
SHOULD WE WEAR "TASSELS" TODAY?

Jesus of Nazareth (in Hebrew, *Yeshua ha-Notsri*), the Messiah of Israel, taught his disciples:

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law (Torah) and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil(l) them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot" -- not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of the pen distinguishing one letter from another -- "will pass from the law until all is accomplished. (...) For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" -- considered by many to be the most righteous men of their time -- "you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-18, 20, Revised Standard Version).

Strong words! Yet Jesus clearly meant what he said - and he expected his disciples to teach others what he had taught them (Matthew 28:18-20). Again, we are told in several places that we are to follow Messiah's example in our personal lives (e.g., in 1 Peter 2:21). But if this be so, then what about certain statutes and judgments in the Law of Moses which Jesus followed in his human lifetime? Are they binding on Messianics (Christians) today, on Messianics of Israelite descent only, or on none?

Let us examine one statute in particular to illustrate these general questions: the statute of wearing "fringes" (King James Version) or "tassels" (Revised Standard Version) in Numbers 15:38-41. There the LORD commanded Moses:

"Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put upon the tassel of each corner a cord of blue; and it shall be to you a tassel to look upon and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to go after wantonly. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God."

A similar (but much shorter) version of the statute is given in Deuteronomy 22:12:

"You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of the cloak with which you cover

yourself."

The word for "tassel" here is *gedil* in Hebrew; in Numbers 15 it is *tsitsit*. These words simply describe the same thing in two different ways. The sense is, the tassel should be twisted with threads hanging from its end, just as traditional Jewish practice would have it. It is to be "put on the four corners" of a "cloak" or outer garment (Hebrew *kesut*).

By Jesus' day, the Pharisees (*Perushim*) had already worked out basic rules for the shape of the outer garment or cloak (square) and the tying and wearing of the tassels on its corners. (This outer cloak was the ancestor of the *tallit* or prayer shawl worn by Rabbinic and Messianic Jews today.) According to rabbinic sources, there were at least five basic articles of clothing a Jewish man would wear: the shoes, the head-covering, the square outer cloak, the girdle, and the undergarment. Certainly these would have been the articles of clothing worn by Jesus himself -- for the Roman soldiers who crucified him gambled over one of them, the seamless undergarment (John 19:23).

Now the Greek Septuagint version translates "tassel" (*tsitsit*) in Numbers 15:22 as *kraspedon*. This word is used four times in the Gospels to refer to something on Jesus' outer cloak, which people sought to touch that they might be healed by him. Some debate whether this word literally means the tassel of Jesus' outer cloak - yet we must reckon not only with Jesus' attitude on the matter, but that of his contemporaries. If the Pharisees (in Jesus' words) made the "tassels" of their outer cloaks long in order to be praised of men (Matthew 23:5), and if people sought to touch the "tassels" of Jesus' outer cloak in order to be healed by God through him, then these "tassels" must have symbolized righteousness or holiness in their eyes. This could only be true of the "tassels" commanded in Numbers 15 and Deuteronomy 22.

Jesus, then, wore the same dress that any observant Jewish man would have worn -- "tassels" and all. Does that mean *we* should also wear "tassels" on our garments? Some think so, particularly among Messianic Jews -- and one may even buy modern shirts with tassels attached (if one wishes) from a rabbinic clothesmaker in Israel. But let us examine the matter more closely...

First (according once again to rabbinic sources), without a seamless undergarment such as Jesus wore, no teacher could publicly read or "*targum*" (translate) the Scriptures, nor perform any other function in the synagogue. How much more, then, would Jesus need to wear *tsitsit* in order to minister to his people! He did not seek praise from men; yet he did not seek to cause needless offense to them either. As with the Temple tax in Matthew 17:24-27, and as with baptism in Matthew 3:13-15, there was no need for him personally to submit to

certain statutes and ordinances -- yet he followed them nevertheless, as an example of obedience to others. Yet despite this and other measures, generally "his own people did not receive him" as the Messiah (John 1:11).

Second, there *is* a higher principle of the Torah involved here. If nothing in the Torah or the Prophets is to pass away before heaven and earth do, then we must reckon with one of the Torah's very first commandments: "*Of every tree of the garden (save one) you may freely eat*" (Genesis 2:16). In other words, God intended from the beginning that humans partake of the *Holy Spirit* - the *only* thing that truly could enable them to keep His commandments! When Adam and Eve chose instead to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil -- the one tree that had been denied them -- they and their descendants were cut off from access to the Holy Spirit, and thus could not keep God's commandments. This included the people of Israel under the Old Covenant (cf. Deuteronomy 5:28-29).

When Israel received the commandment to wear *tsitsit*, it did so after a long history of stubbornness on their part -- and in particular, after flagrant Sabbath-breaking (Numbers 15:27-36). The *tsitsit* were to remind them to follow God's commandments rather than their own human nature. Yet had the Holy Spirit been within them, it would have fulfilled this same function and much more (John 16:13-15).

Thus, while the Old Covenant was still in effect and the New Covenant had not yet been ratified, even the Messiah wore "tassels" when ministering to his people. When the New Covenant was ratified and the Holy Spirit promised by it was made available, the wearing of "tassels" was no longer necessary. Both Israelites and Gentiles may now fulfill the original intent of the Torah, which intent now supersedes all later concessions to human nature and human unrighteousness. Thus Jesus (as consistent with his own teaching) has "*magnified the Law (Torah) and made it honorable*" (cf. Isaiah 42:21, King James Version).

Copyright © 2003 by Johanan Rakkav. All Rights Reserved.
Updated February 3, 2006
