



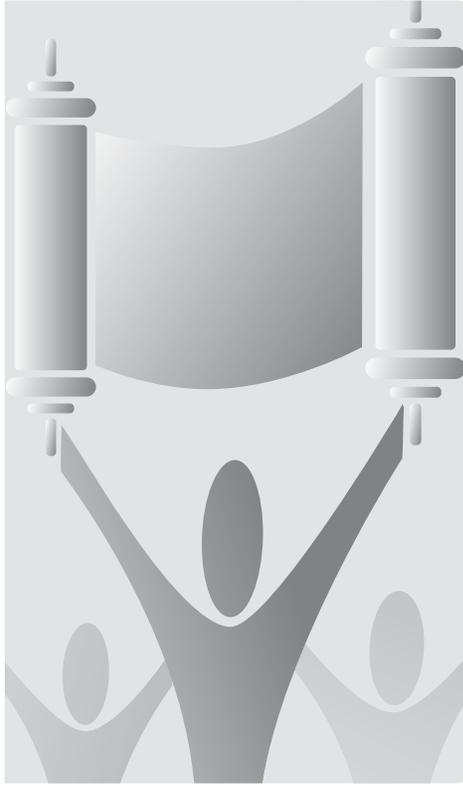
“One Law” and the Messianic Gentile

Take a theological journey with First Fruits of Zion as we grapple with the “One-Law” question and our position regarding Jews, Gentiles, and their respective obligations to Torah.

BY BOAZ MICHAEL AND D. THOMAS LANCASTER

In 2004, my colleague Daniel Lancaster and I were travelling through Midwest America teaching First Fruits of Zion seminars when we had an opportunity to speak at one of Dr. Dwight Pryor’s *Haverim Schools of Discipleship* in Dayton, Ohio. After the teaching, we had some time to sit down with Dr. Pryor for some conversation.

Both Daniel and I regard Dr. Dwight Pryor as a spiritual mentor and father. We felt honored to have his undivided attention for a few minutes. After conversing on a variety of issues, Dr. Pryor asked us, “Do you believe it is a sin for a Gentile believer to violate a commandment of Torah?” We affirmed that we did. I quoted 1 John 3:4 which says, “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” Dr. Pryor pressed the issue further. “What about something like wearing tzitzit? Is a believing Gentile who fails to wear tzitzit living in a state of disobedience and sin?” With a little hesitation, we affirmed that to be the case, and then proceeded to explain our



“One law and one rule
shall be for you and
for the stranger who
sojourns with you.”
(Numbers 15:16)

reasoning. The Torah is mandatory for all of Israel. The Gentile believers are grafted into Israel. Therefore the whole Torah must be binding upon the Gentile believers in the same way that it is binding upon a Jewish believer. We offered several proof texts to prove our point, including the text in Numbers 15:15–16, which states that there is to be “one Law” for Israelite and stranger both.

“What you have done,” Dr. Pryor said, “is something that the apostles never did. You have worked out a theology of how the Torah applies to the Gentile believers. Apart from whether you are right or wrong, or your conclusions logical or not, I am simply saying that your theology and conclusions do not come from the apostles. They never did settle on a theology of Torah concerning the Gentiles, perhaps because of their expectation of the imminent return of Yeshua. I would be very cautious about advancing a theology that the apostles did not raise.”

This article explains why, in the years since that conversation, we have left the dogmatic language of what has been called “One-Law theology” and returned to our original position regarding a Gentile’s obligations to Torah. Nevertheless, we remain in good relationship with friends, Messianic leaders, and congregations that still maintain the rigid One-Law approach as the path for the Messianic Gentile. This paper is not meant to discourage or divide. Though some of our brothers and sisters may have different theories about the exact route of the path, we are all friends in Messiah, and we are all on the same path with the same destination ahead of us—the kingdom of Messiah.

Divine Permission

The Messianic Jewish movement today contains many Gentile disciples who are hearing conflicting opinions about their role in Messianic Judaism. Are Gentile believers allowed to keep the Torah like Jewish believers? Are Gen-

When we first began to teach Torah, we were swept away with the realization that Messiah did not end the Torah.

tile believers obligated to keep the commandments of the Torah in the same way that Jewish believers are obligated?

Of any Messianic ministry, First Fruits of Zion has been the loudest and longest running proponent of Gentile Torah observance. From the onset of this ministry in 1992 and up until today we have been the champions of the Gentile believer’s inclusion and participation in Torah life and the Messianic Jewish movement.

When we first began to teach Torah, we were swept away with the realization that the Torah had not been cancelled by the gospel, that Messiah did not end the Torah, and that God’s covenant with His people Israel is ongoing. It was right there in the Gospel of Matthew, staring us in the face: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets” (Matthew 5:17).

Our ministry was founded on this revelation. We cautiously began to suggest to our readers that perhaps the Torah was not the odious bondage of legalism that Christian theology had led us to believe. Perhaps there was some merit and value in the commandments of the Torah. We took it a step further and suggested that perhaps Jewish and Gentile believers should consider implementing the Torah into their lives on some level. We encouraged believers in Messiah to “take hold” of the commandments:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, “In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp

We stopped short of saying that believers “had to” keep the commandments.

the garment of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’” (Zechariah 8:23)

This seemed consistent with the words of Yeshua. He said, “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, 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” (Matthew 5:19).

However, we stopped short of saying that believers “had to” keep the commandments. We avoided using terms like “should,” “must,” or “have to,” regarding Torah observance. We did not even feel confident in saying that Jewish believers were required to keep the Torah, much less Gentile believers. We only suggested that it might be a good idea. How could it be wrong to obey the Bible?

Our reluctance to be too dogmatic about the matter was based upon a fear of straying into a new legalism whereby people might assume that they needed to keep the commandments in order to merit salvation. We were, and always have been, adamant in our position that salvation is by grace through faith:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9)

We called this approach to Torah “Divine Permission.” It was the idea that believers

(both Jewish and Gentile) had permission to keep the Torah but were not obligated to do so. We articulated the concept of “Divine Permission” in our books *Torah Rediscovered* and *Take Hold*, our *Torah Club* programs, and in our discipleship program *HaYesod*. In fact, lesson thirteen of the original *HaYesod* program was titled “Divine Permission.”

We may have been naïve to advance a theology without considering all the details and implications, but our ministry was young, excited, and genuinely on fire with this new truth. We truly felt as if we had “rediscovered” the Torah—we were driven by the prophetic nature and implications of this restoration and its ramifications for both Judaism and Christianity.

Divine Mandate: One Law

The theology of Divine Permission was a comfortable position to occupy. It did not rock the theology of greater Christendom too much, and it did not bring condemnation down on other Christians who were not taking hold of the Jewish aspects of the Law or walking on the Torah path. It did not present too serious of a challenge to the greater body of Messianic Judaism which was, especially in those days, not Torah-observant at all.

There was a problem, though. As we began to grow in our studies of Torah and our understanding of the Apostolic Writings, we found scant support for a simple theology of Divine Permission. At least in regard to the people of Israel, the Torah speaks only in terms of mandate, not permission. The Ten Commandments are not Ten Suggestions. God did not suggest to the Israelites that they might want to consider keeping his Sabbath; he demanded obedience of the Jewish people. The commandments are described as eternal statutes which are to be kept through all generations in perpetuity. Saying that believers have “Divine Permission” to keep the commandments when God said “Thou shalt” began to seem a little

bit weak to us.

More than that, we took note of one particular passage in the book of Numbers about “one law” for strangers and native-born alike:

As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before the LORD. There is to be one Torah and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you. (Numbers 15:15–16)

This seems simple enough. According to these verses, there is one law for both Jews and non-Jews. Therefore, Gentile believers should keep the whole Torah. If we understand “the alien who sojourns with you” as any Gentile believer, then full obligation to the Torah for all Christians—even the more traditionally Jewish aspects of Torah—becomes a slam-dunk.

Based upon this reading of Numbers 15:15–16, our materials began to steer away from the gentle language of Divine Permission and speak more boldly about the obligation of the Torah: Divine Mandate. We began to say “should,” “must,” and “have to,” in regard to Torah observance. Almost immediately we began to hear complaints from leaders in Messianic Judaism who did not share our new conviction. Notably, leadership from the UMJC coined our theology as “One-Law” theology.¹ We liked the name, so we accepted it and began propagating the concept of one standard of Torah for both Jewish and Gentile believers. Specifically, we were saying that both Jews and Gentiles are obligated to keep the commandments of the Torah—not for salvation—but simply as a matter of covenantal obedience. “One-Law” has come to represent the idea that Gentile believers have a mandate to keep the entire Torah just as the Jewish people do.

One-Law theology = The belief that Gentile and Jewish believers have identi-

cal obligation to Torah and liability for its transgression.

Regarding the moral and ethical statutes of Torah, the teachings of Yeshua and the writings of the Apostles provide generous support for this position. Christians are not “free from the Law” in the sense that they are free to engage in deceit, adultery, murder, or immorality. No one would argue that a Christian is free from the obligation to love his neighbor and honor his parents. However, the commandments which are generally regarded as specific signs for the Children of Israel (i.e., the Jewish people) are

The commandments are described as eternal statutes which are to be kept through all generations in perpetuity.

neither practiced in Christianity nor regarded as binding on Gentile Christians. For example, the commandments to be circumcised, to wear fringes, to affix a mezuzah, to wear tefillin, to eat kosher, to keep the Sabbath, and to keep the appointed times are not generally regarded as incumbent upon Gentile Christians by Christianity, Judaism, or even most of Messianic Judaism. Based upon our reading of the Numbers 15 passage, we saw no reason that these particular “sign” commandments should be neglected by Gentile believers. If it is “one Law” for everyone, then everyone should be obligated to the exact same laws.

A Few Nagging Problems

The One-Law theology left us with just a few nagging problems. If Gentile believers are under the same mandate as Jews, then why didn't the

apostles say so in clear terms? Granted, there are several passages from the Apostolic Writings which can be rallied in defense of the position, but there are others that cannot. We'll look at a few examples below.

A problem that the One-Law position creates is that it severely compromises distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

Another difficulty that the One-Law position creates is our relationship to greater Christianity. So long as we are espousing that all believers are equally mandated to keep the whole Torah in the same manner as the Jewish people, we must condemn Christianity and Christians for being unfaithful to the Law: neglecting commandments like Sabbath, dietary laws, and so forth. It requires a broad and sweeping condemnation of virtually every Christian community in existence.

A third problem that the One-Law position creates is that it severely compromises distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and Jewish identity is lost. Some Messianic leaders have described the complete loss of Jewish identity as a type of theological or spiritual holocaust. This concern alone should give us pause.

While it is true that in Messiah there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free,² and while it is true that Jew and Gentile are fellow heirs, joined together into one new man, it is also true that the apostolic community maintained a clear and certain distinction between who was Jewish and who was Gentile. Paul taught that in Messiah there is no difference between slave and free, yet he also taught that slaves must obey their masters³ while a

free man must avoid becoming a slave.⁴ Paul taught that in Messiah there is no difference between male and female, but he gave men and women different instructions, telling men to love their wives⁵ and women to submit to their husbands.⁶

Obvious differences between the genders and their respective functions and roles continue to exist even in Messiah. The Bible considers a husband and wife to be “one flesh.” However, the same Bible puts in place distinctive roles of the husband and wife. When proper boundaries, roles, and distinctions are not maintained in a marriage, not only does it result in a dysfunctional marriage, but it also affects subsequent generations in that the children of that couple have lost their opportunity to see their parents as role models appropriate for their gender. Abolishing the distinction between men and women amounts to abolishing an aspect of the Torah. The same is true about the distinction between Jew and Gentile.

When we read Paul saying that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile in Messiah, we run the risk of confusing those respective roles. We must remember that Paul was speaking about eligibility for salvation, not roles within the kingdom. Paul illustrated the concept of differentiation within the body with the analogy of one body with many parts.⁷

Although Paul taught that, in Messiah, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, he himself makes clear distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers with regard to their obligation to circumcision. He further distinguishes between the two groups when he declares himself the apostle to the uncircumcised and Peter the apostle to the circumcised.⁸

The notion that the apostles made no legal or ethnic distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers is not sustainable. Acts 15 and the teachings of Paul to the uncircumcised would have been completely unnecessary if

the apostolic community regarded Gentile believers as holding the same legal status as Jewish believers.

A fourth problem in the One-Law equation is circumcision. If Gentiles were under the same obligation to Torah as Jewish believers, then they should not have had an exemption from the commandment of circumcision. The epistles of Paul, however, go so far as even discouraging Gentiles from receiving circumcision. Paul warns the Gentile believers: “And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Torah” (Galatians 5:3). The obvious inverse of this is that a person who does not undergo circumcision is not “under obligation to keep the whole Torah.”

In the days of the apostles, circumcision was understood as the primary sign of conversion to Judaism. However, the equation between circumcision and legal conversion to Judaism should not eclipse the fact that circumcision itself is a clear and literal commandment of the Torah which the apostles did not require of Gentile believers.

Gentiles who underwent a ritual circumcision were regarded as proselytes. They were henceforth reckoned by the Jewish community as legally (halachically) Jewish and thereafter under the obligation of keeping the full set of commandments of Torah that were incumbent upon native born Jews. That meant that they were also liable for the punishments prescribed by Torah. For example, a Gentile proselyte to Judaism could be stoned to death for breaking the Sabbath or flogged for breaking the specifics of halachah.

In Galatians, Paul warns Gentile believers away from making that legal conversion to become Jewish, and one reason he cites is that undergoing circumcision will make them liable for all of the commandments (and punishments).⁹ Though it is always possible to explain a Pauline passage from a different perspective, the simplest reading of Galatians 5:3

presents a problem for the One-Law interpretation. If circumcision-conversion obligates a person to keep the whole Torah, then a person who has not undergone that ritual conversion must not be so obligated.

In any case, as long as we are saying that Gentiles do not need to keep the commandment of circumcision, we are admitting that there actually is a difference between Jewish and Gentile obligation to Torah. It is difficult to maintain a pure “One-Law” theology and accept the epistles of Paul and his teachings regarding circumcision.

In the days of the apostles, circumcision was understood as the primary sign of conversion to Judaism.

First Fruit's Bad Fruits

More troubling than any theological or textual problems with the One-Law approach is the problem of bad fruit. We are in a very unique position to see the fruits or outworkings of this message in the homes and the communities that embrace it. We travel extensively across all varieties of the Messianic movement; we get to see a lot of communities and meet a lot of people who are practicing Torah in one form or another. For the most part, this is the best part of our job. It is exciting to see the Word of God taking root in people's homes and communities and bearing fruit in changed lives. We count it a special privilege to see disciples of Yeshua, both Jewish and Gentile, participating together in the great heritage of Torah. After these long centuries of wandering from the truth, the disciples of Yeshua are returning to the original mode and expression of our faith.

To be completely honest, however, it can also be discouraging. Instead of unity, we have found that the One-Law message sometimes brings disunity, fracturing, and dysfunction. There are several reasons for this. A few examples will illustrate the gravity of the situation.

Rather than continue further along this same path, it is time to reanalyze the “One-Law” message.

When Gentile believers are told that they are under an absolute mandate to keep the Torah in all its 613 commandments, they are left with little choice but to sever relationships with their Christian friends and families who do not share the same conviction. Rather than being able to gently lead brothers and sisters toward obedience to the full counsel of Scripture by maintaining healthy relationships, the Torah-observant Gentiles are often isolated and ostracized. Worse yet, it is common to observe One-Law Messianic Gentiles become bitter toward Christianity, referring to Christians as pagans, labeling Christian celebrations as pagan festivals, and mocking Christians for eating unclean meats. Torah-observant Gentiles can quickly become arrogant over their brothers and sisters in Messiah and display sharp contempt for other believers who do not keep the aspects of Torah that they do.

Not only do the One-Law, Torah-observant Gentiles find it difficult to maintain relationships with other Christians, they also find it virtually impossible to maintain relationship with one another. One-Law theology places the believing Gentile on an equal footing to

the Jewish community, yet leaves the Gentile believer outside of the Jewish community.¹⁰ When Gentiles are given a mandate to keep Torah outside of the Jewish people, it grants them an entitlement to define how to keep Torah. Thus the Gentile is free to observe Torah according to his own interpretation. The Torah-observant Gentile often does so in complete antithesis to traditional Judaism. Since each person defines the application of Torah observance according to his or her own subjective reading and then combines that personal definition with the divine mandate of One-Law theology, the end result is often confusion and disunity.

The result is a state of anarchy disguised under the name of Law. Congregations split over calendar arguments. People are embittered toward one another. Close friends are separated. Communities shrink from several families, to two families, to one family meeting in their home alone on Sabbaths because there are no other Messianic believers in the area with whom they can sustain relationship. The program is not working.

Many One-Law proponents have an aversion to traditional Judaism, and are opposed to its incorporation or even the utilization of its sources. It is common for One-Law Messianics to eschew “rabbinics” and criticize the “traditions of men.” At the same time, they have burned all bridges with Christianity. They reject Judaism and Jewish tradition, and they reject Christianity and Christian tradition. As romantic as such a hyper-protestant, *sola scriptura* purity may sound, it breeds arrogance and is unsustainable.

In cases like these, the fruit that the message of Torah has borne is bad fruit, and we are deeply concerned about the sustainability of a Torah-based Messianic Judaism for both Jewish and Gentile believers. At First Fruits of Zion we want the body of the Messiah to be living and keeping the Torah, but it is not working well in the manner that we have defined it,

and if it isn't working now, it won't work in ten years, and it may vanish within twenty years. Rather than continue further along this same path of fracturing, division, and bitterness, it is time to reanalyze the "One-Law" message.

A Hole in One-Law

As stated above, the Torah says in Numbers 15, "There shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before the LORD. There is to be one Torah and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you" (Numbers 15:15–16).

On the surface, this appears to be a simple statement, but when we dig deeper into biblical studies and interpretations, it becomes a complicated issue. By the time of the apostles, the word translated as "alien" (*ger*; גֵר) was no longer understood as just a Gentile non-Jew. The Hebrew word had shifted its semantic value so that, in many cases, it had come to refer specifically to a Gentile who had gone through a full, legal conversion to become Jewish, i.e., a proselyte.¹¹ That conversion process included circumcision, immersion, and a sacrifice. The Greek version of the Torah (Septuagint or LXX) translates the word as proselyte (προσηλυτος) as well.¹² The Greek LXX text was an accepted standard for the apostolic communities.¹³ The Greek Septuagint gives us an insight into how the apostolic community would have understood and interpreted the passage. Under the influence of the LXX, they would have interpreted Numbers 15:15–16 to read as follows:

As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for Jews and for the proselyte, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as a Jew is, so shall the proselyte be before the LORD. There is to be one Torah and one ordinance for Jews and for the proselyte who sojourns with you. (Numbers 15:15–16, paraphrased)

That reading makes it clear that both Jews and proselytes to Judaism are obligated to the same laws of Torah and liable to a Torah court of law for the same punishments for violations of Torah. This reading is identical to the statement that Paul makes in Galatians 5:3. Therefore, the Apostolic-Era reading of the Numbers 15 passage does not help clarify the question of a Gentile believer's relationship to Torah. It would apply to a Gentile who had become legally Jewish through a conversion.

At First Fruits of Zion, we understand full well that some of our brothers and sisters will not regard the Septuagint rendering of Numbers 15:15–16 as relevant in determining the path of the Messianic Gentile. We are certainly able to respect that opinion, but we find the Septuagint rendering consistent with the rest of the Apostolic Writings, particularly Acts 15.

Acts 15

The council of the apostles in Jerusalem met to determine whether Gentile believers should be compelled to be circumcised and placed under full obligation to the Torah of Moses in order to be "saved" and attain status within the community of Israel:

Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. (Acts 15:1)

It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Torah of Moses. (Acts 15:5)

Note that the moral imperatives and ethical authority of the Torah were not a part of the discussion in Acts 15. There was no disagreement as to whether Gentiles were to be held to moral and ethical imperatives. These were already well understood as essential.¹⁴ So what did the Pharisaic believers mean by "keep the Torah of Moses"? They must have

In Acts 15 the apostles sided with the Pauline camp by exempting the Gentiles from the obligation of circumcision.

been specifically referring to aspects of the Torah which, along with circumcision, were generally regarded as incumbent upon Jewish people but not upon Gentiles.

Note that if the apostles regarded Gentile believers as having the same legal status as Jewish believers and proselytes to Judaism, then Acts 15 and the council in Jerusalem would have been superfluous. The Pharisees certainly could not have charged that Gentiles should be obligated to keep the whole Torah of Moses if the Gentiles were already under that obligation. If the Gentiles were already expected to be completely Torah-observant, then there would have been no reason to provide special direction for the Gentile believers regarding Torah or to accord them any special consideration. Instead the Gentile believers would have received the same instruction that any Gentile proselyte to Judaism would have received in the first century. The very existence of Acts 15 insists that the apostles recognized a legal differentiation between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Note also that there is no discussion in Acts 15 about whether Jewish believers are obligated to keep the Torah. That much is simply assumed. The question placed before the apostles is one of whether the Gentile believers are obligated to undergo circumcision (conversion) and keep the whole Torah with the same legal obligation as Jewish believers. It's not just a question about salvation. It is also a question about legal obligation as evidenced by Acts 21:25 (see below.)

The debate over the question illustrates that the apostolic community was divided on this issue. Some followed the Pauline camp which accorded Gentile believers position within the kingdom and adoption into the people of Israel (as sons of Abraham) without insisting on a legal conversion. Others advanced a stricter interpretation which insisted on conversion and full Torah observance for Gentile believers as a prerequisite to participation in the kingdom.

In Acts 15 the apostles sided with the Pauline camp by exempting the Gentiles from the obligation of circumcision. The apostle Peter asked, "Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:10). The term "yoke" is a common Jewish idiom for one's obligation to the whole Torah.¹⁵

The apostles mandated four decrees for Gentile believers:

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:28–29)

Aside from these four "essentials," the apostles felt led of the Holy Spirit to lay upon the Gentiles "no greater burden." In the epistle that the council sent to the Gentiles, James clearly stated that the council did not demand full Torah observance from the Gentiles:

We have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the Torah"—to whom we gave no such commandment. (Acts 15:24, NKJV)

Thus the apostles did not place the Gentiles under full obligation to the aspects of

Torah specifically associated with Jewish identity such as circumcision. Unfortunately, neither did their ruling offer a definitive solution to the question of Gentile obligation to the Torah. It left open questions about observance and intergenerational continuity. By not requiring Gentiles to take on the legal status of Jews, the apostles created a new category, so to speak. Neither Jew nor proselyte, the Gentile believer was left with an ambiguous and tenuous status among the people of God that can best be described as that of a God-fearer: a monotheist non-Jew worshipping in a Jewish context.¹⁶

In the Synagogues Every Sabbath

At First Fruits of Zion, we are fond of pointing out that the apostle James justified the decision to exempt Gentiles from circumcision and full Torah observance by noting that the Gentile believers were already meeting in the synagogue every Sabbath where they would hear further instruction in the Torah:

For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath. (Acts 15:21)

The Apostolic-Age believers were congregating weekly in Jewish synagogues. James the brother of the Master seems to suggest that the Gentiles would learn Torah in the synagogues. It is fair to say that the Gentiles under discussion in Acts 15 were already on the trajectory of Torah. Their presence in the synagogue on Sabbaths indicates that they were already worshipping on the Sabbath. Their participation in the Jewish community indicates that they were already engaged in Torah life on some level and could be expected to continue to mature in it. However, James did not make learning Torah in the synagogue or taking on additional observances a prerequisite for the Gentiles, nor did he submit that advice to the Gentiles. The

matter about hearing Moses in the synagogues was not included in the letter that the apostles sent out to the believing communities.

Does this mean that the apostles did not want the Gentiles to learn and keep the Torah? It seems that they intended for the Gentiles to learn the Scriptures in the synagogue, and they naturally anticipated that learning would be followed by doing. As for their own authority, though, the apostles refused to lay any greater burden on the Gentile believers than the moral and ethical components of Torah and the four “essentials” of Acts 15. Beyond those essentials, they left the questions of further Gentile obligation to the specifically Jewish aspects of the Torah unanswered.

James the brother of the Master seems to suggest that the Gentiles would learn Torah in the synagogues.

If the apostles intended for the Gentiles to eventually learn the Torah and practice it, they never stated that expectation. They did not offer a term-limit for a Gentile in a believing synagogue to make the transition from non-observant to fully Torah-observant. They were silent regarding any specific plan for Gentile believers to eventually become Torah-observant. They neither forbade the Gentiles from practicing the Torah nor required them to do so beyond a basic moral and ethical standard. This open and ambiguous ruling probably represents a compromise between dissenting factions in the apostolic leadership. The decision satisfied the Pauline camp by not requiring the Gentiles to convert, but it also helped assuage the opposition in that it provided some mini-

mum standards and left the option of taking on more Torah open to the Gentile believers. The council's open posture toward Gentiles and Torah is further illustrated in Acts 21.

Acts 21

In Acts 21 the elders and apostles met with Paul. They rejoiced to hear of his efforts with the Gentiles, and they testified to Paul about the success of their efforts among the Jewish people of Jerusalem. They observed that myriads of Jews in Jerusalem had become believers and all of them were zealous for the Torah. For the apostles, there was no question about whether Jewish believers were obligated to keep the Torah—it went without saying.

The apostles did not preach that Gentiles had a mandate to keep the Torah in the same manner as the Jewish people.

But they also told him that they had heard rumors about his work in the Diaspora. The apostles had heard false rumors that Paul had been “teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs” (Acts 21:20). The charge is that Paul was teaching Jewish believers not to keep Torah or traditional Jewish customs.

If this was true, it would have been a problem for the apostles and utterly discrediting for Paul. The apostles were concerned about exonerating Paul in the eyes of other Jewish believers and proving that he was “walk[ing] orderly, keeping the Torah” (Acts 21:24). However, they were not concerned about what he

was teaching the Gentiles. They told him to prove that he was walking orderly, “keeping the Torah. But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication” (Acts 21:24–25). In other words, so long as Paul himself was keeping Torah and not dissuading Jews from keeping Torah, they were unconcerned about what he might have been telling Gentiles about their obligation to Torah. If Paul was teaching the Gentiles “to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs” (Acts 21:20), it was apparently of no concern, so long as the Gentiles were keeping the four essentials they had already enumerated.¹⁷

Paul may have been teaching Gentiles to keep most of the Torah, but we do know from his own testimony that he was teaching Gentiles not to undergo circumcision. Acts 21:24–25 provides a critical piece of information. It demonstrates the intention of the Jerusalem Council's decision. The passage unambiguously illustrates that the apostles did not preach that Gentiles had a mandate to keep the Torah in the same manner as the Jewish people.

Reconciling with Paul

It seems that neither Acts 15 nor Acts 21 supports the One-Law concept of a divine mandate for Gentile believers to keep the whole Torah in the same manner as Jewish people. Neither do the epistles of Paul. One need not be a scholar to realize that many problems arise in trying to reconcile the Pauline epistles with One-Law theology. A simple, honest, and unbiased reading of Paul's epistles makes that much patently clear. Trying to force Paul into preaching an obligation of total Torah observance for Gentiles requires hermeneutical and exegetical gymnastics.

While teaching the One-Law theology, we at First Fruits of Zion were constantly bumping

up against the epistles of Paul. We commonly heard adherents of One-Law Theology express exasperation, saying, “I don’t like Paul,” or “I wish Paul wasn’t in the canon.”

However, when we back away from a rigid One-Law position and read Paul through a more nuanced, pro-Torah position, several of his otherwise confusing passages snap into focus. Paul’s passion and mission was dedicated to making a place within the kingdom for Gentile believers. From Paul’s perspective, if Gentiles needed to take on Jewishness to the point of being indistinguishable from the Jewish people before they were counted worthy of the kingdom, then the kingdom was not open to Gentiles.

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (Romans 3:29–31)

Paul was not a proponent of One-Law theology, but he did not preach against Gentile Torah observance either. As the materials of First Fruits of Zion aptly prove, it is a complete mischaracterization of Paul’s writings and his intentions to suggest that he was teaching against Torah. Those passages which have been traditionally interpreted as anti-Torah are better understood as parts of his polemic against those who would force Gentiles to undergo a ritual conversion to become legally Jewish. But in Paul’s mind, being legally Jewish is the same as being legally obligated to keep the whole Torah and legally liable for every violation of it.

In this context, it appears that Paul wanted Gentile believers to keep the commandments of God, but he did not want them to take on the legal status of Jews. That is why he continually deflected the Gentile believers away from circumcision. (Circumcision implied

full liability for punishment under a Torah court.) He said, “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God” (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Paul wanted Gentile believers to keep the commandments of God, but he did not want them to take on the legal status of Jews.

Paul does not want the Gentiles to be lawless, but neither does he want to encourage them to become Jewish. His solution is to promote a broad, ethical monotheism that points the Gentile believers towards Judaism and the Torah without forcing the Gentile believer to take on all the distinctive obligations of Jewish identity.

That solution worked well in Paul’s social context. So long as the God-fearing, Gentile believers were congregating in the context of Judaism, hearing the Scriptures in the synagogues, and participating with the greater Jewish community, their default mode of worship was defined by Judaism and Torah. Even if they were not responsible for all the details of Torah law, they were still worshipping and fellowshiping within the parameters of Judaism and the Torah.

The difficulty we experience with Paul occurs when we try to transfer his writings to our own situation. Paul wrote to God-fearing Gentiles participating in a Jewish venue, but today his letters are read and interpreted by Gentiles in a Gentile venue. Outside of their Jewish community context, Paul’s arguments sound like he is arguing against Torah. Instead, he was arguing against requiring a Gentile to adopt Jewish identity.

One-Law for Different People

Paul claimed that by admitting the uncircumcised into the kingdom through faith in Messiah he was upholding the Torah.¹⁸ This seems contradictory. The Torah commands circumcision. How does exempting Gentile believers from the commandment of circumcision uphold the Torah?

Outside of their Jewish community context, Paul's arguments sound like he is arguing against Torah.

Although there is truly only one Torah for all of God's people, it does not apply to all of God's people in an identical manner. For example, the Torah contains laws that apply only to men and not to women. It also contains laws that apply to women and not to men. The Torah contains laws that apply to Levites and not to other tribes. It contains laws that apply to the priesthood, the sons of Aaron, and not to the rest of Israel. It contains laws that pertain to the high priest but not to the rest of the priesthood or the rest of the Jewish people.

This can be compared to a soccer team. All of the soccer players are under the same law. They all have to play by the same set of game rules. However, those game rules differentiate between players and positions. For example, none of the players can use their hands to manipulate the ball except the goalie. If all the players on a team declared, "We all have only one soccer rule book, therefore we should all be able to use our hands," they would not be able to properly play the game any longer. They

might be playing some type of ball game, but it wouldn't be soccer anymore.

In a similar way, Paul discerned that the Torah contains some laws which are binding upon the Jewish people, whether the native-born of Israel or legal proselytes, but not upon Gentiles. In Galatians 5:19–25 he enumerated a list of general prohibitions and admonitions which he calls "the works of the flesh" and "the fruit of the Spirit" respectively. He sums up the fruits of the Spirit saying that "against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:23).

This does not at all imply that there are two different Torahs, one for Jews and one for Gentiles. Rather there is only one Torah, but it contains different directives for different people. An example of how the "One-Law" principle works for different people groups can be seen in the commandments regarding the Passover sacrifice. Exodus 12:48–49 specifies that no uncircumcised person may eat of a Passover lamb, and then goes on to state that the same law applies to both Jew and non-Jew:

If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.
(Exodus 12:48–49)

According to this passage, an uncircumcised Gentile believer is forbidden from eating of a sacrificed Passover lamb. The same law applies to Jewish people. An uncircumcised Jewish man would also be forbidden to eat of the Passover lamb.

Noachide Believers

Given the problems with the One-Law approach whereby Jewish and Gentile believers have exactly the same obligations to Torah, one common solution is to default to main-

stream Judaism's method of dealing with Gentiles. Mainstream Judaism teaches that Gentiles are obligated only to the commandments God gave to Noah. We know of several Gentile believers who, after finding themselves unable to reconcile the One-Law message with the Apostolic Writings, gave up on keeping the Sabbath, the dietary laws, and other Jewish distinctives, and instead attempted to find their identity as "Noachide" believers.

The exact list of those "Noachide" commandments varies from one source to another. A literal reading of Genesis 9:1–6 reveals only a few general principles. The sons of Noah (that is, human beings) are commanded to reproduce and fill the earth. They are allowed to eat whatever they want so long as they do not "eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood" (Genesis 9:4) still in it. They are not to murder each other. If a person does murder another person, God demands the murderer's life. Obviously Genesis 9:1–6 is not meant as an exhaustive list of rules to govern human morality and ethical conduct.

The rabbis of early Judaism made some logical inferences to derive seven general laws that they believed to be binding on all of humanity. They assumed monotheism to be self-evident, so they created laws pertaining to belief in God, a prohibition on idolatry, and a prohibition on sexual immorality. They derived the prohibitions on idolatry and sexual immorality from the Torah's condemnation of the Canaanite nations' practice of both. The Canaanites were punished and driven from Canaan for those sins.¹⁹ The rabbis also noted that the sin of violence and robbery was one of the moral deficiencies which brought the flood, so they added a prohibition on theft.²⁰ They saw that the requirement for man to spill the blood of a murderer could be misunderstood as an endorsement of vigilante-styled justice, so they steered it toward a more civil form of jurisprudence by mandating the establishment of courts of law.

These seven laws are called the Laws of Noah:

1. Not to worship idols or other gods
2. Not to blaspheme God's Name
3. Not to murder
4. Not to commit sexual immorality
5. Not to steal
6. Not to eat things while they are still alive (i.e., not to eat meat with blood)
7. To establish courts of justice

Other rabbis had opinions about additional laws that should be added to the list, but most agreed on these seven.²¹ To be sure, these seven laws are all things that can be derived from one place or another in the Bible, if not directly from Genesis 9. They form a sort of minimalist approach to ethical monotheism: believe in God, be a decent person, be kind to animals and settle your disputes in court.

Traditional Judaism teaches that these laws (which are actually seen as general categories with numerous derivatives) are the only laws in the Bible to which Gentiles are specifically held accountable to observe. According to that opinion, laws like keeping the Sabbath, providing for the poor and honoring one's parents are not incumbent upon Gentiles. Some opinions in modern Judaism go so far as to state that if Gentiles keep just these seven simple rules, they will be welcomed into paradise and eternal life. There are problems with these ideas, though. The rules God gave to the sons of Noah were not given as a means for achieving eternal life or anything of the sort. Neither were they given as the sum total of man's obligations before God. They were simply rules of conduct given to Noah and his sons in order to keep society from degenerating to the chaotic state that characterized it prior to the flood.

Bible students often notice some similarities between these laws and the four essential prohibitions that the apostles placed upon the Gentile believers in Acts 15. It is

possible that the Noachide laws influenced the apostles' decision, but the apostles were not suggesting that the Gentile followers of Yeshua should be limited to just four or seven commandments.

Mainstream Judaism teaches that Gentiles are obligated only to the commandments God gave to Noah.

At First Fruits of Zion, we reject the concept of the Noachide Laws as the full extent of a Gentile believer's obligation to the Torah. The Noachide laws were originally intended as a baseline standard whereby God judges the pagan nations, not as a path of godliness. They are wholly inadequate as the basis of a functional religion.

Not only is the concept of seven laws for the nations absent from the Apostolic Writings, it is scarcely even present in the Torah itself. Moreover, the mainstream Jewish concept of Noachide obligation applies to all Gentiles; it does not have believing Gentiles in view whatsoever. At First Fruits of Zion, we see the apostles welcoming the Gentile believers into the greater commonwealth of Israel, calling them "sons of Abraham" by faith and granting them covenant participation. A Gentile believer is more than just a "son of Noah." A Gentile believer is a "son of Abraham."

Even the four essentials in Acts 15, with prohibitions on unslaughtered meat and the consumption of blood, are more stringent than traditional Judaism's interpretation of the Noachide laws. The apostles specifically enjoined matters of morality and ritual function upon the Gentile believers which transcended the

basics of Noachide ethical monotheism. The Apostolic Writings assign the Gentile believers an identity within the chosen people of Israel.²²

Surely the Gentile believer, who is (according to Paul) part of the commonwealth of Israel and no longer a stranger to the covenants of promise,²³ has a greater share of obligation to the Torah than merely the seven Noachide commandments incumbent even upon unbelievers. Gentile believers are more than just monotheists. Therefore, the Noachide laws also fail to offer a solution regarding a Gentile believer's relationship to Torah.

Nevertheless, at First Fruits of Zion, we have several Gentile friends in the messianic movement who regard themselves as Noachide believers, and we have friends among Messianic Jewish leadership who regard the four essentials of Acts 15 as an apostolic version of the Noachide laws. For those Gentiles who are convinced that the Noachide laws are the correct path for the Messianic Gentile, we encourage you to walk out those commandments in fidelity to Yeshua, and we encourage you to participate with greater Messianic Judaism to whatever extent you are able.

What Now?

At First Fruits of Zion, we first began teaching Torah with the message of Divine Permission: the theological stance that suggested the Torah has value for believers and that believers should consider taking hold of God's commandments. In later years, our ministry cautiously embraced the One-Law/Divine-Mandate position, which taught that both Jews and Gentiles are equally obligated to the whole Torah. However, as mentioned above, we recognized several theological (and sociological) problems with the One-Law model.

The writings of the apostle Paul regarding circumcision and Torah and the directives of the apostles in Acts 15 and 21 posed the most significant problems. We reject the Noachide

laws on the basis that they present an insufficient answer for Messianic Gentiles. So what is the path that we prescribe for the Messianic Gentile?

In Acts 15, the apostles left the question of Gentile relationship to Torah unanswered. They did not burden the Gentiles with the whole yoke of the Torah—a “yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10)—but neither did they turn the Gentile believers away from participation in Judaism, the synagogue, and ultimately Torah life. Instead, the very mode of first-century Messianic faith was intrinsically Jewish. Gentiles participating in apostolic communities were, by default, already deep into Jewish practice. The same open posture of Acts 15 seems to be reflected in the *Didache*.

Divine Invitation in the Didache

The *Didache* is a brief treatise of moral and community instruction for Gentile believers in Yeshua. The full title of the work is *The Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles*, sometimes referred to simply as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. Scholars agree that it preserves the early voice of “Jewish Christianity,” and a few scholars date it as early as 50-70 CE,²⁴ making it contemporary with Paul’s epistles and the Jerusalem Council.

When discussing the question of how much Torah a Gentile is obligated to keep, the *Didache* recommends keeping all of it, but leaves the matter up to an individual’s capacity:

If you are able to bear all the yoke of the Lord [i.e., Torah], you will be perfect; but if you are not able, do as much as you are able to do. And concerning food [i.e., dietary laws], bear what thou art able; but against that which is sacrificed to idols be exceedingly on thy guard; for it is the service of dead gods. (Didache 6:2–3)

This is clear and solid direction from the early communities of Yeshua.

The *Didache* indicates that the Gentile believers not only had the privilege of being able to keep the commandments and peculiarities of Torah life along with their Jewish brothers and sisters, but were actually encouraged to take on as much as they were able. Needless to say, the authors of the *Didache* were not referring to the moral and ethical standards of Torah or Yeshua’s ethical teaching when they prescribed taking on the “yoke of the Lord,” for those could hardly have been presented as

The apostles left the question of Gentile relationship to Torah unanswered.

optional choices which a Gentile believer could choose to keep or ignore. This passage appears in the *Didache* after a long treatise on moral imperatives which are presented as absolutely mandatory for Gentile believers. Instead, the “yoke of the Lord” must be understood as the specifically Jewish aspects of Torah—hence the inclusion of the dietary laws.

In the *Didache*, Gentiles are invited to take on the whole yoke of Torah—as much as they are able to bear. More than Divine Permission, the Apostolic-Era voice of the *Didache* grants Gentile believers a “Divine Invitation” to take on the Torah.

Light to the Gentiles

We have retained our position of Divine Mandate for Jewish believers and adopted the position of Divine Invitation for Gentile believers. We see a difference between Jews and Gentiles in regard to their obligation to certain aspects of Torah. The difference is that Jewish believers

The more a Gentile believer aligns his life with Torah, the more relevant the Scriptures become for him.

have a divine mandate to keep those elements as a part of covenant faithfulness and as an expression of their legal status as Jews. Gentile believers have the privilege of keeping those particulars as an expression of their status as sons of Abraham and disciples of Yeshua.

Being Jewish places a person in a place of unique responsibility. This can be compared to a father who had a natural son of his own when he decided to adopt an additional child. The new child did not know the rules of the household, nor did the father require as much of the adopted child as he required from his natural son. When the natural son attempted to misbehave like the adopted child, the father punished him, but he did not punish the adopted son. The natural son complained about the partiality. The father explained: “You are my natural son; you represent me and know the rules of our home, and you have a responsibility to be an example to your adopted brother. That is why I hold you to a higher standard.”

In a similar way, the Jewish people are held to a higher standard simply on the basis of their four-thousand-year-old covenant relationship with God and the commitments they made at Mount Sinai. By keeping the whole of Torah at this higher standard, Jewish people are to be a visible witness to humanity, a light to the Gentiles.²⁵

Why Would I if I Don't Have to?

Even though we do not teach that Gentiles have a mandate to keep the Torah in the same manner as Jewish believers, we encourage Gentiles to bear as much of the yoke of the Lord as they are able. We push the envelope and choose to

err on the side of obedience to God. There is life and reward in God's commandments. The more we apply the commandments, the more life we experience. The more a Gentile believer aligns his life with Torah, the more relevant the Scriptures become for him. Obedience to Torah offers blessing. Our Master says, “Whoever does [even the least of the commandments] and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). That “whoever” includes the Gentile believer. Therefore, we tell Gentile believers, “There is blessing in the whole of Torah. Keep it all; live it all, but do not condemn other Gentile believers who are not keeping all the same particulars.”

However, one might ask, “If a Gentile believer does not have a divine mandate to keep the particulars of Torah specifically associated with Jewish expression, why would he bother with them? Why keep a Sabbath at all? Why trouble oneself with affixing a mezuzah or keeping a kosher diet?”

We find several compelling reasons for Gentile Torah observance:

1. Love for God
2. Discipleship to Yeshua
3. Kingdom Expression
4. Return to Apostolic-Era Practice
5. Solidarity with Greater Israel
6. Blessing and Reward

Love for God

Obedience to the commandments is an expression of love for God and love for His Messiah. Yeshua teaches that the greatest of all commandments is the commandment to love God. He quotes the words of the *Shema* (Deuter-

onomy 6:5), saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). The Deuteronomy 6 passage from which he quotes goes on to explain how we show love for God, namely by keeping his commandments, speaking of them and studying them, writing them on our doorposts, binding them to hand and head, teaching them to our children. Likewise, Yeshua teaches that if we love him, we will keep his commandments, just as he has kept the Father’s commandments.²⁶ Moreover, the epistle of 1 John states that “this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). Likewise, 2 John 1:6 states, “This is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.” Therefore a Gentile believer should desire to take on the whole yoke of the Lord as an expression of love for God.

Discipleship to Yeshua

Gentile believers should also find discipleship to Yeshua as motivation to walk in obedience to the whole of Torah. When our Master commissioned his disciples to take the gospel to the nations and to make disciples of all nations, he instructed them to teach the Gentiles “to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). This instruction would include his commandments not to neglect even the smallest matters of Torah.²⁷ This is not to say that a Gentile believer who does not accept upon himself the full yoke of Torah is a deficient disciple. There are many paths of discipleship, and walking after Yeshua is much broader than simply adopting Jewish practice. But at its simplest, discipleship should be understood as the art of imitation:

Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:6).

A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher. (Luke 6:40)

Walking after Yeshua is much more than simply adopting Jewish practice.

A Gentile’s practice of the whole of Torah on the basis of his attachment to Yeshua can be compared to that of a woman from the nations who married an Israelite husband. Like Ruth, such a woman abandoned her past affiliations and took on the religious practices of Israel. Ruth declared to Naomi:

Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. (Ruth 1:16–17)

Ruth’s ardent insistence on being counted with Israel is a good model for discipleship. Identification with Yeshua, the king of the Jews, naturally invites the disciple to Jewish expression.

Kingdom Expression

The prophets declare that in the Messianic Era, all nations will keep the Sabbaths, the New Moons, the festivals, and will learn Torah from Messiah.²⁸ All nations will make pilgrimage to Jerusalem, because Jerusalem will be the capital city of all nations. The kingdom of Israel will be universal. All men will serve the king of Israel according to the Torah of Israel.

Knowing that we will all be keeping the whole Torah in Messiah's kingdom makes it clear that keeping the Torah is a part of kingdom living. Gentile members of the kingdom of heaven can take hold of a portion of that future reality today by taking hold of all the commandments of the Torah.²⁹

The rhythms and cycles of Torah life synchronize us to sanctity and instill disciplines and spiritual truth in our lives.

Return to Apostolic-Era Practice

A Gentile believer should be zealous to practice the same faith that the believers in the Apostolic Era did. Christianity has existed for almost two thousand years in antithesis to Jewish expression, but it was not so in the days of the apostles. In the first century, Gentile believers worshipped in a synagogue context in a mixed fellowship of Jewish and Gentile believers, which indicates that they were celebrating the Sabbath and biblical calendar. They participated in table-fellowship with the apostles and other Jewish believers, which indicates that the Gentiles were keeping a dietary standard acceptable to Jewish concern.³⁰ The Bible never offered Gentile believers any alternative festival days. To say that Gentile believers are not expected to keep God's appointed times is the same as saying that Gentile believers are not supposed to have any holy days or days of worship. Neither the Gospels nor the Epistles grant the Gentile believers their own special festivals. Sunday worship and Christian holidays are not instructed in the New Testament.

In the days of the apostles, Jewish and Gentile believers observed God's appointed times together. They met in the synagogues and in the Temple on the Sabbath and festival days to celebrate and observe God's holy days. The apostles never commanded the Gentile believers to keep the appointed times, but neither did they tell them not to do so. They were silent on the matter.

A Gentile believer who decides not to participate in the Sabbath, the festivals, and so forth forfeits solidarity with the biblical mode of life, with the apostolic communities, and with the Jewish people.

Solidarity with Greater Israel

Gentile believers have a spiritual connection with the people of Israel. Torah observance is one way of demonstrating this spiritual kinship in a physical way. This can be compared to the apocryphal story of the yellow stars worn by the Danes during World War II. According to the story, when the Nazis ordered the Jews of Denmark to identify themselves by wearing yellow stars, the Danish King Christian declared that he himself would wear a yellow star, as would every Danish citizen. The story is just a legend, but it illustrates the concept of identifying with the Jewish people for the sake of solidarity. When Gentile believers intentionally shun the aspects of Torah which are traditionally regarded as "Jewish," they theologically erect a wall of partition between themselves and the people of Israel. Inevitably, such a wall results in an "us" vs. "them" psychology which played into the formation of the anti-Semitic expression of Christianity. Solidarity, however, does not necessarily imply that Jewish and Gentile believers should be indistinguishable.

Blessing and Reward

The Torah is a source of rich blessing and reward in this life and in the kingdom. The Torah can be compared to the treasure hidden

in the field which a man found, and from joy over it, sold all that he had to buy that field.³¹ Imagine a man who found a treasure hidden in a field but said, “It’s not my field. I’ll just leave the treasure here and go about my business.” How sad! He wasted an opportunity to obtain great wealth.

The Torah is the very will and wisdom of God. Why wouldn’t a man give “all the wealth of his house” (Song of Solomon 8:6) for the sake of it?

God’s precepts rejoice the heart, enlighten the eyes, and are “to be desired [more] than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb” (Psalm 19:10). Therefore David said, “I delight in your law” (Psalm 119:70); “O how I love your law!” (Psalm 119:97). Shouldn’t all believers cry out along with the anointed king, “With my whole heart I cry ... I will keep your statutes. I call to you; save me, that I may observe your testimonies” (Psalm 119:145–146).

The Torah brings order, godliness, wisdom, and spiritual enlightenment. “Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies ... I have more understanding than all my teachers ... I understand more than the aged, because I keep your precepts” (Psalm 119:98–100). “The one who keeps the law is a son with understanding” (Proverbs 28:7). “The law of the LORD is perfect ... making wise the simple” (Psalm 119:7). By walking in God’s statutes and carefully observing His ordinances, we remain sensitive to the work of the Spirit in our lives and demonstrate that the Spirit of God writes His Torah upon our hearts:³²

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

The rhythms and cycles of Torah life synchronize us to sanctity and instill disciplines and spiritual truth in our lives. They are a source of holiness and sanctity. “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). God sanctifies those who keep his statutes and practice them; as he says, “Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy ... Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you” (Leviticus 20:7–8). “Be holy in all your conduct” (1 Peter 1:15), “Remember to do all [his] commandments, and be holy to your God” (Numbers 15:40). To lay hold of the Torah is to lay hold of holiness.

The ways of Torah are filled with blessing, happiness, and peace. “Blessed is he who keeps the law” (Proverbs 29:18). “Blessed is the man ... [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:1–2). “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart” (Psalm 119:1–2). “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed” (Proverbs 3:17–18). “Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble” (Psalm 119:165). “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul” (Psalm 19:7), “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Keeping the Torah results in God’s blessing upon our lives. God commands a blessing upon those who obey his Torah:³³ “And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 28:2). Life goes well for those who keep His statutes and commandments, and they are promised long life.³⁴

The blessings for keeping Torah and the

rewards for observing it are accessible even to the Gentile believer, because there is “glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality” (Romans 2:10–11). “Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it” (Isaiah 56:2). “Everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast” (Isaiah 56:6) to the Torah is promised reward in the kingdom; even the foreigners who keep the Torah will be brought to the Temple and made joyful in God’s house. “Whoever does [the commandments] and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). “So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?” (Romans 2:26).

Let’s not be like the lazy servant who hid his talents away until his master returned. Instead, we should “keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 6:14). We should invest that which has been entrusted to us so that on the day of his coming, we may say to him, “Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more” (Matthew 25:20). Then we will hear him tell us, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21). Those who keep the Torah will be numbered among those overcomers “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 12:17), “their deeds follow them” (Revelation 14:13) for the reward in the kingdom. “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Advantages to the Apostolic Approach

While we at First Fruits of Zion were still advocating a “One-Law” approach whereby Jews and Gentiles were considered to be under

identical mandates and no distinction between Jews and Gentiles existed, Dr. Dwight Pryor challenged us to consider the apostolic attitude toward the Torah as it applies to Gentiles—a less dogmatic and rigidly defined approach with a more open posture. Divine Invitation is that biblical and apostolic position.

The bottom line for us is this. Jewish believers are under an obligation to keep the whole Torah—not for salvation, but as a matter of covenantal loyalty. Gentile believers, though saved by grace, are under an obligation to the full moral authority of the Torah, and they have an invitation to participate along with Israel in the aspects of Torah life which are specific to the Jewish people. We encourage them to do so.

While Divine Invitation does not go beyond apostolic example, it does not limit a Gentile’s participation in Torah observance. A Gentile is encouraged to embrace as much of the Torah as he is able. He is encouraged to do so out of his love for God and his devotion to Yeshua.

Our motive for leaving the language of One-Law theology behind is purely one of biblical conviction. We have not been motivated by any interest other than better conformity to the testimony of Scripture. Nevertheless, the Divine-Invitation approach for Gentiles has several advantages:

First, it does not advance a theology that goes beyond the instructions of the apostles. As Dr. Dwight Pryor pointed out to us, the One-Law theology, though biblically formulated, did not arise from within the apostolic community.

Second, the Divine-Invitation approach does not require us to misrepresent the words of the Apostle Paul or to reinterpret the ruling of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Instead, it arises naturally from the Apostolic Scriptures and maintains a posture consistent with those scriptures.

Third, because the Divine-Invitation approach to Gentile obligation is more in con-

cert with the Scriptures, it is less vulnerable to criticism from opponents of Torah observance. Those opponents were otherwise able to easily exploit passages from the apostles that were incongruous with One-Law theology.

Fourth, the Divine-Invitation approach allows us to maintain better fellowship with greater Christianity. Under the Divine-Invitation model, we are not compelled to castigate the average Gentile Christian as an unrepentant sinner because he is not Sabbath observant or because he does not wear ritual tassels or observe the dietary laws. Instead, we can concentrate on the common ground we do share. We will be in a better position to offer such a person the opportunity of taking hold of Messianic Jewish expression, such as the beauty and blessing of Sabbath observance, without threatening the person with condemnation if he fails to do so. Undoubtedly, an open posture without condemnation will prove to be more attractive than dogmatic pressure to submit to Torah.

Fifth, the Divine-Invitation model engenders respect for Judaism by leaving the proprietary rights over Torah observance in the hands of Israel proper and the Jewish people. The Divine-Invitation model respects a historical, grammatical interpretation of the Torah, but it also recognizes that Israel is more than just a religion or academic theory; Israel is a people. On a practical level, this can be illustrated with regard to the commandment of keeping the Sabbath. Gentile believers are welcome to keep the Sabbath, but they are not granted the authority to change the Sabbath to the first day of the week, nor are they given the prerogative to redefine what it means to rest from work on the Sabbath or to misappropriate Jewish tradition. Instead, if a Gentile desires to keep the Sabbath, he must first recognize that the Sabbath is a sign between God and the Jewish people. He may choose to participate in the Sabbath along with Israel, but the Sabbath does not belong first to him.

The only difference is that we are no longer twisting a Gentile's theological arm to force him to accept the observant life.

Sixth, the Divine-Invitation model maintains distinction between believers who are legally (halachically) Jewish and those who are not. Such distinction is vital for the survival of Jewish identity. When those distinctions are erased, Jewish identity is quickly lost. Evidence for the loss of Jewish identity can be found in the church where, after becoming Christians, Jewish believers abandon the Jewish aspects of Torah, intermarry, and are lost within a generation. One-Law theology has the same outcome of loss of Jewish identity because it fails to differentiate between Jewish and Gentile believers and their respective obligations.

Seventh, the Divine-Invitation approach does not force Gentile believers out of fellowship within Messianic Jewish congregations. Instead, it allows for a broad diversity of Gentile expression while maintaining the ongoing authority of Torah over the whole assembly. Gentile believers who desire to live out a Messianic Jewish practice should feel welcome within the Messianic assembly, yet not compelled to pretend to be Jewish or find some remote Jewish ancestry to justify their participation in more Jewish aspects of Torah.

Does This Mean I Don't Have To Keep Torah?

A Gentile believer might rightfully ask, "Does Divine-Invitation theology mean that I don't have to keep Torah?" As regards the moral and ethical authority of the Torah, Gentile believers are under the same obligation as Jewish believers. The writings of the apostles and the

teaching of Yeshua are all ethically centered, and they are all founded squarely on the Torah of Moses. As regards the Jewish distinctives of Torah, Gentile believers are granted an opportunity to participate. However, once a Gentile has considered a matter and decided to incorporate it into his practice, he should regard himself steadfastly committed to that particular commandment lest he become a “double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8). For this reason, a person should “sit down and calculate the cost” (Luke 14:28) of discipleship before rashly committing to it. For example, if a family decides that they are going to keep the Sabbath by desisting from working on the seventh day, they should keep that commitment even when it becomes inconvenient to do so. God’s commandments are not to be trifled with.

Critics and Opponents

At First Fruits of Zion, we have been wrestling through the question of the extent of a Gentile believer’s liability to Torah both internally (within FFOZ) and with a wide variety of teachers, trusted advisors, and Messianic leaders for several years. The return to our original language about Gentile obligation to Torah and our intentional distancing from the One-Law theology has not gone unnoticed. In fact, rumors and concerns have been circulating through the Messianic movement for more than a year. For the last year and half, not a week has gone by that I (Boaz) have not had to spend an hour or so in dialogue with concerned constituents who have heard or who are assuming that, “First Fruits of Zion is no longer teaching Gentiles to keep Torah.”

On the contrary, we continue with our core mission of proclaiming the Torah to all of God’s people. But there is a change in the way that we present this message, and that change has been a cause for concern for many of our readers. It is my hope that this paper, published

in *Messiah Journal*, will help explain why our language has changed.

As a staff, we made the decision to back down from the language of “should,” “must,” and “have to,” regarding Gentile obligation to the Sabbath, festivals, dietary laws, and distinctive Jewish aspects of Torah observance. In that discussion, one of our editors pointed out, “People have placed everything on this assumption that the whole Torah is completely obligatory on them. They’ve sacrificed jobs, lost opportunities, and damaged relationships under the assumption that they had a mandate to do all of it.”

Other opponents of the Divine Invitation for Gentiles approach have complained that this position gives Gentile believers the right to make arbitrary choices about whether or not they will keep the dietary laws, the Sabbath, the festivals, and so forth. It gives Gentiles too much space—too much wiggle room. Concerned wives have complained, saying, “You just gave my husband permission not to keep the Sabbath if he doesn’t want to.”

All of these criticisms have merit. But the angst is not the result of a lenient position which encourages Gentiles to keep the Sabbath and festivals; it is the result of a narrow, doctrinaire theology which created the false impression that the Apostolic Scriptures made no distinction between Jewish and Gentile obligation to Torah. When dialoguing with critics and concerned friends about these issues, I acknowledge that we hear their concerns and understand them, but I am also quick to assure them that First Fruits of Zion is still in the business of teaching people about Torah and the beauty of an observant life. The only difference is that we are no longer twisting a Gentile’s theological arm to force him to accept the observant life.

Conclusion

First Fruits of Zion has been on a long journey of theological development since we first

“rediscovered” the Torah in the early 1990’s. Along the journey we have, on occasion, made some wrong turns. It is always difficult to change and even more difficult to admit an error, but the important thing is that we endeavor to remain pliable and open to change under the leading of God’s Spirit and the revelation of the Scriptures. The Bible is unchanging because it is infallible, but we are not. Our desire is to be as biblically sound as possible, regardless of the cost.

The cost may be significant. We have already lost a few of our good friends and long-time constituents. Some of you may feel concerned, frustrated, and perhaps unsettled about this correction. But ask yourself, “Is it reasonable to suppose that during these early years of sailing through uncharted waters that we would not occasionally require a course correction?” During more than fifteen years of wrestling with the implications of the Torah’s reimplementation, we have often been redirected by the testimony of God’s unchanging word. That’s as it should be.

We regret allowing our zeal for Torah to get ahead of our scholarship, and we look forward to the fruit of a more balanced presentation of our message in the future. Our books *Restoration* and *Boundary Stones*, our new-generation *Torah Club* products, and our new *HaYesod* discipleship course all offer a well-reasoned and consistent message of Torah for Gentiles without the inflexible dogmatism of One-Law.

We realize that many brothers and sisters will reject the theology of Divine Invitation as an inadequate answer to the Gentile-Torah question. We hope that our differences over this matter will not lead to any break in fellowship or affection. We remain committed to our mission of proclaiming the Torah and its way of life, fully centered on Messiah, to today’s people of God. Today’s people of God includes the Gentiles from the nations who have confessed faith in the God of Israel and

We affirm that there is one
God, one Messiah, and only one
Torah for all God’s people.

his Messiah. Paul tells us that “there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:4-5). Likewise, we affirm that there is one God, one Messiah, and only one Torah for all God’s people.

The Father’s hand has been evident to us as he has fine tuned the ministry’s mission. After wrestling through all of these issues, we feel that our message of Torah for Israel and for all nations is clearer, sharper, and stronger than ever. We are already seeing the positive impact. The refined message is better received; God’s Spirit is in it; and people are excited. It has given us a fresh enthusiasm and joy in sharing the timeless and unchanging truth of Torah. We are blessed to see how the Father continues to move in the restoration of His people, and grateful if he grants us even some small part to play in that restoration. 

Endnotes

- 1 Some leaders in the UMJC have voiced strong criticism of One-Law theology, but the UMJC contains a diversity of opinions regarding the appropriate extent of Gentile observance of Torah. Many UMJC congregations encourage full participation for Gentiles.
- 2 Galatians 3:28.
- 3 Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22, 4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:9.
- 4 1 Corinthians 7:23.
- 5 Ephesians 5:25–28; Colossians 3:19.
- 6 Ephesians 5:22–24; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:4–5.
- 7 1 Corinthians 12:20ff.
- 8 Galatians 2:7.
- 9 For example, see Exodus 31:14–16. In the apostolic

- era, a death sentence for violation of the Sabbath was a real possibility.
- 10 In the Apostolic Era Gentile believers were adjunct members of the Jewish community. Cf. Louis H. Feldmen, "The Omnipresence of the God Fearers," *Biblical Archeological Review* 12:5 (September/October 1986): 58–63.
 - 11 See David L. Lieber, "Strangers and Gentiles," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Second Edition) 19:241–242; Tim Hegg, *Fellow Heirs* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2003), 13–29. Hegg has demonstrated that the term *ger* did not originally refer exclusively to a proselyte but rather to any stranger dwelling among the people of Israel. By the time of the apostles, however, the word was being read and understood as referring to a proselyte. To this day, Judaism continues to define most of the Torah's *ger* texts as referring to legal proselytes to Judaism.
 - 12 LXX to Exodus 12:48–49 and Leviticus 25:47.
 - 13 R. Timothy McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 137–170. Note McLay's comments on page 169: "The fact that the Greek Jewish Scriptures were cited in the NT in contrast to the Hebrew demonstrates that they were deemed to be Scripture by the Early Church."
 - 14 For example, see Galatians 5:18–23.
 - 15 The context makes it impossible to insist that the term "yoke" in Acts 15:10 refers only to the Oral Torah. For a typical example of how the word is used to mean Torah, see m.*Avot* 3.5.
 - 16 Acts 10:22, 13:16, 26, 43, and 17:4, 17. See Feldmen, "The Omnipresence of the God Fearers," 58–63 and Louis H. Feldmen, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
 - 17 Paul's instructions to the Gentiles may have been the origin of the false rumors about his instructions to the Jews. See Hilary Le Cornu and Joseph Shulam, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Acts* (Jerusalem, Israel: Academion, 2003), 1173.
 - 18 Romans 3:31.
 - 19 Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:3; 18:28, 20:23; Deuteronomy 7:16; etc.
 - 20 Genesis 6:13.
 - 21 *Genesis Rabbah* 34:8; t.*Avodah Zarah* 8:4; b.*Chullin* 92a; b.*Bava Kama* 38a. For more on the Noachide laws, their origin and function, see Tim Hegg, "The Noachide Laws," *messiah magazine* 91(2006): 10–13.
 - 22 1 Peter 2:9–10.
 - 23 Ephesians 2:12–13.
 - 24 Jonathan Draper, "The Holy Vine of David Made Known to the Gentiles through God's Servant Jesus: 'Christian-Judaism' in the Didache," *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 257–283.
 - 25 Deuteronomy 4:4–8.
 - 26 John 14:15, 21; 15:10.
 - 27 Matthew 5:17.
 - 28 Isaiah 2:2–4, 51:4–5, 56:1–7, 66:23; Zechariah 14:16–19.
 - 29 Zechariah 8:23.
 - 30 Acts 11:3; Galatians 2:12; 1 Corinthians 11:20ff; Acts 11:20; Jude 1:12.
 - 31 Matthew 13:44.
 - 32 Jeremiah 31:33.
 - 33 Deuteronomy 11:27.
 - 34 Deuteronomy 4:40.

Divine Parameters for Faith and Life

Boundary Stones gives a new, clear, and logical presentation of the biblical argument for the ongoing validity of the Torah for all believers. An easy, compelling read for you, your family, your friends, and the entire Christian world.

Available Resources:

Book, Student Workbook, Audiobook

