

Rejoicing In The Law?

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“REJOICING in the Law? You’ve got to be kidding!” Such is the sentiment of many Christians when they hear about the Festival of *Simchat Torah*, which serves as the capstone of the joyous seven-day Feast of Tabernacles. “*Rejoicing in the Torah*” strikes them as an oxymoron, making no sense whatsoever. Why would they want to rejoice in that from which Christ came to set them free?

They have been taught that Law and Gospel are mutually exclusive ideas that contrast sharply. One is a “ministration of death and condemnation, and the other the ministration of the Spirit and righteousness” declares J.N. Darby, the father of Dispensationalism.

The division between Gospel and Law, a cornerstone conviction of the Protestant reformation, is stressed in a famous quote by Luther: “Whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian.” The “chief and proper” function of the Law, he adds, is to “reveal to humanity [their] sin ... and the well deserved wrath of God.” In effect the Law is a curse and a killer.

With this in view, who in their right mind would want to “rejoice in the Law”? That must be a “Jewish thing”. Well, I respectfully disagree. Actually it is a biblical thing.

TO SORT OUT this matter, let us begin not with Luther or Darby, but with a far more brilliant sage from Nazareth, named Yeshua (Jesus). For him the Torah was eternal. Heaven and earth will vanish before a “jot or tittle” (*yod v’kotzo shel yod*) shall pass away from the Law, he insists (Mt 5:18; Lk 16:17). Everything must be fulfilled, and since that has yet to occur, the Torah continues as a source of guidance, direction and instruction for people of faith.

Indeed Jesus commends his disciples who keep even the “least (lightest) of the commandments” (5:19). As a teacher, he uses well known rabbinic terminology to emphasize that his instruction does not “abolish” but “fulfills” the Torah. To abolish (*levatel*) is to undermine the Law by misinterpreting it; to fulfill (*lekayem*) the Torah is to properly interpret the text’s meaning so that people will conduct themselves in accordance with the Author’s intent. Like the Psalmist who declared, “Oh how I love your Torah! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps 119.97), Jesus of Nazareth rejoiced in the Law.

Once I was faulted by a pastor for speaking affectionately of the Torah and the biblical Feasts. “Don’t you know that the Law ended with Christ?” he protested. “God nailed the Law to the cross!”

“Excuse me,” I replied, “but if God nailed the Law to the cross then He doubled-crossed himself. He’s the one who gave the Torah to his redeemed and beloved children as a gracious gift.” What was nailed to the cross was not the Torah but our “record of debt” (ESV), that accounting of our trespasses, rightly condemned by the Law (Col 2:13-14).

If Christ is the “end of the Law” (Rom 10:4) in the sense of its termination then he contradicted himself when he said it would not pass away, and contrary to his own testimony he abolished the Law! In truth, Messiah is the *telos* (end) of the Torah in the sense of its aim or goal. Jesus is the Torah-incarnate, the Word-made-flesh, full of grace and truth.

Contra the Reformers, Paul of Tarsus also shared his Master’s bedrock respect for the Torah. He develops various facets of the Law that, especially in polemical settings (like Galatians), can sound entirely negative. But to do Paul justice, one first must put in place the apostle’s foundational commitment to the Torah as that which is “holy, righteous and good” (Rom 7:12); “spiritual” (7:14); that which his “inmost self delights in” (7:22); and the “just requirements” of which

we who walk according to the Spirit are empowered to fulfill (8:4).

When we love one another and God we are fulfilling the (still relevant) Torah, and God rejoices over us! So, yes, by all means let us “Rejoice in the Law” with Israel. It is part of our heritage in Messiah, and to do so accords with New Testament teaching and honors the heavenly Father who gave us the Torah in love.



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