

# Was Jesus Christ Born Under The Law?

by Earl L. Henn (1934-1997)

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*Was our Savior bound by the Old Testament law of rituals and sacrifices when He lived on earth? If not, why not? Does it really matter?*

One of the central themes of the New Testament is that a Christian is a follower, a disciple, of Jesus Christ, who lives His life over again in our flesh by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Paul proclaims,

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

The life of Jesus Christ was a perfect example for us to follow in all respects. In this regard Peter writes, "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (I Peter 2:21). We are to think like Him (Philippians 2:5), imitate Him (I Corinthians 11:1) and follow His example in every detail of our lives (I John 2:6).

However, to walk in the footsteps of Christ is not popular. It is also difficult. It requires self-denial and leading a life quite different from those around us. Unfortunately, this invites persecution. Jesus said, "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20).

## Bound to Keep the Old Law?

Since the founding of the church of God, many subtle arguments have been advanced to convince people that they do not *really* have to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ in order to be a true Christian. One of these crafty arguments centers around the birth and early life of Jesus.

Some have taught that He was born "under the law." The crux of this teaching is that Jesus lived under Old Covenant rules and regulations and that He was bound to keep the "whole law" with all of its rituals and ceremonies. In the Old Testament, God commanded His people to adhere to an exhaustive set of rules governing the offering of sacrifices, various washings and ablutions and physical requirements such as circumcision. These regulations were designed to keep Israel in mind of the need for a Savior and to set them apart as a separate nation to protect them from the influence of Gentile nations (Galatians 3:23-24).

But was Jesus Christ bound by these laws? Did He keep the Old Testament ritual law along with its ceremonies, washings and oblations? This question, which ostensibly appears to be heavily theological and of little practical importance, is vitally important for a Christian to understand. Indeed, this false teaching is a cornerstone upon which many types of heresy have been built.

Why? The reason is clear. The New Testament states that Christians are not required to offer physical sacrifices or practice the various rituals that were obligatory under the Old Testament dispensation (Hebrews 9:9-10; 10:18; I Corinthians 7:19). The teaching that Jesus Christ was born "under the law" and *had* to keep these physical oblations subtly implies that we do not have to follow Christ in all respects. After all, if Christ had to keep these ordinances and we do not, then maybe there are a lot of

other things we do not have to do that Christ did. If this is so, we do not have to "go all the way" in following Christ's example or "walk as He walked" (I John 2:6).

However, Jesus Christ said that His disciples follow Him: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (John 10:27). Indeed, the essence of true Christianity is living the life of Christ over again in our flesh and conforming to His perfect example in all things. Thus, it is *very* important that we have a clear understanding of whether or not Jesus Christ was indeed born "under the law."

First of all, what does it mean to be "under the law"? The apostle Paul says that we are "not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). "Sin is the transgression of the law" (I John 3:4, KJV), and every human being who has ever lived—except Jesus Christ—has sinned (Romans 3:23). Once the knowledge of the law comes, there is no excuse, and the law condemns all who break it to eternal death. Paul personifies the law as the instrument that points the finger of condemnation at each of us: "I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (Romans 7:9). Therefore, to be "under the law" means to be "under the condemnation of the law."

### "Born Under the Law"

This brings us to the pivotal question: Was Jesus Christ born under the law and thus bound to keep all of the Old Covenant rules and regulations?

The scripture most often quoted to support this contention is Galatians 4:4: "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." From this verse, some attempt to show that Jesus Christ was under the law from His birth. They conclude that Christ was duty bound from His birth to do many things that we do not have to do.

However, we need to examine this scripture carefully and understand what it really means. It contains a very deep and poorly understood meaning which is obscured by the interpretation given to this verse by modern translators. The word translated "born" in this scripture is from the Greek word *ginomai*, which can have many different shades of meaning depending upon the context. It primarily means "to cause to be" or "to come into being." The King James Version translates it: "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, **made** of a woman, **made** under the law."

Jesus Christ *was* physically born through the normal process of human birth to the virgin Mary. But God did not inspire Paul to use the Greek word for "born," *gennao*, in Galatians 4:4 because He wanted to focus on the *miraculous conception* of Christ and the overwhelming significance of Jesus' sacrifice.

God emphasizes His Son's humanity in this verse. Like all other men, Jesus was born of a woman; He was flesh and blood. Hebrews 10:5 verifies this: "Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a *body* You have prepared for Me.'"

Another point of note is that the original Greek text does not read "the law," but simply "law." The definite article is missing! Paul is speaking of law in general, not specifically the law of God. The apostle thus means that, when Jesus became a man, He was subject to the same terms, forces and conditions that any other man is. It simply becomes another reference to His humanity like Hebrews 2:10-18.

Yet, even without these points, the verse does not support the idea that Jesus was bound by the Old Covenant because He was born into it. The deeper meaning of Galatians 4:4 is that Jesus Christ *came into being* through the divine miracle in which God the Father caused Mary to conceive by the Holy Spirit. Also, by another miracle, God the Father caused Jesus to be placed under the law *at the time of His crucifixion*. Note the King James' rendering of Galatians 3:13: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being **made**[*ginomai*] a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree."

Jesus Christ was never under the law except at the time of His crucifixion when God the Father laid the entire burden of the sins of the world upon His head (II Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:4-12). He led a perfect life. Therefore, the Old Covenant rules and regulations did not apply to Him because they were designed to remind the people of Israel of their sins and their need for a Savior (Galatians 3:19).

In like manner, a Christian who has repented and received forgiveness of sin through the blood of Christ does not have to keep the Old Testament ceremonial laws either. When one repents from sin, has faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and is baptized, he receives complete and total forgiveness of any and all sins that he ever committed. After coming up out of the watery grave of baptism, he stands before God perfect and sinless just as Jesus Christ was perfect and sinless throughout His entire life. After receiving the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, the newly converted Christian is to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4), following the perfect example of Jesus Christ in all things.

The example that Jesus set for us was perfect in every respect. He even went out of His way to permit Himself to be baptized (Matthew 3:13-15). He did not need to be baptized because He had never sinned, but He did it to set an example for us to follow because *we need* to be baptized. We are to follow every aspect of His life.

## Objections Refuted

Some try to convince others that Jesus was born under the law by pointing out the scriptures that show His parents performing Old Covenant rituals. This includes His circumcision and giving the commanded offering after His birth (Luke 2:21-24). However, note that these were things that were done by *Joseph and Mary*, not by Christ Himself. Jesus was only eight days old at the time of His circumcision and was not even aware of what was going on.

Others point out that Jesus kept the Feast of the Dedication (John 10:22-23). This festival was a Jewish national festival and is not one of God's commanded festivals—under any covenant! Even in this, He set us a perfect example by showing us that it is not wrong to observe national holidays that do not do service to paganism.

The major thrust of all of these arguments is to try to convince others that it is really not necessary to follow Christ in all respects. This teaching is not new. Many attempts were made to seduce the early church of God into error, and convincing the called of God that it was not necessary to walk in the footsteps of Christ was a major means of leading people astray.

The apostle John, who wrote his epistles near the end of the first century, had to warn true Christians constantly about this heresy. "These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you" (I John 2:26). I John 4:1 is another warning: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

What were these false prophets teaching? The end of the first century witnessed many heretical teachings. One of these heresies, Gnosticism, taught that Jesus Christ was not really a flesh-and-blood human being but a spirit that was manifested as a human being. This was undoubtedly one of the things John was alluding to when he wrote,

By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. (I John 4:2-3)

However, there is also a deeper meaning to these words that John was inspired to write. The Holy Spirit inspired John to use the Greek perfect participle for the words "has come" in the above verses. The perfect tense implies not only the historical fact of Jesus Christ having been born as a flesh-and-blood human being but also the present continuance of this fact. John is saying that Jesus Christ is still human in the sense that He is living His life over again in human beings who submit to Him through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The message of this scripture is simply this: A teacher is of God if he teaches that Jesus Christ is coming—living His life over again in the flesh of every true Christian—and that a Christian must follow Him wherever He leads and emulate Him in every way. But a teacher who teaches that one does not have to follow Christ and that it is not necessary for Christ to live in the flesh of His disciples is not of God. John says that this false teaching stems from the spirit of antichrist (verse 3).

As in the days of the apostle John, modern-day Christians must beware of the same false teachings and of the subtle arguments that some present to draw true Christians away from the truth of God. No, Jesus Christ was not *born* under the law. He did not keep the ceremonial law, but He did keep the spiritual law of God. He did not do anything that we are not supposed to do. Conversely, everything that He did we must do. He set a perfect example for us to follow in all respects.

The true Christian knows that, despite the many confusing, conflicting teachings in this world and the subtle arguments of would-be deceivers, ***one will never go wrong following the example of Jesus Christ.***