

The Tradition above all other traditions

There is Tradition, and there is tradition. What is the difference?

The Sabbath School lesson for the week ending Sabbath 25th April 2020 focused on different influences on our reading of Scripture. The influences the lesson reviewed were culture, tradition, experience and reason. In preparation for a panel discussion on 25th April to discuss the lesson, I did some personal study on the question of tradition. What did I use? Prayer, a Strong’s Concordance, a NT Interlinear, a KJV and a NRSV. Doing such study is always akin to entering a treasure trove, and I came to the panel discussion full of the joy of discovery.

What did I discover? There is a Tradition, and there are many traditions. Not all traditions are equal. To paraphrase George Orwell in “Animal Farm,” “All traditions are equal, but one Tradition is more equal than all other traditions.” So what is the difference?

To begin with, the three global faiths known as the “Abrahamic faiths” each has an underlying text, oral or community traditions, and then a summary of the previous two components in the “finished article” of the faith.

	Judaism	Christianity (represented by the majority group, Roman Catholics)	Islam (represented by the majority group, Sunnis)
Underlying text	The Tanakh, comprised of the Torah, the Prophets (Nevi'im) and the Writings (Ketuvim).	OT, Apocrypha & NT.	Koran
Oral / community traditions	Oral Torah, captured in the Babylonian Gemara and Mishnah.	The decrees of Councils, e.g. Trent, and ex-cathedra teachings of the Pope, e.g. bulls & encyclicals.	The hadeeth, attributed sayings of the Prophet of Islam.
Summary of the faith	Talmud.	Canon law.	Sharia law.

The word for “tradition” in the NT is “παράδοσις” (*paradosis*, Strong’s 3862, derived from 3860), meaning that which has been passed on, a tradition, an ordinance, and in the context of 2nd Temple Judaism, the Oral Torah.

The Jews believed that when God gave the Decalogue in writing to Moses on Mt Sinai, He also gave the verbal interpretation of the application of the Decalogue and broader Torah. The Oral Torah grew over the centuries, and by the time of Jesus, comprised the accumulated teachings of hundreds of rabbis down through the centuries.

In the early 1st Century AD, there were two main streams of interpretation, the conservative stream (championed by the House of Shamai), and the more liberal stream (championed by the House of Hillel). Much of what we read in the Gospels can be understood in terms of the contemporary rabbinic debates.

For instance, the question the Pharisees pose in Matt. 19.3 about divorce was a hotly debated rabbinic debate. Shammai taught that divorce was only permissible in cases of actual, physical adultery. Hillel taught the concept of “no fault” divorces, that a man could divorce if his wife burnt the proverbial toast. Many Jews preferred Hillel’s interpretation, as did Joseph, who sought a Hillelite rather than a Shammaite divorce from Mary in Matt. 1.19. Shammai believed that only worthy students could study the Tanakh, whereas Hillel argued that all may be taught to read, study and be blessed by the Tanakh. Clearly, the Gospel Commission of Matt. 28.18-20 was akin to the exegetical optimism of Hillel. On the question of whether it was permissible to tell a lie, and whether or not one could say that a bride was ugly, Hillel argued that every bride is beautiful, if only for

the wedding day, whereas Shammai argued that you cannot tell an ugly bride that she is beautiful – that would be a lie. Clearly, Jesus sometimes upheld the more conservative view, and sometimes the more liberal view. Interestingly, the Beit Hillel is the dominant form of interpretation in modern Judaism. Matt. 5 is an exposition of the law – which the scribes and Pharisees routinely attempted, but Jesus spoke with inherent authority, not quoting any teachers of the past, but as the Lawgiver Himself. The people noted that Jesus spoke with authority, and they listened. Anyway, I digress....back to the question of traditions and Tradition.

Jesus explicitly condemned the Jews for their practice of setting aside the commandments of God for the traditions of men (τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, Mk. 7.8, c.f. Matt. 15.2-6). In the example He gave, “*corban*,” an oral tradition of the Jews had nullified the intent of the 5th Commandment. To hammer home His point, Jesus then said, “And you do many things like this.”

The young student known as Saul (later to be known as the Apostle Paul), of the tribe of Benjamin, named after the first king of Israel – also a Benjaminite, and proud of his heritage, was a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22.3), one of the greatest rabbinic scholars of 2nd Temple Judaism. Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel, and shared Hillel’s more liberal tendencies, as demonstrated in the leniency Gamaliel argued for on behalf of the apostles when they were hauled before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5.34). Gamaliel was wise indeed! Saul however, though a student of Gamaliel, had not taken on the worldview of Hillel! Rather, although he had advanced in Judaism beyond many people his own age, he was violently persecuting the early Church, trying to destroy it. Why? He explains autobiographically that, “....as I was far more zealous for the traditions (“παράδοσις”) of my ancestors” (Gal. 1.14). Thus, what Jesus explicitly condemned, Saul was ready to kill for....the traditions of the Jews, or the Oral Traditions / Oral Torah of contemporary Judaism, and which we can read today in the Talmud.

Once he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul / Paul became an Apostle, and in the light of the revelations he received from Jesus, could critique the blend of religious ideas and traditions all around him. “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2.8). Here, Paul refers to the traditions of men, uninformed by the Person and Gospel of Jesus Christ, as being nothing more than “philosophy and empty deceit.” Modern western philosophy, which long ago abandoned any faith in God, has reached the point of despair, bereft of any explanation of meaning today or hope for tomorrow. Paul would likely use the same critique today as he did in the 1st Century AD, i.e. “empty deceit.”

Peter also critiqued the Oral Torah / traditions of the Jews in 1 Peter 1.18, “....knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers” (“πατροπαραδότου” “*patraparadotou*,” or “that which has been handed down from your father”). The NRSV has a clearer translation here, “....you know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold....” Peter contrasts faith in the sacrifice of the Messiah with the sacrificial system of the Temple, and argues that it is only through the blood of the Lamb rather than the blood of lambs that eternal life can be gained.

Paul then argues for a positive form of tradition “παράδοσις” in 2. Thess. 3.6. “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.” What is this “tradition” that Paul has passed on? It is the command given in / through Jesus Christ that believers are to work in order to eat. “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread” (2 Thess. 3.10-12).

Yet, there is more than just the command to work! In 2 Thess. 2.14-15, Paul parallels the “traditions” taught by himself to the Thessalonians with the “τοῦ εὐαγγελίου” i.e. the Gospel. Paul had passed on the Gospel. This was

the “παράδοσις” of above all other traditions – the Gospel. He affirms this in 1 Cor. 15.3, where he used the verbal form, i.e. “παρέδωκα γὰρ” or “For I handed on to you” or “For I traditioned on to you” when he emphasizes that he passed on, i.e. the Jesus was died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (i.e. the Tanakh, NOT the Oral Traditions), that He was buried, and that He was on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (again, in contradistinction to the “traditions” he had been zealous for before he met Jesus). Thus, the primary “παράδοσις” that Paul and Peter handed on was Christ crucified and Christ Crucified and Christ risen and Christ exalted.

Yet, good as this tradition is, it is not the Tradition above all other traditions. Close, but not quite. There is yet one more, and we find this at the end of Gal. 2.20. “...καὶ **παραδόντος** ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ ἑμοῦ” (literally, “and having given himself over on behalf of me.” Here Paul states that the life we now live in the flesh, we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and who handed Himself over for us. The verbal form is used (in bold). The grammar does not indicate that Jesus “was handed over” as if He were a passive victim. Rather, Jesus Himself chose actively to hand Himself over...for us.

This then is the ultimate Tradition, going beyond the handing over of the Gospel....it is the Son of God passing on / handing over Himself, voluntarily, knowingly, with volition and intent, out of *agape* love, for you and for me. Paul expresses to the church of Corinth that he chose to know nothing except Christ crucified and Christ Risen and Christ Glorified and Christ Returning (1 Cor. 15). This was the heart of what he preached, and by extension, is the heart of what we are called to pass on / hand over / preach and teach and model and exemplify today.

There are many traditions today. Some are the teachings of godless men, and they are nothing but empty deceit, leading to futility and despair. Others are the teachings of religious men, but they are often based on human reasoning rather than divine revelation, and are ultimately futile for salvation. Some traditions though are to be cherished, e.g. the commands of Jesus, and are necessary for us to learn how to follow as disciples, but the Tradition above all other traditions is Christ Crucified, Christ Risen, Christ Glorified and Christ Returning. May He be the heart of all we are and do in ministry!