

The Believer and the Law

Is Torah Observance for Us Today?

by Gary Hedrick

I WAS WORKING AT THE OFFICE ONE DAY WHEN MY SECRETARY SAID I HAD A PHONE call. I picked up the phone and it was Lydia (not her real name), a Christian friend who was active in the Messianic movement and helped moderate the “Messianic Believers” forum on CompuServe.

After a few moments of small talk, Lydia informed me that she had just returned from spending several weeks with an Orthodox rabbi in Israel. She said she was intrigued by his “*Torah*-observant,” traditional Jewish lifestyle. He had convinced her that the Oral Law (*Talmud*) was just as binding as the Bible itself. She had decided to learn Hebrew and adopt a similar lifestyle for herself.

I said, “Lydia, do you realize what you are saying? You are talking about converting to Judaism. How can you do this?” I reminded her that the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament was a warning to professing Jewish believers about the danger of returning to the old, Levitical system once they had been exposed to the glorious Gospel of Jesus the Messiah.

Lydia was undaunted. She said she had learned that her family was Jewish generations before, so she was simply returning to her Jewish roots. I asked how she knew she had Jewish ancestry. It turned out that Lydia’s only “proof” was a vague recollection of her grandmother lighting candles at certain times of the year when she was a little girl.

She also explained her theory about how her mother’s maiden name (Hall) had been “corrupted” from its original Hebrew form (Hillel). Again, I asked if Lydia had any proof of this—birth certificates, court records, or family documents of any kind—and she admitted that she had none. It was only a theory.

Lydia ultimately repudiated the deity and Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ as “so much pagan nonsense” and converted to Judaism. The last we heard, she was attending an Orthodox synagogue in her hometown.

Unfortunately, Lydia’s story is not at all unusual. Dozens of groups have sprung up all over the world calling themselves “Christian” or “Messianic” and promoting varying degrees of *Torah* observance for believers. Categorizing these groups is difficult, because they are so diverse in their beliefs; however, when it comes to the observance of the Law, they generally fall into one of the following categories (or somewhere in between).

- **Level One** (basic Messianic *Torah* observance)—Recognizes the authority of the Bible (Old and New Testaments) only. Encourages observance of biblical feasts and seventh-day Sabbath, and possibly *kashrut* (kosher laws), especially for Jewish believers (optional for non-Jewish believers).
- **Level Two** (moderate Messianic *Torah* observance)—Recognizes the authority of the Bible plus the Oral Law (*Talmud*). Requires observance of biblical feast days, *kashrut*, and seventh-day Sabbath plus rabbinic (non-biblical) Jewish traditions, but only for Jewish believers (optional for non-Jewish believers).
- **Level Three** (strict Messianic *Torah* observance)—Recognizes the authority of the Written Law (Old Testament) plus the Oral Law. The New Testament may or may not be authoritative. Requires observance of biblical feasts, seventh-day Sabbath, *kashrut*, and rabbinic traditions by Jewish and Gentile believers. In some cases, Gentiles may be required to “convert” as *Bat* or *Bar Mitzvah* (males being circumcised) to join the Messianic congregation or “synagogue.”

Ironically, this third category seems to attract more Gentiles—like Lydia—than it does Jews! Rabbi Joseph, our representative in Southern California, was invited to speak on a Friday night at a Messianic synagogue several years ago. He called me when he got back home and said it had been an unusual experience—he said he was the only Jewish person there! Even the Messianic “rabbi” was not Jewish!

Joseph said he had never seen anything quite like it—a whole house full of Gentiles wearing *yarmulkes*, prayer shawls, and doing their best to recite Hebrew blessings and prayers. Yet we are seeing this phenomenon more and more all over the world.

Actually, it is good that many Gentile Christians have a desire to get in touch with the Jewish roots of their faith. In the second and third centuries, the organized church was taken over by Gentiles and gradually purged of any Jewish influence. As a result, what we see today in much of organized Christendom bears little resemblance to the faith of those early followers of the Carpenter from Galilee.

Many Christians are learning about what happened. They are fed up with traditional, Roman-influenced (Gentile) Christendom. They want to shed 2,000 years of man-made traditions and (in many cases) unbiblical beliefs and get back to more of a first-century, Messianic emphasis—like the early church. This is something we encourage wholeheartedly!

But there is a danger here. Certain Judaizers are taking advantage of the Messianic movement’s recent phenomenal growth to carry out their own, legalistic agenda. They are on a full-fledged crusade to bring Jewish and Gentile believers under the Law of Moses. Their teachings contain elements of truth which make them even more dangerous.

For example, they see organized Christendom as a pagan, corrupted offshoot of early Judaism (only partially true) and the Messianic movement (which they call “Messianic Judaism”) as a fourth major branch of Judaism (not true at all), the other three branches being Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. They insist on strict *Torah* observance because they view Gentile believers as proselytes who need to convert to their Messianic version of Judaism.

Another variation of this is the so-called *B’nei Noach* (“Sons of Noah”) movement, championed by Gentiles like Vendyl Jones, which does not insist on adherence to the entire Mosaic code. Instead, they say Gentiles are subject to *HaSheva Mitzvot B’nei Noach* (“the Seven Laws of the Sons of Noah”) as enumerated in the *Talmud* (*Sanhedrin* 382-400). The rabbis call this ancient code “the Path of the Righteous Gentile.”

According to the *Talmud*, a non-Jew who accepted the Seven Laws of the Sons of Noah in ancient Israel had the status of *ger* (lit., “stranger-settler”). He was not required to follow Jewish dietary laws, but could live in their midst and offer sacrifices (Lev. 17:8). The *ger* was allowed to observe the Passover (Num. 9:14) and enjoyed the full rights and privileges of citizenship in Israel (*Yebamoth* 312, commenting on Deut. 14:21).

The *Torah*: Is It for Today?

So what about this idea that the Law is binding on believers today? Is it scriptural? Well, it depends on how you define the term “Law.” The Hebrew word is *Torah*. In the Greek New Testament (and in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament), it’s *Nomos*.

In Christian/Messianic usage, we equate the *Torah*, or the Law, with the Pentateuch, or the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). In Judaism, however, *Torah* has taken on a much broader meaning. It can refer to: (1) the Five Books of Moses, (2) all of the *Tanakh* (i.e., the equivalent of our Old Testament), or (3) the entire body of rabbinic tradition, including not only the Bible but also the “Oral Law” (the *Talmud*) and other Jewish writings.

So when the rabbis talk about being "*Torah* observant," they mean more than just living according to God's Word. To them, true *Torah* observance means following not only the 613 basic *mitzvot* (commands) of Judaism but also the traditions of the rabbis as expressed in the *Talmud* and other traditional Jewish sources.

This includes non-biblical customs and practices that originated in Babylon or in medieval Europe—like men wearing head coverings (*kipot*, or *yarmulkes*), for instance, a practice which was unknown in biblical times.*

Still, is it really feasible for anyone to observe all of the Old Testament Law? For example, take the 613 basic commandments of Judaism. Nearly half of these commandments are related in one way or another to Temple worship (the Temple and the Priest, Sacrifices, Vows, Ritual Purification, Donations to the Temple, Festivals, and so on)—and since there is no Temple, it is not possible to carry them out.

Others, like the regulations for Sabbatical and Jubilee Years, are overlooked for the most part today, just as they were in biblical times (Jer. 34:13-22). Do you think debts will be forgiven or property will revert to its original owners in Israel (or anywhere else) during the upcoming Jubilee Year (*Yovel*) in 1998? No way!

The Babylonian Exile lasted 70 years because Israel had not observed the Sabbatical Year (Lev. 25:1-7) since the days of the judges, 490 years. God sent His people away and allowed the land to "rest" for seventy Sabbaths. You might say He was collecting "back rent"!

Other stipulations of the Levitical Law, like the stoning of rebellious children (Deut. 21:19-21), are skipped over entirely in the 613 commandments.

If *Torah* observance means keeping the 613 Old Testament commandments, abiding by the Levitical Law, or observing the non-biblical traditions of Judaism, then the answer to our question is "no," these are not binding on Messianic (New Testament) believers.

The New Testament Is Torah!

The Levitical Law had two purposes. First, it was *symbolic*. Much of the Law, especially the stipulations regulating offerings and sacrifices, Tabernacle (*Mishkan*) worship, and even the design of the Tabernacle itself, consisted of types and symbols that pointed prophetically to the coming Messiah. Second, the Law was *legislative*. It gave ancient Israel a government and constitution so she could survive in the ancient Middle East. God's priority was to ensure their survival, even in the face of enormous adversity, because it was through them that He would send the Messiah to bless the world (Gen. 12:1-3).

Both purposes were fulfilled. The prophesied Messiah *did* come and accomplish His mission of redemption. Every Messianic type and symbol of the Old Testament found its fulfillment in Him. And Israel *did* survive, just as God said she would.

That is why Jesus said, "*For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled*" (Matt. 5:18). The Greek word translated "fulfilled" comes from the verb *ginomai*, which literally means "to become" or "to come into being." Our Lord was saying, literally, "Nothing written in the Law will pass away until it happens." Most of it happened when Jesus came the first time. The rest will happen when He comes the second time. So He did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it.

The Apostle Paul said, "*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth*" (Rom. 10:4). This verse really agitates the Judaizers because it says the Law has an "end." They try to re-translate it and reinterpret it, but the implication is unavoidable. The Greek word translated "end" is *telos*, which means "the object, scope, or final cause; the end proposed and intended" (*Strong's Exhaustive*

Concordance). It's the same word used in classical Greek to describe the end of a race. Jesus Christ ran the race, crossed the Law's "finish line," and won.

He fulfilled "all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). He reached the goal for us. *There is nothing we can do to gain our own righteousness*. When we believe in the Messiah, God imputes His righteousness to us (Rom. 4:3-5; 2 Cor. 5:21).

But we *are* "Torah observant" in yet another sense. The New Testament is our guidebook and it not only contains all the basic elements of God's Law (the Ten Commandments), but actually expands on them.

COMMANDMENT #1: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3).

New Testament: 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 8:4-6; Rev. 21:8.

COMMANDMENT #2: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, . . ." (Ex. 20:4).

New Testament: Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:23; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 John 5:21; Rev. 21:8.

COMMANDMENT #3: "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; . . ." (Ex. 20:7).

New Testament: Matt. 6:9; Luke 1:49; 1 Tim. 6:1.

COMMANDMENT #4: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8).

New Testament: There is a Sabbath-Rest (in *Yeshua*) for the people of God (Heb. 4:1-16).

COMMANDMENT #5: "Honour thy father and thy mother: . . ." (Ex. 20:12).

New Testament: Matt. 15:3-6.

COMMANDMENT #6: "Thou shalt not kill" (Ex. 20:13).

New Testament: Matt. 5:21-22; Rom. 13:9-10; Rev. 21:8.

COMMANDMENT #7: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14).

New Testament: Rom. 13:9-10; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Rev. 21:8.

COMMANDMENT #8: "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. 20:15).

New Testament: Rom. 13:9-10; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Eph. 4:28.

COMMANDMENT #9: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Ex. 20:16).

New Testament: Rom. 13:9-10; Rev. 21:8.

COMMANDMENT #10: "Thou shalt not covet . . ." (Ex. 20:17).

New Testament: Rom. 13:9-10; 1 Cor. 6:9-10.

In this sense, then, the New Covenant (*Berith Chadashah*) is just as much "Torah" as the Old Covenant. The New Covenant is "the law of Christ," or literally, "the Torah of the Messiah" (Gal. 6:2).

Is it heresy to suggest that the Messiah has the authority to give us a new Torah? Not at all. After all, He is the One who gave the old one to Moses in the first place! There are many references in traditional Jewish sources to the Messiah changing certain aspects of Torah observance when He comes. For example, *Leviticus Rabbah* 9:7 (on Leviticus 7:11-12) speaks of the Temple sacrifices and prayers being discontinued when the Messiah comes. *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* (on Ecclesiastes 11:8) says, "The Torah which one learns in this world 'is vanity' in comparison with the Torah of the Messiah." The New Testament definitely agrees! It contrasts the Old and New Covenants showing the undisputed superiority of the New Covenant.

"All authority" in Heaven and earth belongs to *Adonai Yeshua Hamashiach*, the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:18). Therefore, when His disciples reaped and threshed grain on the Sabbath—in violation of the *Mishnah* (*Shabbat* 7:2), where 39 categories of *m'lakhah* (work) are forbidden on *Shabbat*—Jesus could say He was "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5). He gave them permission to

pick and eat the grain because His authority exceeded that of the Oral Law. He was (and is) the Living *Torah*, the Originator of the Sabbath, and its Fulfillment!

The author of the Book of Hebrews says the very fact that the New Covenant (Jer. 31) is called “new” implies that the “Old” (Mosaic) Covenant is now obsolete. In fact, this first-century writer of Hebrews says it was growing old even then and was about to vanish away (Heb. 8:13), a possible prophetic reference to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. *Yeshua* is the mediator of a “better” covenant (v. 6), one based on Abraham’s pre-Sinai relationship of grace.

Does this mean the Old Testament is no longer profitable to us as New Testament believers? Not at all. In fact, Paul was referring to the Old Testament Scriptures (*Torah*) when he wrote, “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*” (2 Tim. 3:16). The only Bible they had at that time was the Old Testament!

Rather, it means the Old Testament is no longer an active covenant as it applies to New Testament believers. After all, we cannot be under both covenants simultaneously, can we? If we are now under the New Covenant, then we are no longer under the Old Covenant. But that does not mean we cannot study and learn from the Old Testament. Indeed, God Himself never changes, so we should not be surprised to find that the underlying principles of the Old Covenant are carried over into the New Covenant!

Think of it like this. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War to free slaves in the South. Since slavery no longer exists, however, the Emancipation Proclamation has no applicability today. Yet historians continue to study this great document because it is based on underlying principles of justice and freedom that are still valid a century and a half later. Likewise, the Old Covenant has much to teach us today, though it is no longer in force for believers as a legal covenant (Rom. 15:4).

What if believers—and especially believing Jews—wish to observe Jewish festivals or sabbaths as a means of commemorating the past, present, and future work of the Messiah? Or what if Jews who come to the Messiah wish to remain *Torah* observant as a testimony to their families and fellow Jews? The New Testament allows individual believers this freedom and warns us against judging each other, whether for observance or nonobservance (Rom. 14:1-23). Each of us must be “fully persuaded in his own mind” about such matters.

No wonder Paul—who had been one of the Pharisees, perhaps the most observant party in ancient Judaism—had so little patience with the Judaizers who sought to impose Jewish practices and traditions on believers. He told predominantly Gentile congregations (in Colossians 2:16 and Romans 14:14) that their members should refuse to be judged by legalists for not keeping man-made dietary laws (“meat” and “drink”), ritual purity laws, or religious festivals (a “holy day,” “New moon,” or “sabbath”), whether Jewish or otherwise.

The Jerusalem Conference

So the Judaizers are not a recent phenomenon. They were around 2,000 years ago, too. In Acts 15, we read about a church council convening in Jerusalem to deal with this problem. The fledgling Messianic community included a party of *Torah*-observant, believing Jews who wanted Gentiles to submit to the Mosaic Law to be saved (v. 1).

Following extensive deliberations among the Apostles and elders (vv. 6-18), they decided that the Gentiles would not be required to convert to Judaism and be circumcised according to the Mosaic Law (v. 19). Since the New Testament Scriptures were still being written and would not be canonized for another hundred years or so, they gave Gentile believers a distinct and equally biblical set of guidelines to follow.

They were to abstain from: (1) food that had been sacrificed to idols, (2) the shedding of blood, or murder, (3) meat taken from animals that had been strangled (i.e., without properly draining the blood), and (4) sexual immorality.

These points were carefully chosen to include practices that were common in Roman society yet were particularly offensive to observant Jews. Many pagans held banquets in temples where they partook of food that had been offered to idols. There was little respect for life in ancient Rome and killing for sport in the coliseums was a popular pastime. Animal carcasses were hung in the meat markets with the blood still dripping from them. Immorality and sexual perversion were rampant (Roman temples often employed prostitutes). The ancient Jewish sages taught that there are three offenses a Jew must die rather than commit: idolatry, fornication, and murder (*Sanhedrin* 74a).

Today we look at this list and say, "It should have been obvious to them that these things were wrong." This shows us how morally desensitized and spiritually bankrupt Roman society had become. But the Jews knew these things were wrong. By imploring the Gentile converts to turn away from these heathen vices, the Apostles and elders were laying the groundwork for unity between Jews and Gentiles in the early church. The Jewish-Gentile relationship remained relatively stable for a century or so before other conflicts arose. (Unfortunately, by the time of Constantine and the Nicene Council, in the fourth century, the organized, ecclesiastical church had taken on a distinctively Roman character and purged itself of most of its Jewish members.)

Nonetheless, the Judaizers do not give up easily. When interpreting Acts 15, they are quick to point out Verse 21: "*For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.*" They take this to mean that the four guidelines above were given for the Gentiles to observe *while they were converting to Judaism*. A Judaizer's paraphrase of Verses 20 and 21 might read something like this: "All we have to do is give the Gentiles some basic guidelines to get them started because they will learn how to adopt the Law of Moses during the Sabbath services in the synagogues."

No, no, a thousand times no! May God forgive our Judaizing brethren for twisting and perverting the Word of God! This interpretation of Verse 21 is impossible because when they repeat the council's decision in Verse 29, *they mention nothing about the Gentiles learning to adopt the Law of Moses.*

The correct meaning is suggested by the context. Verse 21 explains why the four prohibitions in the previous verse ("pollutions of idols," immorality, "things strangled," and "blood," or murder) were given. The Apostles and elders were sensitive to the fact that there were synagogues in every city where those four offenses, among others, were preached against regularly in Sabbath services. These were four specific points where Jewish law clashed with the surrounding pagan culture. It would be a bad testimony indeed if Gentile converts were found engaging in any of these forbidden practices.

These are perilous times, beloved, and the Judaizers are on the move. They want to pervert the Gospel of grace by mixing it with the Law and traditions of men. Let us heed the admonition of the Apostle Paul to the Messianic congregation at Galatia: "*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*" (Gal. 5:1).

*The only head coverings mentioned in the Bible are the *mitznetef* worn by the *Cohen Hagadol*, or High Priest, and the *migbaat* worn by the ordinary *cohen* in the Temple. No head covering was specified as regular attire for non-priests in ancient Israel.