What Is the Oral Law?

Christian History · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/what-is-the-oral-law/

The Oral Law (or Oral Torah) refers to the body of Jewish traditions, interpretations, and legal rulings that rabbinic Judaism teaches were given by God to Moses alongside the written Torah at Mount Sinai. According to this view, Moses received both a written law (the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy) and an oral law explaining how the written commands were to be understood and applied. These oral traditions were eventually written down in works such as the Mishnah and later discussed in the Talmud.

Orthodox Judaism affirms the divine origin of the Oral Torah, while most Christian traditions do not. This disagreement concerns the source and authority of religious tradition, not the value of studying Jewish history and scholarship. While ancient Jewish traditions can provide valuable historical and cultural insight, Christians believe that the written Word of God is the final and sufficient authority for doctrine and practice (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Most historians and biblical scholars distinguish between the existence of oral traditions in ancient Israel and the rabbinic claim that a complete "Oral Torah" was given to Moses at Sinai. Virtually everyone agrees that oral traditions existed and played an important role in Jewish life. However, there is no direct historical or biblical evidence that God revealed a second body of authoritative law alongside the written Torah. The traditional doctrine of the Oral Torah is therefore accepted within rabbinic Judaism as a matter of religious belief rather than something that can be independently demonstrated from Scripture or history.

What Does Rabbinic Judaism Teach?

Rabbinic Judaism teaches that Moses received two forms of revelation at Sinai:

1. **The Written Torah** — the text of Scripture itself.
2. **The Oral Torah** — explanations and applications passed down orally through generations.

Supporters often point to passages such as Exodus 24:12, where God promises to give Moses "the law and the commandment," arguing that this refers to both written and oral instruction.

Over time, these traditions were collected into the Mishnah (c. AD 200), expanded through commentary known as the Gemara, and together form the Talmud. The Oral Law addresses countless practical questions:

- What constitutes work on the Sabbath?
- How should phylacteries (tefillin) be made?
- What exactly makes food kosher?
- How should ritual purity laws be applied?

The goal was to preserve and apply the Torah in everyday life.

Is There Historical Evidence for the Oral Torah?

The existence of oral traditions in ancient Israel is not controversial. Ancient cultures relied heavily on oral transmission, and it is entirely reasonable to conclude that customs, legal interpretations, and practical applications of the law were passed down verbally from generation to generation. The question is whether those traditions constituted a divinely revealed Oral Torah given to Moses at Sinai.

Here the evidence becomes much thinner. The Hebrew Bible never explicitly states that Moses received a second body of revelation alongside the written Torah. Nor does it instruct Israel to preserve an Oral Torah that would later be entrusted to the rabbis. Instead, the biblical emphasis repeatedly falls on the written covenant documents themselves (Exod. 24:4; Deut. 31:9–13, 24–26).

For this reason, most modern scholars view the Mishnah and Talmud as preserving traditions that developed over centuries rather than a complete body of revelation transmitted unchanged from Moses.

How Did Jesus View the Oral Law?

Jesus frequently interacted with the traditions of the Jewish religious leaders. Sometimes He affirmed practices that were consistent with Scripture. Other times He sharply criticized traditions that elevated human authority above God's Word.

In Mark 7, the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for not observing a ritual handwashing tradition. Jesus responded:

> "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8).

He continued:

> "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!" (Mark 7:9).

Significantly, Jesus distinguished between "the commandment of God" and "the tradition of men." He never appealed to an authoritative Oral Torah as a second source of divine revelation. Rather, He consistently pointed people back to the written Scriptures.

This does not mean Jesus rejected all tradition. The issue was authority. Traditions may be useful, but they must never supersede God's revealed Word.

Did the Apostles Accept the Oral Law?

The New Testament repeatedly places final authority in Scripture rather than in an ongoing body of oral tradition.

Paul commended the Bereans because they tested his teaching against the written Scriptures (Acts 17:11). He instructed Timothy that the sacred writings were sufficient to equip believers for every good work (2 Tim. 3:15–17).

The apostles certainly lived within Jewish culture and were familiar with various traditions, but they never taught that believers were obligated to submit to the Oral Law as a second inspired source of revelation.

In fact, one of the major themes of the New Testament is that God's people are no longer defined by the boundary markers emphasized in later rabbinic Judaism—circumcision, food laws, ritual purity regulations, and similar distinctions (Gal. 3:23–29; Eph. 2:11–22).

Why Does This Matter in Modern Discussions?

Many practices that people assume come directly from the Torah actually originate in later rabbinic interpretations.

For example:

- Detailed kosher regulations often extend far beyond Leviticus 11.

- Many Sabbath restrictions come from rabbinic rulings rather than explicit biblical commands.
- Numerous purity regulations derive from later Jewish tradition.

This does not automatically make such practices wrong. Christians are free to adopt cultural or devotional practices they find helpful. The issue arises when these traditions are elevated to the level of divine commands or imposed upon other believers.

Jesus consistently called God's people back to the authority of God's Word rather than the traditions of men (Mark 7:6–13).

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Exodus 24:12** — Often cited by proponents of the Oral Torah.
- **Deuteronomy 4:2** — Israel was forbidden from adding to God's commands.
- **Deuteronomy 12:32** — God's Word was not to be supplemented or altered.
- **Mark 7:1–13** — Jesus confronts traditions that nullify God's Word.
- **Matthew 15:1–9** — Parallel account of Jesus' criticism of human tradition.
- **Acts 17:11** — The Bereans tested teaching against Scripture.
- **2 Timothy 3:15–17** — Scripture is sufficient to equip God's people.
- **Colossians 2:8** — Warning against being taken captive by human traditions.
- **Galatians 3:23–29** — The believer's standing before God is found in Christ.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: "Without the Oral Law, how can we know how to obey the Torah?"

The Torah certainly contains commands that require interpretation, and oral traditions undoubtedly existed in ancient Israel. However, Christians believe Scripture itself is the final authority and provides everything necessary for faith and godly living (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Common Objection: "Didn't Jesus follow the Oral Law?"

Jesus lived within first-century Jewish culture and undoubtedly participated in some customs and traditions. However, He repeatedly challenged traditions that contradicted or obscured God's commands (Mark 7:8–13). He never treated human traditions as equal in authority to Scripture.

Common Objection: "Is all tradition bad?"

No. Christianity has its own traditions, creeds, liturgies, and customs. The issue is not whether traditions exist but whether they are treated as divinely authoritative. Helpful traditions may serve the church, but they must remain subordinate to Scripture.

Common Objection: "Does rejecting the Oral Torah mean rejecting Jewish scholarship?"

Not at all. Jewish sources such as the Mishnah and Talmud can provide valuable historical, linguistic, and cultural insight into the world of the Bible. The question is whether they carry the same authority as Scripture. Christians have historically answered no.

Why This Matters

The doctrine of the Oral Law ultimately raises a question of authority: Who has the final word—God's written revelation or later religious traditions? When traditions are elevated to the level of divine revelation, they can obscure the clarity of God's Word and burden consciences in ways God never intended. Jesus repeatedly called people back to the Scriptures as the ultimate standard of truth.

For Christians, our confidence rests not in an expanding body of traditions but in the completed revelation of God centered on Jesus Christ and faithfully preserved in Scripture.

Recommended Resources

- **Judaism and the Rise of Christianity** — Jacob Neusner
- **The New Testament and the People of God** — N. T. Wright
- **Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist** — Brant Pitre
- **The Torah, the Christ, and the Promise** — R. L. Solberg
- **Handbook of Jewish Thought** — Aryeh Kaplan
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