



There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus the Messiah.

Galatians 3:28

The Following article is the basis for a sermon that the writer of this article, Paul Gunderson, gave at a church.

This is a compilation of writings by Ariel Berkowitz, Dr Michael Brown and Dr Richard Booker. Specifically; *Torah Rediscovered* – Ariel & D'vorah Berkowitz, *What Do Jewish People Think About Jesus* – Dr Michael L Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus Vol 4* – Dr Michael L Brown and *Jesus in the Feasts of Israel* – Richard Booker. I have only added comments to provide additional clarification or to allow the different excerpts to flow from one to another.
Paul Gunderson

Oftentimes the term Torah is mistakenly referred to as the “Law”. Unfortunately this is incorrect. Torah in Hebrew simply means teachings. Specifically from the first five books of Moses. While the Law of Moses is included as a part of the Torah, there is more to it than just the Law.

Since the word Torah means teaching, instruction, or doctrine, then it would follow that the entire Bible is God’s Torah. Any believer who is living out any part of the Word of God is, therefore, also living out that portion of the Torah. Furthermore, by the same definition, the whole Newer Covenant Scriptures (New Testament) are also torah.

First and foremost, the Torah is God’s teaching. This is the primary meaning of the Hebrew word “torah”. This word does not mean law, it means teaching. Torah is a document in which God has revealed Himself to mankind and taught us about Himself and His Righteousness. Torah is a legally binding agreement between God and His own people. Since Torah is a covenant, both parties involved are subject to certain legal obligations.

Second, we can begin to see that the Torah is not just a list of do’s and don’ts; it is rather a critically important document describing the legally binding relationship between God and Israel.

Although not acknowledged as such in many circles today, our Messiah was the greatest Torah teacher who ever lived. Matthew 5:17-20 teaches this very clearly. In this passage, Jesus forthrightly states that He did not come to do away with the Torah. In addition, He rebukes all who attempt to invalidate it. He said, “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

To back up His statement, He then embarks upon a series of teachings (Matthew 5-7) in which He challenges the popular understanding of several Torah passages by introducing His own interpretations. He accomplishes this through the repeated use of the formula, You have heard that the ancients were told (erroneous teaching of the rabbis), but I say unto you (correct interpretation). This illumination of God’s Word is what He was referring to when He said, “Do you think that I came to abolish the Torah or the prophets, I did not come to abolish, but to make the

meaning full.” (Matthew 5:17) Jesus was speaking about the common teaching of the rabbis of His day.

Jesus was saying, emphatically, that the Torah must be understood in such a way as to see Him in all of its teachings. This, by the way, establishes a critically important principle for proper interpretation of the Torah: we can learn how to follow any given teaching once we learn how it reveals the Messiah.

The Torah, then, is far more than a grand list of laws that are impossible to keep. It is an instructional document, teaching about God and His ways; a legal covenant between God and Israel; the national constitution of Israel, describing how the Great King Himself wants His nation to function within His kingdom.

Believers today, without exception, are not under the binding authority of the Mosaic Law. This, however, is an overly simplistic answer, so, for the moment, let's make a distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus, looking first at the question of Gentile Christians and the Law. Then let us ask this question in two different ways: (1) *Must* Gentile Christians keep the Law? If not, then (2) *Should* Gentile Christians keep any part of the Law?

The answer to the first question, “*Must* Gentile Christians keep the Law?” is quite simple: Certainly not! Nowhere does the New Testament require Gentile believers to observe the Torah. To the contrary, when the Gentiles first started coming to faith in the book of Acts, some Jewish believers argued, “The Gentiles must become circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5).

However, the final verdict as outlined in Acts 15:19 - 21 *Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.*” Does this mean then that Gentile believers are exempt for obeying the 10 Commandments given to Moses? Certainly not, for this is what is taught in the synagogues every Sabbath.

So then, should Gentile Christians observe the moral law while recognizing that the civil law and ceremonial law applied only to ancient Israel? The problem with this approach is that the Torah does not neatly divide itself into these categories - while useful, is not self-evident in the Torah itself - and more importantly, when Paul wrote to the Gentile congregations, he often made reference to the Law, but not in a binding way. So when he called for morality and purity and holiness, he did not say, “Do what is written in the Law.” Rather, he taught with a different emphasis. “It is God's will that you should be sanctified: That you should avoid sexual immorality....For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who objects this instruction, does not reject man, but God, who gives you His Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7-8).

Are Gentile believers free to follow whatever biblical commandments they find edifying and helpful, whether those commandments are written in the Torah, the Prophets, the book of Proverbs or the New Testament? Absolutely, as long as

(1) they remember the principles articulated by Paul understanding that they cannot increase their spiritual standing by keeping the Law; (2) they do not judge others based on keeping or not keeping certain commandments (see especially Romans 14:1-13, Colossians 2:16-19) and (3) they do not get caught up in the nonessentials. Those who find themselves getting caught up in a Torah identity should spend time meditating on the first chapter of Ephesians, after which a devotional reading of Hebrews would prove useful.

There are certain Torah laws that are based on universal principles, laws by which God judged the Canaanites that are found prominently in Leviticus 18 where various sexual unions are forbidden ranging from incest to bestiality to homosexuality. It can be safely said that if the Lord judged the pagans for certain sins, He certainly will not tolerate it from His redeemed people.

In any event, all believers should be encouraged to follow the moral precepts of the Torah – why shouldn't they? – although, most of these laws are articulated and repeated in the New Testament.

Christians are perfectly free to adhere to the dietary laws, be they Jewish or Gentile believers, but believers today are not required to keep the dietary laws, and it is wrong to try to bring God's people into a sense of bondage to the dietary laws. (Mark 7:20-23; Romans 14:14, 1 Corinthians 8:8. Adherence to dietary laws must take second place to evangelism and at times, fellowship. 1 Corinthians 9:20-22 talks about becoming all things to all men so that by all possible means (he) might save some.

It is increasingly common for Gentile believers to celebrate the Biblical holidays. They are not Jewish holidays nor part of the Law, but the Lord's holidays that were given to the Jewish people to take to the nations. There are commendable reasons for doing so. Here are a few:

1. *The biblical holy days are infused with spiritual and prophetic significance.* Passover corresponds to Jesus death (1 Corinthians 5:7-8), First Fruits to His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:0) and the Festival of weeks (Shavuot or Pentecost) corresponds to the giving of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). Trumpets points to the Lord's return with the sound of the trumpet (Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Revelation 11:15) The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) points to Israel's final cleansing (Zechariah 13:1 which follows from Zechariah 12:10), and Tabernacles (Sukkot) points to the final ingathering of the nations Zechariah 14:16-19, see also Revelation 7:9 and Leviticus 23:40 for palm branches and tabernacles).
2. *The biblical holy days have great historical significance.* Although the Messianic significance of the biblical holy days is of greater significance to Christians than the historical significance, the origin and meaning of these days in Israel's history is also important. So if it's OK to celebrate Thanksgiving and July 4 in America and to remember the events connected with those days, how can it be wrong to remember Israel's deliverance from Egypt in the

Passover? When connected to the death and resurrection of Jesus, it can be very powerful.

3. *Celebrating the biblical holy days is a good way to teach about God's acts of redemption.* Paul freely made reference to the holy days when writing to the Corinthians making a spiritual application to Passover in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 and possibly referencing Firstfruits directly in 1 Corinthians 15:20; notice also how Luke casually made reference to Yom Kippur (the Fast) in Acts 27:9, assuming his readers would understand. Yet many Christians today do not understand these references, being so divorced from the Jewish roots of the faith. Celebration of the holy days – or at the least, annual teachings about them – is a good way to educate a whole congregation, from the young to the old.
4. *Celebrating the biblical holy days is a good way to recover the Jewish roots of the Christian faith.* It is absolutely clear that everything God does is summed up in His Son Jesus, that our Messiah and King is to have centrality in every way and that the fullness is found in Him rather than celebrating holy days or observing special seasons. That being said, the church has been Gentilized, so detached from its biblical Jewish origins, that an appreciation for the biblical Jewish calendar – the calendar of Yeshua (Jesus Hebrew name) and the apostles is certainly helpful. To give one example, think of the positive benefits of calling churches to fast and pray for the salvation of the Jewish people worldwide on the Day of Atonement, a day when millions of Jews are fasting and asking God to forgive their sins. What's wrong with doing that?

It is however important to emphasize that many believers do get caught up in unhealthy practices associated with the celebration of feasts, and there are some direct warnings in the New Testament. As a result here are important points to remember regarding Christians and the Law:

(1) Celebration of biblical feasts is not a means for Gentile believers to “become Jewish”. Jews and Gentiles have equal standing in the Lord, and Jews are not called to become Gentiles or Christians nor Gentiles called to become Jews.

(2) Jesus MUST be central in everything we do.

(3) Celebration of the feasts is not commanded in the New Testament and should not be practiced in a legal or binding way. Paul addressed a related phenomenon in Colossians 2:16 - 17: So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of the Messiah.

So, let everything we do as believers find its fullness in Yeshua, let no celebration or observance be done in a binding way, let no believers judge one another based on their observance or non-observance, let no one feel “un-spiritual” if they get nothing out of the celebration of the feasts – and if the Lord puts it in your heart to do, then be blessed in the celebration of the feasts.