

About Diet, Law, and Holy Days

Edwin de Kock

Seventh-day Adventists are often, though not always, vegetarians and observe the biblical Sabbath from Friday evening sunset to Saturday evening sunset instead of Sunday. Both puzzled friends and hostile critics ask questions about these practices by referring to selected texts from the New Testament. In the following, I use the New King James Version, the most accurate Bible available in English today.

Rom. 14:5: “One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day *alike*. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.”

Rom. 14:6: “He who observes the day, observes *it* to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe *it*. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.”

Taken in isolation, these two verses are insufficiently clear, so we need to contextualize them. Yet even as they stand, we note that their author, the apostle Paul, is here not taking sides. In this Scripture, his focus is quite different; verse 10 explicitly shows that he is writing about judging one another. About what? Verse 1 makes it clear: in “disputes over doubtful things.” So we have to read the whole passage: Rom. 14:1-10. Inter alia, verse 2 should be added to verse 6: “For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats *only* vegetables.”

The casual reader may find this strange. It seems to suggest that in the early church, a particular group was urging vegetarianism on all. But that was not the case. Some ancient people did abstain from consuming animal flesh for health or other reasons, but this was not an issue among early Christians, most of whom ate meat.

No, different problems were involved, as becomes clearer when we read the apostles’ letter to the early believers after the first Council of Jerusalem. We find this in Acts 15:1-29. This was the real question: Must Gentiles, in order to become Christians, also become Jews? That is to say, Must the males be circumcised and the converts generally observe the entire “law of Moses”? This was the position maintained by “some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed” (vs. 5). These were *converted* Pharisees, Christian Jews.

But in bringing Gentiles to Jesus, Paul and Barnabas had held that these things were not necessary for them. After all, circumcision was throughout the Roman Empire the sign par excellence of Judaism, and so were other Mosaic observances. But by and large the Jews had not accepted their Messiah. Therefore, the apostles at the Council decided as follows: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.” (vv. 28, 29)

It is important to note that apart from immorality (a great problem among the Gentiles), the God’s Law of Ten Commandments was not the point at issue, only “the law of Moses.” Also, as will be seen, the judgment of the Council was not the last word; for subsequently Paul had more to say about “things offered to idols.”

First let us note that Gentile Christians were commanded to abstain from blood and things strangled. This was repeating what the Lord had told Noah after the flood: “You shall not eat flesh with its life, *that is*, its blood” (Gen. 9:4). To whom did this apply? To the entire human race. If Christians eat meat, the animal from which it comes will have to be slaughtered in

2 *About Diet, Law, and Holy Days*

such a way as to eliminate all blood, as both Jews and Muslims do to this very day. Hence, the German custom of eating blood sausage constitutes the breaking of a very ancient law.

The reference in Rom. 14:2 to those who restricted themselves to eating vegetables may be related to this, but more was involved. To see what it was, we must move on to 1 Cor. 8:1-13. Paul is dealing here with another dispute involving a doubtful issue.

Despite the decision by the Council of Jerusalem, some Corinthian believers maintained that anyone with common sense knew a graven image represented a non-existent deity; therefore, they *could* eat meat that had been offered to idols. But why would they need to do that? On slaughtering any animal, it was a pagan custom to offer a portion to their gods, which was really a nuisance for Christians. Paul agrees with this argument, “Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol *is* nothing in the world, and that *there is* no other God but one” (vs. 4). The problem, however, was that for some people partaking of such meat was a sin. Why? because they saw things differently; yet they could through the example of others be emboldened to violate their conscience (vs. 7). And so Paul concludes, “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” (vs. 13)

Two chapters further on, he deals with this issue once again and concludes: “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience’ sake; for the *‘the earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness.’* If any of those who do not believe invites you *to dinner*, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience’ sake. But if anyone says to you, ‘This was offered to idols,’ do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience’ sake; for *‘the earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness.’* ‘Conscience,’ I say, not your own, but that of the other.” (1 Cor. 10:25-28, emphasis original)

This links up well with Rom. 14 and is concerned with being considerate of other people’s point of view and particularly not judging one another. As my wife has often put it, we must not major in minors.

We have now looked, in part, at diet; but what about observing or not observing special days that may or may not be holy? This is illuminated by two other passages from Paul’s epistles.

In his letter to the Colossians, he says, “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths [note the plural form], which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.” (Col. 2:16, 17). The key concept is “a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

These observances were given through Moses to predict the coming Messiah and Saviour. That is why they were “a shadow of things to come” and for believers no longer had any validity. But the uncomprehending Judaizers had not given up their efforts. They were still maintaining that to be a real Christian one had, in effect, to become a Jew, observing all those ancient feasts. But Paul said that the Gentile converts at Colosse, like those in Rome and Corinth, should not permit any believer to be judged on this ground.

To the Galatians, he writes about these things more harshly: “You observe days and months and seasons and years” (Gal. 4:10). The Judaizers were also, as in other cases, insisting on circumcision. So now he roundly declares, “Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing” (Gal. 5:2).

All those “days and months and seasons and years,” including the kind of “sabbaths” he was writing about had looked *forward* to our Lord’s incarnation and his redemptive work on the cross. They did not, like the weekly seventh-day Sabbath, look *back* to creation (Gen. 2: 2, 3; Ex. 20:11). Where in the Bible do we read about them? Leviticus 23 describes them and

3 *About Diet, Law, and Holy Days*

applies the word “sabbath” to several of them. Particular examples of such annual rest days that prefigured Christ were the two greatest observances of Judaism: the Passover and the Day of Atonement. Both had their fulfillment in the passion and ministry of our Lord.

The weekly Sabbath, however, was not instituted at Sinai and did not form part of “the law of Moses,” although that great man often referred to it. It is the fourth commandment of God’s imperishable Law, which Jesus later said he had not come to abolish but to fulfill (Matt. 5:17-19). But did this rest day not also originate at Sinai?

Ex. 16, which describes the earliest time when God rained manna on his chosen people during their desert wanderings, makes it very plain that it did not. Then, before he spoke the Law on Sinai, the Lord instructed the Israelites to gather only enough of that marvelous food for their daily needs. If they tried to hoard it, it would go bad. Some people disobeyed this command, with the result that the next day the old manna was rotten (vv. 19, 20).

There was, however, an exception. On the sixth day, they had to collect a double portion, for on the seventh none would fall. We read of this in Ex. 16:4, 5, 22-29. Verse 23 says explicitly, “Tomorrow *is* a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD,” an idea repeated in vv. 26 and 29. Nevertheless, some disobedient people did go out and found nothing. All the time, God had been watching to see what they would do, so now he asked, “How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?” (vs. 28), which was a larger issue. In fact, when he first spoke of the manna he had touched on this with the words, “the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not” (vs. 4).

Not only the weekly Sabbath but the Law of God existed from the beginning, long before Sinai, but were reiterated at that time. Centuries earlier, speaking to Isaac, God had repeated his promise to the father of the Chosen People. He said, “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.” (Gen. 26:4, 5).

It is a mere fiction that God’s people previous to Sinai could do whatever they pleased. From the very beginning, they were subject to an everlasting covenant of grace, including both law and sacrifice. The Bible, the Old Testament as well as the New, records no other arrangement.

Let us also note that the present-day religion of the Jewish people is by no means the same thing as it was before our Lord was crucified and the Romans destroyed their temple in AD 70. For all the centuries since then, they have had only *torah* (law), but no sacrifice; for they mostly failed to accept the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

They have compounded their error by also continuing the notion of two torahs, a written and an oral one. According to an old tradition, which Christ rejected, Moses at Sinai received from God not only the two tables of stone and the instructions which he recorded in a book (Deut. 31:24-26). He was supposedly also given an oral law, which all the rabbis since then have been elaborating on. Jesus was very scrupulous about everything in the Hebrew Bible and on more than one occasion said, “It is written” or referred to or quoted from it. But he rejected this so-called oral law, as becomes plain from Mark 7:1-23. This chapter not only focuses specifically on the vanity of “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” but also contains an accusation: “*All too* well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.” (vv. 7-9)

In studying the problem that the apostles, especially Paul, had with the Judaizers, this matter of the so-called oral law should also be borne in mind. The word “law” in the New

4 *About Diet, Law, and Holy Days*

Testament can have a variety of meanings. Only the context determines exactly what this or that writer had in mind.

It was plain that with the coming of the Messiah, and his rejection by a majority in Jewry, Christianity needed to make many changes. Circumcision had to be abandoned, being the generally recognized sign of Jewish identity. As such it could no longer, for believers in Jesus, serve its original purpose. The festivals and ceremonial sabbaths had found their fulfillment in the reality of the Redeemer's ministry and could now, like shadows, vanish. In addition, many practices, based on ideas that are not in the Old Testament, could be safely dispensed with. Such was the spurious doctrine that eating with unwashed hands was a sin, or that different sets of crockery and cutlery were necessary to separate meat from milk products. Even being overly scrupulous about eating flesh, when a portion of it had been proffered to heathen idols, was strictly speaking unnecessary—although one had to be careful, taking into consideration not just one's own but also other people's conscience.

Nowhere, however, does the New Testament suggest that the Ten Commandments have been abolished. On the contrary, in many places it quotes from and therefore affirms the Decalogue. As the writer of Hebrews (quoting from the Psalms) expresses it, it was to uphold God's holy Law that the Messianic incarnation took place, together with all that this entailed:

You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness;
Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You
With the oil of gladness more than Your companions. (Heb. 1:9)

The New Testament is also concerned with the Sabbath, especially how it should be kept. This, however, is a topic that merits a separate chapter, though here we mention two points.

Jesus, the incarnated Creator who had originally instituted the Sabbath, habitually kept it (Luke 4:16). He was also sufficiently concerned about it to say the following to his disciples about it in relation to events that lay forty years in the future, when the Romans would come to destroy Jerusalem, "And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath" (Matt. 24:20).

Finally we note that the original day of rest will exist forever, observed by all the redeemed who have ever lived:

"For as the new heavens and the new earth
Which I will make shall remain before Me," says the LORD,
"So shall your descendants and your name remain.
And it shall come to pass
That from one New Moon to another,
And from one Sabbath to another,
All flesh shall come to worship before Me," says the LORD.

(Isa. 66:22-23).

(Written in about 2006 to answer an e-mail query from a non-SDA scholar in South Africa.)