

The Torah of Yeshua vs. the Legalism of Rabbinical Judaism

Mark 7 describes a resumption of the dispute between Yeshua and the Pharisees over the interpretation of Torah. The issue at hand was over Yeshua's disciples not washing their hands before eating bread according to the traditions of the elders of Israel (v. 3).

The phrase, "traditions of the elders" refers to the interpretations of Torah by rabbinical leaders that developed over time. It later became known as the oral tradition, and then was put down in writing during the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. That writing was called the *Mishnah*. Later rabbis subsequently gave their own commentary on the *Mishnah* during the 3rd-5th centuries, which was also written down in what was called the *Gemara*. Then the *Mishnah* and *Gemara* were compiled together in the multi-volume work called the Talmud. Each volume, called a tractate, deals with a separate topic, like Shabbat, the feasts, marriage, etc. This complexity is further enhanced because there are two versions of the *Talmud* – the larger one written in the land of Babylon and a smaller one written in Jerusalem. Each one follows the same format—*Mishnah* and *Gemara* compiled together and divided into tractates. Altogether, thousands of rabbinical opinions have accumulated and form the basis for Judaism today.

But this rabbinic complexity was already well-established in Yeshua's day. It just had not been written down yet, and was passed on orally from generation to generation. So this "tradition of the leaders" and the later Talmud accomplished the same thing—it created an additional burden of obligations that the original Torah did not make. The washing of hands was one of them. It is now recorded in the Talmud in the tractate *Yadayim* ("hands"). This was not a mere issue of hygiene. It was a matter of ritual cleanness. The Pharisees of the second temple period and the later rabbis based their argument on this verse in the Torah:

"Likewise, whomever the one with the discharge touches without having rinsed his hands in water shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until evening." (Lev 15:11)

This entire chapter of Leviticus 15 deals with obvious bodily discharges of different kinds that made you ritually unclean, but it makes no mention of breaking bread or eating. Nevertheless, the rabbis took it two steps further by saying that washing refers to everyone, not just someone with an obvious discharge, and it specifically applies to washing before eating, in order to preserve ritual purity. So they applied it in a much more burdensome way than the Torah originally intended. Then, once they headed down that path, it became easy to add to the burden. Here is what the "traditions of the elders" of Yeshua's day required:

Mishnah Yadayim: On The Washing of Hands Before Eating Bread

- 1.1 A minimum of a quarter log of water must be poured over the hands (a log is the volume of six eggs).
- 1.2 Water must only be poured from vessels that are unbroken and covered with a lid. Water must not be poured from a ladle, the bung of a barrel, or cupped hands.
- 1.3 Water must not be used if its color has changed or if it is unfit for cattle to drink.
- 1.4 Water must not be used if it was first used to scrub the vessel.
- 1.5 Anyone who pours the water is acceptable, including deaf-mutes, imbeciles, children or apes.

- 2.1 Water may be poured over one hand and then the other, or both hands at the same time.
- 2.2 If insufficient water (less than 1/4 log) is poured out and a second washing is needed to meet the volume requirement, and a loaf comes into contact with the first water, it is unclean. If the washing fails to remove a splinter or a piece of gravel, they remain unclean. But if a water creature falls onto the hands when pouring, the hands are clean.
- 2.3 If the water is poured beyond the wrist and flows back over the hand, it is unclean. Water may be poured over five or less persons at a time as long as their hands do not touch each other.
- 2.4 If his hands were clean and there were two unclean loaves before him and there was a doubt whether he touched them or not; or if his hands were unclean and there were two clean loaves before him and there was a doubt whether he touched them or not; or if one of his hands was unclean and the other clean and there were two clean loaves before him and he touched one of them and there was a doubt whether he touched it with the unclean hand or with the clean hand; or if his hands were clean and there were two loaves before him one of which was unclean and the other clean and he touched one of them and there was a doubt whether he touched the unclean one or the clean one; or if one of his hands was unclean and the other clean and there were two loaves before him one of which was unclean and the other clean, and he touched both of them, and there is a doubt whether the unclean hand touched the unclean loaf or whether the clean hand touched the clean loaf or whether the clean hand touched the unclean loaf or whether the unclean hand touched the clean loaf, the hands remain in the same state as they were before and the loaves remain in the same state as they were before.
- 3.1 That which has been rendered unclean by a father of uncleanness conveys uncleanness to the hands, but that which has been rendered unclean by an offspring of uncleanness does not convey unclean ness to the hands.
- 3.2 One unwashed hand conveys uncleanness to the washed hand.
- 3.3 If a washed hand touched the straps of *tefillin* it became unclean.
- 3.4 If a washed hand touches the margin of a scroll above or below the words, or at the beginning or the end of a scroll, it becomes unclean.
- 3.5 Or if you touched the margin of a scroll on which the writing has become erased and 85 letters remain.
- 3.6 If a washed hand touches a scroll of the Song of Songs or Ecclesiastes, it becomes unclean.
- 4.5 If a washed hand comes into contact with the Aramaic sections of Ezra and Daniel, it becomes unclean.

In Mark 7, Yeshua answered the question of the Pharisees by showing how any tradition of men that violates God's commandments is wrong. He described the practice of the Pharisees of giving their money for temple worship (v. 11), while leaving nothing for the care of their aged parents (v. 12). And in so doing, they violated the commandment to "honor your father and mother" and not to speak evil of them (v. 10, cf. Ex 20:12; 21:17). Their tradition of giving to the temple at the expense of their parents invalidated the Word of God (v. 13) and, because they "do many things such as that," the same was true regarding the rabbinical mandate of washing of hands before eating.