roll right back over you and crush you, or crush someone who is behind you climbing that hill - which is exactly what the Law of the Pharisees did to the Jews.

Romans 9:31-32 "But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone."

The "stumbling stone" was FAITH, or lack of it.

Acts 7:51 "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you."

Ahh - here are the "fathers" again. For them, the Law was a heavy burden, and a yoke of bondage. Why? Because they resisted the Spirit.

Hebrews 3:19 [Speaking of those who died in the wilderness] "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief."

Romans 11:20 "Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear."

Romans 11:23 [Concerning the Jews] “And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.”

Branches were “broken off” from Israel (the Olive Tree) long before Yeshua Messiah lived and died. Faith or unbelief was the issue from the very beginning. The coming of Messiah added a critical decision point. Would they believe - in Him?

1 Peter 2:7-8 “Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,’ and ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.’ They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.”

They stumble, and are disobedient to the word of God because of unbelief.

Belief in Yeshua became “a stone of stumbling” but THE larger overriding issue from the beginning was faith with trust and obedience, vs unbelief with disobedience - out of which grew the Law of the Pharisees.

HAGAR AND SARAH

Galatians 4:22-26 “For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar-- for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children-- but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.”

*I'm just going to repeat a few words here for emphasis. **The Sinai covenant “gives birth to bondage.” The Jerusalem of Paul's day was “in bondage”** - because they were still laboring under the Sinai covenant, and had not accepted the New Covenant - of the Spirit.*

Galatians 4:28 “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.”

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.”

In context Paul is arguing against physical circumcision for converted Gentiles. Circumcision came with a vow to keep all of the law, including the Oral Torah of the Pharisees, and the offering of animal for sacrifices.

We - you and I - are about as able to keep the Law, as Sarah was to conceive a child. When we try to keep the law by our own efforts alone, we produce something akin to what Abraham produced thru Hagar - Trouble! When the law is forced on a people, through strict rules upon rules - like the Law of the Pharisees - it produces either rebellion, or religion without heart.

The Pharisees kept the law outwardly, but inside they were dead. Yeshua called them “whitewashed tombs” (*Matt. 23:27*).

Without the Spirit of Christ, the law becomes a “yoke of bondage” - something to be borne - like slavery. But we are to be free from such bondage. Because Yeshua Messiah has promised to “live in us”. He has promised that He will write His law on our hearts. Our part is to believe Him, and to thank Him every day for this wonderful promise. And when His law *is* revealed in us, this wonderful love has come about by promise - NOT because of our efforts.

Romans 7:6 “But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”

We do serve. We still keep the Ten Commandments. And we go beyond the Ten by returning good for evil, and by praying for our enemies. But we are ever so aware that *we* cannot claim any credit. We walk by the power of the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

I remember years ago, there was a woman with whom I just could not get along. It seemed she rejected me constantly. I felt very defensive around her. Now I was supposed to “love” this woman because she was my husband’s mother, which made me feel all that much worse. (I can talk about her now, because she’s been dead for years.) I remember crying to Jesus in frustration. “I can’t do this! I give up!! If I ever love this woman, it will not be me. It will be You Lord loving her through me.”

Well - when I gave up, that is when the miracle began. She began to sense something coming from me, that I myself could not sense. As her defenses dropped so did mine, and we ended up making a lasting connection. I could take no credit whatsoever.

I tell this story to illustrate our struggle. What we know we “should” do - we can’t do. The more we struggle, the faster we sink. Just like Peter in the water. Most of us give up in frustration. Some of us become rigid or legalistic like the Pharisees. But a few reach out to claim the promise - “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (*Col. 1:27*).

Romans 8:4 “that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh [that is - by our own efforts alone] but according to the Spirit [in us].”

Galatians 3:2 “This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?”

Isaiah 58:6 “Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?”

I do NOT believe that the Sinai Covenant *began* as a “yoke of bondage”. Moses said to Israel, “For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach” (*Deu 30:11 NAS*). It became a “yoke of bondage” as the people “resisted the spirit” and lost faith.

REPENTANCE FROM DEAD WORKS

Hebrews 6:1 “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection (*completion or maturity*), not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God . . .”

I would lump any “works” done to EARN salvation into the same “dead works” pile. Jesus won our salvation by His perfect “works”. Those are the only “works” that ever EARNED anything.

This understanding is absolutely foundational! We do NOT earn salvation through our good “works”.

THE YOKE OF REST

Matthew 11:29-30 [Jesus speaking] “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.”

When we are yoked up with Christ, He will pull the load which we cannot budge. In His strength, and by His Spirit we *will* live His law.

Paul called himself a “bondservant of Jesus Christ” (*Romans 1:1*). James, Peter and Jude, each called himself “bondservant” of Jesus Christ. They had taken the “yoke” of Christ.

THE MARRIAGE COVENANT - A YOKE

Paul strongly cautioned against marriage with unbelievers. “Be not unequally yoked,” he wrote (*2Cor. 6:14*). Marriage was termed a yoke.

The Sinai covenant was a marriage covenant between the LORD and Israel. We covered that in the study titled “Two Covenants”. I think that any person who has endured a loveless marriage would agree that it becomes a “yoke of bondage”. The “first” covenant - without the Spirit - gradually became just such a yoke for most of Israel.

Is it possible then, that Peter is referring to that “first” covenant in Acts 15 ? Is he insisting that the Council NOT force the new converts under THAT yoke? The statement of James in Acts 21:25, makes it clear that the Gentile converts were NOT expected to observe the law of sacrifices.

THE LAW OF SACRIFICES - NOT REQUIRED FOR NEW CONVERTS

Paul returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey. This was more than 20 years AFTER the Damascus road vision. Paul had already written his letters to the Galatians, Thessalonians and Corinthians. James - the head of the Jerusalem Council - encouraged Paul to pay for the purification sacrifices for 4 men, and to be “purified with them”. This he did because there were many new converts from among the Jews and *they* were “all zealous for the law” (*Acts 21:20*). He felt that Paul needed to demonstrate his continuing obedience of the law. Paul had apparently taken a Nazarite vow some weeks before Pentecost, as he journeyed towards Jerusalem, so it seems he had much the same agenda in mind. Acts 18:18 says that he cut off his hair.

NOTE: Hair was shaved at least 30 days before final purification (The Jewish Encyclopedia).

James encouraged Paul to participate in the purification sacrifices, but stated specifically that **“no such thing” was to be observed by “the Gentiles who believe”** (*Acts 21:25*). Here we have evidence that purification at the Temple, along with circumcision and the law of sacrifices was NOT something expected of Gentile converts. No uncircumcised man could have been “purified” at the Temple anyway - not “according to the law”. He would have been executed if he tried to enter the Temple court.

I do not believe that Paul’s actions demonstrate his belief that sacrifices were still necessary under the “new covenant”. Rather Paul wrote, “to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law;” (*1Cor. 9:20*). He did not consider himself “under the law” but rather as one “led of the Spirit” (*Gal 5:18*). He sought an opportunity to preach to Jews, and knew they would not listen to one they viewed as “cut off” because he had failed to observe the law.

The law required that every Israelite male be present in Jerusalem three times during the year for the Feasts. Paul had certainly NOT kept this law. He stayed away from Jerusalem for 14 years (*Gal. 2:1*).

A NEW COVENANT

We must understand that there really is a New Covenant. The Sinai Covenant was rendered “obsolete” by the death of “the husband”. (See the study “[Two Covenants](#)”.) Under the New Covenant, the priesthood has been changed - from exclusively Aaronic, to Melchizedek (which will finally include every redeemed Israelite - as a priest). The ministry has been moved to the “true Tabernacle, which is heaven itself”. The One true “blood sacrifice” has been offered - “once for all” - rendering any other blood offerings “obsolete” and unnecessary.

My focus in this study has been the “yoke of bondage” - which I believe IS the law. It is the law without the Spirit of Christ. Without the Spirit the Law must be forced, which never brings a blessing, and certainly does not earn salvation for anyone.

The prophet Jeremiah saw a day when the Ark of the Covenant will not be remembered or brought to mind. No one will need to consult the rules. The Ten Commandments will not be posted on a wall inside the New Jerusalem, because His law will be written in the hearts of His redeemed. We pray for that day!

Jeremiah 3:16-17 “And,’ says ADONAI, ‘in those days, when your numbers have increased in the land, people will no longer talk about the ark for the covenant of ADONAI – they won’t think about it, they won’t miss it, and they won’t make another one.”

When that time comes, they will call Yerushalayim the throne of ADONAI. All the nations will be gathered there to the name of ADONAI, to Yerushalayim. No longer will they live according to their stubbornly evil hearts” (The Complete Jewish Bible Translation).

Jeremiah 31:33 “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (NRS)

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